Reflections on "Font of Blessing"

Our purpose in writing to the Journal instead of solely to the author of the article, “Font of Blessing” (Aoife C. Lee, Chaplaincy Today 17.1) is to raise an important theological and pastoral case for broad discussion among the APC membership. The author is to be commended for her desire to respond pastorally to the needs of a difficult and heartrending experience for expectant parents. The article and its suggested procedures raised many questions for our staff and very likely for your general readership. Our staff is diverse in religious traditions and gender, including ordained and lay ministers with extensive experience in a tertiary care setting with a large neonatal and obstetrics/gynecological service. Given this context of experience and professional training, we found the article and its suggested practice raised serious questions both theological and pastoral.

The author writes in her introduction: "even when they are not alive at birth, I will baptize these children as pastoral care of the family. I also offer baptism in utero, especially when the mother can still feel that the baby is alive." As a preface to discussion, it seems throughout the article that the concerns of the pastoral care provider are given priority over those of the patient. In the case presented, the parents were described as Roman Catholic and "anxious to have the baby baptized." It is our experience that persons in crisis regularly phrase their needs in words most familiar to them, e.g., "last rites" or "baptism. It then becomes our task to respond to their needs compassionately and consonant with sound theological practice. What the parents are really asking for in this case does not seem to have been explored. In most instances of this sort, it is our experience that parents are looking for reassurance that their child is "acceptable" to God.

In the Roman Catholic and other Christian traditions, sacraments are not administered to those who have died or are yet unborn. Appropriate prayers and rituals are available which directly address the needs and pain of the parents, in the case of baptism, e.g., a naming ceremony with prayers and Sacred Scripture to comfort and assure parents in crisis. To offer baptism and a certificate of baptism is contrary to sound theological and pastoral understanding and practice.

In the case of "baptism in utero" questions also arise. For a female minister boundary issues seem strained at best. For a male minister, it would be totally inappropriate as described. Theologically, in all Christian traditions, baptism requires the pouring of the water and the saying of the words directly on the person to be baptized. By no stretch of the imagination would the "baptism in utero" be considered valid or appropriate. The explanation of the significance of the shell in religious tradition also is questionable. The additional rituals, as described, seem contrived and forced, clouded by the intensity of feeling and helplessness of the parents and family. Furthermore, when the grief is somewhat assuaged,
sometime later, and the experience
comes up for discussion, someone
may well say the “baptism” was
well-meaning but totally contrary
to tradition, throwing the parents
into further confusion and re-
newed grief.

There are compassionate alter-
atives, e.g., memory boxes, pic-
tures, memory books to which
parents can contribute, as well as
read for comfort from those who
have had similar experiences. All
of the above are consonant with
sound theological understanding
and pastoral practice. They also
are respectful of parents and sen-
sitive to their needs without be-
ing intrusive.

Throughout the article, the
focus seems to be on the action
and concerns of the caregiver
and the pursuit of the “ritual.”
In addition there is throughout
a mixing of appropriate theo-
logical comment coupled with
personal interpretation creating
further possible confusion.
Again, we do not question the
sincerity of the caregiver but the
soundness of her theological and
pastoral practice.

We welcome further discus-
sion and comment.

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Editor’s comment:
There is ongoing disagree-
ment both between and within
Christian denominations as to
the appropriateness of baptism
when the child has died either
in utero or during the birth pro-
cess. Further, some parish clergy
as well as chaplains do see pro-
vision of this sacrament in terms
of pastoral care of parents/fam-
ily of the child. As a professional
journal, Chaplaincy Today is an
appropriate medium for com-
ment and debate on this issue.

Author Aoife C. Lee has elected
not to respond at this time, pre-
ferring to leave such comment to
the journal readership.

Rozenn Allyn Shackleton
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