

Homily for Remigius, Bishop of Rheims, c. 530

October 1, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

1 John 4:1–6; Psalm 135:1–6; John 14:3–7

Sometime in the year 496, the metropolitan bishop of Rheims, Remigius, in what is now France, baptized Clovis, the king of the Germanic tribe of the Franks and 3,000 of his soldiers. The Christian world was living through the struggle with Arianism, a doctrine that maintained that God the Son was subordinate to God the Father. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 defined how to speak faithfully about the “Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ.”¹ It isn’t the only way to speak about God. Our words can’t limit in any way the power of God.

Our professor of systematic theology in seminary, the late Father James Griffiss, said if we meddled with the Trinitarian language of the Prayer Book, one could easily find oneself in trouble. I’m sure I went to some services in the 1980s where we heard in place the Names of the Trinity, “Blessed be God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” But God is more than a

¹ Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 583–84.

definition of God's activity. God has revealed God's Name to us.

Back to Remigius and the fifth century. Clovis' conversion and his army would lead to the Catholic Faith's triumph, faith in the God of Three Persons. But what did it do to the Christian community?

Clovis was married to a Catholic, not an Arian. The historical record for his baptism is strong. In 1969, his commemoration was removed from the Universal Calendar of the Roman Catholic Church. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* states that he's still venerated in Reims on his death's traditional date, January 13, c. 533.² We Episcopalians adopted the now dropped Roman Catholic celebration of Remigius on October 1. October 1 was the date in 1049 when his bodily remains were moved to the Abbey of St. Remi. From our Anglican perspective, the date of death is more significant than the translation of relics—especially relics of a saint that is no longer commemorated by the Roman Church.

Back to the 3001 baptisms. Clovis' decision to be baptized as Catholic was not only a spiritual but also a

² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Remigius, St.," 1172–73.

political decision. The political winds in what we call Italy, France, and the region across the Rhine. More significant for the wider Church is the fact of adult baptism without formation.

Father Louis Weil gave a lecture in 2007 in Scotland at a conference of Inclusive Church, a British organization that seeks to help churches become more inclusive.³ His title for his talk was, “When Signs Signify: the Baptismal Covenant in its Sacramental Context.”⁴ He spoke about how validity had come to replace the question of faith for almost a thousand years now.

Few of us Episcopalians, not to mention other Christians, have seen a baptism that made us think of bathing. Few of us, Episcopalians, have ever received enough bread and wine at a Eucharist to experience the Eucharistic bread and wine as food and drink. Validity is a minimum standard. Signification is about faith.

The first baptism I ever did was in the neonatal intensive care unit on the first night I was on duty as

³ <http://inclusive-church.org/>, (accessed 1 October 2020).

⁴ The lecture was published in *Open: The Journal of Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission* in its Spring 2008 issue. It can be found online at this URL: <https://liturgyandmission.org/articles/open-the-aplm-journal/>.

the Protestant chaplain at a Roman Catholic hospital. I had just finished my first year in seminary. A newborn baby was dying. The parents were Methodists.

Earlier that same day at lunch, I overheard folks at the other end of the table speaking about how to baptize in a neonatal unit. Overhearing that conversation enabled me to say to the attending nurse, "I need sterile water and gauze." The amount of water was minimal. But the grace at that moment, the father gently touching with gloved hands his only child was real as I squeezed water on the back of the child's head. I said, "Thomas, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." I said the Lord's Prayers. The father and mother gave life, love, and faith to their son Thomas, gifts in Christ that belong to their son that cannot be taken away.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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