

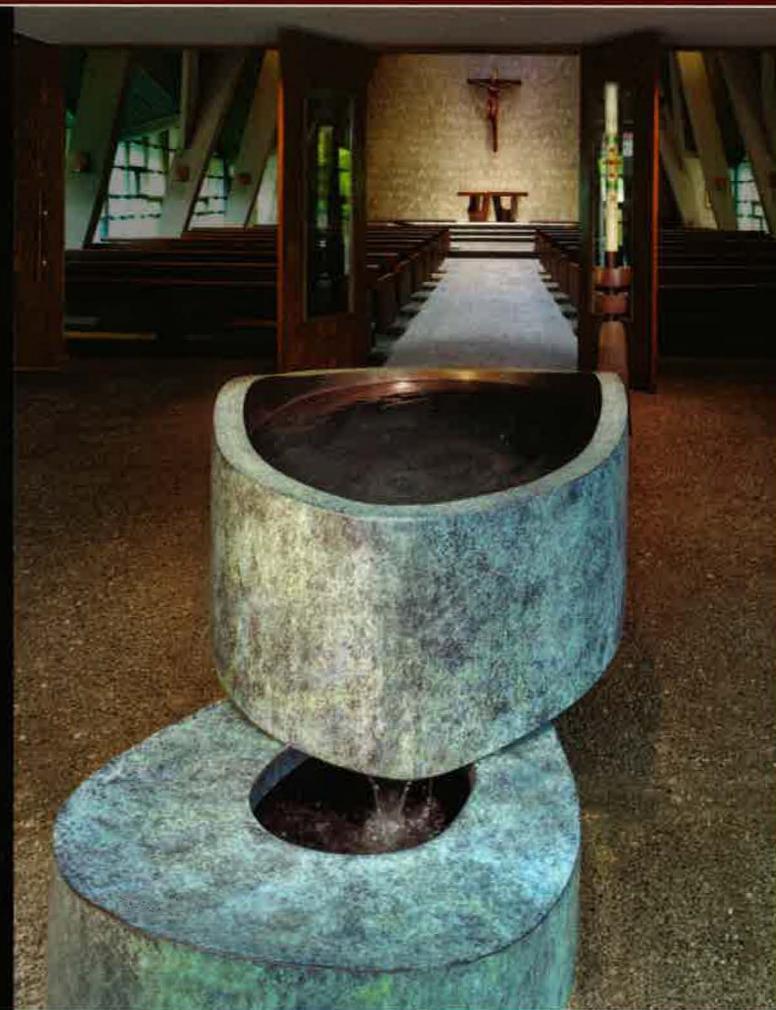
Edited by

Lizette Larson-Miller
Walter Knowles

Drenched in Grace

Essays in Baptismal Ecclesiology

Inspired by the Work and Ministry of Louis Weil



The importance of baptism within Christian history, theology, and practice is of the first order. Rooted in Christian Scripture, baptism is initiation into Jesus Christ and the sacramental beginning of engagement with the church, the body of Christ. In recent decades, the relationship between baptismal theology and ecclesiology has changed. Rather than focusing solely on the implications of baptism for individuals, the center of theological conversation has moved increasingly to the nature of baptism as formative of the church.

One of the pioneers in exploring this theological issue in the United States has been the Rev. Dr. Louis Weil, who, from the time he helped author the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, has advocated for an approach called “baptismal ecclesiology.” In a number of essays since the 1980s Dr. Weil has encouraged an increasingly ecumenical conversation around this particular approach to ecclesiology. This ecumenical collection of essays by a distinguished and international group of sixteen scholars continues the conversation on liturgy and ecclesiology begun by Fr. Weil.

“These essays continue a conversation about baptism that has reshaped thinking about the nature of the church in our time—and with the kind of grace-filled commitment to both academy and church, liturgy and ecclesiology, theory and practice that is characteristic of Louis Weil’s teaching and writing. How wonderful to have a work so successful both in reflecting Professor Weil’s contributions and in carrying the conversation forward!”

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Thus we see now what in these days God calls us to. We are now planted by the waters in which some Christians wade to the ankles (and be we thankful for that), some can but creep, as it were in the way of grace, and some, it may be, can walk on with some strength; some have yet gone deeper, till they be wholly drenched in grace, and this should we all labor after.

