



Rites of Turning Again to Christ

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Introduction

Baptism is the sacrament through which we are united with Christ and his people. It is unrepeatable, for Baptism is a celebration of the eternal salvation won for us, once and for all, through Christ's death and rising. Nevertheless, many awaken at some point in their lives to the realization that their Baptism has been unfruitful, and long for a true experience of the mystery of salvation. As they witness others entering new life through catechumenal formation, they may ask for such formation themselves. This rite of 'turning again to Christ' offers a path to such renewal which nevertheless honours the prior truth of their Baptism.

It is a lamentable fact that most baptized people, in North America anyway, are not practising Christians. This may be true for any number of reasons, most notably

- ▶ because the Church has not successfully encouraged parents to take seriously their role in the primary nurture of the faith when they made baptismal vows on behalf of their children;
- ▶ because the Church, like all institutions with a history of abuse of power, is justifiably regarded with suspicion; and
- ▶ because the Church has not always faithfully followed Christ in serving the poor, educating the faithful, and celebrating worship with creativity and passion.

So it is with humility and great excitement that we should welcome those who have been living outside the communion of the Church, but who wish to return as fellow members of Christ. Most will return after a particular crisis, and with many questions. Often there has been a yearning for belonging that has grown over the years. It is the joyful responsibility of the Church to honour and learn from the experience and questions of each person who returns, and to assure them of unqualified support.

This rite will also serve those already active members of the church who wish to turn again to Christ in a deeper way. They may have no need to be ritually welcomed, yet they can make an intentional journey through Lent, including conspicuous participation in the rites of Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday (see the introductions to those rites for elucidation).

Welcoming those who are Turning Again to Christ

Introduction

Who is it for? This rite provides a graceful way to welcome and affirm baptised people who have not been active Christians for some time and wish to begin again. It launches people upon a pathway that resembles, yet is distinct from, the catechumenate, because it clearly starts from the reality of their Baptism and honours the membership they already have within the Church.

When to do it. This welcoming rite presupposes that a supportive relationship has already developed between the person who is turning again to Christ and another member of the church, who will act as sponsor. They will have discussed what has precipitated this new desire to be an active Christian, and how over the years God has been sustaining and encouraging the person throughout their life's journey. Once the one turning again to Christ is ready to pursue this spiritual quest within the life of the Church and in the light of the gospel, it is appropriate that this rite of welcome be celebrated.

By way of pastoral preparation, the sponsor will help the person to come to a clear sense of what he or she most deeply desires of God and the Church. Out of this experience a person may then formulate a true response to the first two questions of the rite. The answers may begin to reveal a history of alienation from God and the Church which will need to be taken into account in adapting the rites.

This form may be used at any time in the year within a principal Sunday service, but no attempt should be made to fit people into a preconceived schedule. As with other catechumenal rites, it is appropriate to adapt this ceremony to the particular situation of both the individuals and the church community.

Presentation

The person being presented is brought to the service by a sponsor. After the opening greeting and an act of praise (BAS, page 185), the presider invites them to stand before the congregation¹, and asks the sponsor to introduce the one being presented. The introduction includes these words, or other words appropriate to the situation.

I present N, who was baptized in water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, who has responded anew to the call of God's Spirit, and who now wishes to turn again to Christ, within the communion of the Church.²

The presider asks of the inquirer,

What do you seek?

Answer (The person makes a response that has been prepared in conversation with the sponsor, during the time of inquiry).

Presider **What do you ask of this community?**

Answer (Again, the response will be something prepared in conversation with the sponsor, during the time of inquiry).

¹For those who are turning again to Christ, the place of welcome is always the place of worship itself, for they are already members through baptism. They are welcomed back into the assembly of those who gather together to hear the proclamation of God's word. The role of the sponsor will be important here, as in the initiation of Christians. As spiritual companion, the sponsor embodies the Church's care for the returning member until that person is able to make a solemn reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. The text "I present..." should be adapted if it does not express what is happening in the life of the person being presented, for example, when changing denominations.

