

# Empowered by the Waters: Exploring the Transformative Politics of Baptism in Christian Living in the Catholic Diocese of Jinja, Busoga Region, Uganda, East Africa

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## Abstract

This study explores and agrees with Radcliffe's (2012: p. 185) position that "there is such an apparent gap between what Christians celebrate in baptism and the life of the Church". It examines the reasons as to why the baptism rituals do not sufficiently empower the liturgical assembly to make a significant influence on the liturgical, socio-economic and political areas, particularly, in my local Catholic Community of the Diocese of Jinja in Uganda. It suggests practical ways in which the laity can play a more active role in the liturgy of the Word, liturgy of sacraments and liturgy of ethics. The study employs document review as a data collection tool for investigating the sources of empowering Christians which include water, anointing with holy oils of Catechumens and Chrism, godparents, white cloth, lit candle, rosary, and medal. It reviews policy documents and pastoral letters written by Rt. Rev. Joseph Willigers (RIP) (first Bishop) and Rt. Rev. Charles Martin Wamika (current Bishop), particularly, the Diocesan Synod booklet that surveys the involvement of the laity. The researcher interviewed current parish priests of the four oldest parishes in their chronological order of establishment, namely, Jinja (1900), Iganga (1901), Kamuli (1901) and Budini (1907), and head catechists of the 38 catechists of the other remaining parishes of the diocese on the involvement of the lay Christians in liturgical celebrations and other human aspects outside them. The justification for the selection criteria for parish priests of the four pioneer parishes and catechists in the remaining parishes of the Diocese consists in the traditional methods and practices of liturgical and socio-political empowerment compared to those of later newly created parishes. In other words, the four oldest parishes exhibit more liturgical and socio-political empowerment than the subsequent parishes. This study, too, employs participant observation dur-

ing meetings of various councils such as the diocesan pastoral council, Presbyteral (Priests') council, Board of Consultors, catechists, Parish councils, women's and men's Guilds, youths, people with disabilities, children, lay apostolic movements such as Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Legion of Mary, and St. Jude Devotion. The study intends to move the laity from the periphery to the centre of the life of the Church.

## Keywords

Laity, Politics, Baptism, Liturgy, Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Sacraments, Liturgy of Ethics

## 1. Laity

Paul VI defines the lay Christians as,

“all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world. What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. By their very vocation, the laity seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity” (Flannery, 1996: pp. 48-49).

Heywood (1988: p. 242) defines politics as power-structured relations within government institutions, political parties, pressure groups, social and religious institutions, and arrangements such as Church, family, public debate, and firms. One group controls another, because the former is empowered over the latter. In short, politics is empowerment. I define empowerment as the capacity or ability a human being has in being and doing something. It involves one being aware of one's strengths, shortcomings and potentialities. Then, one freely makes choices and decisions with confidence. Nevertheless, this requires one to cultivate knowledge and skills, given the resources one has at one's disposal. Finally, one delves into the activities before him/her.

Positively, the apparent contradiction between baptismal empowerment and disempowerment moves the laypersons in a more intimate collaboration with

clerics and other Church leaders, a sign that both clergy and laypeople share decisions and are accountable in their ministry. In addition, the tension that exists between the aspects prompts the laity to enter into critical dialogue and reflection on what baptism really means for them. The lay people, too, swing into action by challenging the disempowering structure of the Church to enhance a more participatory and inclusive role in the Body of Christ (Chiotti, 2023).

On a negative note, the two poles of empowerment and disempowerment make the laypersons passive, marginalized, and spectators of the actively engaged clergy. The laity, therefore, pose as passive recipients of the mysteries of their salvation. This leaves the clergy worn out, unable to fulfil their clerical obligations and ultimately frustrated in their apostolic ministry. Finally, once the laity remain at the periphery of the Church, they question their ownership, role, authority, and accountability within the Church.

