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Abstract

Catholic tradition teaches that an infant is baptised in the faith of the Church. Born anew of water and the Spirit, the child is incorporated into the Body of Christ. Yet recognising the ecclesial character of baptism does not by itself explain what this incorporation effects in the identity and life of the Church that receives the child. This article argues that at the baptismal font Christ not only incorporates the child into his body but also renews the Church by deepening her fidelity to her own calling. It develops this claim through the ecclesial vision of the *Missel romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre* (1989), known as the "Zairean Rite", whose pattern of gathering, listening, celebrating, and witnessing embodies a Church-Family shaped by Scripture, Catholic tradition, and African and Congolese wisdom. In this wisdom, life is received from God, personhood is constituted relationally, and the birth of a child increases the vital force of the whole community. Although the Rite has so far provided only an order of Mass, its ecclesial vision, brought to the font, serves as a fruitful hermeneutic of infant baptism. In this light, each child received at the font enlarges the Church's communion, deepens her maternal responsibility, and reawakens her missionary vocation, so that she becomes ever more fully the family she is called to be.

Keywords

Infant Baptism | Zairean Rite | Liturgical Inculturation | Church-Family | Ecclesiology | Ecclesial Renewal

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The Church Renewed at the Font

Infant Baptism in the Ecclesial Vision of the Zairean Rite *

Jérémie H. Kinzamba

1 Introduction: Infant Baptism and Ecclesial Identity

An infant comes to the baptismal font in the arms of another, bringing no achievement, no theological understanding, and no autonomous profession of faith. Everything in the scene speaks of reception. A name is spoken, faith is professed, water is poured, and a new life is announced before the one who receives it can comprehend the gift. Here the priority of grace comes to light.[1] God acts before the infant can answer, and the Church welcomes the child with a faith she herself first received. Infant baptism reveals with singular clarity a truth that holds for every baptism, whatever

* This article develops, in substantially revised form, an argument from my Licentiate in Sacred Theology (STL) thesis, which was submitted under my civil name; I publish under my baptismal name. See Héritier O. Kinzamba, Life and the Renewal of the Christian Community. Infant Baptism and Inculturation in the Context of the Democratic Republic of the Congo [unpubl. STL thesis Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, Berkeley/CA], 2023. I am sincerely grateful to Paul Janowiak, who directed the thesis, and Mary McGann, who served as its reader, for their insightful comments throughout the writing process.

1 The Greek *charis* (grace) denotes God's freely bestowed favour and gift to human beings, echoing the Hebrew *ḥēn*. Cf. Brendan Byrne, Galatians and Romans, Collegeville/MN 2010, 179 f.

the age of the one baptised: Christian existence begins as gift, received before it can be claimed. Even when an adult freely asks for baptism and professes faith, that request answers a divine love already given and at work.

The Church has spoken richly of this gift. In baptism a person receives a new identity in Christ: united to his death and resurrection, the baptised is freed from sin, born anew of water and the Spirit, adopted as a child of God, incorporated into the Body of Christ, and admitted into the Church's sacramental life.[2] Baptism, however, does more than give a new identity to the one baptised. As Gordon Lathrop observes, it is also an identity-giving event for a people.[3] This is already present in Paul's theology of baptism: "We were all baptised into one body in a single Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).[4] Through one baptism, the many become one body. The identity received at the font is, from the beginning, an identity within the one Body of Christ.

Yet each child is baptised into a body already gathered by Christ, a community that professes the faith before the child can profess it. If baptism is an identity-giving event not only for the individual but also for a people, every baptism engages the Church as much as the child. What, then, does the incorporation of this child effect in the identity and life of the Church that receives him or her? An adequate answer cannot relegate the ecclesial body to the edge of the scene, a mere spectator left un-

2 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), no. 6, in: AAS 56 (1964) 97–138. English translation; id., Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), nos. 7. 11. 14, in: AAS 57 (1965) 5–75. English translation; Christian Initiation. General Introduction, in: The Order of Baptism of Children (The Roman Ritual Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican and Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI), Collegeville/MN 2020, nos. 1–5 (hereafter OBC).

3 Cf. Gordon W. Lathrop, The Origins and Early Meanings of Christian Baptism. A Proposal, in: Worship 68 (1994) 504–522, here: 516.

4 Biblical quotations throughout this article are taken from The Revised New Jerusalem Bible. Study Edition, trans. and ed. by Henry Wansbrough, New York 2019.

changed, for such a picture would sit uneasily with the Church's own language of incorporation.

A family does not receive a child without its own relationships being transformed. Birth and adoption give people new names in relation to one another, open inherited memory towards a future full of promise, and call love into forms of fidelity it has never before assumed. Baptismal incorporation has a comparable relational depth. The grace given at the font touches the whole community that receives the child, for the child's baptismal identity is inseparable from the Church's own identity. Consequently, the Church does more than receive a new member. She is renewed. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, every renewal of the Church consists essentially in "an increase of fidelity to her own calling"[5]. At the font, the Church is recalled to the mystery of her own life and summoned to become more fully the home whose welcome she announces, the mother who nurtures the faith she professes, and the missionary communion into which this new Christian can grow.

The *Missel romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre* offers a privileged vantage point from which to perceive this ecclesial renewal.[6] The Zairean adaptation of the Roman Order of Mass embodies a distinctive way of being Church, which takes shape in a discernible liturgical grammar.[7] Its

5 Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), no. 6, in: AAS 57 (1965) 90–112. English translation.

6 See Conférence Épiscopale du Zaïre, Missel romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre, Kinshasa 1989 (hereafter MRDZ). In this article, this liturgical book is also referred to as "the Missal", and the liturgy it contains as "the Zairean Rite" or simply "the rite". References to the Missal give the part (II: *Présentation générale de la liturgie de la messe pour les diocèses du Zaïre*; III: *La liturgie de la messe*), followed by the paragraph number and the page number; references to the *Supplément au Missel romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre* follow the same pattern.
The MRDZ provides the Zairean Order of Mass, but there is not yet a corresponding Zairean rite of baptism. This article therefore adopts the ecclesial vision embodied in the Zairean Eucharistic liturgy as a hermeneutical key for infant baptism, an approach grounded in the unity of Christian initiation (see section 2 below; cf. LG 11).

7 Although the Missal is formally an adaptation of the Roman Rite, the designation *rite zaïrois* (Zairean Rite) is widely used, including by Pope Francis;

assembly, gathered by Christ as a Church-Family whose members recognise one another, listens together to the Word of God. It celebrates the Paschal Mystery through differentiated ministries that give communion bodily and social form. Sent forth, it bears witness to the Gospel in a shared life of mutual responsibility. In this pattern of gathering, listening, celebrating, and witnessing, the community enacts what it believes itself to be before God.

