

## ECHOES OF NICAEA: MINISTRY OF THE BAPTIZED IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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The Council of Nicaea convened to resolve an urgent crisis: defining Jesus Christ as truly God and truly human, the only-begotten Son of God. The fathers gathered at the council composed the first part of a Creed, which eventually became the global church's statement of faith. Fifty-six years later, the council of Constantinople finished the Creed, completing a rather long and theologically dense statement that confessed faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and also in the church, and in one baptism for the remission of sins.

Lost in the forest of theological controversies in the Nicene era are the pastoral issues pastors confronted. A pastor had to be a good teacher, able to precisely articulate that Jesus Christ is the Father's only-begotten Son, true God of true God, and to communicate this truth to ordinary people.

This presentation is designed to connect the echoes of the Nicene era with contemporary practices for the church's ministry to its people and the world. The primary area of focus is formation: how does the liturgical theology of baptism in the Nicene era, much of which has been retained or revived in the twenty-first century, address contemporary realities? A ministry offered by the church on behalf of all and for all, grounded in renewed eschatology, accounting for the state of the people's mental and emotional health, and the ministry of the traumatized for the traumatized are the topics I will develop today.

### THE BAPTISMAL RITE AND COVENANT

What did Christian life look like for the newly-baptized?

One conceptual element stands out in the rites of baptism as we know them: the newly-baptized were to annul all associations with the devil and enter into a new covenant with God through Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> We are familiar with the history of these ritual components and their interpretation in the fourth-century mystagogues. In the mystagogical catechesis usually ascribed to St. Cyril of Jerusalem, consecrated bishop of Jerusalem in 350, he explains that the outstretched arm combined with the

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, trans. and ed. Maxwell Johnson, Popular Patristics Series 57 (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 103, 123.

renunciation of Satan severed the covenant with the evil one.<sup>2</sup> The turning to the east and confession of faith (“I believe in the Father and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit and in one baptism of repentance”) previews the content of the neophyte’s new life—one of worshipping and following the one true God.<sup>3</sup>

What exactly did the neophytes renounce? Satan—his works, pomp, his worship, and the “ancient league with Hades.”<sup>4</sup> Nestled in between these explanations of renunciations is Cyril’s instruction on how the neophytes were to conduct themselves in everyday life. Renunciation of Satan’s pomp includes “mania for the theater and for the horse races,” hunting, and other vain things. The mania of the theater includes actors who perform “wanton and shameless acts” and men appearing as women in “frenzied dancing.” The horse races are described as spectacles that destroy souls. Cyril folds these specific instructions in between the renunciations and an extended admonishment to resist the temptation to resume one’s previous way of life. Returning to recreational activities and forms of entertainment subjects the neophyte to re-enslavement to the devil, whose rule will become even more embittered. Cyril uses fear as a motivator to remain steadfast in their new way of life: insincere renunciations would bring one a fate similar to Lot’s wife, whose desire to return to Gomorrah turned her into a pillar of salt.<sup>5</sup>

### RITUAL RENUNCIATIONS AND BEHAVIOR

The rites themselves suggest that the church of the Nicene milieu saw a veritable metaphysical battle for humankind’s allegiance taking place.<sup>6</sup> Knowing that the devil only wanted to enslave the humans in deep embitterment, God liberated them, and invited them into an eternal covenant they would share with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and the communion of saints.<sup>7</sup> The church’s liturgical rites ensured a safe passage from the enslaved relationship with the devil to the free covenant with Christ.<sup>8</sup> The people live in this covenant in the church, and also confess their faith in the church.

The combination of rituals and homilies helps us to see how the Nicene-era church viewed the kinds of challenges the neophytes would face in their new life in the church. When catechumens approached the church for baptism, pastors essentially told them that the devil had enslaved them into a life consisting of a vicious cycle of bitterness. Participating in the devil’s pomp—exultation in the activities of the theater, hunting, and horse racing, for example—likely delivered a temporary “high,” an elevation of excitement that was unsustainable when it declined and failed to fulfill participants.

