

THE BAPTISM OF ART

Notes on the Religion of the Catacomb Paintings

by

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I

THE difference between Graeco-Roman and mediaeval art, whether Byzantine or Western, is too wide to be explained simply by some such sequence of gradual changes as the general history of art-forms normally shews. The impression it makes is much rather that continuity, somewhere or other, was broken. And this was not the work of such outward events as barbarian invasions, the fall of the Western empire, or a shift of the centres of culture. Before any of these things had happened, or their effects had been marked, this difference was plain to be seen. There is no mistaking the break, say, between the frescoes of Pompeii and the mosaics of Ravenna. This is not merely a matter of changing from pagan or secular subjects to Christian, nor of such a gradual growth in the field of form as the following period traces. As early as the sixth or even as the fifth century we are faced by a renewed, revived, genuine religious art, wherein form and content have fused. It is this spiritual renewal that lies at the base of the later and properly mediaeval development. But what were the antecedents of this renewed art? When and where can we first touch and see this revolution in spirit? To answer this question we have to turn to early Christian art.

By the phrase "early Christian art" I understand, here, the art of the Christian Church up to the time of its recognition by the state. This use of the expression is justified by the fact that such traces of this art as remain are sharply differentiated from those of the period after Constantine, and so hold a special place in relation to the whole subsequent history of Christian art. The studies of the last twenty years have convincingly shown, as against the hitherto generally received view, that

there is no ground for dating even the oldest remains of this art any earlier than the end of the second century.¹

The period under review thus amounts to the third century, together with the first years of the fourth, and the last of the second, century. If, as we propose, we keep to the field of representational art, then, apart from the work at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates, which belongs to the third decade of the third century, the records of this art consist almost exclusively of wall-paintings in the catacombs of Rome and one or two other places, and of reliefs decorating sarcophagi found in Italy and southern Gaul. The traditions worked out within the limits of these two kinds of work lasted on in them for a hundred years and more, so that this material may still be used for the study of early Christian art. Besides these lingering traditions, we have to reckon with more novel principles, widespread in other kinds, which, once adopted for wall-paintings and tomb-carvings, were soon to spread as widely there. Whatever the cause, from the time of the edict of Milan onwards, the springs that had fed this early art began to fail, and its days were numbered. The break that finally put an end to it seems to have been the sharpest in the whole history of Christian creative art. It is no coincidence by which it corresponds with an equally decisive break in the destiny of Christendom.

Where lies the originality of this third-century art, when it is compared with the Christian art of other ages? It consists above all, in contrast with anything to be observed later, in this, that the early Christian painter or sculptor made no attempt, even unconsciously, to let the form of his work answer in some degree to its specific religious and Christian content.²

¹ The fundamental work is: F. Wirth, *Römische Wandmalerei vom Untergang Pompejis bis zum Ende des dritten Jahrh.*, Berlin, 1934. See also J. de Wit, *Spätromische Bildmalerei*, Berlin, 1938. The new dating, now generally accepted, is to be found in the works of F. Gerke (e.g. in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 59 (1940): *Ideengeschichte der ältesten christlichen Kunst*) and, after careful checking, in E. Weigand *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 41 (1941): *Die spätantike Sarkophagskulptur im Lichte neuerer Forschung*.

² Max Dvořák denies this. But the peculiarities of catacomb painting he points to are either illusory or common to all the decorative painting of later classical times, whether serving Christian or heathen, cultic or secular ends. See Dvořák, *Katakombenmalereien in Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* (1924).

As far as form goes, these works are no different from any technically comparable products of the pagan workshops of this period (whether or not these were destined for use in the cult). They cannot even be told, as once used to be thought, by their particularly poor formal quality. In some cases, few enough, it is true both carvings and paintings do reach a fairly high level of craftsmanship. Craft-work, indeed, "applied" art, is the most they attain. The form, in these carvings and paintings, simply carries their content, and makes no attempt to express or embody it. And this is the result, not of being afraid of art, or puritanically suspicious of "beauty", but of sheer indifference to art as such. The only interest art could retain for the early Christian was of the kind and degree of importance a modern believer may attach to the way that his Bible is printed or bound. Plainly, some who commissioned or carried out work in the catacombs or on sarcophagi were not without some concern for its decorativeness, richness, lavishness even, at times; but what is quite wanting is the insistence, which marks all great art, above all great religious art, that form shall be totally fused with its content. What is most remarkable is to find this indifference not to be confined to form in the ordinary sense of the word, but to extend even to the inward form. Apparently always, if not indeed necessarily, in the creative process there is a stage before the final embodiment of any subject in visible shape. This earlier stage, the dramatic or poetic rendering of the given subject, is the inward form.¹ And it is here that we find no attempt made to imagine how a thing must have looked at the time that it happened. The only peculiarity here to be seen is that the inward form is, in this art, simplified and condensed to the vanishing point; something there must be, but there is as little as possible. That is how not merely the forms but the features can be borrowed without alteration from the vast storehouse of classical tradition: for the Good Shepherd the figure of Hermes Criophoros serves, for Jonah under his gourd the pose of a sleeping Endymion, while Noah's ark is the property chest that did duty in the

¹ It is this inward form, in religious representational art, which should constitute the proper subject-matter of iconography.

fables of Danaë or Perseus, and in the Greek myth of the Flood, the tale of Deucalion and Pyrrha. More than that, entire themes, such as those of Orpheus, or Psyche and Eros, are borrowed wholesale, to lend them, it is true, a new meaning. For the Christian art, indeed, this was the one thing that mattered, and it was the only new thing that there was about it. Content, as an element answering to form in the production of works of art, concerned it as little as form. It had no use for anything except for meaning.

It is not enough to call this art symbolic, and so to contrast it with the didactic, "narrative" art of its own age or another. Byzantine mosaics are, in this sense, symbolic, in that they image sacred truths and saintly figures standing outside of time, freed from the overmuch particularity of earth. But so far from rendering either their inward or outward form vague or indeterminate, this feature conduces in them to create a special style which lends both alike a bold definition. Early Christian art, in sharp contrast, was quite content, in the matter of style, with the illusionistic or impressionistic kind of realism that was still dominant in the contemporary heathen world. Its inward form, on the other hand, disregarding for the moment its curious curtness, was somehow casual and unpremeditated. This was the more so in that for it neither sacred truths nor sacred figures existed for their own sake, but only as indications of their inherent meaning. It was indeed a descriptive art, but its descriptions might perfectly well be replaced by some verbal or other code of signs. Such an art is perhaps better styled, not symbolic, but signitive—borrowing a term applied, in another connection, by Leibniz. For a sign is distinct from a symbol in this, that its work is all done in passing its meaning on. It is not concerned with *expressing* that meaning, or with making the sign answer to the thing signified.¹ The Good Shepherd in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia at Ravenna (A.D. 450) is a literal depiction of Jesus Christ, not

¹ A sign, unlike a symbol, is in itself a thing indifferent; all that matters about it is what it signifies. It makes no difference whether we write the figure three as 3 or as iii; all that matters is that we should not confuse it with the figure two. "Ce qui distingue un signe, voilà tout ce qui le constitue" (F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 1922, p. 168).

indeed "in general", for no such figure is found at this period, but in one of his aspects for religion. The choice of this particular aspect, however, this special point of view, does not prevent the Person depicted being present before us in his whole reality; the mosaic would seem to say: Here he is; pray to him; he is like this. But in the catacombs, one or two centuries earlier, the Good Shepherd was not an image of Christ at all, even in one special aspect, but simply a picture of a shepherd with a lamb on his shoulders; the shepherd is a sign—not so much even of Christ, as, let us say, of some thought about Christ.¹ In the same way, a little figure holding a staff towards a shrouded corpse at the door of a tomb; another, with a like staff, facing a rock from which water is spurting; three little figures, near which a blazing fire is shewn: these do not so much represent the raising of Lazarus, Moses striking water from the rock, or the Three Holy Children in the burning fiery furnace; rather, they point beyond, to the meaning of those scenes. And in consequence from these conventionalised sketches all is eliminated but what is quite indispensable if the scene is to be recognised and its import understood.