This grammar took shape as Scripture and Catholic tradition were received within the history and wisdom of the Congolese people, an African wisdom in which the spiritual and the communal are never held apart. Within this wisdom, life is received from God, personhood is constituted relationally, and the birth of a child increases the vital force of the whole community, renewing the bonds that unite its members. Formed by this wisdom and brought to the font, the rite's grammar allows familiar doctrines to disclose a further depth. When the assembly gathers as a family around a life God has entrusted to it, ecclesial motherhood takes on the weight of an enduring vocation. As it listens together to the Word, the faith in which the child is baptised, the faith the Church herself first received, returns upon the assembly as a promise it must inhabit. In its celebration of the Paschal Mystery through differentiated ministries, by which the one life of the risen Christ flows through all its members, incorporation into Christ and his Church evokes the quickening of a living body. And in its witness, lived out in a shared life of mutual responsibility, mission takes the shape of a communion in which this child can grow. What Christ gives the infant and what he calls forth from the Church thus belong to a single sacramental event: as the infant receives new birth, adoption as a child of God, incorporation into Christ, and the promise of salvation, the Church's

cf. Francis, Préface, in: Rita Mboshu Kongo (ed.), Le Pape François et le "Missel romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre" (R.D. Congo). Un rite prometteur pour d'autres cultures, Vatican City 2022, 6. The designation reflects the country's official name when the Missal, prepared and approved by the Episcopal Conference of Zaire, was confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship on April 30, 1988. The present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo was officially called Zaire from 1971 to 1997. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the MRDZ and other French-language sources are my own.

communion is enlarged, her maternal responsibility is deepened, and her missionary vocation is reawakened.

The following pages trace this relationship between what the infant receives and what the Church becomes, bringing the ecclesial vision of the Zairean Rite into conversation with the Church's theology of infant baptism. Throughout, the reading follows the rite's own discipline of interpretation, namely what the Missal calls a "triple fidelity: fidelity to the faith and to the apostolic tradition, fidelity to the intimate nature of the Catholic liturgy itself, [and] fidelity to the African and Zairean religious genius and cultural heritage"[8]. Section 2 considers how Scripture, Catholic tradition, and African and Congolese wisdom converge in the rite's pattern of gathering, listening, celebrating, and witnessing. Section 3 then turns to the Church's theology of infant baptism, drawing on Scripture and the magisterial tradition to show that baptism is an ecclesial event in which Christ incorporates the infant into his body, while the Church, in receiving the child, takes up responsibility for the life now entrusted to her. Section 4 brings these two readings together and thereby advances the central claim of this article, that at the font the child's incorporation into Christ and the renewal of the Church belong to one movement of grace.

2 *The Ecclesial Vision Embodied in the Zairean Rite*

The Church becomes visible in her liturgy, where participation, ministry, gathering and sending, and word and gesture give bodily form to the communion she receives and lives before God.[9] For Aidan Kavanagh, such worship is *theologia prima*, arising within the community's encounter with God and its response to God, before it becomes the object of theological reflection.[10] Read in this perspective, the Zairean Rite finds its significance

8 MRDZ II, 75 (no. 2).

9 Cf. SC 2. 26. 30. 41. The Council describes liturgical celebrations as actions of the whole ecclesial body that "manifest it and have effects upon it" (SC 26) and identifies the active participation of God's holy people in liturgical celebration as the "pre-eminent manifestation of the Church" (SC 41).

10 Cf. Aidan Kavanagh, On Liturgical Theology. The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981, New York 1984, 75.

in the ecclesial vision its liturgical forms enact. Convened by Christ as a family and formed by a relational understanding of life, its assembly hears the Word together, celebrates the Paschal Mystery as one body, and is sent to bear witness in the world.

The *rite solennel* (solemn rite) of the Zairean Mass begins with the act of gathering: "The faithful come to the place of assembly and greet one another."[11] In that simple exchange, people who might otherwise merely occupy adjacent places recognise one another as members of a communion called together by God. When the hour of celebration has come, the announcer[12] sounds an instrument to invite silence and addresses the assembly: "My brothers and sisters, peace!" The people answer, "Fraternity! Fraternity!" the announcer repeats, and they reply, "Joy!"[13] This exchange gives liturgical voice to a deliberate pastoral choice. Ignace Ndongala observes that, at the instigation of Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula,[14] Christians in the Congo call one another *ndeko* (sibling, kin, companion; pl. *bandeko*). Such a choice carries particular weight in a society whose wisdom prizes courtesy and expresses respect through forms of address that honour age, office, and status.[15] Fraternal address does not abandon that courtesy but grounds it in a bond that precedes every rank.

11 MRDZ III, 83 (no. 1).

12 See ibid., II, 77 f. (no. 21). The *annonciateur* (announcer) mediates between presider and assembly, guides participation and prayer, introduces the readings, and precedes the Gospel procession.

13 Ibid., III, 83 (no. 2).

14 Joseph-Albert Malula (1917–1989), first Congolese Archbishop of Léopoldville (later Kinshasa) from 1964 and first Congolese cardinal from 1969, was a leading advocate of an African Church rooted in the cultures of its peoples. He championed the liturgical inculturation that led to the Zairean Rite, entrusted parishes to lay leaders (*bakambi*), and promoted basic ecclesial communities.

15 Cf. Ignace Ndongala Maduku, Les célébrations du "Rite zaïrois de la messe" à Kinshasa. Ethnographie de la liturgie d'une Église-fraternité des enfants de Dieu, in: Ignace Ndongala Maduku et al. (eds.), Le Rite zaïrois de la messe en République Démocratique du Congo. Hommage posthume au Révérend Père Laurent Mpongo Mpoto Mamba, CICM (Églises d'Afrique), Paris 2023, 397–426, here: 403. *Ndeko* (Lingala), *mpangi* (Kikongo), *ndugu* (Swahili), and *muanetu* (Tshiluba), the corresponding terms in the

To call a fellow Christian *ndeko* is to claim him or her as kin. The gathering thus takes the form of an extended family, in which the familiar experience of kinship gives flesh to the deeper communion created in Christ. The Missal describes the particular Church of Zaire in precisely these terms, as an "extended family, rooted in the Holy Trinity, that expands to include humanity"[16]. Hence the name Church-Family. Before the ecclesial *we* is explained, it is enacted in the gathering itself, as bodies turn towards one another in recognition.

This recognition prepares the assembly to receive together the Word, reconciliation, Christ's paschal self-gift, and the Spirit who makes communion possible. Responses, acclamations, song, bodily engagement, and differentiated ministries let grace resound through the entire assembly.[17] The action belongs to Christ in his whole body. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* describes full, conscious, and active participation as demanded by the very nature of the liturgy and as the right and duty of the Christian people by reason of their baptism (cf. SC 14). Participation thus gives liturgical expression to an ecclesial identity already received in baptism. In the Zairean Rite, this conciliar vision acquires a culturally embodied and ministerial form, as presider, readers, servers, singers, dancers, announcer, and assembly contribute according to their distinct vocations, so that the life of the risen Lord circulates through the whole body in the interplay of its members.

