# Appendix: Part One
# A Rite of Passage

*Aidan Kavanagh is professor of liturgy at the Divinity School of Yale University. He told the following story within a lecture delivered in August 1977 at the Theology Institute held at Holy Cross Abbey in Colorado. It is reprinted, with the author's kind permission, to give us hope for the Vigil in this time of liturgical renewal.*

I have always rather liked the gruff robustness of the first rubric for baptism found in a late fourth-century church order that directs that the bishop enter the vestibule of the baptistry and say to the catechumens without commentary or apology only four words: "Take off your clothes." There is no evidence that the assistants fainted or the catechumens asked what he meant. Catechesis and much prayer and fasting had led them to understand that the language of their passage this night in Christ from death to life would be the language of the bathhouse and the tomb—not that of the forum and the drawing room.

So they stripped and stood there, probably faint from fasting, shivering from the cold of early Easter morning and with awe at what was about to transpire. Years of formation were about to be consummated; years of having their motives and lives scrutinized; years of hearing the word of God read and expounded at worship; years of being dismissed with prayer before the faithful went on to celebrate the eucharist; years of having the doors to the assembly hall closed to them; years of seeing the tomb-like baptistry building only from without; years of hearing the old folks of the community tell hair-raising tales of what being a Christian had cost their own grandparents when the emperors were still pagan; years of running into a reticent and reverent vagueness concerning what actually was done by the faithful at the breaking of bread and in that closed baptistry. Tonight all this was about to end as they stood there naked on a cold floor in the gloom of this eerie room.

Abruptly the bishop demands that they face westward, toward where the sun dies swallowed up in darkness, and denounce the King of shadows and death and things that go bump in the night. Each one of them comes forward to do this loudly under the hooded



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gaze of the bishop (who is tired from presiding all night at the Vigil continuing next door in the church), as deacons shield the nudity of the male catechumens from the women, and as deaconesses screen the women in the same manner. This is when each of them finally lets go of the world and of life as they have known it: The umbilical cord is cut, but they have not yet begun to breathe.

Then they must each turn eastward toward where the sun surges up bathed in a light that just now can be seen stealing into the alabaster windows of the room. They must voice their acceptance of the King of light and life who has trampled down death by his own death. As each one finishes this, he or she is fallen upon by a deacon or a deaconess who vigorously rubs olive oil into the catechumen's body, as the bishop perhaps dozes off briefly, leaning on his cane. (He is like an old surgeon waiting for the operation to begin.)

When all the catechumens have been thoroughly oiled, they and the bishop are suddenly startled by the crash of the baptistry doors being thrown open. Brilliant golden light spills out into the shadowy vestibule, and following the bishop (who has now regained his composure), the catechumens and the assistant presbyters, deacons, deaconesses and sponsors move into the most glorious room that most of them have ever seen. It is a high, arbor-like pavilion of green, gold, purple and white mosaic from marble floor to domed ceiling, sparkling like jewels in the light of innumerable oil lamps that fill the room with heady warmth. The windows are beginning to blaze with the light of Easter dawn. The walls curl with vines and tendrils that thrust up from the floor, and at their tops, apostles gaze down robed in snow-white togas, holding crowns. These apostles stand around a golden chair draped with purple on which rests only an open book. And above all these, in the highest point of the ballooning dome, a naked Jesus (very much in the flesh) stands up to his waist in the Jordan as an unkempt John pours water on him, and God's disembodied hand points the Holy Spirit at Jesus' head in the form of a white bird.

Suddenly the catechumens realize that they have unconsciously formed themselves into a mirror image of this lofty icon on the floor



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directly beneath it. They are standing around a pool in the middle of the floor, into which gushes water pouring noisily from the mouth of a stone lion crouching atop a pillar at poolside. The bishop stands beside this, his presbyters on each side: A deacon has entered the pool, and the other assistants are trying to maintain a modicum of decorum among the catechumens who forget their nakedness as they crowd close to see. The room is warm and humid, and it glows. It is a golden paradise in a bathhouse in a mausoleum: an oasis, Eden restored: the navel of the world, where death and life meet, copulate and become undistinguishable from each other. Jonah peers out from a niche, Noah from another, Moses from a third, the paralytic carrying his stretcher from a fourth. The windows begin to sweat.