Baptism is a Christian ritual in form of sprinkling (aspersion) or immersion or pouring water on a person (affusion) who declares his/her faith in Jesus Christ as the Saviour of humankind. Baptism effects holiness or cleansing or transformation (2 Cor.5: 17), makes one an adopted child of God (Matt.3: 3-17; Mk.1: 9-11; Lk.3: 21-22) and a member of the Church (Morden, 2010).

Senn (2012) defines liturgy as an elaborate form of public worship consisting of prayers, rituals or ceremonies and sacraments of the Church as means of offering praise, adoration, thanksgiving and supplication to God. It consists of the Word of God and Sacraments. The liturgical celebrations of the Church facilitate conversion of the worshipping assembly through scripture, history, theology, hymns and spontaneous and written prayers that pass on the Church's doctrines. The liturgical assembly relives the salvific events that took place in the history of humankind that culminated in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Liturgy of the Word refers to the readings taken and listened to during a liturgical ceremony. According to Segler and Bradley (2022: p. 131), on weekdays, a text is read from the Old or New Testaments, followed by the Gospel text. On Sundays, a biblical text is taken from the Old Testament, followed by a responsorial Psalm. The second reading is normally from the New Testament letters or the book of revelation. The Gospel text is read in accordance with the three-year cycle. The liturgy of the Word also extends to the homily, sermon, preaching, or reflection on the readings taken to translate the Word of God into concrete Christian living. What the Church leader preaches ushers the liturgical assembly into supplication or petitionary prayers. Finally, the liturgy of the Word also includes the hymns sung or recited for the spiritual and moral edification of the Faithful.

Liturgy of Sacraments: The concept "sacrament" derives two Latin words, namely, "Sacra", referring to sacred/holy, and "mentum" meaning thing or object (Orberg, 1998: p. 33). A sacrament is a physical object that is set aside to signify the grace it confers and each of them celebrates the paschal mystery (the suffering, death and resurrection) of Jesus Christ (Francis, 1999). Vorglimler (1992: p. 45) defines a sacrament as a visible object that signifies an invisible reality. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments as follows. Baptism washes away original

and personal sins, makes one belong to God's family and a Christian. The physical sign employed is water, holy oils of catechumens and Chrism (anointing), white cloth (purity), and lit candle (light to the world). Confirmation makes the recipient an adult in the Christian faith and imbues the candidate with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit such as knowledge, wisdom, understanding, fortitude/bravery/courage, piety/devotion, counsel, and fear of the Lord (Isa.11: 2-3). Confirmation's visible signs are holy oil of Chrism and laying on hands by the Bishop. The Eucharist consists in bread and wine blessed by a priest, constituting the body and blood of Christ (Matt.26: 26-30; Mk.14: 22-26; Lk.22: 14-20; 1Cor.11: 23-25). It is spiritual food and pledge of eternal life (Chiara, 1977). Penance is confession before a priest, reconciliation with God and humankind and absolution (prayer of forgiveness, cf. Jn. 20: 19-23). The visible signs include confession of sins by a penitent before a priest, who says a prayer of absolution or forgiveness. Anointing of the sick is conferred to a sick person, who confesses his/her sins, is prayed over and anointed by a priest and receives Holy Communion (Jas.5: 14-15). In ordination/Holy Orders, the Bishop lays his hands on the ordinand, says a prayer of ordination over him, anoints his hands and sets him aside as a priest (Miller, 1963).

Liturgy of Ethics: What is celebrated in liturgy is lived concretely in Christian life. The rituals performed at a liturgical function lead the participants to put them into practice and what is practised in real life is celebrated in liturgy. It is the intersection between liturgy and lived experiences or between theology and spirituality (Keating, 1996; Balthasar & Oakes, 2013: p. 262).