²"What do you seek?" is the same question Jesus put to would-be disciples, the question he asked the blind man at Jericho, the same question we all must face if our religion is to be more than the impulse to measure up to some external expectations of us. It is the question we will want to ask the one returning if we trust the stirring of the Spirit in their interior lives. And so it needs to be asked with sensitivity.

The second question, "What do you ask of this community?" is a gentle reminder of the congregation's involvement and delight in the member's return. The members of the community will then have a better understanding of how they may be able to support and help this person.

These questions are about knowing one's own heart, and bringing that openness of heart to the gospel proclamation. It is followed by publicly confessing and declaring one's baptismal standing; consciousness of this standing is thereby reinforced as the real basis of restoration.

The presider replies as follows, or in some similar words, adapting the reply to the answer given:

In baptism, we died with Christ³
so that we might begin a new life together
in the power of his resurrection.
You were marked in your baptism with the sign of his cross;
and now you have come
to enter more fully into the meaning of that sign.
Will you reexamine the covenant made in your baptism,
and seek the help of God and the support of this community
in embracing that covenant?

Answer **I will.**

To the sponsor and congregation the presider says,

Dear friends in Christ,
will you care for *N*,
and support *him/her*
by prayer and by example?

People **We will.**

Presider Will you help *him/her* continue to grow
in the knowledge and love of God
and of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord?

People **We will.**

Presider Will you share with *N*,
as God gives you opportunity,
your own experience of life in Christ?

People **We will.**⁴

³The words "In baptism, we died with Christ" challenge the person to recognize the profound meaning of baptism and the seriousness of this step. The affirmation about a person's readiness to begin this journey back to life within the covenant leads into the question "Will you reexamine...?"

⁴The congregation is called upon to promise its support and faithfulness. The communal life of a parish can grow in richness and vitality as the congregation welcomes and supports those who are turning again to Christ, celebrating the gifts they bring. In order to make these commitments, it is important that members of the congregation have opportunities to explore the meaning of their own baptism, and find practical ways of supporting those who come among us. It is through the stories shared with others that people find meaning and order in their lives and within the larger drama of God's story.

Thanksgiving

The presider prays for the person, saying,⁵

God of steadfast love,
on behalf of this our *brother/sister N*,
we offer thanks and praise to you
for the covenant you made with *him/her* in baptism
and for the experience of your guiding presence
which has brought *him/her* to this day.
Help us to serve *him/her* faithfully
with the kindness you have shown us
and to accept with joy all the gifts of grace *he/she* brings.
Together may we offer ourselves in your service,
seeking your kingdom
and the honour of your holy name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

A musical acclamation may be sung.⁶ Then the presider says to him/her,

God's word is like bread to our hearts;
we cannot live without it.
God's word is like rain
that comes down upon the earth;
it brings forth fruit in our lives.
Come now and share with us
in hearing the word of the Lord.
Let us prepare our hearts
to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.⁷

⁵The thanksgiving follows without pause ("God of steadfast love...") It makes explicit the awareness that all this has taken place in the presence of a delighted father who has run out into the road to embrace a returning child. It acknowledges the fact that a returning member enriches and changes the community, and our response is thanksgiving.

⁶Some suggested hymns for this moment are #39 (*Common Praise*): "You are God's work of art"; #548 (*CP*): "Eye has not seen (*refrain*)"; #554 (*Hymnal 1982*): "Simple gifts".

⁷These words link our thanksgiving and the reading of the word, and echo the situation of those turning again to Christ: their recognition, conscious or sub-conscious, that they are indeed starving, hands reaching out for the bread of life. It is hoped that the good news of Jesus will resound in their experience, that they will hear it again as if for the first time, testing the meaning of their history in the Church against this new hearing of the word. It is for this reason that this Welcome is placed before the ritual Proclamation of the Word.

Clearly the Welcome expects the proclamation that follows to be joyful, intelligent and transformative. The BAS has issued the same challenge by extending the title 'proclamation' to include not only preaching but the public reading of scripture as well. The attending ceremonial can help to suggest the supreme importance of this

The person and his/her sponsor now return to their places. The service continues with the Collect of the Day and the Proclamation of the Word.