Early Christian art does not pursue the same aims, nor, therefore, reach the results, that mark other ages of Christendom, or other, non-Christian, cultures. Form in it does not express religious feeling; does not expound sacred story; does not create saintly figures. To put it bluntly, it is not an art at all. It is a language coined to convey thought within a religion. This thought it does not embody, as the language of poetry does; it simply clothes it, like the words of our everyday speech. This feature demands a more serious and broadly-based explanation than it has so far received. Any such explanation must clearly be closely bound up with the character of the thought which this art utters, and of the religious experience from which it sprang. An earlier theory explained all the peculiarities of early Christian art by the funerary purpose of its surviving examples. This view was put out of court when the Christian work at Dura-Europos was found. This has

¹ We explain later on what, in fact, this thought was. But it is worth noting here that Hermes Criophoros, bearing the ram, or Aristaeus, the giver of honey and oil, were already accepted signs of salvation.

nothing to do with graves or burial-grounds. But it too shews no scenes or figures recorded for their own sake; it too is governed by the same curtness, and the same "signitive" principle.¹ The instance of Dura is all the more instructive in that there the almost completely contemporary frescoes in the Jewish synagogue shew a quite opposite principle. There, episodes from the Bible are worked out in detailed narrative; figures are given to some of the characters, such as the prophets, which can in some conventional sense be called portraits. It is most illuminating to have these two series of works, so close together in time and space, when we remember that, though the one belongs to the Jewish dispersion and the other to Christendom, both were exposed to the same Hellenistic and other influences. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the contrast of manner between the two is the result, not of different outside influences at work on the artists, as in such cases historians are too often ready to think, but of some deeper difference in their religious intention. The whole shape of the two religious outlooks displayed is quite different.

There is nothing new in the manner shewn in the Dura synagogue work. All the religious art of classical antiquity shares these two types of representation, the mythical scene and the saintly figure. From the fourth century onwards Christian art, too, shews this manner, more and more frequently, and, when it appears, then it denotes the end of the early Christian epoch. The position would not be radically changed if we could point to examples of this later manner occurring within the earlier period. For all through that period signitive art continues to be the dominant characteristic manner. Nor have we far to seek outside the borders of Christendom for an analogy to it, in the art of the mystery religions. These in the second and third centuries reached their widest diffusion. They have the same way of representing mystical figures and scenes, not for their own sake, but for what they mean in the mystery. And here, too, we find the same trend

¹ On the principles common to the Dura paintings and those in the catacombs, Dom O. Casel has some just remarks in the *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft*, 12 (1932), p. 39. On the differences between the baptistery paintings and those in the synagogue, *ibid.*, pp. 40-1.

towards curtness, the same indifference towards form as such.¹ These points by themselves would suffice to point towards the interpretation of early Christian art which we are advancing; but they do not stand alone. In any signitive art it is the choice and combination of themes which is the significant thing, not the way they are treated, a matter to which such an art is sublimely indifferent. And here we observe some more points in common to early Christian art and that of the mystery religions. Both choose to shew rather the working of godhead than godhead itself; and both group their representations on the principle of their convergence in meaning. On the sarcophagi and in the catacombs the Good Shepherd is not an image of Christ. More than that, he is not so much as a symbol of Christ, were it only in one of his aspects, the Saviour Christ. He is simply a visible token for the thought that it is he who saves, that it was to save us he came, that it is by him we are saved. Daniel in the lion's den is no portrait, however conventional, but a sign of the fact that he was delivered, and we are delivered, as Daniel was. And the Good Shepherd's lamb, or Daniel's lions, are not simply there to mark their identity: they point to the same idea as the figures themselves. But a statue of Isis, Diana of the Ephesians, or of some Aeon or other, had at this period similar religious meanings and was liable, therefore, to be overloaded with special attributes pointing to it. This cannot be said of the ancient Egyptian representations of Isis. Mithras, repeatedly, is shewn in action, in the act of slaying the bull—as is the Saviour, in the act of rescuing the sheep. He is shewn, that is to say, not for his own sake, but that of his office, the part that he plays in religion. As for the grouping of themes to converge on one central idea, we can see how it was done in the underground basilica close to the Porta Maggiore, just as, later on, in the *cubicula* of the Roman catacombs, we see the same thing done, with other themes, serving another religion.²

¹ This "symbolische Tendenz" was noted by Jacob Burckhardt, in a penetrating reference in *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen*, as long ago as 1853.

² See J. Carcopino, *La basilique pythagoricienne de la Porte Majeure* (1927). The purpose of this building, and of its decorations, remains partly unexplained, but all the subjects there treated can be reduced to the one of victory over death.

These are no mere chance analogies, though quite compatible with real differences, and providing no evidence for any borrowing. The never-ending and partial disputes over the influence on Christianity of heathen mystery religions have only obscured the plain fact that Christianity is a mystery religion. In the second and third centuries, at any rate, it was clearly perceived to be so. Not for nothing did Lucian of Samosata remark of the Christians that "they ever venerate that great man who was crucified in Palestine for having brought into being this new mystery."¹ While pagans thus saw in a "new mystery" the fundamental content of Christianity, there is also every reason to think (as in the sequel we hope to shew) that the Christians themselves experienced their religion above all as a mystery. And if that is so, we might *a priori* expect to find in their art this experience reflected. This would explain both its "signitive" character, and the peculiar resemblance it bears, as we saw, to the art of other mystery religions just in its choice and combination of themes. Once so much is granted, then, we have the clue to a deeper understanding of those chosen themes and of the thought which binds them together.

II

Catholic and Protestant scholars alike have hitherto tended to go astray in their interpretation of early Christian art. By instinct the Protestants shrank from whatever they found in its monuments which seemed to them to hint at "sacramentalism". The Catholics looked for a wrought-out and rounded system of doctrine, and read into the Christian mystery of pre-Constantinian days the graded and orderly scheme of the sacraments which was established, eventually, only much later.² To an unprejudiced view it should, however, be clear, on the one hand, that "sacramental" themes, those of baptism

¹ Lucian, *Peregr.*, 11: οτι κανὴν ταύτην τελετὴν εἰσήγαγεν εἰς τὸν βίον. cf. P. de Labriolle, *La réaction païenne*, 2nd ed., p. 102. Dölger, quoting these words of Lucian, says: "The pagans of the later second century viewed Christianity as a new mystery religion" (*Ichthys*, II, p. 516).

² Examples of this, on the Protestant side, are still to be found, in the works of Achelis and Elliger; on the Catholic side, in the works of Wilpert.

and of the eucharist in particular, are without doubt represented on sarcophagi and in the catacombs; there is room for dispute, at best, only on how widely they are distributed. On the other hand, it is equally clear that a living faith and a list of religious truths are two quite different things. What a Jew or a pagan, newly converted, and therefore baptised, and thereby initiate into the Christian mystery, was bound first of all to believe in would be the reality of his initiation. The heathen and Christian mysteries might give very different interpretations to the notions of initiation and the salvation thereby guaranteed. We shall see later on that they did, and that the difference accounts for the victory of Christianity. But these two notions remained none the less the link between heathen and Christian, and, for them both, the core of religious experience. More than that; in Christianity this experience must have been, as it was, very much deeper and livelier. And if this is so, it would be strange indeed had not this basic experience of mystery religion furnished the basic aim also of mystery art.

The ever-recurring themes on the sarcophagi and in the catacombs seem at first sight very various, and any close interpretation of them individually will be found to depend very largely on the broad interpretation given to them as a whole. For the purpose of this we may, and should, keep to the subjects most widely distributed. It goes without saying, we need to exclude from our reckoning those that occur for the first time in work dated later than Constantine. The figures for the sarcophagi need not delay us, since they lead in fact to the same final conclusion. We may safely concentrate on the catacomb paintings, and there the figures will speak for themselves.¹ The representations most frequently met with are

¹ I give the figures as they appear in Styger, *Altchristliche Grabeskunst*, 1927. The sarcophagi figures, which yield much the same result, are as follows:

1. Moses (standing for Peter) striking water from the rock	121*
2. Jonah	40 (or 115)
3. The raising of Lazarus	36
4. Daniel	30
5. The miracle of the loaves	55*
6. The binding of Isaac	50*
7. Adam and Eve	50*

The figures marked with an asterisk are those which claim a higher proportion of the total than those for the corresponding subjects in the catacombs. This

/ the *Orante* (153 times) and the Good Shepherd (120). Next, in order of frequency, come Moses striking water from the rock (86), Jonah (64, showing the whole story, or 146, reckoning separate episodes), the raising of Lazarus (53), Daniel in the lions' den (39), Noah (36), the miracle of the loaves (30), the binding of Isaac (25), the healing of the paralytic (19), Adam and Eve in the garden (19) and the Three Holy Children (17). Of other subjects, found less than 10 times, but in some of the oldest work, I mention Susannah (6), the Baptism (4), Christ and the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well (4), and a fisherman catching a fish. The last are two of the oldest. Since most examples examined spread over some two hundred years, to as late as the early fourth century, and their relative dating is often far from clear, it would be rash to draw from these figures many far-reaching conclusions. At least they give some idea of the bounds of our field of study, and of the comparative popularity of the various subjects represented. Though the whole range of the paintings shews an extreme degree of simplification and curtness, none of them using more than the fewest figures and furnishings, far the most popular of them are those that are simplest of all, the *Orante* and the Good Shepherd. Whatever remoter suggestions these may be thought to convey, no one can well doubt that their general sense is the Saviour and the soul's salvation.¹ The sense of the rest, we have suggested, depends on their links with each other, and with these two less doubtful cases.