## 2. Introduction

Previous studies interpret Church baptism as such an experience that empowers its recipients with the Holy Spirit, holiness, a new identity, namely, belonging to God's family, and membership to the Church, God's indwelling or Trinitarian life and courage to steer through life until death, and eternal life. Christian worship and sacramental faith do transform the participants and commission them to transform the world (Mallia, 1997: p. 32). These scholarships, however, fail to account for Christians' inactive role and vulnerability in the socio-economic and political realms. This study is important in the sense that it links socio-economic and political vulnerability of the baptized Christians to liturgical vulnerability. Passivity among the laity during a liturgical celebration derives from the priest doing almost everything. He presides over almost all the sacraments, particularly, baptism. He anoints, asks people to profess the creed, in many circumstances, intones the Gloria, Creed, and Our Father, baptizes, preaches or delivers a homily. He asks for a response by saying "The Lord be with you", to which the lay people respond, "And with your spirit" (Wilton, 2003: p. 22). He lights and hands on the candle, lays the altar, decides on the readings for the liturgy, reads the Gospel text, blesses and dismisses people at the end of the liturgical celebration.

The lay people play a minimal role in the liturgical celebration by taking the first and second Scriptural readings, and responding to the priest. They present

their children for baptism, serve as godparents, the catechist prepares and instructs the parents for the baptism of their kids or an adult preparing for baptism, profess the creed, give offertory, receive, but do not distribute holy communion. Their common role in liturgy is to answer the Amen at the end of every prayer that is led by the priest concluding with “Through Christ our Lord...” In other words, the priest is the key actor while the other ministers, if any, are mere spectators. The baptism performed by a layperson at the point of death is regarded as incomplete until a priest does the anointing with the oil of catechumens and oil of chrism to the candidate in question. The laity, then, merely provide a congregation to the divine drama presented and acted by the priest.

This article examines the reasons for the minimal role played by the laity in Church in the liturgical, socio-economic and political spheres, and suggests strategies for more inclusive roles among the laypersons.

### **3. Literature Review**

This subsection assesses data on the reasons for the minimum role of the laity in the liturgical celebration, sources of empowerment, the gaps between the liturgy within the Church and liturgy outside the Church (liturgy of ethics).

#### **3.1. The Ground for Empowerment: The Symbolisms Used in Baptism That Have a Direct or Indirect Link with Power/Empowerment**

In order to move the laity from the periphery to the centre of the church and society, it is necessary to examine the sources of empowerment, which are located within the liturgical celebration. These include the symbolisms that the Church employs in carrying out baptism.

##### **3.1.1. Water**

By washing away original and personal sins, the blessed water in baptism empowers the candidate with grace. Baptism is an empowering event by way of carrying with it the power to rise from the dead, but also a humiliating one in the sense that it refers to death and burial. The three immersions or sprinkling or pouring of water on the candidate signifies death, burial and resurrection. It is a glorification mixed with humiliation. These blessed waters evoke the desire of every human being for our final home in which there is no threatening sea, for all death and destruction are ended (Mallia, 1997). This gives courage to the baptized Christian to steer through the uncertainties of life. Waters of baptism are a mystery of holiness and power. They are filled with holiness and power, not only, but are themselves holiness and power-giving (Osborne, 1987: p. 73). Once immersed in the holy waters, the baptized people give blessings to others. This kind of blessing is grounded in the priesthood derived from baptism and confirmation; it is not a preserve of the ministerial priesthood. The baptized have the vocation of blessing each other by saying, “The Lord be with you,” whose answer, “And with your spirit” is not only a blessing, but also a sign of Catholic identity. In the word of

blessing are democracy and equality, a sense of intention and well-wishing (Radcliffe, 2012: p. 123). The baptized should utter more words of blessing, talking well about others, words of forgiveness and sharing hopes and fears than cursing, gossiping and words of violence.

### 3.1.2. Oil of Catechumens/Exorcism

Anointing of the candidate with oil is an allusion to the ancient Roman custom of anointing athletes before their contests, for the candidate must wage an unceasing contest against the world, the flesh and the devil. Anointing with oil of exorcism or catechumens or pre-baptismal anointing makes the baptized partakers of the good olive tree, namely, Jesus Christ. Holy oil protects its recipients from darkness and enables them to overcome the power of the night or evil (Mallia, 1997: p. 32). The baptized become Christ's athletes and are safe under the Lord's protection. This oil frees them from the fetters of evil and the control of demons. They, then, begin the life of courage to face the devil and its temptations and the life's journey of holiness. It is a preparation for the indwelling of the Trinity, which empowers them to stretch beyond the natural and human limitations and banishes fear. Because some Catholic population take the contest against the world literally to mean detachment from any worldly cares, a correct explanation here is necessary.