The bishop rumbles a massive prayer—something about the Spirit and the waters of life and death—and then pokes the water a few times with his cane. The catechumens recall Moses doing something like that to a rock from which water flowed, and they are mightily impressed. Then a young male catechumen of about ten, the son of pious parents, is led down into the pool by the deacon. The water is warm (it has been heated in a furnace), and the oil on his body spreads out on the surface in iridescent swirls. The deacon positions the child near the cascade from the lion's mouth. The bishop leans over on his cane and, in a voice that sounds like something out of the Apocalypse, says: "Euphemius! Do you believe in God the Father, who created all of heaven and earth?" After a nudge from the deacon beside him, the boy murmurs that he does. And just in time, for the deacon, who has been doing this for 50 years and is the boy's grandfather, wraps him in his arms, lifts him backward into the rushing waters and forces him under the surface. The old deacon smiles through his beard at the wide brown eyes that look up at him in shock and fear from beneath the water (the boy has purposely not been told what to expect). Then he raises him up coughing and sputtering. The bishop waits until the boy can speak again, and leaning over a second time, tapping the boy on the shoulder with his cane, says: "Euphemius! Do you believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, who was conceived of the Virgin Mary, suffered



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under Pontius Pilate, and was crucified, died and was buried? Who rose on the third day and ascended into heaven, from whence he will come again to judge the living and the dead?" This time the boy replies like a shot, "I do," and then holds his nose. "Euphemius! Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the master and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who is to be honored and glorified equally with the Father and the Son, who spoke by the prophets? And in one holy, catholic and apostolic church which is the communion of God's holy ones? And in the life that is coming?" "I do."

When the boy comes up the third time, his vast grandfather gathers him in his arms and carries him up the steps leading out of the pool. There another deacon roughly dries Euphemius with a warm towel, and a senior presbyter, who is almost 90 and is regarded by all as a "confessor" because he was imprisoned for the faith as a young man, tremulously pours perfumed oil from a glass pitcher over the boy's damp head until it soaks his hair and runs down over his upper body. The fragrance of this enormously expensive oil fills the room as the old man mutters: "God's servant, Euphemius, is anointed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Euphemius then is wrapped in a new linen tunic; the fragrant chrism seeps into it, and he is given a burning terra-cotta oil lamp and told to go stand by the door and keep quiet. Meanwhile, the other baptisms have continued.

When all have been done in this same manner (an old deaconess, a widow, replaced Euphemius's grandfather when it came the women's time), the clergy strike up the Easter hymn, "Christ is risen from the dead, he has crushed death by his death and bestowed life on those who lay in the tomb." To this constantly repeated melody interspersed with the psalm verse, "Let God arise and smite his enemies," the whole baptismal party—tired, damp, thrilled and oily—walk out into the blaze of Easter morning and go next door to the church led by the bishop. There he bangs on the closed doors with his cane: They are flung open, the endless vigil is halted and the baptismal party enters as all take up the hymn "Christ is risen . . .", which is all but drowned out by the ovations that greet Christ truly risen in his newly born ones. As they enter, the fragrance of chrism



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fills the church: It is the Easter smell, God's grace olfactorally incarnate. The pious struggle to get near the newly baptized to touch their chrismed hair and rub its fragrance on their own faces. All is chaos until the baptismal party manages to reach the towering ambo that stands in the middle of the pewless hall. The bishop ascends its lower front steps, turns to face the whiteclad neophytes grouped at the bottom with their burning lamps and the boisterous faithful now held back by a phalanx of well-built acolytes and doorkeepers. Euphemius's mother has fainted and has been carried outside for air.

The bishop opens his arms to the neophytes and once again all burst into "Christ is risen," *Christos aneste.* He then affirms and seals their baptism after prayer, for all the faithful to see, with an authoritative gesture of paternity—laying his hand on each head, signing each oily forehead once again in the form of a cross, while booming out: "The servant of God is sealed with the Holy Spirit." To which all reply in a thunderous "Amen," and for the first time, the former catechumens receive and give the kiss of peace. Everyone is in tears.

While this continues, bread and wine are laid out on the holy table; the bishop then prays at great length over them after things quiet down, and the neophytes lead all to communion with Euphemius out in front. While his grandfather holds his lamp, Euphemius dines on the precious Body, whose true and undoubted member he has become; drinks the precious Blood of him in whom he himself now has died; and just this once drinks from another special cup—one containing milk and honey mixed as a gustatory icon of the promised land into which he and his colleagues finally have entered out of the desert through Jordan's waters. Then his mother (now recovered and somewhat pale, still insisting she had only stumbled) takes him home and puts him, fragrantly, to bed.

Euphemius has come a long way. He has passed from death into a life he lives still.



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