

Font of Grace Revisited: The Corpus Christi Baptistry

By **Raymond M. Rafferty**

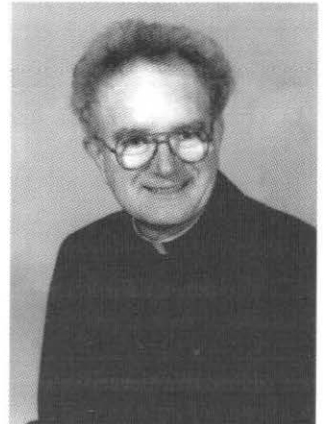
Visitors often come to Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan to view “the little brick Church, . . . with big plain windows and white columns and pilasters and a well-lighted, simple sanctuary,”¹ where Thomas Merton attended Mass, the church in which he was baptized and received into the Roman Catholic faith. They wish to stop at “the altar of Our Lady where Father Moore received my abjuration of heresy and schism” (*SSM* 222). In particular, they wish to visit the baptistry and to view “the shallow font”² where Father Joseph Moore baptized Merton on November 16, 1938.

The baptistry is near the entrance to the church. A painting of the baptism of Christ by Frances Railton adorns the wall above the white marble font, and a small relief of the baptism of Christ is the only decoration on the font, except for a plaque identifying the donor. A font cover of mahogany decorated in gold is suspended from a canopy. Next to the font is the confessional booth where Merton made his first confession after baptism.

The area was quite new when Merton was baptized since Corpus Christi Church was dedicated on October 25, 1936. But the font itself is older. It was taken from the old Corpus Christi Church, which stood on the same site from 1906 through 1935. That building was demolished to make room for the current church. From the dedication book of the church, it would appear that the font is the only item brought from the old church to the new one.

Therefore, the font was the source of Christian life to thousands before Merton, and one person in particular is a recipient of note. On March 13, 1921, Venerable Terence Patrick Cooke was baptized in that font. Cooke would become the Archbishop of New York from 1968-83, and his cause for canonization has been presented to Rome by John Cardinal O’Connor, Cooke’s successor as Archbishop. Since 1994, Cooke officially can be called Servant of God as his cause is investigated.

According to the baptismal registry, Terence Patrick Cooke was born on March 1, 1921, the son of Michael Cooke and Margaret Gannon. The godparents were James Gannon and Mary Gannon, and Father John Dooley, founding pastor of Corpus Christi, celebrated the baptism. It is known that the family lived in a tenement on LaSalle Street, just a few blocks from the church. In 1926, the Cooke family moved to the Bronx, and St. Benedict’s Parish became Cooke’s spiritual home. But the baptismal registry of Corpus Christi would hold the record of his ordination to subdiaconate at St. Joseph’s Seminary, Yonkers, NY on January 28, 1945.



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On at least one occasion as the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Cooke would return to Corpus Christi. On August 5, 1978, he celebrated the funeral Mass for Father George Ford, the man who built the new church that so impressed Merton. It was to Father Ford that Merton had said, "Father, I want to become a Catholic" (*SSM* 216), to begin his journey to the font of Corpus Christi.

Some visitors ask why there is no plaque on the baptismal font commemorating the baptism of Thomas Merton. As pastor of the church, I resist such designations, knowing that the Spirit who hovers over the waters of baptism imparts extraordinary gifts to all the baptized. While Thomas Merton and Terence Cardinal Cooke are well-known beneficiaries of the grace which flows from the font of Corpus Christi, the divine gift and its effects cannot be celebrated only in the life of a few. It should be proclaimed in the life of all who die with Christ in the font and all who even to this day are raised in the waters of baptism.

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- 1 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 207; subsequent references will be cited as "*SSM*" parenthetically in the text.
 - 2 Thomas Merton, "On the Anniversary of My Baptism," l. 41, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 157.