The order of the celebration carries the same conviction. In the local traditions evoked by the Missal, the word of the elders instructs and challenges, and the *palabre* moves from speech towards reconciliation. The Zairean Rite accordingly places the penitential act after the readings and the homily, so that the assembly asks for forgiveness only after it has

country's four national languages, designate not only a brother or sister but any relative, whatever the degree of kinship.

16 MRDZ II, 75 (no. 1).

17 Besides the announcer, distinctive features include the readers' request for the presider's blessing before they proclaim the Word (cf. Ibid., II, 78 [no. 22]), rhythmic movements expressing "the participation of the whole body in prayer", and the ministers' dance around the altar (ibid., II, 78 [nos. 28 f.]).

heard the Word as one body.[18] The sign of peace follows as "the conclusion of the rite of reconciliation", and the gifts are therefore brought to the altar by brothers and sisters already reconciled (cf. Matt. 5:23–24).[19] Hearing, conversion, and reconciled communion form a single movement. The Roman rite of infant baptism follows a similar order, proclaiming the Word before the renunciation of sin and the profession of faith.

The communion enacted in the liturgy also takes shape in daily life. Malula's formation of lay leaders and his promotion of the *Communautés ecclésiales vivantes de base* (CEVB; Living Basic Ecclesial Communities) arose from the same ecclesial intuition.[20] These human-scale communities enable people to know one another, discern concrete needs, and organise responses.[21] Communion thereby becomes mutual responsibility, and the Church-Family comes to signify a network of practices in which the gifts and wounds of each member become the concern of all.[22]

The welcome first offered in the gathering follows the same path. A community received by God learns in turn to receive its members, and its

18 Cf. MRDZ II, 76 (no. 14). On the *palabre* as "a kind of celebration of the word" that sometimes ends in a sacrifice consecrating "life in its communal, familial, and personal dimension", see ibid., Supplément, 17 (no. 86).

19 Cf. MRDZ, II, 76 f. (no. 15). See also Nwaka C. Egbulem, The Power of Africentric Celebrations. Inspirations from the Zairean Liturgy, New York 1996, 63.

20 Cf. Joseph-Albert Malula, Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula, vol. 3: Textes concernant l'inculturation et les abbés, ed. Léon de Saint Moulin, Limete 1997, 67.

21 See Pierre Hegy, Worship as Community Drama. Introduction to Liturgy Evaluation, Eugene/OR 2019, 178. The CEVBs are small local Christian communities in which the faithful pray, reflect on the Word of God, practise mutual care, and share responsibility for the Church's life and mission. The parish gathers and coordinates them within a wider communion.

22 John Paul II emphasised that the image of the Church as "God's Family", adopted by the African Synod, requires a communion that transcends ethnic boundaries. His insistence addresses a real tension in African societies, where strong bonds of kinship, clan, or ethnicity, while sustaining solidarity, can also become sources of exclusion or division. See John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (September 14, 1995), no. 63, in: AAS 88 (1996) 5–82, English translation.

welcome makes the prevenient hospitality of grace perceptible in human relationships. Catechesis and personal profession unfold within this welcome; they do not earn it.

The communion received in this way presses towards witness. The risen Christ promises his disciples the power of the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and at Pentecost the one good news is heard by each listener in their own native language (cf. Acts 2:4–11). The many tongues become the very medium of one proclamation. Such witness follows the logic of the Incarnation. The eternal Word "became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14), born of a woman within a particular people, language, and tradition. What the Word assumed in becoming flesh, the Spirit opens at Pentecost to every people. Witness here takes the form of inculturation. The Gospel enters the concrete histories and languages of peoples, gathering their experience into paschal communion.[23] Pedro Arrupe gives theological precision to this movement when he describes inculturation as the "incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context", an encounter in which Christian experience not only finds cultural expression "but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about 'new creation'"[24]. Catholicity, in this sense, takes concrete form as cultural particularity is received and transformed by the Gospel. This is what the Second Vatican Council asks of the young Churches, which, "in harmony with the economy of the Incarnation", are to "borrow from the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and disciplines, all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator" (AG 22). The Zairean Rite enacts precisely such an incarnational reception.

The rite carries within itself the convergence of Scripture, Catholic tradition, and African and Congolese wisdom, three sources whose riches it gathers far beyond what can be told here. The Roman Order of Mass

23 Cf. Diego Irarrázaval, Inculturation. New Dawn of the Church in Latin America [trans. by Phillip Berryman], Eugene/OR 2008 [originally published: Maryknoll/NY 2000], 31.

24 Second Vatican Council, Decree *Ad Gentes* on the Mission Activity of the Church (December 7, 1965), no. 22, in: AAS 58 (1966) 947–990, English translation.

served as its structural and textual point of departure, and its development unfolded within the discernment of the Church.[25] Among these sources, Congolese wisdom contributes, before all else, an understanding of life as a gift from God. In many Congolese traditions, human existence is grasped in relation to God as creator, source, and sustainer of life, and this relation finds expression in the very names by which God is invoked. Nzuzi Bibaki observes that no human title can contain God, yet those who worship cannot cease to name the One to whom they turn. "They do so by analogy, the only way available to us, in every culture and language, to speak of God. Nothing is more human than to humanise God"[26]. Congolese names for God emerge from this analogical movement. Among Bangala speakers, *Akongo* evokes the Supreme Being and ruler of the universe. For the Kongo peoples, *Nzambi Mpungu* designates God as the Almighty. Among Mongo speakers, *Nzakomba* names the Supreme Being and creator of all; and for Tshiluba speakers, *Mvidi Mukulu* names the Great Spirit, the primordial One from whom all that exists receives its origin.[27] These names do more than translate a generic term for divinity. They gather a people's experience of origin, sovereignty, transcendence, and sustaining presence, and so allow the Christian confession of God to take root in languages already shaped by the recognition of a divine source of life.

A Tshiluba expression of praise cited by Malula gives striking poetic form to this relation between God and the life God gives: "Maweja Nangila, diba katangila tshishiki; wa kutangila diamosha nsense" (God is the sun upon which no one can gaze steadily; whoever dares to look is burned by its rays).[28] The Zairean liturgy takes up the same imagery. Near the beginning of Mass, before the invocation of the saints and ancestors, the pre-

25 Cf. Egbulem, Power of Africentric Celebrations, 38.

26 Nzuzi Bibaki, Le Dieu-Mère. L'inculturation de la foi chez les Yombe (Publications Saint Pierre Canisius), Kinshasa 1993, 49. "Humanise" here means speaking analogically, not reducing God to human measure.