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, 86-9.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, 92-3.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, 88-93.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, 92-3.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Paulo Nogueira, “Early Christianity as a Popular Religiosity in the Mediterranean World,” *Revista Teologia* 59 (2022): 62.

<sup>7</sup> See Saint Basil the Great, *On the Human Condition*, trans. Nonna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 75-76 (from Basil’s homily “Explaining that God is not the cause of evil”).

<sup>8</sup> See the interesting analysis by Constantin Oancea, “*Chaoskampf* in the Orthodox Baptism Ritual,” *Acta Theologica* 37, no. 2 (2017): 126.

The devil manipulated spectacle to dazzle neophytes and keep them returning for more—like a dopamine hit, or drug addiction, that has disastrous consequences when withdrawal settles in. Participation in emotionally intense activities—horse-racing, hunting, dramatic and musical performances—could lead participants to an emotional ceiling that eventually expires and results in a letdown. These exciting activities were unsustainable over the long run, and they did not address the fundamental problem confronting each person—the inevitability of death. Baptism in Christ and participation in his death and resurrection addressed the fundamental problem of death by referring repeatedly to the promise of eternal life for those who commit to the covenant in Christ.

Pastors faced a similar challenge when ordinary people requested baptism. Renouncing Satan and his pomp required a change of lifestyle—radical for some. Sustaining a commitment to a radical change of lifestyle was no easy matter, and pastors tended to use negative reinforcement to exhort initiates to remain faithful to their new way of life in Christ. John Chrysostom said that the initiates would face Satan in battle “from that day onwards,” referring to the demons’ aversion to the light shining from the anointing on the forehead of the initiates as they were preparing to enter the font.<sup>9</sup>

### POST-BAPTISMAL REPENTANCE

We know that many of the newly-baptized did, indeed, lapse, by denying their faith or committing other grievous sins like murder or adultery. The church created a system of post-baptismal repentance that reconciled the lapsed with the church. The system evolved to account for categories of sins with amendments ranging from the recitation of psalms and prayers to periods of excommunication. The church continues to use this system in the present day, encouraging people to come forward for the sacrament of penance as often as possible. The sacrament of penance made amending one’s life possible after baptism, yet many continued to struggle with habitual sin.

### RENEWED ESCHATOLOGY

The baptismal rites of the Nicene era initiate the neophyte into a life that bridges the two worlds of heaven and earth. The Byzantine prayer for the consecration of chrism states that the name of Father, the only-begotten Son, and the Holy Spirit is imprinted upon neophytes in baptism.<sup>10</sup> The prayer said before the anointing with chrism asks God to “keep,” confirm, deliver, and guard them—verbs denoting protection, which is necessary for people who remain vulnerable to the temptations presented on earth even as they have inaugurated their citizenship in heaven.<sup>11</sup> The final petition of this prayer asks that the newly-anointed would “become sons and heirs of your heavenly kingdom,” again depicting the destiny of the baptized. Again, they dwell in both worlds, completing their sojourn in this world while having already

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 160.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Denysenko, *Chrismation: A Primer for Catholics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 6-7, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Denysenko, *Chrismation*, 19-20.

received the name of God and the gift of sonship that belongs to the kingdom of God. In his catecheses on the sacraments, St. Ambrose of Milan, writing between 380-390 CE, instructed the neophytes to choose eternal life, in reference to the anointing with myron they received. His instruction shows that the transformation of human nature in the rites of baptism honors the freedom neophytes possess in exercising their will—they still have the power to choose a life compatible with the heavenly precepts and virtues while continuing their sojourn on earth.

Turning to our current twenty-first century context—the coronavirus pandemic and the political and economic turmoil that followed shed light on an existing truth that Christians have always held: humankind’s destiny is not infinite life on earth with all of its features and benefits, but God has recreated humans, in baptism and anointing, to pass through death into eternal life with him and the communion of saints. The pandemic also illuminated an existing societal crisis—the prolonged suffering of people who dwell on the margins.