### 3.1.3. Oil of Chrism

Kings at their coronation and priests at their ordination were anointed (1Sam.10: 1; 1Sam.16: 13; Ex.29: 7; Lev.8: 12). In baptism, the anointing with Chrism signifies the kingly and priestly dignity of Jesus in which the baptized persons share and which the baptismal character bestows. Anointing with chrism/post-baptismal anointing and in confirmation is the fundament of participation of all the baptized in Church ministry (Ratzinger, 2006). Vorglimler (1992) agrees with Ratzinger's postulation by arguing that baptismal ordination elevates and empowers the laity by making them concelebrants at the Eucharist. Priesthood of all believers means taking pleasure in and expressing joy as a form of love to all humanity. It is also thanksgiving or Eucharist to God for all the benefits they receive and with these, they concretize it in the Eucharist at the altar.

Once they receive the power of concelebrants from baptismal ordination, Christians receive the prophetic power and ministry by which they speak to and about each other, in joke, gossip, comment, blessing, accusing, teaching, writing, in poems, journalism, playwrights, campaigns, and politics. The church treasures professional poets, journalists, writers, teachers and singers, for they refresh and renew the language with which humans contemplate the beauty of God's creation [(Paul VI, 1982: p. 728; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2005: No. 5]. Baptism gives the candidate the authority against the injustice committed within the Church, but many a time, the priests and the laity shy away, because it is a very difficult task that requires a lot of courage. A Christian as a prophet is required to be truthful, humble, gentle, patient, and courageous without aggressivity.

The baptized share in Christ who ruled from the cross in a non-violent way by non-violent lifestyles in decision-making in families, Church, government, in parliament, banks and businesses. Prophecy consists in voicing one's attitude, and mentality. To concretize this, the people should exercise their authority through prayer, devotion and experience of God and authority of government, that is, respect between reason and faith and one another's office and status. One of the solutions to this is to attend to the voices of the dead in the past councils, writings of the saints, teachings of the Church and the voices of the laity who are living now.

Baptism empowers Christians, but it also humbles and makes them realize that they are not God. It makes them powerful and yet vulnerable. However powerful and influential they are, they do not solve all the problems of the world. This is a big lesson for religious and political leaders who are dictatorial to the extent of controlling everything through watching, policing, measuring, administering, taxing, and distrusting everyone and everything and they completely fail. It means that baptism both empowers and disempowers Christians. Baptism empowers its recipients who become a community of believers and participate actively in the Body of Christ. The baptized Christians are empowered through forgiveness, holiness, purity, the Holy Spirit and all of them become equal before God, ruling out marginalization. On the contrary, the Church disempowers her members by controlling them and emphasizing the necessity of baptism as a purifying ritual to rid humans of original sin, leading to a debased self-image. The scholars of the oil of Chrism under this sub-section have not addressed what exactly causes the duality between empowerment and disempowerment.

#### **3.1.4. White Cloth**

In the early Church, candidates used to strip themselves naked and wore a white garment meaning that they stripped the old self with its deeds (Easton, 1934: p. 26). This symbolism was in imitation of Christ who hung naked on the cross. The white cloth placed on the baptized candidate signifies purity, putting on and rising with Christ (Gal. 2: 7). The baptized transcends oneself to divinity, thus, empowerment with purity and freedom from the grip of the devil. A sinner is transformed into a saint. The white cloth gives a Christian identity whereby social status is abolished in the sense that all the baptized become equal and brothers and sisters in Christ (Ferguson & Reynolds, 2009: p. 124).