27 Cf. Malula, Textes concernant l'inculturation, 20 f.; Tshilemalema Mukenge, Culture and Customs of the Congo, Westport/CT 2002, 42 f. These examples represent only a small selection of the DRC's many ethnic and linguistic communities.

28 Malula, Textes concernant l'inculturation, 20 f.

sider proclaims: "We stand before the sun upon which we cannot gaze steadily. Let us advance with confidence towards the throne of grace."[29] Later, in the Preface, he addresses God as "you, the sun upon which one cannot gaze steadily, […] you, the master of life"[30]. Like the sun, God gives and sustains life while remaining beyond human grasp, and so holds nearness and transcendence together. Life is thus experienced as received rather than possessed, flowing from a source whose giving is never exhausted by what it gives.

The plurality of God's names expresses convergence, not fragmentation, within the Church's one confession of faith. Distinct histories, languages, and experiences yield different names, yet the Zairean liturgy confesses through them the one God revealed in Scripture, whose saving design reaches its fullness in Christ. Local naming is thus an act of ecclesial reception: fatherhood and motherhood,[31] origin and protection, sovereignty and transcendence enter Christian praise, while revelation purifies every image and opens it beyond the limits of clan, ethnic group, and place.

The language of "vital force"[32] belongs to this recognition of a divine source of life. It names life as proceeding from God, animating persons, and binding them to one another and to a creation filled with divine

29 MRDZ III, 84 f. (no. 6).

30 Ibid., III, 101 (no. 39).

31 For Bibaki, the language of divine motherhood arises from the conviction that the God revealed in Scripture cannot be confined to masculine imagery. God gathers within the divine mystery all that is best expressed through both man and woman. Motherhood can therefore name, analogically, dimensions of God's life-giving and nurturing care. Cf. Bibaki, Le Dieu-Mère, 50.

32 The notion of "vital force" was popularised by Placide Tempels, for whom Bantu thought identifies being with force and holds life to be the supreme value. All beings, from God through the ancestors and the living to minerals, form a hierarchy of forces that can strengthen or diminish one another. Congolese theologians, especially Vincent Mulago, developed the notion in terms of vital union and participation linking God, the ancestors, and the living. See Placide Tempels, Bantu Philosophy [trans. by Colin King], Paris 1959; Vincent Mulago gwa Cikala, Un visage africain du christianisme. L'union vitale bantu face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale, Paris 1965.

gifts.[33] The MRDZ itself speaks this language. The dance of the ministers around the altar during the Gloria "manifests the will to commune with the vital force that radiates from the altar, from the sacrifice of Christ"[34]. The vital force is thus traced to Christ. The life that unites the community radiates from his paschal sacrifice and is drawn towards its fullness in him.

Life received from God is always someone's life, irreducibly singular and yet already woven into relations. Indeed, personhood is constituted through them. Family, land, language, neighbours, and ancestors[35] mediate how a person comes to be and inhabits the world. Simon Bockie's account of Kongo identity distinguishes a personal and a communal dimension of the self, which belong together, so that tearing them apart brings crisis to both the person and the community.[36] This cultural intuition of relational personhood prepares the imagination to perceive the ecclesial depth of incorporation into the Body of Christ, a communion extending across peoples and generations.

The birth of a child reveals this relationality in its most generative form. Congolese communities receive the child as a gift whose arrival opens their common life towards the future. The child is born into more than a household. Because "traditional marriage in the Congo is more than a union between two individuals [and is], above all, an alliance between families"[37], the newborn arrives as the living bond of that alliance. Around the child, people discover themselves anew as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, and elders. In this way, the birth augments the community's vital force. It deepens and renews the ties among

33 Cf. Mukenge, Culture and Customs, 35.

34 MRDZ II, 78 (no. 29). The *Supplément* roots the gesture in the circle dances of the villages, in which the centre is regarded as a source of radiating force, so that to dance in a circle is to participate in the force that radiates from the centre, cf. ibid., Supplément, 15 (no. 74).

35 In many African traditions, "not all the dead are ancestors. Moral excellence, bravery, successful social and family life, and other qualities are important criteria in establishing who is truly an ancestor". Egbulem, Power of Africentric Celebrations, 60.

36 Cf. Simon Bockie, Death and the Invisible Powers. The World of Kongo Belief, Bloomington/IN 1993, 33.

37 Mukenge, Culture and Customs, 117.

its members even as it entrusts a singular life to their care. Protection, naming, teaching, storytelling, and the transmission of wisdom become the forms in which joy matures into responsibility.

Gift and responsibility thus belong together. Yet the relational character of life also makes it vulnerable. The same relationships through which the vital force grows can also diminish it through violence, exclusion, and neglect. The Zairean Rite gives this awareness liturgical voice when, after the hearing of the Word, its penitential act portrays evil as an invasion by which "our life is diminished"[38]. The Church-Family therefore always lives under a call to conversion. She becomes true to her name as she receives from Christ the power to protect life, restore communion, and carry the Gospel beyond every boundary of clan and kinship.

The MRDZ enacts this vision in the celebration of the Eucharist. Yet the same vision also casts light on the baptismal font. Seen from within this vision, the font stands at the heart of a gathered family that receives grace together. The sacrament reaches beyond the minister, the infant, and the parents into the communion that carries them all, and it turns the assembly's participation into responsibility for the life placed in its midst. This interpretive passage from altar to font is warranted by the unity of Christian initiation, which itself leads from font to altar, since those reborn in baptism are gathered into the assembly that celebrates the Eucharist.[39] It is within this sacramental and ecclesial unity that infant baptism can now be considered more closely.

3 *Infant Baptism as an Ecclesial Event*

The ecclesial vision traced in the preceding section, with its sense of life as a gift received from God, of personhood constituted through relationships, and of a vital force that grows as the community welcomes new life, brings into focus what, according to Scripture and the Church's tradition, baptism accomplishes sacramentally. Christ shares his paschal life with

38 The first stanza of the penitential act reads: "Lord our God, as the leech clings to the skin and sucks a person's blood, so evil has taken hold of us. Our life is diminished. Who will save us, if not you, our Lord? Lord, have mercy". MRDZ III, 94 (no. 23).

39 Cf. SC 10; LG 11.

each person baptised and incorporates him or her into his body, the Church. Infant baptism makes the priority of this divine gift especially clear, since the infant receives it before being able to articulate a personal response.[40]

In Romans 6:3–4, those baptised into Christ Jesus are baptised into his death and buried with him, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead, they too may walk in newness of life. John 3 expresses the same divine initiative as birth "of water and Spirit" (John 3:5). At the font, the Church thus receives and celebrates a life whose source is Christ and whose destiny lies in his new creation. Because this life is received within Christ's body, new birth in him is also entry into a new communion.

