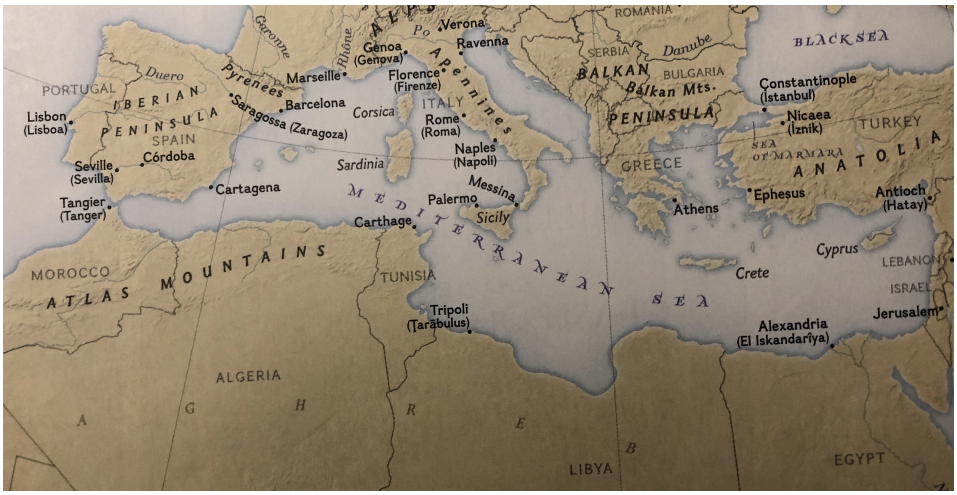
Christ Church Parish
Tacoma, Washington
Adult Formation Epiphany | Lent 2021

Baptismal Fonts and Spiritualities in Early Christian North Africa
First Session Tuesday, January 26: A Mystical Birth



Christian presence in North Africa
The Christian movement entered what was called Roman Africa at some point in the late 1st or early 2nd century. The first clear evidence we have of Christians in this region is recorded in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* (180 CE) - Scillium was a Roman town next to a large marble quarry, southwest of Carthage. The seven men and five women were put to death for their refusal to worship an image of the Roman emperor. We know that the Bible they carried with them (i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures and a few New Testament writings) was in Latin and the *Acts* of their martyrdom were also written in Latin – not in Aramaic (the language of Christians in Palestine) and not in Greek (the language of Paul and the New Testament books). In other words, the seed of Christian faith and life had been planted in the soil of North African Roman culture and would produce a flowering of the new faith different than the one of Jewish or Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Christians.

By the middle of the third century, the minutes of a regional council meeting include the names of 87 North African bishops, leading some historians to suggest that at least 100 towns and cities had communities of Christians large enough to support their episcopal supervisors. Though we have literary evidence of Christian presence in the writings of Tertullian (155-240), a prominent lay theologian, and Cyprian (200-258), bishop of Carthage, archeological evidence becomes abundant by the late 3rd and 4th centuries, especially after the Emperor Constantine made all religions, including Christianity, legal in 311-313, ending the horrific persecution of Christians by his predecessor, Diocletian.

Holy Baptism in North Africa
Indeed, it is clear from the literary and archeological evidence that Holy Baptism was a ritual *process*, rather than a short ritual act. Preparation for baptism – initiation into the Christian community – could last from one to three years. This period of time was thought necessary as women and men, born and socialized into the values and practices of Roman imperial culture, encountered the values and practices of the Christian way of life – many of which were at odds with those of the dominant culture. As a minority religion that was viewed with a good measure of skepticism if not intolerance – consider the martyrdom of the Christian women Perpetua and Felicity and their companions at Carthage in 208 – Christians wanted to know if spiritual seekers were capable of a sincere commitment to Christ and his Body, the church.

