

The Ephphetha Rite

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The ephphetha rite comes before the baptism of an adult, but after the baptism of a child. There are bigger differences between the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and the Rite of Baptism for Children, but this one sometimes puzzles people, especially if they are trying to catechize unbaptized adults or parents of unbaptized children about the meaning of the rite.

Mark's gospel supplies the foundational account for the ceremony (7:31-37). In this episode, some people bring Jesus a deaf man with a speech impediment. They ask him to impose hands. Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. First he puts his fingers into the man's ears. Then Jesus spits (apparently onto his own fingers) and touches the man's tongue. Looking up to heaven, Jesus groans and says, "*Ephphatha*," which means "Be opened." Immediately the man can hear and speak plainly.

Several aspects of this account have made it appealing to those in catechumenal ministry not just today but throughout the history of the Church. The man who needs healing is brought by others - much as a catechumen is accompanied by sponsors. They ask for handlaying, just as is practiced in the exorcisms of the scrutinies. Jesus takes the man apart from the crowd, just as catechumenal formation takes place apart from the community. Jesus works the miracle through actions and words, just as we celebrate sacraments.

Most striking is the preservation of the Aramaic word *Ephphatha*. It shares a rare distinction with phrases such as "*Talitha koum*" (Mark 5:41), "*Abba*" (Mark 14:36), "*Raqa*" (Matthew 5:22), "*Rabboni*" (John 20:16), and "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*" (Matthew 27:46 || Mark 15:34). Something about these words was so powerful in the original language, that the New Testament, which was composed in Greek, retained them. Not even the words of Jesus at the Last Supper share this privilege: "This is my body" (Mark 14:22) and "This is my blood" (Mark 14:24) were written in Greek. As a word, "*Ephphatha*" has surprising tenacity in the Christian tradition, even though it is hard to pronounce and spell. In fact, the RCIA spells it differently - with an "e" in place of the first "a", which is closer to the Latin transliteration found in the new Vulgate: *Effetha*. The *editio typica* of the RCIA changed each "f" to a "ph", but otherwise uses the Latin spelling.

The seventh-century Gelasian Sacrament is our earliest record of the ephphetha in a scripted prebaptismal ceremony on Holy Saturday (section 42). It takes place after an exorcism and before anointing with the oil of exorcism and the renunciations of Satan and of his works. The rubric for the bishop can be translated as follows: "Then you touch [the catechumen's] nostrils and ears with spittle and say into their ear: 'Ephphetha, this is be opened, to a sweet aroma. But you, devil, flee, for the judgment of God has come near.'" Obviously, the ritual intended to repel whatever grip Satan held over those who had not yet been baptized.

By the sixteenth century, the catechumenal and baptismal ceremonies had been combined into a single event. In the Roman Ritual's Rite of Baptism of Adults, the ephphetha followed a series of exorcisms, the recitation of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and another exorcism. Here is a translation of the Latin rubric (34) that follows: "Next the Priest uses his thumb to take some saliva from his mouth. (This is omitted whenever there is present a reason to preserve cleanliness, or the danger of causing or spreading disease, in which case the prescribed touch with its formula may be omitted). The Priest touches the ears and nostrils of the person who is elect (or of each person among the elect). While touching the right and left ear, he says, 'Ephphetha, that is, be opened.' Then touching the nostrils, he says: 'To a sweet aroma. But you, devil, flee, for the judgment of God will come near.'" The same rubric and words appear in the sixteenth-century rite of baptism for children (13). It even appears in the same place - after exorcisms and before the renunciation; hence, before baptism.

Consequently, whenever the ephphetha appeared in liturgical books prior to the Second Vatican Council, it preceded baptism and appeared among the ceremonies of exorcism. Why did the postconciliar Rite of Baptism for Children change this?

While the council was still in session, Pope Paul VI appointed a group of liturgical experts to implement the vision of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. This Consilium in turn appointed dozens of study groups to take on the various aspects of the liturgical renewal, according to their fields of expertise. Study Group XXII prepared the rites of initiation. It started its work with the rites for adults, and after sending them out for experimentation around the world, it turned its attention to the Rite of Baptism for Children. All the while, Study Group XXII was developing the General Introduction to Christian Initiation, which serves as the overview to both rites. The group's members imagined that both baptismal rites would be printed in one book, with the general introduction at the beginning. However, the rites became available at different times and were published independently, even in Latin. All the study groups sent regular reports to the Consilium, and these schemata are numbered in the order in which they were received.

In its very first schema of 1965 (S. 77, p. 16), Study Group XXII agreed to eliminate saliva from the ephphetha because its use now seemed to be "intolerable everywhere on earth." It also suggested that the minister no longer touch the nose, but rather the closed lips of the mouth, drawing his actions closer to those of Jesus. The group also wished to change the words that accompanied these actions, in order to make them less exorcistic.

Later that year Study Group XXII permitted the rites of immediate preparation for baptism to be celebrated on Holy Saturday or even on Good Friday. These included the ephphetha, the return of the Creed, and the taking of a new name (S. 112B, p. 29). Although these three rites survived in the first edition of the RCIA, the option of celebrating them on Good Friday did not.