The Body of Christ is not an aggregate of individuals who happen to share a common faith, but a communion in which belonging to Christ entails belonging to one another. Having affirmed that all were baptised into one body, Paul draws the consequence in the strongest terms: "if one member is suffering, all the members share its suffering, and if one member is honoured, all the members share its joy" (1 Cor. 12:26). The baptised infant is received into this mutual belonging. Pierre Marcel's image of baptism as grafting is particularly suggestive here, since the baptised person becomes one plant with Christ.[41] A graft is taken into the organism's life and begins to live from it, rather than merely adhering to its surface. So too, baptism incorporates the infant into a communion whose life precedes the child, sustains him or her, and henceforth unfolds with him or her as one of its members.

The household baptisms recounted in Acts and in 1 Corinthians place this sacramental incorporation within concrete networks of belonging (cf. Acts 16:15; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16). Historical caution is necessary be-

40 It is worth noting that the priority of the divine gift does not make infants passive objects of the celebration. As Kimberly Hope Belcher shows, infants participate in a manner proper to their age. Carried, named, signed, washed, anointed, and clothed within the web of persons who bring them to the font, they take part through bodily reception before they can profess faith in words. See Kimberly H. Belcher, Efficacious Engagement. Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery, Collegeville/MN 2011.

41 Cf. Pierre C. Marcel, The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism. Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace [trans. by Philip E. Hughes], London 1953, 145.

fore treating every baptised household as documentary proof of infant baptism, since the texts do not state explicitly whether these households included infants. Yet given the inclusive formulas the texts employ, such as "she and her household", said of Lydia (Acts 16:15), it is probable that at least some of them did. Peter's call to baptism makes this even more likely, as he extends the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit not only to his hearers but also to their children (cf. Acts 2:38–39). Beyond the historical question, the ecclesiological significance of these households remains important.[42] The Gospel does not ordinarily enter human lives by extracting individuals from their relations. It enters households and communities, reorders existing bonds, and gathers persons into a new allegiance in Christ. Baptism is irreducibly personal, but never private. Those baptised are added to a people constituted through the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, prayer, and the sharing of life (cf. Acts 2:41–47). Baptism gives a new identity precisely by giving a new belonging.

John 15 offers a complementary image. Christ is the vine, the disciples are the branches, and fruitfulness depends upon abiding in him. A branch possesses no life in isolation; it lives by receiving a life whose source exceeds it. This image resonates with Congolese attention to life as relational and participatory while giving it a decisive christological centre. The life communicated in baptism is participation, through the Spirit, in the paschal life of the crucified and risen Christ. Communion therefore belongs to the form of baptismal life itself, not merely to the social setting in which baptism occurs.

The Gospel accounts of Jesus receiving children disclose something of the form this communion must take. When the disciples try to regulate access to Jesus, he responds indignantly: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them" (Mark 10:14; cf. Matt. 19:13–15; Luke 18:15–17). Luke specifies that those brought to him included infants (Luke 18:15). Jesus receives children in their concrete personhood, without applying adult measures of understanding, productivity, or social im-

42 Cf. Joachim Jeremias, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, Philadelphia/PA 1962, 19. 21. For a more recent account of this debated early evidence, see Everett Ferguson, Baptism in the Early Church. History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries, Grand Rapids/MI 2009.

portance. Elsewhere in the Synoptic tradition, he places a child among the disciples and declares that whoever receives such a child in his name receives him and the one who sent him (cf. Mark 9:36–37). The child entrusted to ecclesial care thereby becomes a summons addressed to the community. In receiving one who cannot yet repay, explain, or assume the responsibilities of adult membership, the Church is tested in her capacity to receive as Christ receives. Her welcome of the child becomes a measure of her own discipleship.

The developing tradition of infant baptism gives these scriptural convictions increasingly explicit doctrinal form. Evidence for the practice appears early, although its prevalence and theological interpretation during the first centuries remain historically debated. The church order known as the *Apostolic Tradition* directs that the "small children" be baptised first and that parents or another member of the family answer for those who cannot yet speak for themselves.[43] Tertullian's counsel that baptism sometimes be delayed, particularly for children unless circumstances make it urgent, indicates that the baptism of children was already a recognisable practice.[44] In the middle of the third century, Cyprian of Carthage and a council of sixty-six bishops rejected the proposal that baptism be postponed until the eighth day after birth, judging that the mercy and grace of God are to be refused to no one born.[45] Gregory of Nazianzus recommends, in the absence of immediate danger, waiting until about the age of three, when children may begin to hear and respond to something of the sacrament, even without fully understanding it. Yet his counsel presupposes the sanctifying efficacy of baptism and urges its administration when a child is in danger.[46] Augustine, recalling his own childhood, re-

43 Cf. Trad. ap. 21, 4, in: Paul F. Bradshaw et al., The Apostolic Tradition. A Commentary, ed. by Harold W. Attridge (Hermeneia), Minneapolis/MN 2002, 112.

44 Cf. Tertullian, bapt. 18, 4 f., in: Tertullian's Homily on Baptism, ed. with an introduction, trans. and commentary by Ernest Evans, London 1964, 39.

45 Cf. Cyprian of Carthage, ep. 64, 2–6, in: The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage, vol. 3: Letters 55–66, trans. and annotated by Graeme W. Clarke (ACW 46), New York – Mahwah/NJ 1986, 109–112.

46 Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, or. 40, 28, in: Festal Orations, trans. with introduction and commentary by Nonna V. Harrison (PPS 36), Crestwood/NY

counts how a serious illness nearly occasioned his baptism, although it was subsequently deferred.[47] In his mature theology, however, the baptism of infants acquires sharper doctrinal significance as Augustine relates it to the universality of sin and the necessity of Christ's saving grace.[48] These different judgements concerning when children should be baptised gradually bring to light a shared theological conviction, that grace precedes the human capacity to understand or merit the gift received.

Aquinas develops this gratuity in explicitly ecclesial terms. In the *Summa theologiae*, he argues that infants are baptised not through an act of faith of their own, of which they are not yet capable, but in the faith of the Church, into which they are incorporated through the sacrament; that faith is professed on their behalf by those who present them for baptism.[49] The Church, in other words, baptises in her own faith. Aquinas thus identifies ecclesial faith as prior to and more encompassing than the explicit act of any individual believer. The infant is baptised not into the private religious convictions of the parents but into the faith of the Church. The Church believes before the child can confess, receives before the child can respond, and gives a sacramental home within which personal faith may later mature. Personal appropriation remains necessary, but it develops within a gift and a belonging that precede it.

2008, 123 f.; id., or. 40, 17 (PPS 36, 112; Harrison).

47 Cf. Augustine, conf. 1, 11, 17 f., in: The Confessions. Introduction, trans. and notes by Maria Boulding, ed. by John E. Rotelle (WSA I/1), Hyde Park/NY ²2012, 50–52.