JOHN COTTON, *WAY OF LIFE OR GOD'S WAY AND COURSE*
(1641)

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Bodies at Baptism

ANDREA BIELER

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM is the tangible and corporeal event in which divine grace is being poured out onto bodies in the encounter with Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of deliverance and deep transformation. The human person who is entangled in the powers of sin as alienation from God, neighbor, and the planet Earth is rescued. In Baptism, thus, a saved body emerges through ritual acts that are attentive to words that bear divine promise and to material elements such as water and oil that carry the powers of cleansing, forgiveness, and healing. Both words and elements are directed towards the body being baptized.

There is an intimate dimension to Baptism that lifts up the singularity of the individual person before God: Right before Baptism one's name is uttered and placed in *HaShem*, whom Christians confess as the Triune God.¹ At the same time Baptism is the initiation rite through which individuals become part of a communal body, the church as the body of Christ. In the rite of Baptism, people are absorbed into the body of Christ through water, Word, and Spirit—a body so porous and fluid that human beings can be immersed in it. Belonging to Christ through Baptism evokes a loss of self as egocentric autopoiesis. This loss is acted out in ritualized gestures that pertain in particular ways to the body. These gestures hint at an eccentric understanding of belonging: a particular name is voiced in the assembly and becomes immediately immersed in Divine Mystery. Even in the act of dying, an eccentric dynamic emerges: those who are

1. For a spatial understanding of the Trinity that is grounded in the Jewish tradition of substituting the unspeakable name for the Divine with *HaShem*, which means in Hebrew "The Name." See Frettlöh and Marquardt, *Die Welt als Ort Gottes*.

baptized die and rise *with* Christ. In this interrelatedness a new identity emerges that is signified in the wearing of a new garment.

Baptism can thus be perceived as ritual space of Christian identity formation that is intimate, eccentric, communal, and cosmological. The cosmological dimension transpires through the element of water—the connecting tissue between the individual body and the planet; both depend on it as a matter of death or life. Many early depictions of baptismal rites and theologies imply an understanding of the connection between the physical body and the cosmos that is most intriguing for contemporary discussions that seek to emphasize the theological significance of the ecological dimension of this water ritual.² Dale Martin spells out the connection between the microcosmic body of the individual and the macrocosmic body: they resemble each other in terms of the basic materiality of that they consist. They also bear similarities in terms of the way they function in the creation of a healthy balance.³ These speculations about the micro and the macro body can be found in Plato, pre-Socratic philosophers, and Hippocratic medical theory who converge:

in assuming that the human self (body and soul) was composed of the same elements as the universe: air (pneuma), earth, water, and fire. Thus the dynamics that one saw at work in the external cosmos could be read onto and into the human body, the inner body being buffeted by the same weather as the outer body. . . . As is already apparent, construing the body as really (not just figuratively) a microcosm blurs any boundaries between the inner and the outer body. The workings of the internal body are not just an imitation of the mechanics of the universe; rather, they are part of it, constantly influenced by it.⁴

In acts of renunciation, anointing, and in immersion the permeability of the microcosmic and the macrocosmic body becomes tangible. What is “inside” the body has an intense relationship to the “outside”—the environment that shapes embodied living every moment as we breathe in and out. For Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, the oil used for exorcisms has the power to drive away the enemy’s power, and the breath of the saints can drive out devils. Oil and breath have the capacity to enter the porous body through the skin and other body openings and to remove evil spirits that hover inside.⁵

2. See for instance Mary McGann’s essay in this volume.

3. Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 16.

4. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

5. Yarnold, “Fourth-Century Baptismal Homilies: Cyril of Jerusalem,” 77.

It thus seems to be of pivotal theological significance to pay attention to what happens to bodies in Baptism. The saved body is ritualized into existence; from there meaning making and corporeal interpretation emerge. Drawing on a deconstructivist understanding of embodiment as practice, we are led to ask how the saved body emerges from this ritual as words are sung and spoken over the body and things are done to the body. Interpellations (*Anrufungen*) that speak particular bodies into existence as well as the gaze of the gathered assembly that rests upon the body to be baptized come into focus.⁶