The group suggested that the gospel passage behind the action be proclaimed and explained by the celebrant in a few words. The celebrant then was to use his thumb and touch the right and left ears and the mouth (lips closed) of the elect, while saying a revised text, which has been preserved word for word in the final edition: “Ephphetha, that is be opened, that you may profess the faith you hear, to the praise and glory of God.” If there were many elect, the celebrant could say the complete formula once, and then repeat only its first word for each of the following elect. In the Latin typical edition of the RCIA, this abbreviated formula was expanded to “Ephphetha, that is be opened” (202). However, the English translation says instead, “If there are a great many elect, additional priests or deacons may assist in carrying out the rite” (199).

In a note, Study Group XXII said that the formula was altered because of the change from signing the nostrils to signing the closed lips. This made the rite correspond exactly to the biblical account, which would be plain because that gospel would be proclaimed.

The group chose to insert the expression “the praise of God” into the ephphetha formula because this theme appears in the material that prepares for the return of the Creed in the Gelasian Sacramentary (S. 112B, p. 43). This probably refers to words of imprecation addressed to Satan: “Begone, accursed one, give honor to the living and true God, give honor to Jesus Christ his Son and the Holy Spirit” (42). Instead of asking Satan to honor the Trinity, the celebrant would ask the catechumen to praise God.

A rite that was originally exorcistic, preparing for the renunciation of Satan (“Do you renounce?”) was becoming a preparation for the confession of faith (“Do you believe?”) by opening the ears and lips of the one to be baptized. In general, this followed another trend in the development of the initiation rites, one which affected the scrutinies. Formerly, the scrutinies contained imprecations addressed to Satan. These have been discarded in favor of deprecations addressed to Christ. The power of Christ is so overwhelming that the Church focuses completely on him.

When Study Group XXII turned its attention to the Rite of Baptism for Children in March 1966, it faced a difficulty with the ephphetha. In the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the ephphetha prepared catechumens for the return of the Creed. But this sequence of events made no sense when dealing with infants. The group had already decided that the presentations of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer did not correspond to the “true condition of the infant,” as requested in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 67. Therefore, the members decided to remove both these presentations, as well as the ephphetha, from the Rite of Baptism for Children, and keep them only in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (S. 149, p. 4). These were thus eliminated from the outline of the ceremony prepared in July 1966 (S. 179).

However, by October 1966, the ephphetha for infants was back on the table. Study Group XXII asked if there was interest in an adapted ephphetha for children (S. 179 addendum III, p. 3). The draft of the rite the next month created a space for

it (S. 200, p. 12). A new text finally appeared in the draft of June 1967 (S. 230, p. 13). Without further explanation, this follows the lighting of the candle: “If it so pleases the episcopal conferences, the Ephphetha rite takes place. Using his thumb, the celebrant touches the ears and the mouth of each infant, saying, ‘The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.’ All say, ‘Amen.’”

The Latin formula in this final draft is nearly identical to the one in the published edition of the Rite of Baptism for Children, 65. It shows a different purpose of the ephphetha. For adults, it prepares for the immediate recitation of the Creed before baptism, but for newly baptized infants it points toward a future day when they will profess their own faith.

When the RCIA was finally redrafted in June 1969, it included a note (S. 344, p. 54.) that still appears in the final edition of the RCIA. There, it is translated this way: “By the power of tis symbolism the ephphetha rite, or rite of opening the ears and mouth, impresses on the elect their need of grace in order that they may hear the word of God and profess it for their salvation” (RCIA 197).

So, when Study Group XXII changed the position of the ephphetha in the Rite of Baptism for Children, it was ultimately responding to the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which called for the baptismal ceremony to be adapted to the needs of children (67). Children would not recite the Creed before baptism. It would be pointless to prepare them for it through the ephphetha. However, by adapting again the words that they had already adapted once for adults, the members turned the rite into a postbaptismal ceremony that anticipates a future of faith.

In its final edition, the Rite of Baptism for Children makes the ephphetha an option at the discretion of episcopal conferences. In the United States the conference decided to include it, but left its performance “at the discretion of the minister” (RBC 65). Hence, the ephphetha is still optional at every infant baptism in the United States.

Conferences still have the option of eliminating it altogether from the Rite of Baptism for Children. Perhaps this shows the ambivalence of the study group that prepared the revised rite. On one hand, it wanted to keep the ceremonies for children as sincere as possible; although the revised words and placement were pastorally sensitive to the reality of infant baptism, infants would not understand any of it. On the other hand, the group was seeking a way to honor the long history of a prebaptismal ceremony, from which this would take some departure.

When baptizing infants, the priest or deacon may include or omit the ephphetha. Before baptizing adults, according to the typical edition of the RCIA in Latin, all the preparation rites are optional (193). If they are done and if they include the ephphetha, it precedes the recitation of the Creed (197).

The third edition of the Roman Missal contains new rubrics for the baptism of a child at the Easter Vigil. Among the instructions is this: the ephphetha is to be omitted. This is probably because adults can receive the ephphetha earlier in

the day, and administering it only to children would raise questions. Besides, it is always optional.

A word that came from the lips of Jesus in his very own language can still be pronounced in churches today every time we pray that a person be enlightened with the gift of faith, and emboldened to proclaim it.

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