48 Cf. id., pecc. mer. 1, 19, 24 f., in: Answer to the Pelagians I. Introduction, trans. and notes by Roland J. Teske, ed. by John E. Rotelle (WSA I/23), Hyde Park/NY 1997, 47 f.

49 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, STh III, q. 68, a. 9 ad 2 f.; q. 69, a. 6 ad 3, in: Summa Theologiae. Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries, vol. 57: Baptism and Confirmation (3a. 66–72), trans. and ed. by James J. Cunningham, London – New York 1975, 109 (q. 68, a. 9). Aquinas follows Augustine, for whom it is the whole company of the saints and the faithful, the whole Mother Church, who presents the child for baptism. Cf. Augustine, ep. 98, 5, in: Letters 1–99, trans. and notes by Roland J. Teske, ed. by John E. Rotelle (WSA II/1), Hyde Park/NY 2001, 429 f.

The Second Vatican Council provides a broader ecclesiological horizon for understanding this priority. *Lumen Gentium* presents the Church as "a sacrament or as a sign and instrument" of communion with God and of the unity of the human race, describing her through the interrelated realities of the People of God and the Body of Christ.[50] Through baptism, and through confirmation and the Eucharist, which complete Christian initiation, Christ continually gathers and builds the Church as his body.[51] The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes this sacramental agency explicit when it describes the liturgy as "the work of the whole Christ, head and body"[52], and it teaches that baptism is the sacrament of faith while insisting that faith requires the community of believers. "It is only within the faith of the Church that each of the faithful can believe."[53] Infant baptism thus reveals something fundamental about faith itself: Christian faith is received ecclesially before it becomes a personally articulated act.

In the *Order of Baptism of Children*, this ecclesial structure of faith takes liturgical form. Parents request baptism, godparents stand with them, the assembly hears the Word of God and responds to it, the saints are invoked, the community prays, and the faith professed is explicitly identified as the faith of the Church, in which the children are baptised.[54] Here, the post-conciliar reform made a significant change. In the earlier Roman Ritual, the questions were addressed to the infant, while the godparent answered on the child's behalf, giving ritual expression to the faith that the infant could not yet articulate personally.[55] The Council asked that

50 LG 1. 7.

51 Cf. LG 11; OBC, General Introduction 1 f.

52 Catechism of the Catholic Church. Revised in accordance with the Official Latin Text promulgated by Pope John Paul II. Includes Revision of Paragraph No. 2267 promulgated by Pope Francis, Washington/DC ²2019 (hereafter CCC), no. 1187.

53 CCC 1253.

54 Cf. OBC 35–60, which runs from the reception of the children through the celebration of God's Word, the intercessions, and the litany of the saints to the profession of faith and the baptism.

55 In the pre-conciliar rite, the priest addresses the infant by name ("N., do you renounce Satan?"), and the sponsor answers, "I do renounce him;" the same pattern governs the opening dialogue, the threefold profession

the rite be "adapted to the circumstance that those to be baptised are, in fact, infants," and that the roles and duties of parents and godparents be "brought out more clearly in the rite itself" (SC 67). In the revised ritual, parents and godparents are accordingly called to renew the vows of their own baptism. They renounce sin and profess their own faith. The celebrant and the assembly assent to it as the faith of the Church; and the child is then baptised in that faith.[56] This ritual change concerns who speaks and in whose name. Accordingly, the revised ritual describes the preparation for and celebration of baptism as the concern of the People of God and, in a particular way, of the local Church.[57] Together, the differentiated ministries of celebrant, parents, godparents, and assembly manifest a community receiving a new member and assuming responsibility for the life sacramentally entrusted to it. Ecclesial motherhood becomes liturgically visible, and the ritual names it in words borrowed from Augustine: "Mother Church, who brings each and all to birth"[58].

The 1980 Instruction *Pastoralis Actio* reinforces this account by grounding infant baptism in the priority of divine grace. Baptism manifests the Father's prevenient love, gives participation in the Son's Paschal Mystery, communicates new life in the Spirit, and incorporates the baptised into the Body of Christ.[59] The infant receives this gift fully despite being unable to make an explicit act of faith, and, through the sacrament,

of faith, and the question "Do you wish to be baptized?" Cf. Rite for Baptism of Children, in: The Roman Ritual. Complete Edition [trans. by Philip T. Weller], Milwaukee/WI 1964, part II, chap. 2, nos. 1. 14. 17 f.

56 Cf. OBC 56–60. After the threefold profession, the celebrant and the community together assent to it as "our faith" and "the faith of the Church" (59), and the parents and godparents are asked whether it is their will that the child be baptised "in the faith of the Church, which we have all professed with you" (60).

57 Cf. ibid., General Introduction 7. 10 f.

58 OBC 2, paraphrasing Augustine, ep. 98, 5: "The whole Church gives birth to each and every one" (WSA II/1, 429 f.; Teske).

59 Cf. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Infant Baptism *Pastoralis Actio*. Instruction on Infant Baptism (October 20, 1980), no. 9, in: AAS 72 (1980) 1137–1156, English translation.

is made a child of God and co-heir with Christ.[60] Citing Augustine and Aquinas, the Instruction holds that the baptised child "believes not on its own account, by a personal act, but through others, 'through the Church's faith communicated to it'"[61]. The same Instruction, however, refuses to separate sacramental efficacy from ecclesial responsibility. Infant baptism cannot become a magical act or merely a religious convention.[62] There must instead be a well-founded hope that the gift conferred will be nurtured through Christian formation, a responsibility belonging to pastors and the wider ecclesial community as much as to parents.[63] The grace that precedes the child's response thus calls forth responsibility in those already able to respond.

Sacramental doctrine here becomes an ecclesiology of responsibility. Because the Church believes with and for the child, she must embody the faith she professes at the font in sustained practices of reception, nourishment, protection, teaching, and accompaniment. Her prior faith creates the space in which the faith given to the child in the sacrament may grow into personal confession. That same faith also places the Church under judgement. A community may profess the Creed while leaving parents isolated, delegating formation almost entirely to specialists, or treating children as *ecclesially* incomplete until they can participate explicitly. When parents and godparents renounce sin and profess faith, and the assembly assents to that profession, they do more than supply words on behalf of the child. Together, they reaffirm their own baptismal identity.[64] In receiving the newly baptised, the community accepts a concrete claim upon its prayer, time, institutions, formation, and witness.