A phenomenologically oriented approach to embodiment will also take the subjective dimension into account that explores the felt sense of the participants. Attending to the historical documents that are available to us, we need to acknowledge that there are not very many sources in which participants describe their embodied felt sense of Baptism. One treasured exception is the witness that Ephrem the Syrian (306–73) gave about his own Baptism: “For when the waves of oil lift me up, they hand me over to the sayings about Christ, and then the waves of Christ bear me back to the symbols (mysteries) of oil. The waves meet each other, and I am in their midst.”⁷ His own Baptism evokes in Ephrem a sense of being overwhelmed; he captures this sense in the wave image: He is carried away on the mighty waves of anointing that evoke an interplay between the teachings about Christ and the sensual experience of anointing. In the dramatic synaesthetic interplay of the audible, the tactile and the olfactory, the baptismal event unfolds.

In what follows, I seek to explore the attention that is given to bodies at Baptism and the theological significance this body awareness might imply. I claim that the performative dimension of bodily engagement in Baptism is pivotal for baptismal theology. I proceed by highlighting two historical examples for the sake of further constructive theological work.

Standing Naked Without Shame

I begin with some glimpses into the *Mystagogical Catechesis* of Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) by focusing on the significance of nakedness. Cyril offers homilies for the neophytes that retrospectively interpret the

6. See Bieler and Plüss, “In This Moment of Utter Vulnerability: Tracing Gender in Presiding” for the interrelatedness of a deconstructivist and a phenomenological perspective regarding the body in liturgy.

7. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymni de Virginitate* 7, 15.

meaning of the Baptism they had received. The body technologies these homilies reflect are couched in thick descriptions of the tangible quality of the rites themselves. Woven into these descriptions we find intense processes of meaning making, in that the body practices described become an intense field of theological explanation. What is written onto the body becomes almost a site of revelatory knowledge, filled with references to Scripture and theological allusions. Cyril speaks of bodily practices as symbolizing something. Cyril often times juxtaposes symbol and reality in a Platonic way indicating that the symbol is less real than the thing it symbolizes. He nevertheless assumes an ontology of participation that means that the body participates in the reality it signifies.

Cyril explains what happened upon entry into the baptistery:

Upon entering [the baptistery] you took off your clothing, and this symbolised your stripping off of "the old nature with its practices." Stripped naked, in this too you were imitating Christ naked on the cross, who in his darkness, "disarmed the principalities and powers" and on the wood of the cross publicly "triumphed over them." . . . This was a remarkable occasion, for you stood naked in the sight of all and you were not ashamed. You truly mirrored our first-created parent Adam who stood naked in Paradise and was not ashamed.⁸

The interpretation of nakedness these sequences provide is preceded by a reading of Romans 6 that alludes to Baptism into Christ's death; the cited passage is followed by a description of prebaptismal anointing with exorcistic functions. Then the actual baptismal act happens.

What is written onto the bodies of those who stand naked is the departure of the old nature, of Adam after the fall, a body in whose limbs corrupted desire has lurked. What emerges is Adam in paradise, a body that stands naked and is not ashamed. The naked body right before Baptism is thus already placed in the garden of paradise. The naked body before Baptism does not know shame anymore.⁹ Also, in the act of standing naked, Christ on the cross is imitated. The place of deepest despair and vulnerability becomes the place of disarming power. Nakedness thus becomes a means for the performance of eccentric identity in relation to Christ and to

8. Yarnold, "Fourth-Century Baptismal Homilies: Cyril of Jerusalem," 76.

9. Theodore of Mopsuestia offers a different perspective. For him nakedness before Baptism still resembles the shame of Adam and Eve after the fall, while after Baptism nakedness is without shame. See Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 35. See also Rita Nakashima Brook and Rebecca A. Parker (*Saving Paradise*, 115–40) on the understanding of Baptism as portal to paradise.

the garden of creation. It is a technology of the body that initiates transformation with regard to shame and power. The scene as depicted by Cyril can be interpreted as a liminal practice in which the weakening of the body that has been made vulnerable opens up the possibility of deep transformation.

