

Baptismal Tracts and Educational Reform under Charlemagne

Historians turn to the Carolingian era as a ship on a dark, foggy night at sea turns to a beacon's glow. The late eighth and ninth centuries displayed a burst of energy that stands in marked contrast to the silence of the preceding and following centuries. Above all, the "renaissance" of the Carolingians manifested itself in an enormous literary output.

The chief cause of this literary productivity ^{is} was the educational reforms legislated by Charlemagne. Kenneth Clark, of television fame, referring to the centuries of transition from the late classical to the medieval world, said that civilization "got through by the skin of its teeth". If those ages were not as dark as they have been painted, the remark captures well the importance that educational reform had for Charlemagne. By the year 800 he headed a vast empire, but large parts had submitted to Frankish domination and Christianity in little more than name. Not only border areas, but interior regions of the empire continued in their various indigenous practices and beliefs. Unification was essential to the survival of his realm. If America in the decade of the 1960's saw one of its hopes for future survival in a higher quality of education, Charlemagne, too, saw it as a solution to the disunity that threatened the perpetuity of his empire.

It was no easy task to effect the unity of peoples spread over so large an area. Key in this endeavor was the

role of the clergy, for they were the only practical means of access to every level of the population. Virtually all education lay in their hands. The schools, the libraries, the scriptoria where books were produced, were exclusively associated with monastic or episcopal centers. But even for the great majority of the population who received no formal education, the clergy, through the distribution of the sacraments, were their one contact with the world of learning. The very determinant of those who belonged to Charlemagne's empire and those who did not was Christian baptism, whether or not it was always received in faith. Charlemagne, we are told, gave the defeated hordes of pagans an alternative: baptism or death.

As liturgical rites in their normal celebration, the Christian sacraments were important vehicles of education. This was especially true for the rite of Christian initiation, for according to traditional teaching, the catechumen or his sponsor had to receive at least fundamental instruction in the Christian faith from the priest in order to profess his belief at the font.

Charlemagne's legislation shows that the clergy and the liturgy were pivotal to the success of his efforts to unify the empire. If the liturgy was everywhere celebrated in the same way, if the clergy everywhere used the

same books to perform and explain the Christian rituals, if the people everywhere could identify with a common celebration and understanding of their faith, a basis for a strong, unified society was laid. If, on the other hand, the clergy did not exercise their role of instructors, or if their understanding and their interpretations varied from parish to parish, if there was no common model according to which the liturgy everywhere was celebrated, then the clergy were a block to any possibility of unification. The legislation of Charlemagne shows clearly that his program of educational reform was, in fact, a program of clerical reform.

The situation at the parochial level was much as the ruler feared. Priests were often illiterate. It was not even assured that they could recite the basic prayers of their office. If they had a Bible or liturgical books, these were poorly copied and filled with errors. Furthermore, the liturgical books they used, containing the prayers and rubrics, or directions, for performing the Mass and baptism, were different from area to area.

In cooperation with the bishops Charlemagne vigorously renewed the legislation of his father, Pippin, regarding ecclesiastical reform. Three main points were reiterated time and again from the palace at Aachen and from regional councils, synods, and episcopal capitularies.

First, priests should follow the custom of the Holy See of St. Peter in Rome in all liturgical practices. (The "Ordo Romanus" is mentioned quite specifically in some of the reform decrees; in others it is not.) Second, every priest was to have copies of all the books necessary to fulfill his duties, and these must be free of errors. Third, the priests were to be examined by their bishops before ordination and annually in regard to their faith, baptism, and the Mass.

A few examples illustrate these reform directives. The edict of Archbishop Arno of Salzburg in 798 stated that

Priests should not be idiots, but should read and understand the Holy Scriptures so that they can instruct according to the tradition of the Holy Roman Church and teach the Catholic faith to the people commissioned to them and celebrate Mass according to the Roman custom. Public baptism must be celebrated at the two ~~constitut~~ constituted times of Easter and Pentecost, and this ought to be done according to the order of the Roman tradition. (MGH Conc. aevi Karol. I p. 198)

The Admonitio Generalis issued by Charlemagne in 789 stated in regard to the correction of books that in every monastery or bishopric the liturgical books should be "grammatically emended... and if there is need to copy the Gospels, psalter, or missal, this should be done by men of mature age with the greatest care". (MGH Capit. I p.103). A format for an episcopal examination issued about 803 lists the following questions a bishop should

ask his priest:

How do you believe and hold the Catholic faith or creed and how do you know and understand the Lord's Prayer?

How do you know or understand your Mass according to the Roman order?

How well can you read the Gospel?

How well do you know the homilies of the Fathers and chant the Divine Office according to the Roman rite?