Infant baptism is therefore an ecclesial event in the fullest sense. Christ gives new life to the child and incorporates him or her into his body; through the same act, he calls the Church to inhabit more faithfully the communion she is and professes to be. Because the infant cannot immediately reciprocate the Church's welcome through understanding, service,

60 Cf. ibid., 20.

61 Ibid., 14.

62 Cf. ibid., 25.

63 Cf. ibid., 28–30.

64 See OBC 56.

or explicit profession, the gratuity of ecclesial belonging becomes especially visible. The Church must receive before expecting a response, nurture before demanding maturity, and love without making usefulness or assent the measure of belonging. In doing so, she learns anew the form of the grace by which she herself exists. What she receives at the font is thus not only a new member but a renewed summons to fidelity to her own calling.

4 *The Church Renewed in Receiving the Child*

The Zairean Rite has disclosed a Church-Family whose gathering, hearing of the Word, common celebration, and sending forth unfold within a wisdom that welcomes life as God's gift. Scripture and Catholic tradition, in turn, have shown that the infant is baptised in the faith of the Church, a Church that welcomes the child and assumes responsibility for the life Christ gives. These two lines of argument now converge: Christ renews his body through the very child that body receives. In the Council's sense, this renewal is a deepening of the Church's faithfulness to her vocation, given as gift before it is required as task.[65]

A Congolese understanding of birth clarifies the relational depth of this claim. A child's arrival is celebrated because the life received from God strengthens the vital force of the community as a whole. That increase is not merely numerical. The newborn renews existing bonds and creates new ones. Lingala kinship language makes this relational expansion audible. For the child, a mother's younger sister becomes *mama leki* (younger mother) and her elder sister *mama kulutu* (elder mother), while a father's sister is *tata mwasi* (female father); cousins are ordinarily received as siblings. From birth, then, the child has more mothers, fathers, and siblings than a single womb could provide. Before any catechesis begins, kinship already extends the child's belonging beyond the immediate household. John McKenna identifies the same dynamic in his theological reflections on infant baptism, observing that "the newborn infant changes

[65] See UR 6.

the configuration of the family from the day of its birth, if not sooner"[66]. The gift of a singular life thus gives others new names, responsibilities, and possibilities of communion. Scripture knows this generative logic. Pope Francis observes that the word occurring most often in the Old Testament after the divine name is "child" (*ben*, "son"), "which is itself related to the verb 'to build' (*banah*)", so that Psalm 127 speaks of the gift of children with "imagery drawn from the building of a house and the social life of cities"[67]. The child builds the house that receives him or her.

This relational understanding illuminates what incorporation into the Body of Christ entails. Baptism does not merely place the infant within an already completed ecclesial arrangement. Because the body is a living communion, the member it receives helps to constitute relations that did not previously exist. The Church is now the Church of this child, and this child belongs to her. Her sacramental identity remains the gift of Christ, but it acquires a new, concrete, and historical form as the assembly becomes responsible for an unrepeatable person. Incorporation and ecclesial renewal are thus distinct yet inseparable dimensions of one gift. Incorporation is truly given in the sacrament. The child is a member of Christ's body. Renewal is given in the same act but unfolds over time, since its concrete expression requires the community's continuing response. Through this child, Christ calls the Church to be, more truly, a welcoming, nurturing, and missionary communion.

The first of these marks, welcome, takes bodily and public form in the gathering that opens the Zairean liturgy. Worshippers turn towards one another and acknowledge those with whom they will stand before God, and the announcer's dialogue names their gathering as peace, fraternity, and joy.[68] Carried over to the baptismal font, this gathering brings out the ecclesial significance of the child's presentation and naming.[69] At the

66 John H. McKenna, Infant Baptism. Theological Reflections, in: Worship 70 (1996) 192–210, here: 207.

67 Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), no. 14, in: AAS 108 (2016) 311–446. English translation.

68 Cf. MRDZ III, 83 (nos. 1 f.).

69 Cf. OBC 35–41, where the parents name the child and request baptism, and the celebrant receives the child with the sign of the cross.

reception of the child, the Roman ritual has the celebrant say that "the Church of God receives you with great joy"[70]. An assembly formed by the Zairean greeting knows what such words commit it to. Its welcome cannot end with recognition during the ceremony. The name spoken at the font enters the community's memory and lays claim to its time, its prayer, and its institutions. The CEVBs offer a particularly concrete form for this fidelity. Because their members can know who is pregnant, who has given birth, who is celebrating, who is grieving, who has been displaced, and who lacks food, education, or safety, baptismal responsibility can acquire faces, addresses, and habits. Visits, meals, catechesis, schooling, safeguarding, and accompaniment do not supply something the sacrament left undone. They are forms of ecclesial fidelity to the communion the sacrament has created.

Welcome matures into nurture. Here ecclesial motherhood becomes a lasting vocation, for to receive a child is to undertake that child's formation in life and faith. The Yombe image of God not only as Father but also as Mother speaks analogically of the divine source as life-giving, protecting, and nurturing, without confining God to human categories.[71] Ecclesial motherhood derives from this prior divine care, by which God gives and sustains life before any human welcome. It is the motherhood of the whole Church, to which the ritual's Augustinian formula, cited above, already bears witness.[72] This motherhood neither displaces parents and godparents nor romanticises communal life. Rather, it names the vocation of the entire body to make room for the child, nourish faith, protect the vulnerable, transmit memory, and accompany freedom towards mature confession. Such nurture begins where the assembly itself is formed, in hearing the Word together, for the faith professed at the font binds those who profess it before it can be handed on. The child belongs to the Church before becoming articulate. Infant baptism thus reveals the gracious law by which the Church herself lives: all are received through a love that precedes them.

70 Ibid., 41.

71 Cf. Bibaki, Le Dieu-Mère, 50.

72 Cf. OBC 2.

The differentiated ministries of the Zairean celebration give this responsibility a communal form. Because Christ animates this body, the child's incorporation is a quickening rather than an addition. The celebrant's sacramental ministry, the parents' daily care, the godparents' witness, the catechist's teaching, and the assembly's prayer are neither interchangeable nor isolated. Together they express a body receiving one of its members. By receiving one whose contribution cannot be measured by adult standards, the Church relearns that ministry responds to grace rather than establishing a condition for membership.

The invocation of the saints and the ancestors of upright heart widens this communion across generations.[73] A baptised child enters neither an ecclesial present without memory nor a family confined to the living. The Church receives the child into a history of faith, courage, failure, suffering, and hope, discerned in Christ. Congolese memory includes resilient families, song, humour, hospitality, and faith; it also carries colonial extraction, war, massacres, displacement, and violence. Liturgical remembrance places this inheritance within Christ's judgement and mercy, obliging the community to discern what should be transmitted, healed, or refused. It also resists despair by commending the dead to divine mercy. The child renews this work because inherited faith must now become a habitable future, and because no historical power has the final word over a life whose deepest origin and destiny lie in God.