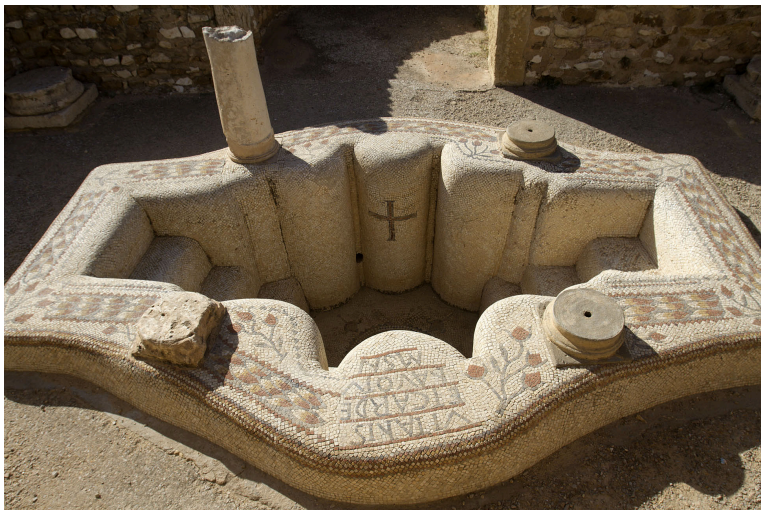
This process of baptismal formation included the study of Scripture, learning how to pray, learning the significance of worship practices, and charitable service to those in need in a society that offered virtually no social assistance. *Worship, learning*, and *service* were thus integral to Christian faith and life, each one informing the other. Throughout the period of baptismal formation, the catechumens ("those capable of hearing" the good news) were marked on their bodies with the sign of the cross, received prayer in the midst of the Sunday liturgy, and were exorcised – that is, received prayer that the destructive "spirits" alive in the dominant culture in which they grew up would depart from them and that they would be refreshed by the life-giving Spirit of God.

Lenten preparation for Holy Baptism
What contemporary Christians call Lent emerged as the forty-day period dedicated to the immediate preparation of the catechumens for the rituals of Christian initiation celebrated at the Easter Vigil. While the medieval practice of Lent (1000-1500 CE), informed by Irish penitential practice, focused on personal sin and the forgiveness of sin through the death of Jesus on the cross, such was not the case in the early church. Christians in North Africa (and elsewhere) experienced Lent as *midwives* to those about to be born into the Christian community. Preparation for "walking in newness of life" (Romans 6:4) was the primary image of Lent in which the worshiping assembly and those to be baptized, anointed, and communed at Easter heard three gospels: the Samaritan woman encounters Jesus, *the living water* (John 4:3-42), the man born blind is healed by Jesus, *the enlightener* (John 9:1-41), and Lazarus is raised from the dead by Jesus, *the resurrection and the life* (John 11:1-44). Rather than a morose penitential season focused on one's failings and the cross, Lent was thought to be a season of joyful anticipation focused on living water, light, and resurgent life, a season marked by a more intense focus on communal *prayer*, meditation on *Scripture*, *fasting* in order to give to the hungry poor and *almsgiving* to widows and orphans who had no means of support – again, the three pillars of Christian faith and life. In other words, the practices of those

coming to Holy Baptism were practiced by the already baptized during the forty days in preparation for the renewal of their baptisms at Easter.

Birth from the womb

That the Christian community was referred to as a midwife who assists at birth may come as a surprise to contemporary Christians, but it was a vivid image for our ancestors in the faith who viewed welcoming new members as one of the community's primary responsibilities. Such welcoming – expressed in the water washing of Holy Baptism and its attendant rituals – was not viewed as the work of the clergy alone but that of the entire assembly. It should come as no surprise, then, that birth imagery was prominent in this season as life was emerging from winter's chill. Keep in mind that early Christians did not view the vernal equinox and the season of Spring as something "pagan," but rather as God's continuing gifts through which earthy life is restored after winter's dormancy or "death." Thus the Jewish feast of Passover, originally a Spring lambing festival, and the Christian feast of Pascha (the original name for Easter) praise God for God's creative power in bringing the Hebrews to birth through the waters of the Red Sea and Christians to birth through the waters of the font or pool.



Baptismal pool, Church of St. Vitalis, Sbeïtla, Tunisia

In the Church of St. Vitalis (Vitalis, a 2nd c. martyr), we find what is called a "yonic" font, a baptismal pool intended to express a vagina or birth canal (see Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*). On the near side of the pool, there is a mosaic thanksgiving inscription for the font. The undulating, labial shape of the pool is bordered with growing plants and leaves or petals – all signs of fertility. The person to be baptized stepped down naked into the pool and stood on the circle [left] that enclosed the Greek letters **Ch**i-**R**ho (the first two letters in Greek for **Chr**istos or Christ) with the Greek letters Α and ϖ (Alpha: beginning; Omega: ending), references to the

cosmic Christ in Revelation 21:6 and 22:13. After a triple immersion in the Name of the Triune God, the newly washed would ascend the steps on the opposite side and then be anointed with olive oil – made a *christos*, a messiah, an agent sent by God into the world – and clothed in a white robe.