But is there any such link, and, if so, what does it consist of? Somewhat surprisingly, one recent theory set out to deny it outright, and proposed to regard all the paintings as a sort of popular Bible anthology. It was very soon answered, and answered conclusively.² Mgr. Wilpert is, after de Rossi, the greatest authority on catacombs and sarcophagi, and he has reflects a later state of affairs, for very few of the sarcophagi go back to the third century. But the traditional themes, with their traditional interpretation, persist.

¹ See, for example, Gerke, *Ideengeschichte*, referred to above in n. 1, p. 8. Discussion is still going on the fine shades of meaning of the *Orante* figure, which, for our purpose we can neglect. Is it, for instance, prayer for the soul's own salvation, the prayer of a saved soul, or a personification of prayer in general?

² The view was put forward by Mgr. Styger (A.G., 1927) and answered by Mgr. Kirsch in the *Römische Quartalschrift*, 36 (1929).

advanced no *explicit* theory to cover this point, but in practice gone on the assumption that in early Christian art we have a complete exposition of the truths of the Catholic catechism. Such a view seems to us an anachronism.¹ Other scholars have sought to explain why paintings and carvings should bring together the subjects they do, by seeking analogies in Christian literature, and in particular in the liturgical prayers for the dying and Holy Week lessons; but they have nowhere succeeded in shewing any complete coincidence; those which are partial can well be explained, not by borrowing, but by the common stock of the religious thought which was inspiring sculptors and painters and writers alike.² Apart from that, to explain any compound of elements by the mere fact that some or most of these elements are to be found in other compounds as well, is to ignore or deny that they have any direct connection in thought. The majority of those who have worked in the field of early Christian art have always felt this connection was there, and forty years ago one of them hit on an accurate, if not complete, definition. This link consists in the one idea that, all would admit, the *Orante* and Good Shepherd denote; the idea of Salvation. There Ludwig von Sybel was perfectly right.³ Where he went wrong was in viewing it through some kind of vague reminiscence of the Lutheran principle of salvation by faith. Hence he explained it too abstractly, torn from its original context, and cut off from that life of religion from which early Christian art actually sprang. If the idea of salvation is the central idea of all Christianity, that is simply because it is the central idea of the great Christian mystery. What has a Christian to do with any salvation but that which through a sacrament made him a Christian? This fact, though as true in the twentieth century as ever it was in the second or

¹ For the most recent exposition of this view, see Wilpert, *La fede della chiesa nascente secondo i monumenti dell' arte funeraria antica*, 1938.

² See E. Le Blant, *Les sarcophages chrétiens de la ville d'Arles*, 1878, p. xix, and cf. K. Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, 1928, II, p. 382, and K. Michel, *Gebet und Bild*, 1902. Le Blant in his day referred to the *Ordo commendationis animae*, Holl to the Holy Week lessons. Neither contain all the catacomb subjects, and both include subjects not to be found in the catacombs. Moreover, those wanting in one cannot be supplied from the other.

³ L. von Sybel, *Christliche Antike*, I, 1906.

third, was undoubtedly then more vividly felt. It was felt in its fulness, and so, for that reason, was also its converse; we may put it thus: No salvation without sacrament; but also: No sacrament without the idea of salvation. In our day, those scholars, believers or not, who come from a Protestant background, forget the first half of this formula. Those of the Catholic school are inclined to ignore the corollary, and treat the sacraments as self-sufficient, or simply as corner-stones of an established religious scheme, easier to link with salvation in theory than practice. But we can find the key to understand the early Church in general, and early Christian art in particular, only if we will refuse to divorce salvation and sacrament, even in thought.

It may be objected that some of the catacomb subjects listed above may seem to have no meaning outside salvation, directly regarded; while others refer to the sacrament only. In the first class would be the Good Shepherd, *Orante*, Daniel, the three children, Susannah, perhaps Adam and Eve in the garden:¹ the second class would include the Baptism² and the miracle of the loaves.³ But this classification is not well-grounded, as can be seen at once from the mere fact that it will not cover the rest of the repertory. The raising of Lazarus and binding of Isaac directly suggest the thought of Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection: but, in the natural context of Christian faith, this thought is inseparable from that of salvation, and

¹ Von Sybel made the acute observation that Adam and Eve may well be represented, not for their own sake, but simply as signposts to Eden. How otherwise are we to know it is Eden? In any case, this is not one of the earliest themes. It may have a double reference, and at once signify Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.

² Four of eight catacomb paintings of the Baptism, listed by Styger, shew a dove descending out of the heavens, and have therefore been deemed to depict the baptism of Jesus. The other four, lacking the dove, are taken to shew a neophyte's baptism. The distinction is open to question. None of the eight, in fact, views either the Lord's, or any one individual's, baptism as a concrete and unique event. It is worth noting that in every case the painter, to serve his own ends, shews the figure baptised, whether Christ or another, as that of a small boy. So do the sarcophagi. In short, there is here no "depiction" of anything, simply the suggestion of the thought of baptism. No more is required.

³ The miracle of the loaves is a recognized eucharistic subject. But several Protestant scholars have suggested that, in certain cases that Wilpert lists under this head, we may have only the heavenly meal, shewn as a token of heavenly bliss: they may well be right. In any case heavenly bliss could not be supposed to be had save through the sacrament.

that of the sacrament (directly, at least, that of the eucharist; but, as we see later on, this makes little difference). The next most popular catacomb subjects point quite distinctly, not to salvation alone, but sacramental salvation through baptism. It is noteworthy in how many cases Moses striking water from the rock is replaced by Peter, and the Jews slaking their thirst at it by heathen, shewn to be such by being depicted as Roman legionaries. Noteworthy too that in one of the oldest of these pictures of Moses, in the water that flows from the rock a fisherman, who, though no portrait, is clearly meant for the Saviour, is fishing, that is, catching souls.¹ Noah, again, saved from the flood in the ark, is not simply a type of salvation from danger. As early as 1 Pet. iii. 20-1, his deliverance is treated as figuring baptism, with special emphasis laid on the fact of its being effected "through water", δι' ὕδατος.² Jonah, of course, may equally well be said to have been saved "through water", while in the Gospels themselves his deliverance is linked with the thought of Christ's death and rising again. In the catacombs his story, unlike the rest, is most often worked out in a series of three or four episodes. In a fresco at Cagliari, now destroyed, the normal treatment of this subject was to be found combined with the symbolism of souls being snatched from the water, in baptism, and by this means its mystery import was emphasised.³

¹ In the *cubiculum* next door to this, the fisherman catches his fish in the same water in which a baptism goes on alongside him. These paintings are to be seen in what Wilpert calls *Sakramentskapellen* A₂ and A₃ of the cemetery of Callistus. As for Moses, he often does duty for Peter (wearing a beard when he does so, though in his own person he is beardless). This is the case in the catacombs in 26 out of 86 cases, and in all but one on the sarcophagi. See E. Becker, *Das Quellwunder des Moses in der altchristlichen Kunst*, 1909. The point here is not so much that this equation is possible, as that it leaves unaffected the symbolism of baptism, or, more precisely, of baptismal water, which is the root thought in this subject.

² The subject of Noah is not the historical narrative, either. It is significant that on her own sarcophagus (Garrucci, II, p. 36) Julia Juliana is shown in the person of Noah standing in the ark, while the dove brings her the olive-leaf, sign of salvation. From this Mgr. Wilpert concludes (*Katakombenmalereien*, p. 344), though it does not seem obvious, that Noah, in the catacombs, stands for salvation, not baptism. However that may be, in general, here we have both in conjunction. Julia Juliana is baptised, therefore one of the "living", the "saints". She is saved, in the way Noah was saved.

³ At Cagliari a lamb coming up from the water stood for the baptised, and therefore saved, soul (see Wulff, *Altchristliche und byzantinische Kunst*, I, p. 92). One of the catacomb paintings of Jonah, after his deliverance, resting beneath the gourd, bears an inscription: ZOSIMIANE IN DEO VI[VAS] (Wilpert, *op. cit.*, plate 205). The sense of this is the same as that of the Julia Juliana sarcophagus.