Holiness is such an empowerment because the baptized share in the holiness of Christ (Leijssen, 2007: p. 43). Equality, holiness and sainthood are a big challenge to the too much hierarchical structure of the Church and society/world. The holiness of the baptized lies in wearing the glory and holiness of God and belonging to the holy Church, which is the glory of being human for whom Christ came to divinize. Holiness consists in being in unity with the Church. Holiness also spurs Christians to enter into ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

The teaching that baptism strips a candidate naked before God in order to be touched by Christ is very empowering since Christian physicality is transformed



into the Body of Christ. With the conviction that Christ's touch makes the baptized person Christ himself, Christians begin treating others as Christ himself, therefore, it empowers them to treat others and ourselves with dignity and respect in politics, economics and social life, that is, liturgy of ethics. Baptism invites its recipients to do the mission of charity to the poor (liturgy of ethics). The Catholic diocese of Jinja has two institutions that help it express charity to the vulnerable children. St. Philomena Baby's Home, with the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, takes care of babies whose mothers have abandoned them and St. Mugagga Boys' Home with the Banna Karoli or Brothers of Charles Lwanga on Rubaga Hill, Jinja, attends to boys who are complete orphans or have parents whose economic stand is wanting (Uganda Catholic Secretariat, 2022: p. 193). The people at the margins of society become the Christ to whom those baptized are bound in baptism. The Christ on the altar is the same Christ in rags in the cold who must be tended. Almsgiving is one of the ways of evangelizing the world. The oil of gladness that the baptized is anointed with overthrows the sadness, isolation, loneliness, inequality in our world, restrains and tames their appetites and greed.

Although the diocese of Jinja as an institution expresses her charity to the vulnerable, the mothers who abandon their children fail in being charitable to these children. Other parents care less about their children, invoking the sympathy of the diocese and other charity organizations. This study, then, hopes to engage the laity more in taking care of their own relatives.

### 3.1.5. Paschal/Baptismal Candle

The lit candle symbolizes that the baptized candidate has left the old ways of darkness and has turned towards Christ, the light of the world. It is a shield against the darkness of the devil. This spiritual empowerment guides one forward to the eternal home. This shapes one's values in form of morality (Morrill, 2000: p. 219). According to Connell (1995: p. 23), those Christians who live morally receive the reward of meeting with Christ and the saints in the heavenly court, following their death. When parents and godparents bring their child for baptism, they are greeted in the entry of a Church building, which symbolically affects what they desire of the Church for the child, a place in the life of faith. Baptism is a death, thus, reducing the baptized, while it is also rising to new life in Christ, that is, it is empowerment. One joins the communion of saints, earthly and heavenly (Rom.6: 4).

At the very moment of baptism, the candidate receives spiritual, socio-economic, moral and political power by water and the Holy Spirit (John Paul II, 1994: p. 290). Baptism is both a death and rising to new life or a hope that banishes fear of death. Faith is not an illusion, but it is hinged on the belief that Christ is with the baptized in the waters, having gone with all the sinners at his baptism and fighting with them against Satan. At baptism, one receives power and eternal life until one actually dies. The hope for the resurrection sustains the baptized through the struggles and predicament one undergoes. One should see one's failure and sorrow as somehow fruitful and fertile with God's grace. This conviction empow-



ers Christians to live on ready to face death. Belief in eternal life enables them to live their present life with enthusiasm.

### **3.1.6. Godparents**

Biological parents realize their insufficiency and give their child to the Church through choosing godparents, a sign of shared parenthood. The child is entrusted to the parish community. It enters a larger family of the Church (Radcliffe, 2012: p. 51). One has more than one identity, namely, a biological family member and a member of the Body of Christ. One belongs also to the whole Catholic Church. In other words, these multiple identities are an empowerment to the baptized candidates. Wherever the baptized Christian is, one is made welcome in any Catholic Church one happens to enter into. This position agrees with Odama, former archbishop of Gulu archdiocese, who argues that one's tribe is humanity through baptism (Katongole, 2011: p. 1). Since the baptized enters into a world of humanity, its sorrows and agonies become agonies of this individual. So, one joins others in fighting and defending human rights.