Of course this ritual process was inspired by the birth of a child from its mother's watery womb. Once breathing, the newborn would be swaddled in a clean wrap and then brought to the mother's breast for milk. In this ordinary practice, early Christians saw their own ritual practice: birth in the waters, anointing, "swaddling" in a white robe, and being brought to the church's "breast," the altar, there to drink milk mixed with honey, followed by the bread fragment and wine cup of the Holy Eucharist.

Significance of the birth pool

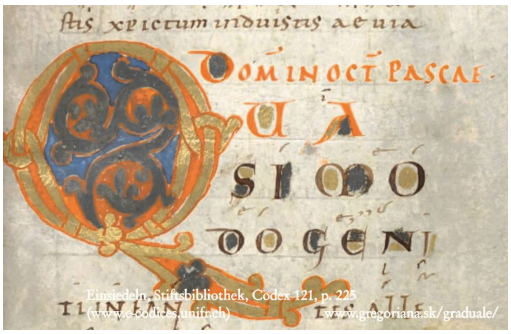
What are we to make of the practice and this yonic pool? Keep in mind that the Latin word we know in English as "church" is *ecclesia*, a feminine noun. Thus, among early Latin Christians, the Body of Christ, the church, was thought of in feminine categories. It was not a stretch then to see Holy Baptism as a birth from **ecclesia's womb**. Rather than flee from feminine imagery – as did more dualistic Greek Christians – the baptismal pool as womb or vagina valorized the female body: it was worthy of giving birth to the sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ. This should not surprise us given the early Christian counter-cultural commitment to spiritual and social equality between women and men (a commitment of the historical Paul that was, tragically, overwhelmed by cultural patriarchy in the early medieval period). In Rome, the baptismal hall of St. John Lateran, the first public church of Christianity, contained and still holds this inscription next to the font: "Here a godly people are born; the Spirit gives them life in the fertile waters. In these waters, our mother bears her children." Leo the Great (400-461), bishop of Rome, recognized a relationship between birth from the font and the birth of Jesus: in Christ's birth, the Spirit was present, and in the birth of the Christian, the same Spirit is present. "The watery baptismal font," he preached, "is an image of Mary's womb."

In his magisterial study of Holy Baptism, the distinguished Benedictine scholar, Aidan Kavanagh, wrote that the New Testament itself presents birth imagery:

Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit (John 3:3-5).

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4-5).

There is no "easy" birth: a measure of risk, whether small or large, attends every birth. Perhaps this is why our ancestors understood baptismal formation – akin to being nurtured for nine months in the womb – **a communal undertaking** rather than a private one "done" by the individual. No wonder St. Paul refers to the "household of faith" rather than individual choice (e.g., Galatians 6:10). For Americans who have been socialized into an aggressive form of individualism, it can be a challenge to grasp and live into the profoundly communal nature of Christian faith and life. One is born into a household, not an exclusively private relationship with one's "higher power." No wonder then that the worshiping assembly plays such a prominent role in the baptismal liturgy: "We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood" (The Book of Common Prayer, 308).

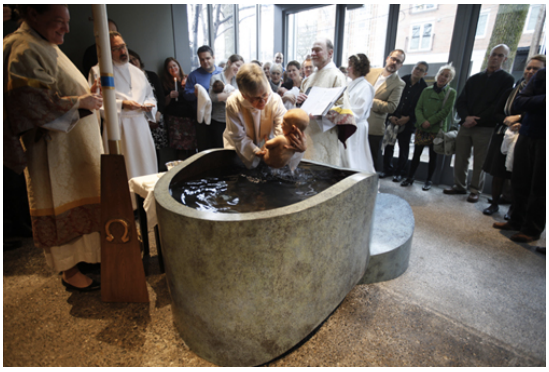


Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Codex 121, p. 225
(www.e-codices.unifr.ch)
http://www.gregoriana.sk/graduale/

The older name for the Second Sunday after Easter – *Quasimodo geniti infantes* – was inspired by 1 Peter 2:2, which served as the refrain for the introit, the scriptural verses sung at the beginning of the Mass: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation. Alleluia." Keep in mind that the writer of this New Testament letter speaks of **milk**, turning our attention once again to the church's breast, the altar, from whence newborns receive nourishment. That is a different way of apprehending the eucharistic gifts – less as forgiveness of sin and more as spiritual food and drink to enrich the soul's maturing growth.

