

# THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West  
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS



## Baptism

By The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield

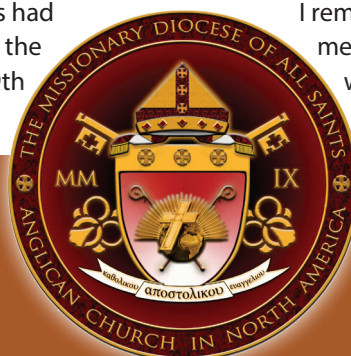
I am truly a product of modern times. My supposition is that what I have personally experienced is the same for everyone else. Although this may be true to some extent, in most cases it is clearly not. Additionally, for many modern people, this supposition extends to all times. How we think and act now is how people have always thought and acted, right? Wrong. But our modern American society tries really hard to maintain this incorrect belief. And one of the best vehicles to perpetuate this incorrect belief is the film industry.

I remember some years back almost walking out of the latest version of *The Last of the Mohicans* not because the acting was bad, but rather because the movie was only remotely related to the book by James Fennimore Cooper. It especially didn't help that I had just finished the book and was therefore hypersensitive to the movie's inaccuracies. By far the worst part of the movie's failure was that all of the characters had modern late-20th Century sensibilities, especially the women, unlike the book, where they had early 19th Century sensibilities.

So, why do I digress about this modern tendency? Well, I find myself doing it again. I have often been troubled by my own catechesis as a child and have thought that others, especially my age, had experienced the same thing. I do not know if this is true, but I sense that it may be true because of the theological crisis that is plaguing our modern age.

I am the product of the 1960s. My parents, God bless them, wanted my brother, sisters and I to have a proper Roman Catholic education, including being properly catechized. I was probably receiving a pretty normal catechesis up until Vatican II hit. The Mass stopped being in Latin and likewise, it seems, the nuns stopped teaching the faith. In general terms, I learned some things, but the kind of catechesis I received was woefully lacking in some fundamental ways. One such example of this was my Confirmation.

I remember being bowled over when my mother told me that the bishop would lay his hands on me, and I would receive the Holy Spirit. To my recollection, no instructor in my religion class told me this



### Our Core Value is:

*"The Convocation of the West is Missionary, bringing people to Christ and meaningfully engaging in the transformation of the culture around us."*

### The Vision of the Convocation is:

*"To STRENGTHEN existing churches;  
To PLANT new churches; and  
To RAISE UP missional leaders."*

aspect of Confirmation nor was it covered in preparation for this sacrament. The first time I heard that was from my mother.

As part of my daily devotion, I have been reading Ephesians and thinking about Baptism. And I have been thinking whether we truly catechize our young people as to what happens in Baptism. I also begin to wonder if people my age and younger fully understand the amazing transformation that occurs during this great sacrament. Or am I the lone person whose catechesis was so woefully lacking.

Now, I must digress again. When considering what takes place at Baptism, one has to keep in mind the differences between Eastern Orthodox and Western Christianity. Our theological development in the West, for better or for worse, was influenced by lawyers. Many of the great doctors of the church were in fact lawyers and saw things from a legal perspective. Saint Augustine, thinking about original sin, thought that the great sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was transmitted to all of mankind. He also saw Baptism as the washing away of this original sin.

But the Eastern Church balks at this interpretation. They see no justice or justification in believing the sin of Adam and Eve was imputed onto us. They believe in original sin, but they view it very differently, seeing it as part of the Fall of Mankind, and with it, all of creation. So, what happens during Baptism is slightly different depending on whether it is the Eastern or the Western Church that is addressing the issue.

But, either way, what is clear is that, in Baptism, something momentous happens. The old “man” dies and a new “creature” is resurrected. In the Anglican 39 Articles of Faith, Article 27, we have:

*“Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church, the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.”*

What struck me in my lessons and in this Article is the concept of “regeneration.” Is this a concept we fully understand? Is it a concept we were taught? Is it a concept our children or grandchildren were taught? Are we teaching it now? Are we revisiting it and stressing it? Or do we just say the word and never elaborate. With my own instruction at the time, the stress was on

the adoption – being adopted children of God and dearly loved – which is true. But what about the regeneration of our souls and the ramification of this on our lives?