Handing on the Gospel

After the gospel reading the person turning again to Christ may be brought before the congregation; and a copy of the Bible may be presented to him/her by the catechist, saying,

**Remember the story of God's great work
begun in you at your baptism.
May you grow day by day
until you reach the measure of the full stature of Christ.⁸**

The Prayers of the People

The person may be prayed for by name; and the prayers on pp 627 and 628 of the BAS may be adapted for this purpose.

proclamation (e.g., processing the book during the initial entrance, maintaining an auspicious place for scripture readings, use of candles, incense, etc.). The most important element, however, is the active participation of the congregation.

Essentially, this is a period of mystagogy (i.e., of growing into a fuller appreciation of our sacramental life) in which people may rediscover their identity and calling as the Baptised. It is a time to re-enter the life of ongoing conversion and to seek reconciliation with the community from which they had become estranged.

⁸Presentation of a copy of the bible must not overshadow the ritual of proclamation, which is the real "handing on of the Good News".

Ash Wednesday: A Call to the Life of Conversion

Introduction

Ash Wednesday launches the followers of Christ into the Lenten journey with an act of penitence that demonstrates our vulnerability and the recognition of our utter dependence upon God. As St. Augustine reminds us, it is the compelling generosity of God's compassion and forgiveness that empowers us to repent. Experiencing this excess of love, we can begin to let go of enslavement to our own desires and addictions, as we are enticed into a life of increasing liberation and purpose. In a culture where individualism and personal gratification predominate, it is profoundly creative, albeit exceptionally difficult, for Christians to set aside time for the purpose of exposing our inner darkness to the revealing light of Christ. But as Jesus turned toward Jerusalem, confronting the powers of darkness that resisted the reign of God, we also turn to acknowledge and renounce those powers which have drawn us away from the light.

Who is it for? When those who have been alienated from the gathered life of the Church return to a more intentional relationship with God and fellowship with the community, their presence is a powerful reminder of the Church's call to on-going conversion. Their willingness to return, to forgive and to be forgiven, reveals our own need for the healing of divisions and for harmonizing the fragmented aspects of our lives.

When to do it. It is assumed that, by Ash Wednesday, those who are returning to Christ will already have spent time telling their stories to sponsors who will have helped them to articulate the ways in which God has been drawing them back into the worship and service of the body of Christ.

Ash Wednesday, of course, draws all the followers of Christ into reflection on his disturbing determination to go to Jerusalem. But there are times when a member already invested in a life of faith has turned some new corner on this pathway, or has experienced a new perspective which results in a desire to mark this particular Lenten journey by celebrating it more intentionally. This too may be celebrated within this rite.

The exhortation following the sermon (BAS p 281) may be expanded in the following manner.

After the sermon, all stand, and the presider addresses the congregation, saying,

Dear friends in Christ,
every year at the time of the Christian Passover
we celebrate our redemption
through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Lent is a time to prepare for this celebration
and to renew our life in the paschal mystery.
It is also a time for those who are turning again to Christ
to prepare by self-examination and penitence
for a new commitment to the covenant they once entered at their baptism.
We begin this holy season
by remembering our need for repentance,
and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed
in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Commendation

Those turning again to Christ may then be commended individually.⁹

Sponsor **I commend N who wishes to follow the path of penitence,
and turn again to Christ.**

Presider For some time now you have been confirming your baptismal
commitment. Are you ready to answer again the call of Christ?

Answer **I am.**

Here the person being presented may be invited to tell how the Spirit has led him/her to this moment.¹⁰

As each one is presented, the presider asks of the sponsor,

**Do you, as sponsor, believe that the time has come for this person to join
us in this time of discipline, in submission to the Spirit of Christ?**

Sponsor **I do, as God is my witness.**

⁹It is appropriate that those being presented not be called forward at this point, but remain standing in their place (together with their sponsors). Their identity as part of the company of the baptized is thus underlined.