Such renewal has a missionary direction. Sent forth to bear witness, the assembly must become a home in which this child can mature, one wider than lineage, ethnic group, or nation. The Church-Family is judged by this evangelical breadth. The Missal already supplies the measure when it describes the Church as an extended family open to all humanity.[74] By grounding belonging in Christ, baptism extends responsibility beyond household and clan. The assembly must also become family to any child whose ancestry, language, social standing, or circumstances would otherwise leave that child at the community's margins. Catholicity becomes concrete whenever a newly baptised person enlarges the range of those whom the Church calls her own. Each newly baptised child also

[73] Cf. MRDZ II, 76 (no. 8).

[74] Cf. ibid., II, no. 1, p. 75.

bears a vocation through which the Gospel will address the community in ways it cannot yet anticipate.

Because life can be diminished as well as increased, the joy of reception must remain truthful about the conditions in which many children are born. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, millions have been displaced, and women and children make up a particularly vulnerable part of that population.[75] Some infants are born on roads of flight or in camps for the displaced. An account published by the United Nations Population Fund in 2025 tells of a displaced mother who gave birth while bombs could be heard nearby, and she named her daughter *Amani*, Swahili for "peace".[76] Other children first encounter hunger, bereavement, or wounds inflicted by sexual violence used as a weapon of war. These realities, present also in other parts of the world, test whether ecclesial welcome can bear the cost of what it proclaims.

The Holy Family places such children at the centre of Christian memory. Jesus himself was threatened before he could speak and was carried into Egypt by parents fleeing a ruler's violence (cf. Matt. 2:13–15). In the endangered child, the Church encounters not an exceptional object of compassion but a life with which Christ has identified himself. Here the patristic debate recalled above acquires new pastoral weight. Tertullian and Gregory of Nazianzus counselled delay in baptism except when danger made it urgent.[77] In a context where danger has become ordinary, the very exception they allowed shows with painful clarity how human fragility heightens the urgency of a grace that does not wait upon cognitive maturity.

The Zairean Rite's penitential image of evil as a force by which "our life is diminished"[78] gives theological language to this fragility. Read along-

75 See USA for UNHCR, Democratic Republic of the Congo Refugee Crisis Explained (January 3, 2026).

76 See United Nations Population Fund, Giving Birth under Fire in North Kivu, as Conflict Grips the Democratic Republic of the Congo (February 12, 2025).

77 Cf. Tertullian, bapt. 18, 4 f. (Evans 39); Gregory of Nazianzus, or. 40, 28 (PPS 36, 123 f.; Harrison).

78 MRDZ III, 94 (no. 23).

side infant baptism, it calls the Church to resist every power that wounds the life entrusted to her care. Baptism joins the endangered life to the crucified and risen Christ and incorporates the child into a body obliged to defend that life. The white garment summons the community to honour the child's dignity; the candle, to keep watch; the anointing, to protect vulnerable bodies; and the sign of the cross, to stand in solidarity with those marked by suffering.[79] These symbols proclaim hope credibly only when the Church's practices give them social and bodily consequence.

The commemoration that young Congolese activists have named *Genocost* intensifies this summons by linking the remembrance of mass death to the economic exploitation that sustains violence.[80] Its theological relevance lies in the question it puts to the Church-Family: can a community profess that life is God's gift while ignoring structures that render children disposable? The answer required at the font is both penitential and constructive. The Church must refuse silence, resist every diminishment of life, accompany wounded families, and form communities capable of protection and advocacy. Baptismal renewal is the body's conversion towards the life Christ gives, and this renewal commands it to serve.

Celebration and conversion therefore belong together. As a singing and dancing assembly, the Church rejoices in the life she receives from God; as a wounded community, she recognises the fragile conditions to which her little ones are exposed and the demands of her maternal vocation. At the baptismal font, she brings both her joy and her wounds before God in conversion, prayer, and hope. There the child is incorporated into the Body of Christ, who died and rose, and the Church, in welcoming this new member, is called to renewed fidelity to the grace she has received. Sustained by that grace, her joy becomes thanksgiving, and her conversion takes concrete form in intercession, protection, and nurture for this child and in care for every child left at the margins. In receiving the infant, she thus receives the measure of her own renewal, which is to become, for this child, the family she proclaims herself to be.

79 For the signing with the cross, the anointing with chrism, the white garment, and the lighted candle, see OBC 41. 62–64.

80 Cf. Congolese Action Youth Platform, What Is the Geno-Cost?

5 *Conclusion: One Movement of Grace*

In the celebration of infant baptism, Christ incorporates the child into his body and, through the same sacramental gift, calls the Church herself to renewal. Purified from original sin and born again of water and the Holy Spirit, the infant receives divine adoption and becomes a member of Christ's Church. In that same act, the Church receives from Christ a new life entrusted to her care. Scripture and Catholic tradition teach that the child is baptised in the faith of the Church; the ecclesial vision of the Zairean Rite illuminates what that faith entails for the Church who receives the child. Her communion is enlarged, her responsibility deepened, and her missionary vocation reawakened.

The renewal of the Church consists in a growing fidelity to the vocation she has received (cf. UR 6). What the Zairean Rite discloses belongs to the heart of what the Church herself means by renewal, for each child received at the font calls her to this fidelity and to the conversion it requires. She becomes more truly the Church-Family as the welcome of her gathering matures into nurture, the Word she hears into a faith she inhabits, her celebration into shared responsibility, and her witness into a communion wide enough for every child. Incorporation and renewal are thus inseparable, for Christ gives the child to his body and, through that gift, summons the Church to become more fully the welcoming, nurturing, and missionary communion she is called to be.

Christian initiation leads from the font to the altar. At the close of the baptismal rite, those present gather before the altar to pray the Lord's Prayer, looking towards the day when the child will receive the fullness of the Spirit in confirmation and share at the Eucharistic table.[81] The family that receives the infant at the font is the family that gathers at the altar, and each newly baptised member enlarges the communion the Eucharist builds up. While the MRDZ provides an inculturated form for the celebration of Mass, no corresponding order for the baptism of children yet exists. It is therefore to be hoped that such a rite, shaped by the same threefold fidelity that guided the MRDZ, to the apostolic faith, to the nature of the Catholic liturgy, and to the religious and cultural heritage of Africa and

81 Cf. OBC 67 f.; CCC 1244.

Congo,[82] will one day give ritual expression to what these pages have sought to show that the incorporation of a child into the Church and the renewal of the Church are one movement of grace, in which Christ, by giving a child to his body, renews that body.

Abbreviations

AAS	Acta Apostolicae Sedis
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AG	Ad Gentes
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CEVB	Communauté ecclésiale vivante de base
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
LG	Lumen Gentium
MRDZ	Missel romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre
OBC	The Order of Baptism of Children (2020)
PPS	Popular Patristics Series
SC	Sacrosanctum Concilium
STh	Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae
Trad. ap.	Traditio apostolica
UR	Unitatis Redintegratio
WSA	The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century

82 Cf. MRDZ II, 75 (no. 2).

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