“Regeneration” is the belief that we are born again through Baptism. In other words, through Baptism we die, we are buried with Christ, and we are raised with Him. Saint Paul calls this a mystery, and it is. But this mystery changes us. And it should change the way we look at ourselves. As Saint Paul indicated in his letter to the Romans:

*“Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” [Romans 6:4]*

Because we are baptized, we are dead to the old person and should be walking in the newness of life. The Eastern Orthodox will tell you that there are two deaths through baptism. The first is the death of the old and the birth of the new person; the second is a constant dying to sin daily as we “walk in the newness of life.”

This concept of the second death feeds into their concept of “Theosis”, meaning becoming more Christ-like. And here is where I think my catechism failed.

In these modern times (or post-modern times), we are constantly told that things are “not our fault”. It is our parents’ fault for our failures. The sex-drive is natural and therefore cannot be resisted; our genetics determines whether we are a saint or a sinner, a judge or a criminal or even a murderer. We “cannot help it.” It is like that old Flip Wilson line, “The devil made me do it.” Only in this case, it is our genetic make-up and our environment. Once set, it’s done.

Now, let us be clear: there have been great scientific discoveries that explain everything from schizophrenia to depression. These are legitimate, scientific developments. And there have been great strides in psychiatry and psychology, which have helped people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and dealing with bad things that have happened to them. But, this being said, there are many people who profess to be experts who state that no change is possible, that people cannot improve. And this concept is what has crept into the way many of us view many things that effect our lives.

This way of thinking has even entered our Christian faith. We are told that we will sin, that we will fail, and this is true. But we are told this in such a way that I think many people believe that there is no sense in even trying. We will sin; God knows this; we



are already forgiven – so no need to change.

They say that the devil is skilled in Scripture, quoting just enough and then changing just one part. It sounds good; it sounds true; but in it, like poison in a beautiful meal, is death. The fallacy in what I just wrote is the conclusion: “so no need to change”. When I was a teenager, we would kid with our non-Roman Catholic friends that we could sin all week, go to confession on Saturday, receive communion on Sunday and go back to sinning on Monday. We were “unclear on the concept”.

But these concepts are wrong. To be regenerate means that we CAN resist sin. We CAN strive to be better and succeed. Yes, we may stumble and fall. Sin is quite attractive. But to assume that there is something defective in our nature that prevents us from doing better is to deny the mystery that takes place in Baptism. It is to deny that we are, in fact, regenerate.

There is one caveat to what I just wrote that, as Christians, we are bound to observe. As I write about our new nature that can resist sin, I am writing introspectively. I am telling each of us how we deal with our own personal struggles. This however is not to be applied to “others”. We are commanded not to judge lest we be judged. If someone is weak in their fight of faith, we must realize they are on their own journey. If they ask, we can help. But

until then, to think we are better is to give in to the greatest of all sins: Pride. And to tell them what they are doing wrong before even being asked to help is most likely to give in to another sin: Hypocrisy. No, what I am writing about are thoughts for our own personal growth and not meant to be clubs to beat into submission others.

But, that being said, it is time we stop giving ourselves the excuse. It is time to stop giving ourselves the “pass”. It is time to deal with our sins and strive to be better. It is time to accept our regeneration. It is time to embrace our new nature fully. It is our time to adopt our own Theosis. But as we do this, let us be merciful to others AND to ourselves. Let us realize this will take time and perfection will not be reached until the resurrection. And let us also remember that David, with his host of sins, foibles and peccadillos, remained God’s favorite. We, like David, are dearly loved. So, let us show our love for God by doing better and by trying each and every day to be a little more Christ-like. And let us live up to our Baptismal promise.

Amen and God bless,  
The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield  
Vicar General for the Convocation of the West

## Pro-Life And The Gospel

By Bishop Winfield Mott

The Pro-Life movement began in the aftermath of abortion law revision in the U.S., culminating in the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision. Since that time, it has achieved few of its stated goals, but has nevertheless had a profound impact on both Christianity and politics in America. In a nation more polarized than at any other time since the Civil War, it has become the standard used by many to define Christian orthodoxy, and by many secularists to define what Christianity means.

It is the nature of polarized times that little reflection happens, as protagonists slug it out with those on “the far side,” at first represented by the Pro-Choice movement, but now perceived much more widely. As a result, rational discussion and critical self-insight has devolved into little more than slogan shouting and soundbyte quips, absent any reflection.

A current example is the very public debate of the august US Conference of Catholic Bishops on whether or not to excommunicate President Joe Biden for holding political views which differ from the bishops, whose first priority, in summary, is to secure legislation making abortion illegal. On the flip side, the MoveOn movement, whose goal is to elect progressive Democrats, is raising funds to defeat a Texas Democratic Congressman, who is one of the last incumbent Pro-Life Democrats. No one seems to notice that the debate on abortion has some serious flaws.

