

Infant Baptism in the Home Mission Field.

BY THE REV. G. R. BALLEINE, M.A.

A SCENE witnessed some months ago will explain the origin of this paper. It was Sunday afternoon in an East London parish. Fifteen rough women were chatting in an empty church. With them they had twelve babies and two sheepish-looking men. A curate marshalled them round the font, and began to read, but no one made the smallest attempt to take part in the prayers, till suddenly they all awoke to the fact that there was an awkward pause; apparently the clergyman was expecting them to do something. The curate tried to point out the place, but was repulsed with a growl: "I don't know nothing about it, guv'nor; the kid ain't mine." Eventually one of the younger women pertly pushed herself forward, and declared that she would read anything required, or they would never get home to tea; and with much giggling she acted as sponsor to all the twelve babies, obviously without the faintest idea of what it was all about. In the vestry, afterwards, the fact was disclosed that not one of those people attended a place of worship, that not one of them lived in the parish, that not one of them was known, even by name, to the clergy, and that several had come from long distances, because that church was supposed to be a lucky church to be christened in!

Such a scene at once suggests several obvious questions:

1. Is it right to accept, without inquiry, any unknown child who happens to be brought for Baptism? Infant Baptism was originally intended for children of members of the Church. Defenders of the practice in every age have fallen back on that text¹ where St. Paul declares that the children are holy because the parents are holy. Gradually other children were admitted under very stringent safeguards. "Sometimes," writes St. Augustine, "it is granted to children of unbelievers that they are baptized, when by some means, through the providence

¹ 1 Cor. vii. 14.

of God, they happen to fall into the hands of pious people";¹ and he gives as examples infants captured in war or deserted by their parents, who have been adopted into Christian households. But it would have been an unheard-of thing in those days for the Church to baptize a child, and then send it back to an unbelieving home.

In the medieval Church the practice was the same. Thomas Aquinas lays down the law that the children of unbelievers are not to be baptized, unless they have passed out of their parents' hands into Christian families; and the rule of St. Thomas is still binding on the Church of Rome, which has, for example, almost always refused to baptize the children of gypsies, because there is no safeguard that they will be brought up in the faith. It is true that some of the Jesuit missionaries in India and South America began to baptize heathen babies in an almost wholesale fashion, but Pius VI. finally stopped the practice by a Bull (1775), in which he absolutely forbade the Baptism of infants of the heathen, even though the parents themselves should ask for it, unless there was practical certainty that they would be brought up as Christians.

In all the Protestant Churches of the Continent we find the same rule, that Infant Baptism is for children of Church members only; for example, we find it laid down in the Huguenot Book of Discipline: "The children of gypsies shall not be baptized, unless the parents resign up their authority to the sureties."

But when we turn to our own Church we find that opinion has differed rather widely. On the one hand, the Puritans were over-strict, so that their opponents, by a natural recoil, swung to the other extreme, and we find even the judicious Hooker apparently pleading for indiscriminate Baptism. In forty-three dioceses of our Church, however, the rule is very definite. In almost every part of the foreign mission field no infant is accepted for Baptism unless his parents are full members of the Church. Not only are the children of the heathen excluded,

¹ "De Grat. et Lib. Arb."

but also the children of inquirers and the children of the excommunicated, and in some missions the power of excommunication is in constant use.

Ought not the clergy in the home dioceses also to be more strict? Ought it not clearly to be understood that no unknown child can be accepted for Baptism; that parents must take their children to their parish church, or to the church which they themselves regularly attend? And when notoriously ungodly people bring their children to the font, ought not the question to be put to them, lovingly, but with perfect firmness: Are you yourselves first willing to become Christians, to renounce sin, to believe the faith, to obey the laws of God, and to make your home one to which the Church can entrust one of her little ones?

Two objections suggest themselves. The first is a legal difficulty. Is not this expressly forbidden by the Eighty-first Canon? "No minister shall refuse to christen any child that is brought to him." But leading authorities almost all interpret this in the same sense as Bingham, who writes: "This canon is only to be understood of such children as have undoubted right to be baptized, whom the minister is not to refuse to christen for any private reason of his own, such as was that of Snape, who would not baptize a certain child because the parents insisted on having him called Richard";¹ and he gives reasons which make it highly probable that Bishop Bancroft had this very case in his mind when he helped to frame this canon.

The other objection is doctrinal. Is it right to deprive any child of the grace of Baptism? This was the question raised by the Jesuits, which the Church of Rome officially considered, and answered in Pope Pius's Bull. And without entering into all the intricate theological difficulties involved, it is enough to say that anyone who would maintain this view to-day must remember that he is upholding a doctrine of sacramental grace higher than any that was ever heard of in the early Church—a

¹ Fr. Ch. iii., 19.

doctrine which even the Church of Rome repudiates and condemns.