¹⁰Those turning again to Christ may be invited to speak about what caused their alienation from the Church, and the experiences through which the Spirit enticed them back into the community of the Faithful. The sponsor needs to guide them in preparing what they will say at this moment.

The presider may then ask the sponsors and the congregation,

Brothers and sisters, will you accompany *these our friends* through the coming days of spiritual preparation?

Sponsor **We will.**

The presider then continues,

I invite you therefore, in the name of the Lord,
to observe a holy Lent
by self-examination, penitence,
prayer, fasting, and almsgiving,
and by reading and meditating on the word of God.
Let us kneel before our Creator and Redeemer.

The service continues with the silence, and Psalm 51 (p 282).

After the prayer over the ashes (p 285), the presider may say,

I invite *N and N* who *are* turning again to Christ
to receive this sign of ashes.
By the power of the Holy Spirit,
may God grant you to be for us
a living sign of that conversion
to which the Lord now calls us all.¹¹

Ashes are applied to the forehead of each, with the following words.

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Then one of those turning again to Christ may say,

I invite all who in this season of Lent are turning again to Christ
to receive this sign of ashes.

They may then join with the presider in applying ashes to others, using the same words.

¹¹Those turning again to Christ are invited to receive the sign of ashes first. One of them then invites the congregation to come forward, thus confirming the ongoing conversion of the community. They may join the presider in applying ashes to others. The interdependence of congregation and penitents is strengthened by the active role they are given in this rite.

Maundy Thursday: Restoring Communion in Mutual Service

Introduction

Maundy Thursday begins the most intense three days (the Triduum) of the Christian year. The liturgies of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Great Vigil of Easter are intended to be experienced as one extended celebration. Because the Thursday rite is our participation in the Last Supper, with our Lord's washing of the disciples' feet before the sharing of bread and wine, it is a particularly appropriate and poignant moment to complete the period of reconciliation for those turning again to Christ. From this moment on, they will participate fully with all the Faithful in Christ in celebrating the passion and resurrection of the Lord.

Of course, it is to be expected that submitting to the loving kindness of another – having one's feet washed – will be emotionally difficult, as we're reminded in the Maundy Thursday gospel. Peter was mortified: "Lord, you will never wash my feet." Jesus responds, "If I don't wash you, you don't really belong to me." In a typical human reaction, Peter then demands a full bath, "Lord, don't wash just my feet. Wash my hands and my head." Jesus' reply is particularly significant for the Maundy Thursday rite. "Those who have bathed and are clean all over need to wash just their feet. And you, my disciples, are clean . . ." Thus the Maundy Thursday ritual of foot washing is especially appropriate for those who are already baptized, but are returning to the Church. This is not the washing of baptism, but the washing *in remembrance* of baptism – a communion restored in mutual service. It is our joy and responsibility to remind those returning that they are "already clean" through baptism, and that their renewed commitment to Christ is inherently about servanthood.

Who is it for? Although for some time it was common for the clergy to wash the feet of 12 members of the congregation, supposedly representing Jesus and his disciples, the Church has reawakened to the value of the ministry of all Christians, this way of doing foot washing has come into question. All disciples are called to servanthood. It is appropriate, therefore, that those who are turning again to Christ be the first to have their feet washed, and then in turn to wash the feet of others, as models of the renewal to which all are called in Lent. Their renewal is our renewal, and their re-commitment is iconic of our constant call to conversion in Christ.

The exhortation following the sermon (BAS p 305) may be expanded in the following manner:

Presider Fellow servants of our Lord Jesus Christ,
on the night before his death,
Jesus set an example for his disciples
by washing their feet, an act of humble service.
He taught that strength and growth in the life of the kingdom of God
come not by power, authority, or even miracle,
but by such lowly service.