Thus, in these three subjects, we find the idea of salvation and that of the sacrament bound up beyond all unravelling. But, were it not that the two do suggest one another, and implicitly co-inhere, even where outwardly they are distinct, this is not psychologically possible.¹

Dölger's most thorough research on the Fish in early Christian symbolism leaves no doubt that we have here to do with no mere emblem, such as the *labarum* of later days, but with a symbol, something more vivid and complete by far. The Fish denotes not simply Jesus Christ, but Christ the Saviour; not simply the Saviour, but a Saviour who works through sacraments; through that of communion, for fish is a food (as the Pectorius inscription, for instance, insists); through that of baptism, for fish live in water (Tertullian significantly styles the Christians *pisciculi Jesu Christi*). To speak more precisely, both sacraments in this one symbol are envisaged from one point of view, felt as one act of Christian initiation, wherein indeed, as we have already admitted, the two sacraments fused into one. In just the same way the reliefs and the paintings have one common meaning, one and yet complete, because it is quivering with life. Various as may be their starting points and shades of meaning, all alike point towards salvation, in all the convergent senses of that great word—Salvation through

¹ It should not be overlooked that, in the catacombs, few *cubicula* shew in isolation subjects which, like Daniel, or the three children, hardly directly relate to the sacraments. Such subjects usually come in conjunction with Noah, Jonah and the binding of Isaac. Moses striking water from the rock characteristically tends to accompany the raising of Lazarus. Sometimes, as Dom H. Leclercq noticed (*D.A.C.L.*, xi, 2, cols. 1666 f.) this can be accounted for by the similarity of the two subjects as decorative compositions; yet such symmetry is very far from being apparent in every case, and it is hard to exclude the thought of affinity in meaning. Some subjects, more often found on sarcophagi than in the catacombs, clearly have a double reference, first to the water of baptism, then to the wine of the eucharist. Such are the woman of Samaria by Jacob's well (9 examples), and the miracle at Cana of Galilee (34, against 2 in the catacombs). The healing of the man born blind (50 times on the sarcophagi, 7 in the catacombs) has connections, of course both with baptism viewed, as it was more and more in the fourth century, as φωτισμός, enlightenment, and with the pool of Siloam of John ix. 7. As for the healing of the paralytic (on 33 sarcophagi), its appearance in the Dura baptistery goes to shew how it makes its connection with baptism, by way of the pool of Bethesda, in John v. 2. Dura, and not a few later baptisteries, also shew, with the same end in view, Peter saved on the water (Matthew xv. 28-33), and the Good Shepherd, whose figure, Tertullian tells us (*de Pudic.*, c. 10), communion chalices also bore.

the one Baptismal Mystery.¹ But this we can only hope fully to grasp if we turn to the life of religion itself, to the structure of that religious awareness, apart from which not this or that point of symbolism, but the whole signitive art that sustains it is meaningless: a point that is not at once clear, but becomes ever clearer as we move on into the age after Constantine.

III

Fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani; it is not possible to understand early Christianity without paying heed to these words of Tertullian: "Christians are made and not born".² But how are they made? Through baptism, treated as initiation. There is no other way. So it was in those first ages; so it is still, in theory at any rate. In practice, however—and that for a long time now—it has come to look very different.

What is still, ontologically, taken for granted, now, psychologically, no longer happens; and nothing that is subject to history can escape psychological change. Only the convert, in present-day Christendom, baptised in manhood, can still experience, and therefore remember, his baptism: all the rest, the majority, cannot. As far as they are aware, it is one sacrament among others, and matters much less than communion. For such an outlook, Origen's words, when he called baptism "the source and the starting-point" of all the gifts of grace, though in accord with Church teaching, remain merely words.³ For present-day Christians the centre of their sacramental life lies in the eucharist; and that is natural enough, since from Constantine onwards it has come to hold far the greater place in the thought and imagination of the Christian Church.

¹ W. Elliger, *Zur Entstehung und frühen Entwicklung der altchristlichen Kunst*, 1934, p. 81, maintains that in early Christian art the eucharist is represented more often than baptism. But it is not a question of representation, so much as allusions. In any case, the point is a small one, since the eucharist is included in baptism. The fisherman, like the fish, alludes to them both (cf. Gerke, *Ideengeschichte*, p. 37 ff.).

² *Apol.* xviii. 4. (Cf. *de testim. animae*, 1: *(Anima) fieri enim, non nasci, solet Christiana.*) And see E. Bickel in *Pisciculi*, Festschrift Dölger, 1939, pp. 54–61; though the interpretation there given does not affect the root-meaning of Tertullian's phrase.

³ Origen, In Joann. VI, 17. Ἡ χαρισμάτων θεῶν ἀρχὴ καὶ πηγὴ.

Correspondingly, baptism has dwindled, its ceremonial and symbolism have been impoverished, and in Western Christendom, at any rate, it has been sharply divided by an interval, sometimes of many years, from confirmation and first communion. The believer, now, lives by the eucharist, and gives little thought to his baptism. If not on the plane of existence, on that of awareness, we were none of us made, but born, Christians. The early Church for the most part was made up of those who were newly converted, and therefore could not but feel otherwise. Baptism for them was the most important event in the life of a Christian, and to his mind would appear as a single and singular initiatory mystery, experienced once for all and unrepeatable, beyond comparison with anything in the world. But included within this one mystery, on the same footing with the baptismal act, there were two other moments, each more intense than the last; the chrismation, and holy communion.

This uniqueness and unity of the one mystery are most important. Though for a long while, it seems, they eluded the eye of historians, there is no lack of evidence for them in the literature of the period.¹ Heathen writers, with Lucian, speak of one *καὶνὴ τελετὴ*, or, with Pliny, of one *sacramentum*: never of baptism and of the eucharist in isolation.² Two features are characteristic of Christian documents. One is the way they combine the two sacraments within the context of the initiatory rite. The other is that their habitual distinction is drawn, not between baptism and eucharist, but between the baptismal eucharist and that of ordinary Sunday observance. Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* belongs to the early third century, but it reflects the church order prevailing in Rome during the previous century. It describes at length only the baptismal eucharist, and ordinations, but pays no attention to

¹ The chief exception among historians is R. Reitzenstein, *Vorgeschichte der christlichen Taufe*, 1929. The point is well taken by Dölger, *Ichthys*, II, p. 521: "In the earlier view of Christian initiation, the eucharist was inseparable from baptism." p. 524: "Baptism and the eucharist were indeed closely linked throughout all Christian antiquity."

² Tertullian, quoting Pliny in *Apol.*, II, 6, gives *sacramentum* in the singular, which is the reading of much the best manuscript, *Cod. Fuldensis*; *Cod. Parisiensis* has the plural. cf. *Apologeticum*, ed. Walsing, 1929, p. 5.

the Sunday eucharist.¹ The Text of the *Didache*, which may be earlier, moves from prescriptions on baptism straight to the prayers of the eucharist, and only briefly, elsewhere, refers to the service of Sundays.² Justin, in his first *Apology*, draws a clear picture, and this, which belongs to the mid-second century, is of course evidence for some time earlier than that. In chapter 61, for the first time, Justin speaks of the ritual of baptism. Then, for three chapters, we have a digression on devilish parodies of this rite in heathen mysteries. The next chapter returns to the subject of baptism, with an account of the kiss of peace and the communion that follow it. In chapter 66 Justin interprets the rite of the eucharist, in the same way that in chapter 61 he had interpreted baptism, glancing likewise, though more briefly, at "imitations" of it in the mysteries of Mithras. The next chapter, which, but for the epilogue of 68, is really the last in the book, begins with the words: "And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things (*or*, one with another recall these things). And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together (*or*, all support one another)."³ Only then does Justin go on to describe the service of Sundays, in which the synaxis precedes and leads up to communion.⁴ By dint of this perfectly lucid arrangement Justin contrives to describe first, in detail, the initiatory mystery in its entirety, then, and more briefly, what is in effect its part-repetition on Sundays, with the synaxis taking the place of the baptism. From this it is fair to conclude that the Christian mind of his day was aware, not as we are, of two sacraments, baptism and then the eucharist (with, no doubt, others as well), but of one. The foundation was laid in the baptismal eucharist; thereupon followed, Sunday by Sunday, its reproduction in

¹ For the text of Hippolytus, see the edition of G. Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition*, I, 1937.

² I have not here to consider the real character of these eucharistic prayers as they appear in the *Didache*.

³ Tr. M. Dods, in *The Writings of Justin Martyr*, in the Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 1867, p. 65.