Margaret Miles provides a summary of the major motives that Christian authors attached to the issue of nakedness in fourth-century sources that are considered orthodox: stripping off of the old man with his deeds, imitation of Christ, leaving the world, death and rebirth, new life, the undoing of shame, and quasi martyrdom.¹⁰

The historical significance of nakedness in Baptism ought to be discussed by situating the issue of nudity within the larger cultural context. Regarding the cultural customs in Roman bath houses, Miles assumes that mixed naked bathing came to be gradually customary in the fourth century. This tendency to accept mixed bathing practices however was rejected by a variety of Christian authors. Cyprian and Jerome warn consecrated virgins in particular not to go to bath houses in which males are present since the virgins would quench the hot desires of youth.¹¹ A harsh critique was also uttered against the display of naked bodies in the context of gladiatorial games in the coliseum, which were associated with the devil's pomp. Augustine, pointing to the spectators who went into a frenzy watching the games and their cruelty, spoke of this audience as offering incense to the demons with their hearts.¹² Miles concludes:

Christian naked baptism, then, cannot be understood as a continuation of secular culture made feasible by Christians' familiarity with and acceptance of secular nakedness. Ironically, the appropriate context for Christian baptism must rather be Christian aversion to secular nakedness, an aversion informed by the sense that a human body because of its intimate connection with the soul should not be casually or carelessly exposed.

10. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 35.

11. *Ibid.*, 29.

12. In *Confessions* 6.8.13 (Augustine, *Confessions*, 101), Augustine describes at length the uncontrolled desire for bloodshed that emerges from watching the display of naked bodies at the gladiator games. Pointing to the example of his friend Alypius he writes:

He was struck in the soul by a wound graver than the gladiator in his body whose fall had caused the roar. . . . As soon as he saw the blood, he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness. Without any awareness about what was happening to him he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure.

For Christians following an incarnated Christ naked bodies have religious meaning; bodies are the site and naked bodies the symbol of religious subjectivity.¹³

In contrast, historian Laurie Guy takes another stance regarding the depiction of nakedness as it is portrayed in Cyril's homily as well as in other texts; he doubts that the descriptions we find in these texts indeed reflect actual practice. Guy contends that the allusions to nakedness were rather meant to be understood in a metaphorical sense since nudity was so much disputed by Christian writers.¹⁴ Even if we cannot come to a final conclusion with regard to the historicity of the depiction of nakedness in Baptism, it is nevertheless crucially important for theological inquiry into Baptism to engage the somatic imagination of these early writings.¹⁵ The somatic imagination of the texts offer a powerful reframing of nakedness. When the devil's pomp—a notion that hints at the imperial games—is contested in its cruelty during renunciations and the nakedness of Adam is evoked, the baptized body is removed from the coliseum to the garden of paradise.

In more general terms we may say that early and medieval baptismal rites are filled with dramatic actions that pertain to the body; stripping off clothes and standing naked is just one of them. In addition we can see fasting, anointing of the entire body or of particular parts of the body, the ritual closure of body openings by offering the sign of the cross, breathing into the face, covering of the ear with saliva, putting salt onto the tongue, and immersion and sprinkling practices. Following the baptismal rite, the kiss of peace was exchanged and the participation in the Eucharist was practiced. These diverse rites imply a synaesthetic interplay in which sensual experience inspires religious insights: what Baptism effects and evokes is understood not only through the ears of those who listen to homilies, but also through the senses of taste, smell, and touch. When Cyril speaks of the neophytes as the aroma of Christ to God by referring to postbaptismal anointing, he probably is alluding not only to 2 Cor 2:14–16 but also to the sensual experience such anointings did evoke.¹⁶ When Cyril describes the triple submersion of the neophytes as the symbolic dying

13. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 29–30.

14. Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 220ff.

15. My use of the term "somatic imagination" is inspired by Carolyn Walker Bynum's deliberations on the depictions of the human body as a site of religious expression, e.g., when it comes to the relationship with Christ and understandings of the incarnation, salvation, and healing. See Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 181–91.

16. Yarnold, "Fourth-Century Baptismal Homilies: Cyril of Jerusalem," 83.

and rising with Christ, he offers a very visceral and embodied interpretation of the reading of Romans 6.

Signing the Cross onto the Body

The era of the Reformation has often been associated with a departure from embodied ritual as a move away from the external body environment towards the interior of the believing self. According to this view, faith is not so much expressed and embodied in the exterior gestures of ritual; rather it is located in the interior space of the believer where faith as the habit of the heart resides.