Reinvigorated by the sober acknowledgement of the finite nature of the present life, today’s Christians must renew their pursuit of the kingdom of God with vigor. This pursuit entails a renewed eschatology and a pastoral focus on vigilance. The Christian community in the process of completing its earthly pilgrimage, with heaven as the destination, engages the core activities of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, holding all things in common while attending to the needs of the least of the Lord’s brethren, especially those on the margins.

### **A SOJOURN TO “THE MARGINS”**

Who do we have in mind when we speak of those on “the margins?” The phrase is used colloquially to refer to people who are socially excluded and lack access to basic social services.<sup>12</sup> Various Christian communities have identified the marginalized as people whose living conditions demand that they receive Christian ministry, especially regarding the provision of basic human services. Christians throughout the world find themselves among the marginalized, especially those communities that are minorities in countries and regions with limitations on religious freedoms.

Christianity still carries exclusionary characteristics, especially in the churches with policies of closed Holy Communion. A pastoral strategy that reaches out to the marginalized must begin with an accounting for existing exclusionary characteristics and practices. A church that offers the liturgy “on behalf of all and for all” must learn how to see the marginalized in their midst and outside the borders the church constructs.

### **MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH**

Public awareness of the mental and emotional health crisis afflicting the world was increasing when the pandemic heightened the urgency of the problem. The US Surgeon

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, “What is Marginalization? Definition and Coping Strategies,” LibertiesEU, Civil Liberties Union for Europe (October 5, 2021), <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/marginalization-and-being-marginalized/43767>.

General's report on the epidemic of loneliness in America revealed staggering statistics.<sup>13</sup> Surveys found that nearly one out of every four adults suffers from loneliness, with 47 percent feeling that their relationships are not meaningful, and 57 percent of Americans reporting that they eat meals alone.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that 70 percent of the global population will suffer a traumatic event at some point in their lives.<sup>14</sup> Trauma contributes to a number of mental and emotional disorders, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>15</sup> Gabor Maté argues that untreated trauma contributes to severe physical illnesses and prolonged substance abuse. Maté contends that many illnesses are expected consequences of abnormal circumstances and appeals for a global discussion on finding remedies to aid people in recovery from trauma.<sup>16</sup>

### MECHANISMS FOR COPING WITH TRAUMA

Mental health professionals have quivers full of arrows for teaching people how to cope with trauma and its consequences. The church is a hospital and as the body of Jesus Christ has a role to play in ministry to the traumatized. Baptism and anointing are rites that refer to preservation, protection, and healing. Furthermore, the rites of baptism, anointing, and Eucharist are anchored in trauma narratives. Jesus Christ saved humankind through a series of traumatic events. The liturgical texts repeatedly testify to Christ's betrayal, passion, death, burial, and resurrection, but the events include his own experience of kenosis, loneliness, abandonment, and despondency. Jesus himself experienced trauma, even as an infant, given the threat on his life and his family's need to take refuge in another country. The events of his Pascha were traumatic for him and also the eyewitnesses who came to constitute the church, his apostles and followers.

When the presiding minister instructs a candidate for baptism to renounce Satan, immediately discontinue certain daily behaviors, commit themselves entirely to a new person (Christ) and his community, initiate them into a new life by requiring them to strip, receive an anointing, be immersed in water, and emerge with new clothing and a new anointing—and to interpret all of this as your participation in Christ's death and resurrection—it can rightly be called a trauma.

Many people of the church have experienced trauma and the church as a gathered community recalls Christ's trauma in the celebration of the Eucharist. Karen O'Donnell writes that the celebration of the Eucharist, in remembrance of Christ, is a form of non-

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<sup>13</sup> Vivek Murthy, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The US Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the US Surgeon General, 2023), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," World Health Organization (May 27, 2024), <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/post-traumatic-stress-disorder>.

<sup>15</sup> "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."