⁴ Reitzenstein is surely correct when he writes (*op. cit.*, p. 39): "Justin . . . describes communion as a part of Christian baptism." *ibid.*, p. 179: "So too Justin (like the *Didache*, that is) in the *Apology* gives separate descriptions of communion at baptism and of the Sunday rite. We must suppose this treatment of the subject to be intentional and justified by the facts."

part, bound up with the memory of it. That commemoration of which Justin speaks in the first words of his sixty-seventh chapter is most naturally interpreted as referring to the baptismal mystery in its entirety, not to any one definite moment therein. And, as the Christians who have gone through it commemorate it by their mutual aid and their communal life, so, Justin seems to mean, the Sunday eucharist is celebrated in memory of it. By this means what was experienced once can be continually present in this sacrament, weekly repeated.¹

There is no lack of testimony to the close union into which baptism and eucharist, with other rites, later lost or else, like confirmation, developed into distinct sacraments, enter, once the two are regarded as parts of the initiatory mystery, wherein one follows the other as a matter of course. As early as the Epistle to the Hebrews (vi. 4-8) baptism and communion form links in a single chain: "ye were *enlightened*, and *tasted* . . . the heavenly gift." Some Christian documents which, somewhat later, deal with the baptism of individuals, not with its solemn public performance, give a picture which draws them still closer together. So, in the second half of the second century, the legendary *Acts of Xantippa, Polyxena and Rebecca* tell how Xantippa begged Paul to baptise her; Paul, taking her by the hand, led her into the house, and there baptised her in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost; then, taking the bread of the eucharist, gave it to her, saying: "Be this to thee for forgiveness of sins, and for the renewal of thy soul." Thereupon Xantippa, having received the divine gift of holy baptism, returned to her house, rejoicing and praising God.² Here we find that the forgiveness of sins and renewal of soul is conferred by the eucharist, not by the baptismal rite in isolation, but, on the other hand, still not apart from it; for Xantippa refers the "gift of holy baptism" to the two moments taken together. In Tertullian, as also in Didymus of Alexandria, it is not uncommon to find the various stages of the initiatory mystery set out, beginning with baptism and ending

¹ Batiffol, *Études d'histoire et de théologie positive* (9th ed., 1930), II, p. 9, it seems to me, is mistaken in taking the first words of Chapter 67 as referring to a commemoration of the Last Supper.

² See *Acta Xantippae et Polyxenae*, ed. M. R. James, 1893, p. 43.

with communion, while the word *sacramentum* is indifferently used for either sacrament in isolation, or for the two of them taken together. Cyprian, in arguing that there is no entering the kingdom of God apart from baptism, quotes John iii. 5, but, equally, also from John vi. 54, where the reference is to the eucharist, not baptism.¹ The Epistle of Dionysius of Alexandria to Pope Xystus II yields two further and striking pieces of evidence; one bears on the way that the normal communion at mass in the Christian mind is connected with baptism, presumably with the eucharistic part of it; the other is on the importance believers attach to the punctual performance of the whole ritual of the initiatory mystery.²

In Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* we have a description in detail of this whole mystery, starting [at least in the Sahidic, Arabic and Ethiopic versions.—*Tr.*] with blessing the water, and ending up with communion, and, incidentally, giving most valuable indications on this, the supreme crowning point of the rite. We learn that here there were given two cups, one of milk mixed with honey, the other of water, besides the properly eucharistic gifts of bread and a cup of wine, to which the ordinary Sunday communion was limited. Ritually, though not dogmatically, all three cups stood on one footing. [The single formula of administration is shared out between the bread and three cups.—*Tr.*] The text points out the symbolism of milk and water. The milk and honey is given in token of the land of promise, that is, the kingdom of heaven, the land flowing with milk and honey, and at the same time by way of food for babes, with whom the newly-baptised are compared; the water, so that the inward and animal—not yet the spiritual—man might be washed, as his body had been in the font.³ The cup of milk and honey was long retained in the rites of the Roman, African and Alexandrian churches, and in the Abyssinian and Coptic churches remains in use to this day; the

¹ *Testim.* III, 25 and 26. Cf. Dölger, *Ichthys*, II, p. 525. "Any allusion in Christian antiquity to rebirth carried an implicit reference to the complete initiation rite, baptism, confirmation and eucharist together."

² *Vide apud* Euseb., *Hist. Eccl.* ix, and cf. Feltoe, *Dionysius of Alexandria*, pp. 56–9, and Batiffol, *L'eucharistie*, pp. 285 ff.

³ *Aquam vero in oblationem in indicium lavacri ut et interior homo quod est animale similia consequatur sicut et corpus. Ap. Trad.*, ed. Dix, p. 41.

cup of water seems to have disappeared sooner; it is, at any rate, more rarely mentioned, apparently since, with the widening gap between baptism and eucharist, its symbolism had ceased to be understood. Drinking water, still more tasting honey and milk, were ritual practices widespread in antiquity; the heathen mysteries had known them long before the Christian; but that does not settle the question of what was their point in the Christian mystery, and what was the reason for bringing them into it. In our view, the point was to couple its links more closely, and so to bring out its inward unity. The draught of water at the rite's end sends us back to the bath in water at its start, and dovetails baptism into the eucharist, as it were, between the bread and wine.¹ The cup of milk and honey at once strikingly symbolises the soul's regained infancy and newness of life, and suggests that what confers them is not merely the washing but the entire mystery. Small wonder that the newly-baptised Perpetua's first vision shewed her the milk cup proffered her by the hands of the Good Shepherd, and the second, her dead brother, young Dinocrates, drinking from such a golden cup as they had lately shared, perhaps, as their initiation ended.²

IV

The name of baptism must have conveyed to the mind and, even more, the imagination of early Christians not merely the act from which the name was drawn, but the baptismal mystery in its entirety. All the vigour of their hope, every tremor of their faith, they bent on this. And thus they could refer to baptism even those images of the catacombs that scholars of our day confine to the eucharist or to salvation. And this peculiar feeling that they had for baptism led them to lend it an *absoluteness* which later ages could not grant, did not even

¹ According to the text (*ed. cit.*, pp. 41-2) the neophyte first receives the bread, then drinks of the cup of water, then of that of milk and honey, last of all of the cup mingled of wine and water. On the anticipations of this rite in heathen mysteries, and on its subsequent history, see Usener, *Kleine Schriften*, IV (Heilige Handlung).

² *Passio Perpetuae*, c. VIII (*ed. Robinson*, 1891, p. 74). Dölger, *Antike und Christentum*, II, 1 (1930), pp. 1 ff. adduces reasons for believing Dinocrates to have died a Christian. Yet it is still in a baptismal form that Perpetua conceives his lot to be eased beyond the grave.

feel, and from the last consequences of which the Church recoiled from the start. This absoluteness has two sides to it; on the one hand, baptism is irreplaceable and indispensable; on the other hand, it takes effect at once and once for all.

✓ A formula for the indispensable necessity of baptism might be, and often was, found in the words of Jesus in John iii. 5: "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." The sense of these words remains unchanged to-day, but early Christianity accepted them with an immediacy and force which we fail to match. The idea that salvation apart from baptism is impossible was taken so literally as to cover even the righteous of the old Covenant, whose deliverance from Hades could be imagined only under the concrete shape of baptism. In the mid-second-century *Epistle of the Apostles*, Christ declares to the disciples: "I went down to Lazarus' abode and proclaimed to the righteous and prophets that they should come forth from the mansion below and ascend to the mansion above; and with my right hand I shed forth upon them the water of life and forgiveness and of salvation from evil (the Ethiopian text here has simply 'the water of baptism') as I had done unto you, and unto them that have believed in me." In the *Shepherd of Hermas* (*Simil.* ix. 16) the salvation of the Old Testament worthies, though it is not linked up with Christ's descent into Hades, is still found inconceivable apart from baptism. With Hermas, these worthies receive the "seal of the gospel", τὴν σφραγίδα τοῦ κηρύγματος, from the apostles and teachers who had fallen asleep "in the power and faith of the Son of God", those, that is, who had themselves received baptism, and they too must be "raised through water", ἀναβῆναι δι' ὕδατος, that they may be "made alive", ἵνα ζωοποιηθῶσιν. Evidently the same sense that baptism is irreplaceable governed those who were "baptised for the dead" (1 Cor. xv. 29), who, that is, either themselves were baptised on behalf of dead kinsfolk or friends (a custom later attested in Marcionite and Cerinthian circles, described by Tertullian as *vicarium baptismi*), or baptised and gave communion direct to the dead, a practice condemned in a constitution of Carthage in 397. Clearly in this last case communion was

taken as part of the baptismal rite and standing, as part, for the whole. The baptismal mystery exerted such power over the imagination of Christians that they conceived even martyrdom, the one generally accepted substitute for it, not as something different, though having the same effect, but as its exact counterpart in a variant form. It was in fact a dipping in blood, alongside the dipping in water; and this thought was much more than a metaphor. Tertullian (*de Pudic.* 22) sees in the blood and the water that came from the Saviour's side (John xix. 34) the prototype of both patterns of baptism; while Cyprian, who, as does Origen too, rates that of blood higher than that of water (*ad Fortunatum*, 4); accordingly deems it an authentic *sacramentum baptismi* (Ep. LXXIII, 22); he brings it, that is, under the idea of the saving and quickening Christian mystery.