We could be inclined to interpret Luther's second revision of the *Baptismal Booklet* (*Taufbüchlein*) in this vein. The second edition from 1526 shows a diminution of ritual actions and gestures compared to the version of 1523, which is still very close to the Roman rite.¹⁷

In the epilogue to the 1523 version of the rite, he already utters his reservations when it comes to particular practices:

Now remember, too, that in baptism the external things are the least important, such as blowing under the eyes, signing with the cross, putting salt into the mouth, putting spittle and clay into the ears and nose, anointing the breast and shoulders with oil, signing the crown of the head with chrism, putting on the christening robe, placing a burning candle in the hand, and whatever else has been added by many to embellish baptism.¹⁸

In the 1526 edition, regarding the rites situated in front of the church, Luther suggests reducing the exsufflation to just the words and consequently neglecting the breathing under the eyes of the person to be baptized. In addition he recommends omitting entirely the salt rite, which was

17. The first *Baptismal Booklet* published in 1523 was mainly a translation of the Roman rite of the Magdeburg Agenda of 1497. It contained only minor changes.

18. Leupold, *Luther's Works: Liturgy and Hymns*, 53:102. In German (Luther, "Taufbüchlein," 536.1.2–537.1.3):

So gedenke nu, daß in dem Täufern diese äußerliche Stücke das geringste sind, als da ist: unter Augen blasen, Kreuze anstreichen, Salz in den Mund geben, Speichel und Kot in die Ohren und Nasen tun, mit Öle auf der Brust und Schuldern salben und mit Cresem die Scheitel bestreichen, Westerhembd anziehen und brennend Kerzen in die Händ geben, und was das mehr ist, das von Menschen, die Taufe zu zieren, hinzugetan ist.

supposed to deliver another exorcism as salt is put into the mouth. Luther also considered the *ephphatha* rite to be a superfluous action in which the priest touches the right ear of the person to be baptized with spittle. Inside the sanctuary, the prebaptismal anointing of the chest and the shoulders, as well as the postbaptismal anointing of the head, particularly the parting, ought to be skipped. This pertains also to the sign of peace.

We might say that Luther indeed devalues in his revisions the external body environment that had been the site of particular ritual actions. He characterizes the rites that ought to be abolished as less valuable pieces, which are only a superficial adornment added onto the baptismal rite. These rites relate to the surface of the skin as well as to the openings of the body: mouth, ears, eyes, and nose. The ritual actions that pertain to such openings do have a dual function in the Roman rite: the *ephphatha* rite is supposed to stimulate the sense of hearing and the ability to speak. It refers back to the healing of the person who was deaf-mute in Mark 7:32–37. The salt rite relates to the body opening of the mouth; it serves as an exorcism that is supposed to inspire the sense of taste for the reception of the gift of wisdom.

The rites have to be understood in the context of exorcisms. Satan as well as evil spirits invade the body through its orifices. The treatment of body openings that occur in baptismal rites should be understood as a practice of defense. Consequently, we might say that prebaptismal anointings that are perceived to have exorcistic power have protective functions; they are also able to drive out evil spirits that lurk inside the body. It is thus not only the openings of the body but also the skin that is a permeable organ through that evil spirits can enter.

The omissions Luther proposes seek to repulse Satan as a power that pushes from the external corporeal environment into the internal body space. Since the reformer is willing to let go of such practices, how does he describe the essential significance of Baptism? How can he describe Baptism as our sole consolation, as foundation for the reception of all divine gifts bestowed upon the believer, and as entrance into the holy assembly?

For the sake of a theology of Baptism that seeks to pay attention to the corporeal and performative aspects, we need to return once more to Luther's reform proposals that he laid out in the 1526 edition of the *Taufbüchlein*. On the one hand the speech acts are retained that were related to the exsufflation, the oration with the flood prayer (*Sintflutgebet*), the exorcisms in shortened form. He also preserves the Lord's Prayer, the words spoken at the entrance into the church, the renunciation of the devil, the creed, and the questions that are to affirm the desire to baptize as well

as the answers of the godparents. With regards to the ritual actions before entering the church, he holds on to the sign of the cross to be made on the forehead and the chest with the common words ("receive the sign of the cross"). Luther also suggests keeping the laying on of hands during the Lord's Prayer, the actual baptismal rite through immersion and concluding, the dressing of the neophyte with the christening gown (*Westerhemd*).