<sup>16</sup> Maté's definition of trauma is helpful: "An event is traumatizing, or retraumatizing, only if it renders one diminished, which is to say psychically (or physically) more limited than before in a way that persists." Gabor Maté, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (New York: Avery, 2022), 24.

identical repetition.<sup>17</sup> The ritual celebration itself is traumatic, even though it is not identical with its prototype. O'Donnell writes that the newly-baptized person is called to be something new in baptism and that time is ruptured during the rite because the future is coming into the present.<sup>18</sup> O'Donnell argues similarly that partaking of Holy Communion ruptures time for the participant because of the entrance of Christ's body and blood into the physical bodies of communicants, another instance of a traumatic event.<sup>19</sup>

O'Donnell asserts that the creators of liturgical rites promoted trauma recovery, because this process includes taking refuge in a safe place (presumably the location of the church's gathering), constructing a narrative that makes sense of the trauma, and returning to society.<sup>20</sup>

O'Donnell's depiction of liturgical participation as a possible means for trauma recovery is compatible with the legacy of the Nicene church in many ways. Baptism in the Nicene epoch envisioned a radical change of life, including death to some of one's previous associations. Most importantly, the neophytes were now living with feet in two worlds—earth and heaven—and were destined for eternal life with God in heaven. The sacramental event had, indeed, been a rupture in their personal timeline of life, and that breach remained as they prioritized their citizenship in God's kingdom over everything else.

In some ways, the twenty-first century church is not ready to receive its sacraments as events that promote trauma recovery. The church itself as a community leaves the door open to trauma when it sacralizes entitlement and privilege, justifies and attempts to conceal a variety of sins, and fails to use its prophetic voice to protect the traumatized and those vulnerable to trauma. Sometimes the church stigmatizes a variety of mental and emotional disorders, ranging from condemning suicide as an unforgivable sin to erecting obstacles to full acceptance in the church for people struggling to cope with their disorders.

## MAKING SENSE OF SIN AND SPIRITUAL THERAPY

People afflicted by mental and emotional illnesses sometimes turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms to numb their pain.<sup>21</sup> These mechanisms include substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual addiction, violence, digital media addiction, gambling, and emotional abuse. Many of these behaviors would fall under categories similar to the spectacles of the theater, hunting, and horse racing identified by Cyril of Jerusalem as the pomp of the devil Christians must renounce forever. If the church community learns about unhealthy coping behaviors, those who bear the burden of mental illnesses are easily stigmatized. The stigmatizing can drive them out of the church community and

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<sup>17</sup> Karen O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary, and the Body in Trauma Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 19-21.

<sup>18</sup> O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 171.

<sup>19</sup> O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 171.

<sup>20</sup> O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 179-80.

<sup>21</sup> See Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 31-38.

push them to the margins. Those who remain in the community can find themselves both sacramentally and socially excluded.

This penultimate section is an inflection point of my presentation, and a hazardous one at that. This point is not moving towards the identification of the Nicene era rituals or their interpretation as the cure for mental illnesses. The Nicene legacy of baptism speaks prophetically to our age in its sense of pastoral urgency: to embrace repentance as an urgent and radical change of life because the kingdom of God is at hand.

The issue for pastors is not so much whether or not people will sin, but how to address the kinds of behaviors that neophytes once had to renounce. People often renounce the very sins they struggle to resist and overcome, including substance abuse, sexual addiction, and self-harm. Physicians and psychologists have argued that many people engaging behaviors like alcoholism and sexual addiction are not trying to sin, but turning to activities and substances that numb their pain. The point here is to acknowledge that many people are steeped in lives of sin involuntarily.<sup>22</sup>

The twenty-first century church can renew the Nicene legacy of the renunciation of Satan at baptism by renouncing many of the causes of trauma that are under our control. The church can renounce demonic lies and falsehoods that tell us that we have to endure ongoing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of family members. The church can renounce bullying and emotional manipulation that runs rampant in workplaces and schools. The church can renounce the demonic falsehood that our physical appearance, weight, and clothing make us ugly and unwanted. The church can renounce the devil's whispers that upgrading to the next phone with its accessories and having the most followers on a social media platform defines our value. The church can renounce Satan's temptation of worldly dominion that provides life support to greed and catalyzes the drums of war. We can continue to renounce the most egregious demonic falsehood of them all—that we can deny almighty God because we ourselves can become his equals by creating cults of self-adulation.