This study hopes to fill in the following gaps. It hopes to give the necessary explanation on the contest against the world in relation to any world cares. It also intends to explore the causes and the duality between empowerment and disempowerment. In addition, this study suggests strategies of more involvement of the laity in caring for their relatives.

## **3.2. Reasons for the Minimum Role of the Laity in the Liturgical Celebration and Liturgy of Ethics**

Despite the powers the baptized Christians receive in a liturgical celebration, their story out there in the socio-economic and political realms is almost the opposite in the sense that they operate at the margins of the Church. It looks as though baptism disempowers its recipients. For example, of the 23 Members of the Ugandan Parliament who hail from Busoga, only 7 (1.61%) belong to the Roman Catholic denomination.

This study identifies specific barriers to lay participation such as institutional, theological and doctrinal, sociocultural, psychological and practical barriers. According to Osborne (1987), the Church originally involved her people more in the baptismal process and catechumenate through several ministries. He writes,

“Some of these ministries were basically lay (sponsors and teachers), and others were specifically clerical (Episcopal presidency), then, Presbyteral presidency, and deacons and deaconesses played particular roles. As the rite of baptism developed, however, clerical roles took over the lay roles almost completely.” (p. 77).

With time, active involvement of the lay Christians declined, leaving only the clerics on stage. Radcliffe (2012: p. 186) holds the institutional Church responsible for the low involvement of the laity in liturgical celebrations over the ages through her teaching and practice. He observes a wide gap between what is celebrated in

baptism and the life of the Church, because some bishops and priests are nervous and uncertain about Vatican II's resolution to bridge the gap between the clerics and the laity (Flannery, 1996). In addition, he argues that clerics view active involvement of the laity as competition between the two segments of the same Church. As a result, they even fear how instrumental the laity are in extending the reign of God.

Morrill (2000: p. 36) agrees with Radcliffe's position, by contending that Church leaders fail to take seriously the dignity, wisdom, rights and talents of the lay people. Augments by positing that clerics "are paralysed by timidity, fearful of new experiments or of disapproval from above or below." He goes on to comment that they go to the extent of being so proud that they rejoice in being with big titles, for example, some wish to become Popes for just one day, and others would like to replace the title "Monsignor" with "My Lord". He observes that they do not want to let go promotions and titles and eventually distance themselves from their flocks who end up doing only the minimum in their Christian lifestyle.

From the doctrinal and theological points of view, on the contrary, Murray (1980) attributes the challenge of the laity withdrawing to the back seat in the Church to their misunderstanding of the Church's teaching that baptism makes them share in the humility of Jesus (Phil.2: 5-8; Rom.6: 3-5) and that their sinfulness distances them from God (Gen.3; Isa.59: 2). Further, the Church's teaching that humans are sinners, fallen from God's grace, in need of redemption, or their recognition of creatureliness, helplessness, imperfection and humility [Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). Nos. 27, 1849 and 1870], has been misconstrued by the lay people who think that every activity related to politics, economics, and social performances is closely linked with cheating, stealing, telling lies, murders, rigging elections and subjugation of subjects.

The Trinitarian formula that accompanies the sprinkling, or immersion or pouring of holy water on the candidate empowers one with the very life of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, thus, uplifting one to the divine level. Unfortunately, baptism does not mechanically empower people as such. Besides, since the baptized is just at the point of initiation, other sacraments are needed through which empowerment is nurtured and nourished.