We can recognize that the concentration on the openings of the body fades into the background. This shifting attention allows for a reorientation and a focus on the sign of the cross placed on the forehead and the chest. The inscription of the sign of the cross onto the body is the preparation for the Holy Spirit to enter. At the same time the speech acts pertaining to the exorcism that are spoken in front of the church door are retained: "Depart you unclean spirit." This speech act is amplified in the renunciation of the devil that the godparents proclaim on behalf of the child.

I suggest that what we see here is not devaluation of the body or outer ritual practices in favor of an inner conviction of faith. Rather, we see a re-framing and shifting of ritual actions so that a theology of the body comes into focus that is not constrained by binary dualisms such as internal or external, work (ritual) or faith, ritual gesture or word. Luther accentuates over and over again the significance of the external social and corporeal space that is inhabited by living bodies:

Indeed, it has to be an outward thing that we can touch and comprehend, and thereby draw into our heart, since the entire Gospel is an outward oral proclamation. Summing up, the things God wants to do as an effect in us, God seeks to accomplish through outward orders.¹⁹

Luther unfolds an understanding of the body as a space that can be inhabited either by unclean spirits or by the Holy Spirit. Baptism effects a fundamental change: people are removed from the sphere of Satan into the sphere of the Holy Spirit. This transformation not only pertains to the individual corporeal space but also has social consequences within communities. Through the power of the Spirit, a new social *Gestalt* is given to the assembly. Through Baptism the assembly is continuously transformed into a community of priests who are rescued through exorcistic speech acts, the sign of the cross,

19. Luther, "Von Der Taufe, Großer Katechismus, Teil 4," 697.1.4–10, "Ja, es soll und muß äußerlich sein, daß man's mit Sinnen fassen und begreifen und dadurch ins Herz bringen könne, wie denn das ganze Evangelion ein äußerliche mündliche Predigt ist. Summa, was Gott in uns tuet und wirket, will er durch solch äußerliche Ordnung wirken."

and the act of immersion from the powers of evil spirits and Satan. For Luther, belonging to Christ through Baptism occurs in a change of power spheres in which the body and its social environment are transformed.²⁰

The baptismal booklets of the German Enlightenment, however, brought a devaluation of the corporeal experience in Baptism, as it became imperative to abolish all ritual actions that were considered to be magic or against reason. The worship books of the Enlightenment focused on the homily that was supposed to address the family of the child to be baptized; they also offered alternative rephrasing of the creeds, the Lord's Prayer, or the baptismal formula. These rites focused on an individual address of the family of origin; shared ritual practice disappeared more and more. The power of the baptismal rite was situated in the domain of cognitive expression through language; ritual gestures and embodied participation were not trusted as transmitters of meaningful baptismal theology.

Contemporary Protestant baptismal rites in Germany have reintegrated a variety of ritual practices that highlight bodily engagement; the suspicion of the Enlightenment that devalued bodily intuition in ritual seems not to carry much contemporary weight. Empirical studies on the reception of baptismal practices within the assembly emphasize that the key scenes that leave an impression on the participants are not so much located in the cognitive sphere of words remembered but rather in embodied gestures. The emotional density of memories of baptismal celebrations are related to an overall sense of incorporation into community, as well as to ritual actions such as the signing of the cross, the water ritual, the passing on and the holding of the baby to be baptized, and the baptismal blessing. Parents remember less the wordy explanations of what actions are about; they instead point to the significance of ritual actions.²¹

Bodies at Baptism matter. What is done to the body shapes in significant ways baptismal theologies expressed in liturgical texts, baptismal homilies, and personal reflections. Bodies at Baptism matter: salvation occurs when Spirit sinks into flesh through corporeal rites such as standing naked, anointing, signing the cross, and immersion. In Baptism the mystery of the incarnation is celebrated: the Word becomes flesh and the human body becomes a site of salvation.

20. Gutmann, *Symbole Zwischen Macht Und Spiel*, 247.

21. See Sommer, *Kindertaufe*, 294–300.

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