*N and N have been examples for us in turning again to Christ.
Therefore, I invite them to receive this sign of restoration
to the community perpetually reborn
in the cleansing waters of baptism.*

Those turning again to Christ are then seated on chairs near the front of the assembly; the presider, carrying a towel, proceeds to wash their feet, and then hands them towels.¹²

One of those turning again to Christ may say,¹³

In this season of lent we all are turning again to Christ.
Therefore I invite you, who share in his royal priesthood,
to come and follow the example of our Master.
But come remembering his admonition
that what will be done for us is also to be done by us to others,
for "a servant is not greater than his master,
nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.
If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

These then share in washing the feet of others; those receiving this sign may also share in administering it to others (including the Presider).¹⁴

¹²Some visual link to baptism (to underscore the implications of Jesus' response to Peter) is appropriate. The water for the foot-washing may be taken from the font at this moment, using the vessel customarily used in filling the font; or the foot-washing ceremony may be set within the baptistry (if there is one).

¹³The iconic leadership of those turning again to Christ through the lenten journey will become explicit when one of them voices this final paragraph of the invitation.

¹⁴Various approaches are envisaged in this rubric. If the presider alone had washed the feet of those turning again to Christ, one of them could be handed the pitcher and another the towel so that they, with the presider (holding a basin), may wash the feet of others. Or this ministry may be given over entirely to those whose feet have just been washed (so that the presider is free to receive the foot-washing with others). Those who subsequently receive the foot-washing may in turn administer it to others in a continuing rotation through the congregation.

The service continues with the Prayers of the People.

The presider may introduce the greeting of the Peace in these or similar words:

On this night Jesus gathered his own
and gave them this holy meal as a sign
that would draw them back into his peace
even after they had betrayed and forsaken him.
We ourselves, who have often betrayed him
and betrayed or offended one another,
are now reconciled by the blood of his cross.
Therefore, in Christ's name I implore you,
be reconciled to one another.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

The presider may first greet those who have turned again to Christ, and then invite members of the congregation to greet them as well.¹⁵

If the room is stripped of ornaments after the communion, those who have turned again to Christ may appropriately assist in this work.

¹⁵The sharing of the Peace becomes the first recognition of a fully restored communion between those turning again to Christ and the community of the Faithful. In greeting returning members first, the congregation publicly acknowledges the profound reconciliation that God has brought about.

Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant

Introduction

Who is it for? There are many ways for members of the Church to affirm their Christian faith. Weekly participation in the eucharist is the normative reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. Daily prayer, private and corporate, articulates and nourishes trust in the Lord. Acts of ministry also confirm the faith that is in us. James has much to say on this in his epistle (James 2:14-26). Those turning again to Christ, particularly when coming home to the Church after some time away, should be encouraged to reaffirm their faith formally within the Community of the Faithful. This act of reaffirmation *with* the Church, then, emphasizes re-integration into the Body of Christ, and has a profound effect both upon those returning and upon the members of the Church. It is a reminder both of the need for continual conversion for all Christians inspired by Christ's Spirit, and of the Spirit's work of reconciling all humanity.

When to do it. In the ancient Church, the Great Vigil of Easter eventually came to be seen as the most fitting occasion for baptism, when the Faithful gathered to celebrate Christ's rising. The Easter Vigil has, once again, become the annual rite of reaffirmation for Christians, and as such is the most appropriate occasion for those who have turned again to Christ to publically reaffirm their faith. The *Book of Alternative Services* makes specific provision for all members of the congregation to reaffirm their faith at the Easter Vigil, even when there are no baptisms. It is in this context that those who have turned again to Christ re-assert their profession of faith. Care must be taken not to usurp the special status of those being baptized at the Vigil, however. For this reason those who have turned again to Christ stand with the community during the Baptismal Covenant; then, after the Welcoming of the Newly Baptized, they may symbolize their reaffirmation by going first to the font to touch the water, giving the lead to the rest of the congregation.

After the welcoming of the newly baptised (or, when there are no baptisms, after the renewal of baptismal vows), each person who has turned again to Christ may go to the font to touch the water as a memorial of their baptism.

The presider then invites the whole congregation to touch the water,

**Emboldened by the work of God's Spirit in *N and N*,
let us all come to the font and touch the water of life,
as a sign that we have renewed our commitment to Christ.**