The counterpart, for the Christian mind, of baptism being thus quite indispensable and quite inevitable lay in the fact that it worked without failing, and worked full salvation. It gave full salvation from sin and from death, at once and once for all. Such, at any rate, was the primitive sense of the initiatory mystery, and such the basic experience of the baptised and converted. The act of conversion and state of repentance were both conceived as one thing under the name *μετάνοια*, while *μετάνοια* was crowned from above by baptism, bringing deliverance from death and from sin. The Epistle to the Hebrews (vi. 1-2), enumerating "the first principles of Christ", brings them down to these three moments: conversion, initiation and salvation. The same truth is even more shortly and sharply expressed in Acts xi. 18: "Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life", τὴν μετάνοιαν εἰς ζωὴν; in other words, he has granted them life, found, through repentance, in baptism. It is significant that, in the subapostolic age, the baptised were described as "the living", and all alike held equal title to the style of "saints".¹ Augustine, in his day, with equal significance, testifies that in his Africa the Punic Christians called baptism

¹ *Didache*, x. 6: "If any be holy, then let him come [to communion]. If any be not [holy], let him be converted (*μετανοήτω*). " "Let him repent" is an inexact rendering, though it is to be found, for example, in Laurent's French version. On the sense of the words "saint" and "holy" in the early Church, see H. Delahaye, *Sanctus*, 1927.

simply Salvation, and the eucharist, which first gives life in the baptismal mystery and ever after remains "the food of immortality", they called, in like fashion, Life.¹ The pagans, Porphyry and, later, Julian, were disturbed above all by the stubborn belief of the Christians in the immediacy and completeness of purification in baptism, "like a snake sloughing its skin". It disturbed them because they could never conceive the depth of the spiritual revolution that was the reality answering to the idea of μετάνοια.² For the new Christian convert it was, on the other hand, this deep experience that gave him confidence in the finality of his salvation, and would not let him conceive any kind of repentance but that which had brought him, through baptism, to his salvation. Repentance, for him, was conversion; μετάνοια εἰς ζωὴν was done once for all, and incapable of repetition. So it is said in the chapter of Hebrews already referred to (vi. 4-6), that "it is impossible", ἀδύνατον, "to renew" the baptised "again unto repentance", πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν. What is in view here is clearly not any unwillingness, but a psychological and even an ontological impossibility. "Whosoever is begotten of God sinneth not" (1 John v. 18); St. John's first Epistle here, too, states a fact, not a wish.³ The primary and fundamental sense of the phrase in the Creed: "I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins" is that baptism delivers from sin, and grants immortality, once for all, not that it renders forgiveness for sins after baptism possible, though that interpretation was never ruled out, and was in course of time inescapable. This does not mean, as is commonly thought, losing the early sharp sense of the end, in the effort to set up a durable order on earth: for logical conflict in matters of faith is no barrier to psychological, any more than theological, that is to say meta-logical, compatibility.

The Church, clearly enough, always knew very well that Christians, in spite of being baptised, always die (at least

¹ *De peccatorum meritis* (Patr. Lat. 44, 128).

² P. de Labriolle, *op. cit.*, pp. 274 ff., 397, 407.

³ Tertullian, *de Bapt.*, in *fine* c. viii, first likens baptism to the Flood, and then goes on: "Sed mundum rursus deliquit, quo male comparatur baptismus diluvio—the comparison fails, since after the Flood, the world relapsed again." Cf. Holl, *op. cit.*, p. 122: "The earliest Christianity knew of but one forgiveness of sins, that given in baptism."

physical death), and often, moreover, start sinning again: but that did not stop it believing repentance and baptism final; it only set it to look for a manner of thought which would let it combine what was absolute with what was relative. Of course, it could not accept the Valentinian and Carpocratian teaching that sin was not imputed as guilt to them, in other words, did not count as sin. But, as for death, all Christians believed that death was no longer true death, and reckoned the day of their death as the date of the martyrs' "birthday".¹ The hundred years of the penitential controversy, which ran from the mid-second to the mid-third century, witness not only the tenacity of the rigorist view but the resistance that belief in the finality of baptism put up against all attempts to modify it; attempts that yet answered to a real need for the Church. Even in the fourth century, in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, we still meet this characteristic hesitance in the Church's mind: "They that have been baptised into the Lord's death must sin no more. For just as the dead are unable to sin, so they that have died with Christ cannot commit sin. So, brethren, we think not that any who was washed in the laver of life would besmirch himself with unseemly deeds." Here, so to speak, we are given the choice between "Must not", "Cannot", and the somewhat timid "think not that any . . . would": the notion of prohibition cannot quite shut out that of impossibility. In the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle, celebrating a baptismal eucharist, blesses the bread, and prays to God: "Make, Lord, this bread the bread of life, that they who taste thereof may become incorruptible. . . . Grant that in this life they may ever be unspotted." Doubtless it is taken for granted that the prayer is heard; sinlessness and incorruption alike could be taken quite literally. The Gnostic Menander promised those that received his baptism that they should escape old age and death.²

¹ And that of others besides. Tertullian states, *de Cor.* c. III: "Oblationes pro defunctis, pro natalitiis annua die facimus": "we make our offerings for the dead on the anniversaries of their death instead of on their birthdays."

² Irenaeus, *adv. Haer.* I, xxiii, 5, describes Menander's teaching: "Resurrectionem enim per id, quod est in eum baptismum, accipere ejus discipulos, et ultra non posse mori, sed perseverare non senescentes et immortales." He insisted: "Mortem ad suos non modo non pertinere, verum non pervenire. In hoc scilicet se a superna et arcana potestate legatum, ut immortales et incorruptibiles et statim resurrectionis compotes fiant qui baptismum ejus induerint" (Tertullian, *de Anim.*, c. 4).

Even as late as the fourth century Jovinian could still maintain the view, by then archaistic, but in close accord with the primitive Christian notion of sanctification, that the devil can never tempt the baptised, and that the same reward awaits them all alike in heaven.¹ The Church could not but reject such rigid formulations. They sprang, nevertheless, from that same feeling for the absolute finality of baptism, which, in other aspects, inspired Tertullian's rigorism, or the widespread notion that it is better not to be baptised than to sin after baptism. This thought found expression as early as the second Epistle of Peter (ii. 20-2), and later was to lead to the custom of delayed or death-bed baptism. It even induced Monica to refrain from having Augustine baptised in childhood.²

V

"The seal of incorruption", "the laver of regeneration"; these are not simply elegant phrases; they mark the measureless fullness of the experience undergone by early Christianity. "Like as Christ was raised from the dead," says St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans (v. 4), "so we also", who are baptised, should "walk in newness of life", ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν. And the life thus renewed in baptism was no fiction, but the real life of the newly-converted. The focus of their faith renewed the immortality, or resurrection, that they found in the baptismal mystery. *Fiducia Christianorum resurrectio mortuorum*. With this triumphal axiom Tertullian opens his treatise on the resurrection of the flesh, and his words find a distinct echo in the calm confident phrase of the simple-hearted Syrian, Aphraates: "The Holy Ghost through baptism enters a man, and gives him resurrection."³ In the *Acts of Philip*, the apostle in the hour of death recalls his "scaling" and prays God to

¹ Jerome, *adv. Jov.*, I, 3. Cf. Tixeront, *Histoire des dogmes*, II, pp. 245 f.

² The fourth century nicknamed *clitici* or *grabatines* those who put off baptism until their death-bed. Constantine, among them, adopted the pretext that he must wait till he could be baptised in Jordan. Once clad in his chrisom robe, Eusebius says, he intended to have no more dealings with the purple.