2. We have spoken hitherto solely of parents who are definitely non-Christian. We must now consider the children of those who are nominally members of the Church, but whose membership is little more than nominal. This is a point which has been debated at many different times, and almost all Churches have come to the conclusion—to use the words of the College of Geneva, when John Knox referred the point to them for decision—that “wherever a profession of Christianity hath not utterly perished, infants are beguiled of their rights, if the common seal be denied them.”¹ And to meet this very difficulty of parents who, though members of the Church, could not entirely be trusted, the Church in very early days provided her second safeguard in the form of sponsors. Almost as soon as we hear anything of infant Baptism, we find the system of *sponsores* as a recognised institution.² Its theory is perfectly simple. The Church will not admit any but a dying infant to Baptism, unless one or more of her members, in addition to the parents, promise to be responsible for the training of the child in the faith. We get a picture of the practice in the fifth century in that work *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* which used to be attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite: “It appeared good to receive infants thus; the natural parents hand the child over to one of the faithful, who is a good teacher of divine things. On this man promising that he will educate the child in holy living, the priest enjoins that he promise the renunciations and confess the faith.”³ Notice that the sponsor must be one of the faithful, and also one who is a good teacher of divine things. And most Churches still maintain this care in the choice of sponsors.

What is the position of the English Church with regard to godparents to-day? The number, which has varied from time to time, is fixed by the rubric at three; and to this the Twenty-ninth Canon adds: “No parent shall be admitted to act as godfather

¹ Epist. 285. ² *E.g.*, “Tertul. de Bapt.,” c. 18. ³ “De Ecc. Hier.,” c. 7.

for his own child." This last has been the rule of the Church for centuries,¹ and to disregard it is to do away with the double security so wisely required—*i.e.*, parents who are members of the Church and sponsors who are members also. It is true that in 1865 the Convocation of Canterbury tried to repeal this Canon, but the York Convocation did not agree, and the alteration has never been ratified by the Crown.

The duties of godparents are clearly laid down in the Exhortation, and the Church has surely the right to refuse any who are obviously unfitted to undertake these duties. Besides this, the canon lays down the rule, "Neither shall any be admitted Godfather or Godmother before the person so undertaking hath received the Holy Communion."

How wise is this whole institution of sponsors! How useful when properly enforced! What a safeguard for Christian education! What a field of service for the laymen and laywomen of the Church! And yet how often infants are baptized with no sponsor but the mother, and in how few parishes are any steps taken to insure that the sponsors shall be Christian people who are duly qualified for their work!

How can that be done? First, by more frequent and more definite teaching on the subject of suretyship. People have come to regard it as a form. They need to be taught to look upon it as an honourable and sacred responsibility.

And then will follow greater care in the selection of persons for this post. In some parishes already Guilds of Sponsors have been formed, and the members, who are all regular communicants, are ready to undertake this office for a certain number of children. But the scheme is difficult to work. Our modern city population is so fluctuating, so often children whom we receive into the Church in six months' time are swallowed up by some quite different district, that it is almost impossible for sponsors of this kind to keep in touch with them. A better plan seems to be to throw the responsibility on the parents—to insist on their finding sponsors, whom the Church can accept,

¹ *E.g.*, Canon 55 of Council of Mainz, A.D. 813.

from among their friends and relations, who are much more likely to keep in touch with them wherever they may move ; and even to-day, deplorable though the state of many of our cities may be, there are few women who cannot find three good Churchpeople somewhere in the circle of their friends. By the rubric notice must be given beforehand : " Overnight, or in the morning before the beginning of Morning Prayer." The Puritans at the Savoy Conference pleaded for a longer notice, unfortunately without success ; but, short as it is, it does give time to hand the parents a form explaining the solemn character of Baptism, and the safeguards required by the Church, to be returned filled in with the names and Church membership of all the three sponsors, and it might be well to adopt the rule of the Huguenot Book of Discipline : " A surety coming from another Church shall not be admitted to present a child unto Baptism, unless he bring with him a certificate from his own Church."

3. But when we have eliminated the infants whom the Church cannot lawfully accept, and have secured duly qualified sponsors for the others, a third point remains for consideration—the time and place of Baptism. The directions of the Prayer-Book are perfectly clear and simple : Baptism is to be administered on Sundays and Holy Days, when the most number of people come together after the second lesson. On two points only is discretion allowed to the curate. He may appoint whether the Baptism shall be during the morning or evening service, and, if necessity require, he may baptize on a week-day ; but still, it is implied, only after the second lesson in a regular service at which a congregation will be present. How much more seemly, how much more impressive, is the swearing-in of the new soldier in the presence of the whole regiment than the method which has become usual at the present day, and what a safeguard against the meaningless irreverence of the scene I have already described ! " The Sacraments are not ordained of God to be used in private corners as charms or sorceries."