1. We are not orthodox Christians because we oppose

abortion. It is the opposite: we oppose abortion because we are orthodox Christians. The first priority of the Christian Church is to gather into, celebrate and proclaim Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said absolutely nothing at all about abortion, but He said a lot about loving your enemies, forgiveness, not judging others and law being made to serve mankind rather than mankind to serve the law.

2. While Christians in different times and places must formulate ethical decisions by extrapolating the principles of Jesus’ ethics (as summarized in the Beatitudes), it is crucial to the process to note how difficult it is to do so without intermingling our own perspectives, to the point of hijacking Jesus’ ethics to serve our own purposes. Church history is cluttered with examples of this, from Second Century Gnostics, through Donatists, iconoclasts, Crusaders, theocrats, Manicheans, Pelagians, Albigenses, Puritans, Shakers, Mormons, Prohibitionists, and many, many more. We could easily fall victim to the same temptation.

3. All abortions are tragedies. That does not mean abortion is always the wrong decision.

4. The basic failure of the orthodox churches is to attempt a legislated solution to an ethical pastoral problem. Jesus never does this. It is a tempting shortcut, in contrast to the harder job of teaching ethics to the Faithful. It also does not work, when imposed on an unwilling majority or large minority, as prohibition measures of various kinds have overwhelmingly proven.

5. Christian ethics call for a teaching and persuading approach, in which good example replaces enforcement, and the loving regard for our neighbors replaces condemnation.

6. Jesus did teach, in the strongest terms, that we should love and care for children. To protect the unborn but neglect them once born is the ultimate in hypocrisy. If you oppose abortion, you are therefore committed to effective societal support, financially and collectively, for post-natal care, childcare, a good and accessible educational system and programs which ensure children are fed, nurtured, protected and sheltered.

7. A county public health officer I knew commented that Planned Parenthood prevented far more abortions than the legislative advocacy of the Roman Catholic and other Pro-Life churches, because Planned Parenthood provided affordable and accessible contraception, whereas the Roman Catholic hierarchy tried to block most forms of contraception.

8. Abortions, after all, are overwhelmingly caused by unwanted pregnancies. Effective contraception prevents unwanted pregnancies. Duh, as the kids say?

9. Christian ethics in society is always focused on peacemaking, not polarizing. Where are the mediators among us to reach out in love to heal the brokenness? I have never known any woman, even the most ardent Pro-Choice advocate, to say, "I want to get pregnant so I can have an abortion." There is common ground, and it is the best and natural instinct of Christians to occupy it.

10. There are powerful interests, nevertheless, who prefer polarization. The sincere millions in the Pro-Life movement have often been cynically used by politicians for their own purposes, not to further Christian ethics. The genuine portions of the Pro-Life movement need to disassociate themselves from these politicians, not cater to them.

11. The current situation, where Christian orthodoxy is identified as identical with the Pro-Life movement, and the Pro-Life movement is identified with right-wing politics, to the exclusion of all else, means Christian evangelism cannot happen in America. The message of the Church is, or rather ought to be, "God loves you, unconditionally; His Son, Jesus Christ is your Savior; come and rejoice." Our mandate from Jesus is to proclaim that message. All else is irrelevant until that message has been heard. This does not mean it is wrong to be pro-life, nor even that a Christian cannot be involved in right-wing politics. But the tail should not wag the dog.

In the heat of battle and partisan passions, even in the daily drowning in life's details, it is possible to lose sight of the larger picture. There are always many tempting detours in our pilgrimage along the tangent highway of orthodoxy (in Greek, "ortho" means "straight" and "odos" means "road"). To reflect is part of the Christian process of sin, repentance, absolution and amendment of life. To reflect on what it really means to be pro-life is a worthy exercise for all of us.

# IMPORTANT UPDATE

## Upcoming Liturgical Music Conference 2021 P o s t p o n e d

The October Music Conference has been postponed until next year, October 2022, because of the Delta Variant. Last year, the Convocation of the West planned to have a conference on Music. A little thing called the Pandemic delayed it by a year. We thought we were ready to proceed this year, but because of the Delta variant, the Governor of Washington State has implemented mask requirements for indoor activities. Additionally, he may eventually require Covid health passes. We therefore have decided to delay by another year this conference. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience that this cancellation may have caused. Please contact the Vicar General of the West, the Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield, if you wish to discuss this matter. And please continue to pray for the end of this plague.