How do you know or understand the rite of baptism? (MGH Capit. I p. 234)

In order to carry out this legislation the priests needed new books. They had to have liturgical ordinals that corresponded to the prescribed Roman rites and that were grammatically correct. Moreover, they needed brief explanations of the Lord's Prayer, Creed, the Mass, and baptism with which to face their examiners and instruct their parishioners. From the beginning of the Carolingian era, but particularly under the reign of Charlemagne (768-814) innumerable expositiones symboli (creed), orationis dominicae, Missae, and baptismi appeared.

These expositiones are very important, first of all, in witnessing the success of at least the first stage of the clerical reform legislation. Liturgical books and didactic manuals were produced in great numbers according to the plan of Charlemagne and the ecclesiastical reformers upon whom he relied.

Until very recently no one paid much attention to the myriad didactic tracts that were directed at the lower clergy. In the case of baptismal commentaries, few of all the extant texts had been recovered from the ancient manuscripts and fewer yet studied. In the past, editors were selective and condemned material to oblivion that they deemed unimportant or unimpressive because of its anonymity, frequency, of mere re-iteration of patristic works.

In the last decades, however, historians have recognized the value of collecting and studying the liturgical tracts in their entirety. They have become important, at one level, as indicia of the diffusion and effectiveness of Carolingian reforms. This has been facilitated by the work of paleographers such as Bernard Bischoff who have dated and assigned places of origin to many of the late-eighth and ninth century manuscripts in which the tracts are found. Now, when the numerous expositions on baptism, for instance, have been mapped geographically and chronologically, it is possible to see if the reforms were, in fact, implemented, where, and when, or in what areas more vigorously or more quickly than in others.

In fact, the baptismal commentaries reveal far more than simply the diffusion and effectiveness of the great mass of legal capitularies produced in the Carolingian

era. One would expect to find that these tracts, which are a direct result of legislation that sought to unify liturgical practice and clerical instruction through conformity to a single Roman model, would be highly repetitive. But when their actual contents are compared, neither in the sequential order of celebrating the individual ceremonies of baptism, nor in the explanations given of these ceremonies do the majority of the tracts conform to a single, let alone Roman, model. This variety between the texts, when it is followed in their manuscripts across time and space, reveals an astonishing degree of non-conformity all over Charlemagne's realm and in the same time period. It is this variety and its cause, in light of Charlemagne's goal of unity through Romanity, that will be examined here.

Of the baptismal texts I have been able to identify there is a certain percentage that does, in fact, simply re-iterate the standard text that the Carolingian age recognized as representing the officially approved, "correct" Roman order and interpretation of the rite. This text was written, or at least promoted, by Alcuin, the most learned advisor and teacher at Charlemagne's court and a leading figure in Charlemagne's educational reform program. Alcuin's explanation of the rite of baptism is based on an early, sixth-century, text from the

heart of the Petrine tradition, the city of Rome. Charlemagne gave Alcuin's text official approval when he used it to question the archbishops of his realm on how they taught baptism. He also stamped it as the standard, "correct" form for explaining the rite by including it in the agenda of topics he wished to be discussed at the five regional reform synods of 813, renowned for their influence on subsequent reform legislation. Through the vehicle of these councils, Alcuin's text was known to the diocesan bishops responsible for implementing the clerical reform decrees as the preferred model for baptismal instruction. The explanation was, indeed, copied without change or supplementation by a number of the compilers of clerical manuals. It is this fact that permits us to wonder at the far greater number of baptismal tracts that do not use the Alcuinian model approved by Charlemagne and authorized by the reform decrees.

These tracts display their variety in a number of ways. First, there are those that modify Alcuin's text for no immediately apparent reason. A combination of supplementing, abbreviating, substituting, and rearranging the model constitutes over a dozen of the identified tracts. The number of different modifications of Alcuin in clerical manuals is particularly surprising because, if the reforms were to have immediate effect, there must

have been pressure to produce these handbooks quickly and in large numbers. There was no necessity for reworking their model, which had official sanction, and yet this is what the compilers have done time and again.

While Alcuin-modifications essentially acknowledge the Roman order and are based on a common model, even if for uncertain reasons they do not whole-heartedly conform to it, other baptismal tracts show a definite preference for non-Roman rites that the Romanity of Charlemagne's liturgical reform was intended to replace.

Liturgists identify five main western rites of baptism: Roman, Gallican, Spanish, Milanese, and Irish. There are certain distinct features of the Roman rite, such as the omission of the washing of feet after the infant is raised from the font and the inclusion of a second post-baptismal anointing by the bishop, that separate it from these non-Roman rites.