³ Aphraates, *Hom.* I, 19 (ed. Parisot, p. 44).

clothe him again in the white robe of his baptism.¹ The fundamental religious impulse of early Christianity is this belief in a deliverance from sin and death effected through the mediation of the mystery. Its religious content is another matter. The religious content of Christianity is defined by the gospel, and, in the gospel, first and foremost, by the figure of Christ; there is nothing even remotely like it in the other mystery religions; and that is why they paint a coarser, more self-centred picture of salvation, and their idea of conversion, far from tending to fuse with that of repentance, has, more often than not, nothing to do with it. It was in virtue of its content that Christianity triumphed over the other mystery religions. But, had its own faith not been centred on a mystery, it could not even have begun to compete with them for the allegiance of the unbelieving and the pagan world.² It was; and by this faith it *lived*: down to the time of Constantine all its fruits were marked by it, from the endurance of the martyrs down to the most original features of its art, an art perhaps best styled "mortified"—deeply humiliated.

This mortification, we have seen, went so far that, in the result, it can hardly be called art at all. Not merely its aesthetic form but everything visible about it is but a means to serve an alien end. It is a code of visible forms intended to serve as signs, and this signitive character it draws from its mystery import. It is neither descriptive nor expressive; it is indicative. What it points to is that same fiery core, that same life-giving sun, faith in a mystery, to which the martyrs and confessors of the age, their heathen converts, the ritual of their baptism, even the very enemies of Christianity testify. The Saviour, the saved, the various aspects of salvation, these, linked by the thought of the sacrament, between them exhaust the interests of Christian

¹ *Acta Philippi*, 144 (ed. and tr. M. R. James, p. 450). This is his prayer: "Let not their dark air cover me, that I may pass the waters of fire and all the abyss. Clothe me in thy glorious robe and thy seal of life that ever shineth, until I have passed by all the rulers of the world and the evil dragon that opposeth us."

² Loisy was quite right when he wrote (*Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien*, p. 328): "C'est au mystère chrétien, ce n'est pas à l'Évangile de Jésus, que le monde antique s'est converti et qu'il aurait pu se convertir." But this is only one side of the story. The Christian gospel is not something accessory to the Christian mystery; had the ancient world drawn this distinction, it would have remained unconverted.

art in its first stages, just as, we saw, in the Epistle to the Hebrews (vi. 1, 2), repentance, baptisms and laying-on of hands, and resurrection exhaust "the first principles of Christ". Repentance remains beyond the purview of the art of the catacombs. So does the Gospel story. So does the figure of Christ, though all these provide it with its inspiration. Repentance is only a preliminary condition, the porch-way of the mystery. Baptism and resurrection, on the other hand, the initiatory sacrament with its import of salvation, on these twin themes the art of the catacombs never wearies of reiterating its meagre repertory of sign-forms, so touching in their chaste simplicity. ✓ Once these forms are supplemented by the first faltering illustrations of the Gospel stories, once narrative, and saintly figures gloriously set forth, begin to claim a place, it is the foreshadowing of another age.

The old traditions lingered longest, it is true, in the field of funerary art. They lingered there because in them mystery religion had found a form of expression with a certain coherence and, therefore, stability. It was not, as is still often thought, that a sufficient explanation of the whole character of early Christian art is the fact of its funerary function. It did not take the discovery of the Dura baptistery to refute this theory. The most superficial survey of Christian belief in that period would refute it. People who had joined the company of the "living" through Christian initiation, people for whom baptism had once for all cancelled death, could not, when they came to decorate their graves and tombs, express in their art any thought but that they lived by, that which was the centre of their whole existence. They felt and thought of baptism not ✓ as "one of the sacraments" but as "The Sacrament", the one initiation into eternal life. It was one side of that spiritual reality which, on its other side, was resurrection or salvation. On the walls of cemeteries and the sides of coffins painters drew and sculptors chiselled the manifold images of this one reality. They were poor enough painters, and indifferent sculptors, no doubt. It is a long time now since the fundamental quality of this catacomb art was first perceived. Before the end of the last century Bernard Aubé had named it "humility",

and Eugène Müntz was wondering how it comes that, though it is dominated throughout by "idées funéraires", yet there "la mort ne se présente à nous que sous les formes les plus riantes".¹ And in fact there is nothing to compare with the impression that the catacomb paintings leave of a childlike joyfulness, light-heartedness, almost gaiety. This is not merely the result of the fact that it was not the convention of the ancient world to shew death as a skeleton with a scythe. The truth is that for those whose bones were laid in these places there was no such thing as death.

The triumph of the Church at the end of the third century meant a new beginning for the art of the Church as well. Its former restriction to subjects of a strictly signitive character was soon forgotten. Some subjects vanish; others, like the binding of Isaac, the baptism of Jesus, the raising of Lazarus, are transformed as they enter into a new context of preaching and teaching. The story of Noah in the illuminations of the well-known Vienna *Genesis* has nothing in common with the Noah of the catacombs. Only Daniel in the lions' den, a type of salvation as rudimentary as is its execution, continues to crop up here and there on the sarcophagi of Merovingian Gaul. But already quite new subjects are appearing, the *Majestas Domini* and the *Traditio Legis*, figures of the Christ, of the Mother of God, the apostles and the saints. In place of mere allusions to religious ideas, we have the embodiment of religious scenes, and of the religious feeling itself soon incorporated in the very form of church buildings, forerunners of Sancta Sophia and the mediaeval cathedrals of the West. All these changes are only a reflection of the changes going on in the life of the Church itself.² The Church is emerging into the light of history, finding its place on earth. From the time of Constantine onwards, mystery becomes liturgy; the sequence of the liturgical year is established, each sacrament falls into place in the sacramental

¹ B. Aubé, *La théologie et le symbolisme dans les catacombes de Rome*, in *Revue des deux mondes*, 58 (1883), pp. 362-95. E. Müntz, *Études sur l'histoire de la peinture et de l'iconographie chrétienne*, 1881.

² On the changes in the liturgical life of the Church, and in the life of the Church in general, see Dom F. Cabrol, *La prière des premiers chrétiens*, 1929, pp. 11 f., and especially the whole of Ch. XI, The Sanctification of Time, in Dom G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 1945.

system, and the majestic cosmos of Christianity takes final shape in the imagination of believers. This cosmos is already in search of its expression, its embodiment: soon it was to find them. Not till it did could original Christian art be produced.

