



The Baptismal Font

After the resurrection, Christ commissioned the Apostles to make disciples of all nations baptizing them and teaching all that he has commanded (Matt 28:16-20). The book of *Acts* makes many references to those accepting Christ's message and being baptized. Even the Ethiopian goes to the river to be baptized by the deacon Philip (9:26-39).

It was after Christianity became the official religion of the Empire and formal churches were established that fonts became elaborately designed. Some shaped like a cross, and others like a tomb. The shape reflected the understanding that one dies and rises to a new life in Christ. Round fonts suggested the idea of a womb where one comes to a new birth in Christ. Fonts with eight sides offer the image of a new creation, on the eighth day (the first day of the week).

These fonts often had their own room separate from the worshiping area. In later centuries these elaborate fonts were simplified and placed in part of the church building, usually a chapel. They now sit on the floor. By the 10th century, infant baptism was the norm and the font was elevated. These are the fonts currently found in the great basilicas in Europe today. As smaller churches were built, these elevated "tubs" became a bowl on a single pedestal. The font had lost its power through the actions of baptism to visually be a strong symbol of a death to an old life style and a birth to a new life in Christ.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has reached back into its history to again embrace the richness of the past. The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) has been recovered and is the model for the Church's sacraments. It is a journey of faith-seeking individuals guided by the community that celebrates the sacraments of initiation upon their readiness at the Easter Vigil. The journey continues through a never-ending period of Mystagogy. All our sacraments begin with "sacramental preparation" and are lived out in our Christian lives.

It is the initiation of adults that challenges how we use water in baptism. Using a bowl on a pedestal and pouring a small amount of water over the forehead of the adult does not visually speak to the power of the sacrament. The rites of the Church call for rich and lavish use of symbols, generous amounts of water, not just a few drops. To accomplish this goal parishes have again built large fonts capable of using generous amounts of water and even the immersion of an adult. Their shapes have again awakened the imagination of artisans and liturgists.

The placement of the font has no solid tradition other than a separate baptistry or chapel. When the font is at the main door, it suggests to all who enter that it is through the water of baptism that they are part of the body of Christ. It is through this water that we come to the Table of the Lord to receive his Body and his Blood. Sight lines are difficult in this placement. However, it does encourage movement by the assembly. In all our liturgical celebrations we are not passive observers, but participants. Movement helps us become fuller and more active participants. Placing the font in a position where one would have to stand and turn around is one way to make us more active in the celebration of this sacrament.