In the rites of baptism, the sponsors make the renunciations together with the candidates for baptism. It is a short step to invite the entire community to utter these renunciations together with the candidates and their sponsors. One of the most important aspects of connecting some of the known causes of trauma and mental health disorders with Satan's service, pride, and pomp is naming the adversary.<sup>23</sup> The church would take an active role in asking God to remove evil influences that harm those seeking entrance into his kingdom via baptism and anointing. The activity is communal and it requires a commitment to an ascetical life where each person is attending to the care of their soul, along with their minds and bodies.<sup>24</sup>

The baptized and anointed members of the community who are among the traumatized would be participating in this event—the traumatized ministering to the traumatized. Naming the causes of trauma and related afflictions is a continuous part of communal life. The traumatized minister to the traumatized by joining them in renouncing the harmful sources of their afflictions. The community folds the naming of the trauma into their liturgical traditions of petition and thanksgiving—asking God

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<sup>22</sup> See van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 31-33.

<sup>23</sup> See van der Kolk's comment on the power of language in van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Saint Basil the Great, *On the Human Condition*, 96-98.

to deliver them from temptation and harmful vices while thanking God for deliverance and amnesty.

The twenty-first century retrieval of Nicene baptismal theology does not confuse the practices of renunciation, petition, and thanksgiving with the medical and psychological treatment that contributes to improved coping and healing. The contemporary retrieval I am proposing here honors God as the divine physician who heals all that is infirm through the pouring out of divine grace. God is the source of medicinal and psychological treatments that promote healing, and the Christian community promotes such practices in the spirit of *fides et ratio*.

Allow me a cautionary word about the renewal of Christian eschatology. It is a copout to simply defer to the promise of future salvation as a reason for tolerating wrongs that are not righted, illnesses that are not healed, and people who continue to return to their own sin. The point of the present time is to continue to seek God, to pursue the righteousness of God's kingdom while simultaneously confessing and lamenting the problems that keep us in sin—even when those problems are our own selves. Thanksgiving fits each situation—some are grateful for improved coping, others for healing, and still others for the company and encouragement of fellow Christians who refuse to abandon them while they struggle to become whole. One of the twenty-first century applications of the Nicene heritage is to sustain company and fellowship for all who struggle and to use punitive measures only as a last resort, to protect the vulnerable from harm. Abandonment is one of the most egregious causes of trauma. A church of the traumatized ministering to the traumatized, on behalf of all and for all, must remove abandonment from its pastoral toolbox, with the stipulation that the vulnerable must be guarded at all costs.<sup>25</sup>

### CONCLUSION: THE NICENE LEGACY TODAY, IN HIS ABSENCE

This presentation has reflected on how the twenty-first century church might retrieve the baptismal theology of the Nicene-era church. The essay asserts that the Nicene-era church emphasized the urgency of preparation to meet Christ in the next life, which is often found in pastoral admonitions to neophytes that they now dwell in two intersecting worlds—heaven and earth, yet are bound for heaven. A renewed sense of urgency to prepare for eternal life with God illuminates the responsibility of the Body of Christ—the church—to truly minister on behalf of all and for all by renouncing evils that cause trauma and providing companionship to the traumatized who suffer in the church and on the margins.

As the Body of Christ awaits the completion of its pilgrimage and reunification with Christ in the fullness of his glorified presence, it is assured that the one who was exalted in humility will be our most beloved and trustworthy companion as the we complete the journey on earth and make our final entrance into heaven.

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<sup>25</sup> van der Kolk's assertion that "our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another" is applicable here (see van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 38).