Two practical objections may be urged against obedience to the Prayer-Book. The first is the cry against any undue lengthening of the service; but as a matter of fact the Baptism Service takes hardly any longer than the Ante-Communion, and if the clergy will choose short hymns and shorten the sermon by five minutes, the people can easily leave the church at the usual time.

A stronger objection, however, arises from the position of the font. An Office which is read behind the backs of the people, out of sight of most of the congregation, seems hardly suitable as a part of the public service. At present we are bound by the Eighty-first Canon: "There shall be a font of stone, the same to be set in the ancient usual places, in which only font the minister shall baptize publicly." And though there are more ancient churches than is commonly supposed which have the font at the east end, such as Milton Church, near Cambridge, where it is part of the pier of the chancel arch, there can be no doubt that the ancient usual place is near the west door. This can be explained historically. The font has come into the church from the outside. Baptisms were originally in the open air in streams or rivers. Then fonts were placed in the churchyard. Then, for reasons of warmth and shelter, they were moved inside the church, and for long no inconvenience was felt through their position. For in those days there were no seats or pews in the churches, and when the priest passed from the east end to the west it was quite easy for the congregation to turn and group itself round the font. But with the introduction of pews in the sixteenth century the people could no longer shift their position freely during the service, and some of the clergy brought the font up to the chancel step; others baptized in brass basins which they placed on the Holy Table; but the Bishops united to stop this practice on the mystical ground that, since Baptism symbolizes admission to the Church, therefore the place of Baptism must be at the church door. It is interesting to notice that Roman writers give a different explanation; they say the font stands in

the west, because that is the region of darkness, showing that the position was fixed first and the mystical interpretations thought of afterwards. At the Savoy Conference the Puritans tried hard to get the canon altered to read that the font "be so placed as all the congregation may best see and hear the whole administration"; but again they failed. However, in the eighteenth century the movement began again, and one by one the fonts were brought up to the chancel step, so that sixty years ago this was their position in a very large number of churches; but the wave of restoration swept them all back to the west end once more.

Are we bound to accept that as final? There is great need of bringing Baptism back to its right position as an integral part in the public service of the Church: for the sake of the children, that they may be helped by the prayers of the whole congregation "when the most number of people come together"; for the sake of the sponsors that they may be helped to realize the responsibility of their office; for the sake of the people, that they may be reminded of the meaning of Baptism and of their own vows. But this cannot conveniently be done so long as the service has to be held behind the backs of the congregation. One remedy undoubtedly is to place the font at the chancel step on the opposite side to the pulpit. It remains for those whose conservative instincts shrink from this proposal to suggest a better remedy for an acknowledged evil.

4. One point remains to be mentioned, and that is the language of Baptism. The rubric orders the service to be held "in the vulgar tongue," but those who, through constant use, are perfectly familiar with the language hardly realize how utterly unintelligible the seventeenth-century English of the Prayer-Book often is to uneducated people. I had an opportunity of testing this with a class of factory girls—just the type from whom the godmothers in our home mission parishes are drawn, and I wrote on the blackboard, "Dost thou in the name of this child renounce the devil?" explaining that it was one of the questions that would be put to them if ever they acted as godmothers,

and asking them to write the meaning in their own words. The answers were instructive. "Will this baby's name make the devil's famous?" "Do you feel tears of bitter sorrow for the devil?" "Did you pray before choosing the child's name, or did the devil suggest it?" "Will you give the child the name of a saint of which the devil is afraid?" "Does the child's name do something to the devil?" And seventeen of them answered simply and truthfully, "I don't know." If the question had been in Latin it could not have been more unintelligible. And, remembering the strong language of the Twenty-fourth Article, the question arises whether we ought not to have a fresh translation of the Prayer-Book into the vulgar tongue for use in poor parishes. I leave on one side the thorny question of changes in doctrine and ritual: I deal simply with the question of language. Our services have been translated into French for the Channel Islands, into Welsh for Wales, into Manx for the Isle of Man, and into Hebrew for the Jews. Why should not those in authority give us yet another translation into the plainest and simplest English for permissive use among uneducated people?

It may be that these suggestions will lead to consideration which may help to bring about a more reverent and seemly use of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.



The Angel of the Hours.

BY E. H. BLAKENEY, M.A.

I SAW Time throned upon a sea of glass;
 Round him, with eyes half-veiled, three Seraphs stood,
 Claspng the Morn about their brows. Their feet
 Burned as brass burneth in the fire; while lo,
 Soft as the sigh of Night, a light wind stirred,
 Rippling that golden harvest of their hair.
 And each within the circuit of her hand
 Held one white star; and when I raised mine eyes
 To mark that starry gleam, I straight divined
 Names writ, with mystic signature, in scrolls
 Of lightning-flame—Truth, Holiness, and Love.