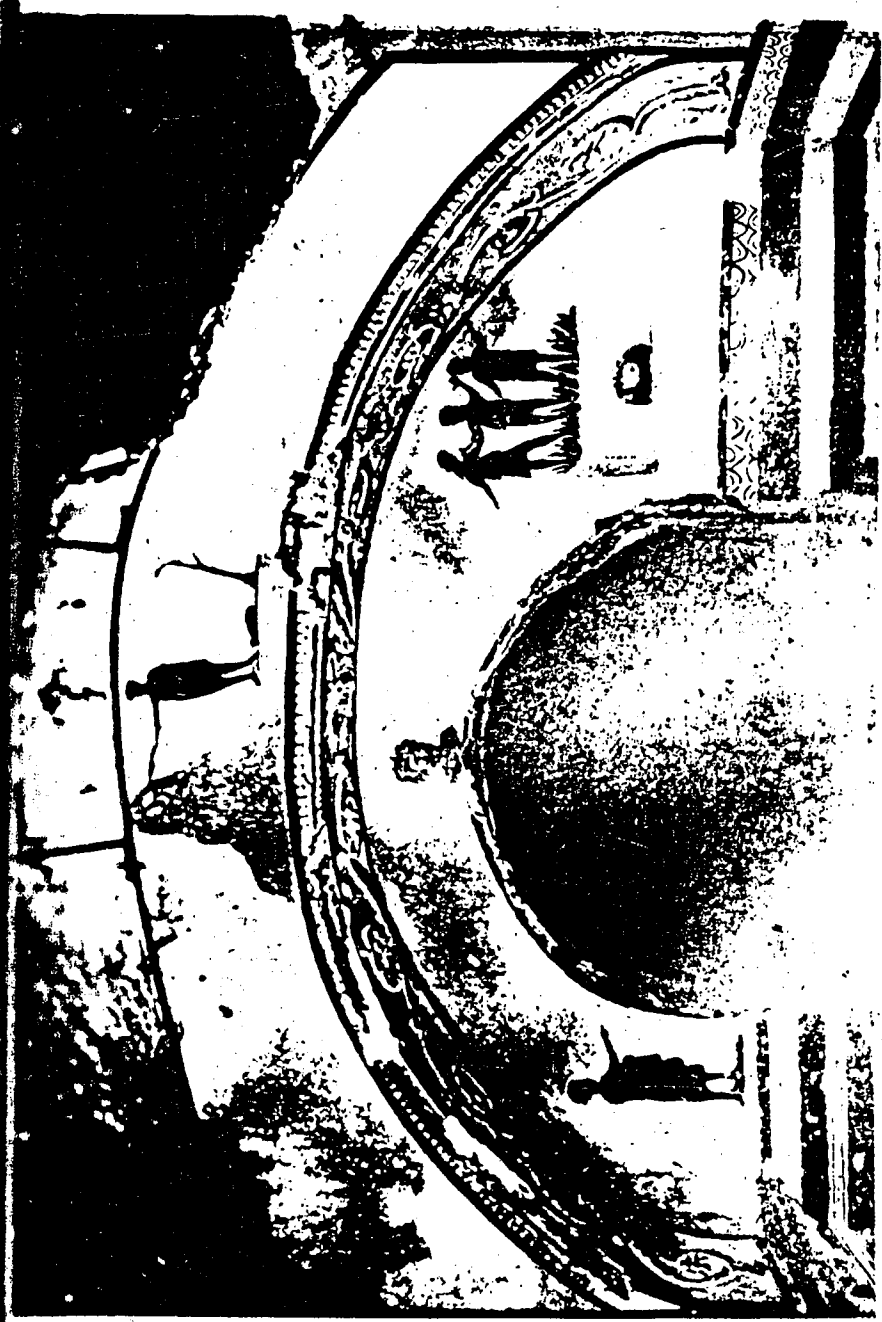
But in that case what is the meaning of that prologue to its history formed by the catacomb paintings and sarcophagus carvings? In the development of artistic form the period of the edict of Milan marks no kind of break; and the art of the Roman empire from Augustus to Justinian can be studied without any need to consider whether the subjects it treats are Christian or not. Such a study is indeed fruitful and necessary; there is just one thing it cannot explain: how there emerged that new, mediaeval, thoroughly religious and Christian art which gradually established itself, as well in the Eastern as in the Western empire. For this new art to emerge, bodily forms and animated figures had to become spiritual, a naturalistic art had to become transcendental: but such a regeneration could never be carried through within the limits of a normal development of taste and form. The roots of it lay not in art at all, but beyond art, in that one religion capable of the intensity of spiritual life to make art unnecessary, and so bring about, if not its death by direct means, at least its long mortification. This is what was accomplished in early Christianity, and what alone made possible the subsequent age-long flowering of Christian creative art. If art was to live and grow, it had to deny itself, and plunge, as though in the baptismal font, into the pure element of faith. It was vouchsafed "repentance unto life", and, washed in "the laver of regeneration", it emerged, in the words of the Epistle to the Galatians, "a new creature". "Newness of life" was granted it. What was accomplished, in those years of self-denial and concentration on the thought of the baptismal mystery, was the veritable baptism of art.

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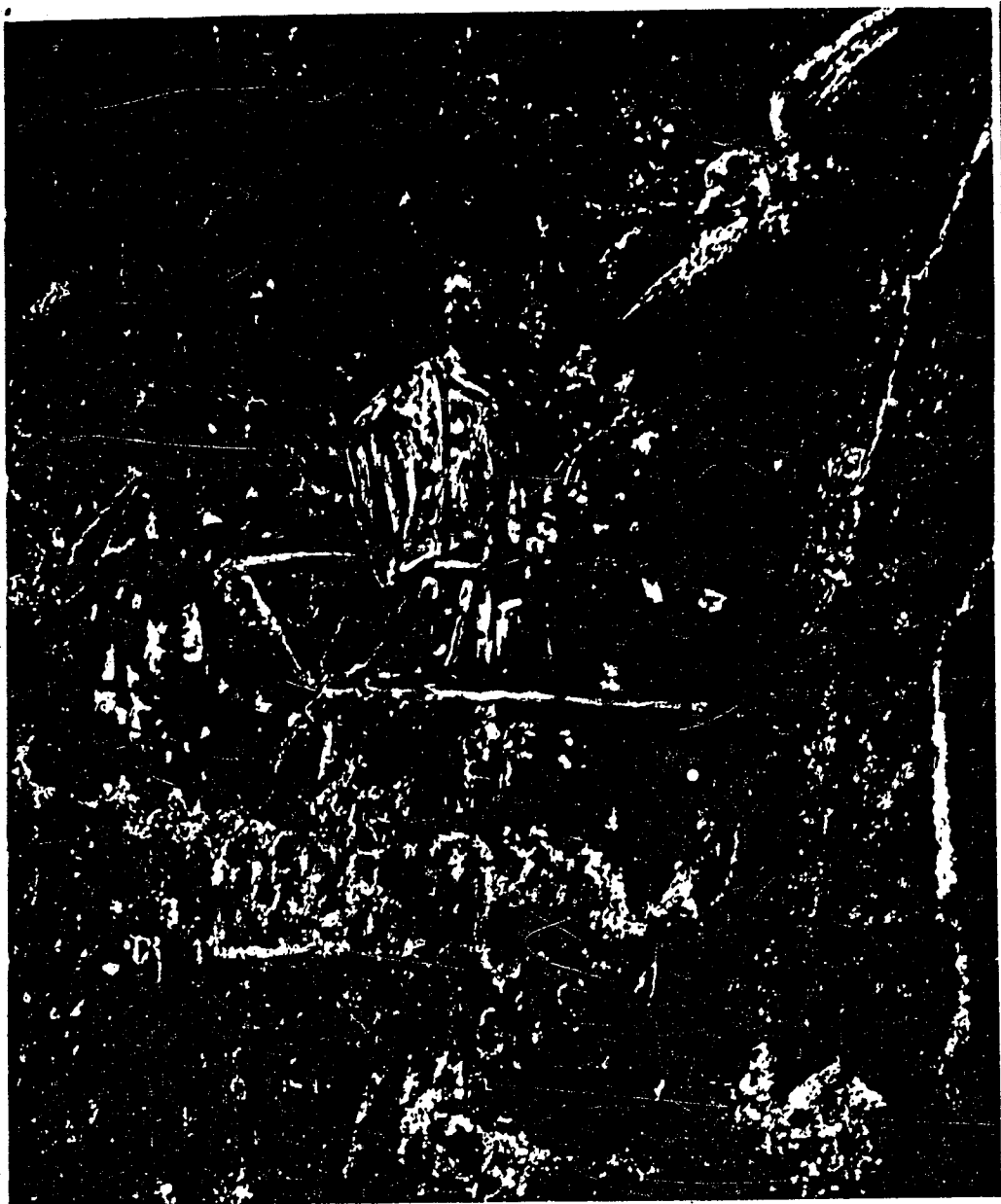
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CATACOMBS OF DOMITILLA
Fresco on the ceiling of a cubiculum.
The Good Shepherd



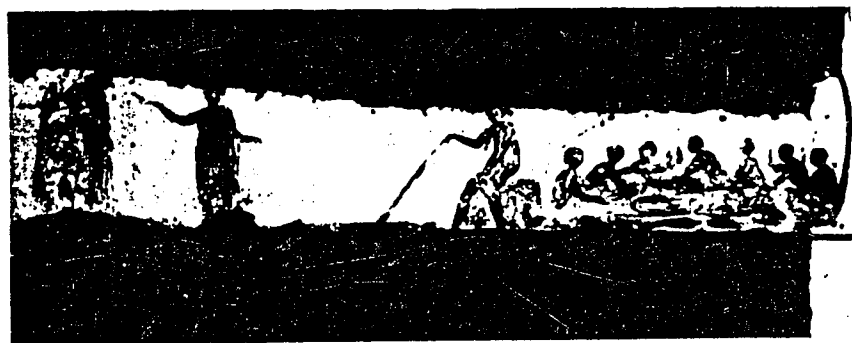
CATACOMBS OF PRISCILLA *Capella greca*
Moses striking the rock: The three children in the fiery furnace



CATACOMBS OF PRISCILLA *Capella greca*
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CATACOMBS OF PRISCILLA *Capella greca* : The breaking of bread



CATACOMBS OF CALLISTUS *Crypt of Lucina* : Eucharistic symbol :
 Moses striking the rock, a fisherman, Christ eating with the
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 A fisherman, the baptism of Christ, the paralytic carrying
 his bed



CATACOMBS OF CALLISTUS : Blessing of the loaf and fish



CATACOMBS OF CALLISTUS
The baptism of Jesus
Jesus and the Samaritan woman



SARCOPHAGUS FROM S. MARIA ANTIQUA (*third cent.*) : The story of Jonah :
Christian catechesis, the Good Shepherd, the baptism of Jesus