There are adult Christians who assume that their baptism as infants or young children holds little significance for them since they have no memory of it and begrudge the fact that it was not their personal decision. Such concerns can overlook an important dimension of Christian faith and life: the conviction that **God always acts first** – that even the stirring within an adult for life with God is a stirring of the Spirit no matter how faint or incoherent that stirring or seeking might be at first. And, then, who among us got to vote on our birth? Begrudging one's parents for the sexy time that led to pregnancy that led to one's birth too easily obscures the deeply Jewish and Christian conviction that **life is a precious gift from the Holy Three**. And who can remember their birth? The more important question is this: "What will you do with the life that is yours?" We might ask the same of adults who were baptized as infants: **"What will you do with the Christian identity offered you in Holy Baptism?"** Of course, one is always free to walk away from it: there can be no coercion in the life of faith – even though monarchs and popes and

priests and parents have given the terrible impression at times that without baptism one is doomed. Born in the font, one can always say later, "It's not for me" – though one will always be known with affection by the God who washed and anointed one's life [Left: Baptismal font, St. Paul's Episcopal Seattle: "It's a 'wombish' font," said a number of St. Paul parishioners].



Episcopalians and Anglicans are quick to speak of God's unconditional love for all people, indeed, for the entire creation. There is a hint of universal salvation that is often just below the surface in this insistence on the love of God: regardless of religion or no religion, everyone will enjoy a happy afterlife with one's higher power. If that is so – and please know that this is a minority view in Christianity – why baptize? Why even participate in a Christian community? Is such participation simply to diminish one's potential loneliness or, to quote the former governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, is it because "religion serves weak people who need strength in numbers"?

Or could it be this: that baptism gives birth to women, children, and men who are **priests called to public life in the world**? "Share with us in Christ's eternal priesthood"? The metaphorical twist of the New Testament is this: priests were religiously "pure," circumcised males, from elite families, who served in the Jerusalem Temple. In Christian baptism, however, women, men, and children, from every conceivable background – and at times considered, sadly considered, not up to snuff by others – are consecrated as priests for the life of the world. Is that not so because the One who was born from Mary's watery womb was always – always – found among those who were considered "impure," outsiders, just not good enough for God – always exposing and challenging this terrible lie?

God's love is universal – though its implication, loving others unconditionally through one's actions, can be overlooked. Baptism as birth is birth as a disciple of Jesus Christ who spent his life not in synagogue or in church, but in daily life, in public life. For Christians who imagine that faith is merely personal ("God and me") or even communal ("We like the people at our church"), the birth and baptism of Jesus expand those notions to a third: living one's baptismal vocation with others in daily life, promoting the values and practices of the Reign of God.

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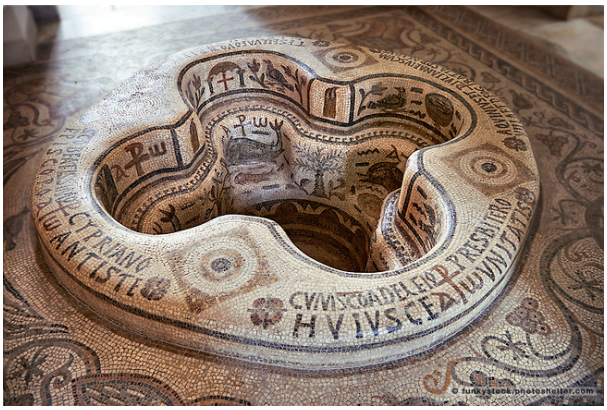

The Clupea baptismal font
6th c., Kélibia, Tunisia

The Bekalta baptismal font
6th c., El Gaalla, Tunisia