One example of a baptismal tract that shows the composer's definite preference to explain the Gallican rite is a brief exposition of the order for performing baptism that I have found in eight manuscripts. In six of these it is part of a presbyteral interrogation, clearly one of the numerous texts which resulted from Carolingian decrees on the examination of clerics. The

interrogator in this text asks, "How do you baptize?" The cleric responds, "In the name of the Holy Trinity I immerse him three times in the font. I anoint him with oil and chrism. I wash his feet following the example of the Lord. I place on him a white garment in the tradition of priests. I give him the Body and Blood of the Lord".

This description is in blatant contradiction to the Roman rite, which always excluded the Gallican, Milanese, and Irish foot-washing ceremony as part of its baptismal rite. The phrase "I anoint him with oil and chrism" suggests that the priest is performing the chrismation that is reserved for the bishop alone in the Roman rite. (There is other evidence that this is what happened in Gaul and Spain when the Roman rite was partially adopted, but bishops were scarce). One of the eight manuscript witnesses of this text, however, omits mention of the foot-washing. Perhaps this is a bow to Romanity. In the earliest known manuscripts of this exposition (Laon, Bibl. Mun. 288, s. ix¹) it is preceded by another exposition of the prayers recited in the baptismal ceremonies. One of these prayers is found in none of the Roman sacramentaries or ordinals, but only in a Gallican supplement to the Roman rite (J. Deshusses, Le Sacramentaire Gregorian I pp. 374-5, #1074) and in a late eighth-century excarpus of a sacramentary from northeastern France (C. Coebergh & P. de Puniet, CCM v. XLII p.99, #48).

In another of its ninth-century manuscripts (Albi, Bibl. Mun. 38 bis, s. ix med.) written in southern France, the exposition is appended to an early Hiberno-Gallican canonical collection, the Collectio Sangermanensis. Two more of its earliest manuscripts come from the south of France. Thus, the manuscript evidence indicates that in southern France adherence to the Gallican rite persisted even while the Roman rite was being imposed.

Two examples have been given of the kinds of variety found in the baptismal tracts. The first showed that some of the texts are modifications of the Roman order of the rite. The second illustrated that a clear preference for a non-Roman rite existed among the tracts. A third form of variety does not concern differences in the liturgical order of the rite being described, but in the explanations supplied for the individual ceremonies.

Almost every baptismal tract that has been identified possesses some singular explanation found in none of the other commentaries. For example, there are several cases of unique explanation concerning the distinction between pagan cults and ideas and the Christian lifestyle. The theme constantly recurs in our baptismal literature, especially in the explanations of the ceremonies of the catechumenate (renunciation of Satan, salt, exorcism, exsufflation, scrutiny). Jesse, Archbishop of

Amiens, addressing the priests of his diocese on baptism, explains that the salt given to the infant before baptism is symbolic of the Christian purification as opposed to the pagans' rite of purification. Pagans offer their children to demons through a purgation of fire. But Christians, like salt that leaps up and resists the flames when sprinkled in a fire, oppose the pagan process of purification. Rather, Christians offer their children to God through a purification by water.

Jesse's treatise on baptism follows the Roman order of the rite very closely. It is only in his interpretation of the ceremonies that his baptismal instruction becomes unique. In his singular analogy of the pagan and Christian purification rituals there lies perhaps an explanation of the variety in Carolingian baptismal instruction-- be it in the form of non-conformity with Rome or in independent interpretations.

By looking collectively at the types of variety displayed, such as the alteration of Alcuin's explanation, the distinct preference for Gallican tradition, and Jesse's unique intrusion regarding pagan practices, we begin to see the reason for the great variety among Carolingian baptismal tracts. These texts, written for priests who had the ultimate responsibility of bringing the Christian faith to the people, respond to local needs and deal

with local problems. The newness of many of the rural areas to Christianity and the persistence of pagan superstitions and folklore was a major challenge to catechetical instructors. In other areas, long familiarity with indigenous rites could simply not be ignored wholesale for the Roman rite.

In implementing Charlemagne's legislation on baptism the bishops of the individual dioceses met the people on their own grounds. Charlemagne's effort to unify his empire by raising the level of education was not, it has been shown, always effected by the implantation of Roman models. In fact, in the only certain area that some minimal education reached the people-- in baptismal instruction--, neither Romanity nor conformity is found. Efforts were clearly being made to raise the level of intelligence of the clergy, as the great number of the tracts and their wide distribution shows. But the great variety of texts in the baptismal literature demonstrates a spirit of independence and more, of responsibility, in implementing the reforms as effectively as possible. At the very time people were trying to impose the Roman rite, practicality prevailed when it came to the actual implementation of the reforms at the local level. There was sensitivity to indigenous tradition and recognition of the particular needs of individual areas. In the eyes of the implementors of Charlemagne's reforms, there could be many mansions in the Father's house.