Baptism makes one a member of the whole Body of Christ, the Church (Johnson, 2003: p. 105). A person becomes a member of one's local Church, not only, but a member of a parish, which parish belongs to a diocese or an archdiocese, which, in turn, belongs to the universal Church. A baptized person is, in a sense, universal and assumes the triple role of Christ, namely, priest, prophet and king. As king, the baptized person is imbued with a political power, that is, the ability to lead, influence and govern others. The Christian who is empowered to govern others, however, fails to realize the leading role flowing from the priesthood of Christ and of the baptized. Therefore, the baptized Christian is a powerful and yet a vulnerable person. This power does not express itself well in one's life and one of the reasons is that in my diocese a child is brought up in such a way that em-

phasizes one's humility and obedience to elders and parents. In many homes, parents would not like free expression among children. In an interview held with M. A, "Children are expected to listen to their elders and keep in the background" (13 May 2025).

The baptized is anointed on his or her forehead with the oil of Chrism that makes him/her "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's own people (1 Pt.2: 9). The problem is that the baptized do not feel that they are priests in the general sense of the word. One of the reasons is that the ministerial priests are taken to be more "alteri Christi" (other Christs) than the lay faithful. Secondly, not enough catechesis is given to the faithful on the priesthood of all believers. In other words, baptismal empowerment is not heavily felt by the faithful. Thirdly, the majority of lay people are rather passive, so, it makes little sense to them even when it means so.

In the profession of faith, the parents of those to be baptized, godparents and the whole liturgical assembly profess their Christian faith by either answering questions posed by the minister or reciting the Apostles' creed (Bragotti et al., 2011: p. 137). This enables the participants in the liturgy renew their baptismal vows and do it on behalf of the children to be baptized. One of the problems, however, is that the majority of the people do it for formality, that is, it remains creedal Christianity, devoid of conviction and does not yield much in the liturgy of ethics (Johnson, 2003: p. 297). It is not done dramatically enough as to exert a serious impact on the lives of the believers. Besides, it does not reflect their faithful commitment to Christ. The commitment of love of God they make in the creed wanes when they commit many evils such as violence, injustice, theft, idolatry, hatred, frequent marriage divorces, extramarital relations, premarital sexual unions and crossing from one religious tradition to another. Holy Christian life is, in most cases, lived from Saturday evening to Sunday afternoon.

The baptized Christian is directly empowered by being forgiven original and personal sins, a deep intimacy with God and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. From the moral point of view, the same person acquires and lives a virtuous lifestyle. On the contrary, however, baptism indirectly influences one's socio-economic and political skills of temperance, defence for the marginalized and disadvantaged (justice), participating in the democratic process, and labouring for the common good.

From a psychological perspective, the possible reasons for the Christians' misconception of truths on baptism include spiritual immaturity, spiritual blindness (2Cor.4: 4), hardheartedness, cognitive limitations, preconceived biases, and emotional challenges, on the part of the Christians. An example of cognitive limitation is when a Christian makes no difference between God and Satan, for both of them are spiritual powers or between a Church structure and a traditional shrine, because both are places of worship or between a rosary and a talisman, for both are religious articles. On the side of the Church teachers and preachers, misconceptions do arise due to the complex nature of biblical and theological content, theo-

logical disagreements, poor biblical and theological training, failure to communicate effectively, and contradictory cultural elements (Warren, 2002). Unfortunately, very few lay people, particularly, in Uganda and Busoga as a region undertake theological and religious studies, except when they belong to the teaching profession or young men in the seminaries destined for priesthood or young men and women who aspire to religious life as Rev. Brothers and Sisters/nuns.

Inadequate involvement in the liturgies of the Word and of Sacraments, and in theological and religious studies result in limited involvement of the laypersons in political campaigns, voting or being voted into political offices, transacting businesses and the like. This study agrees with Dulles (2002) who urges the lay people to engage in parameters of social justice through their words and deeds as a means of evangelizing the political and socio-economic realms. Besides, the grace effects of baptism include spiritual regeneration or rebirth of the soul, one's participation in the life of God and journey to resurrection and eternal life (Murray, 1980: p. 7). It leads both the Christian leaders and adherents to overemphasize the Church as a spiritual institution, whose duty is to lead people to heaven at the expense of worldly concerns such as politics, economics and social services. Consequently, Catholics fail to balance between spiritual and worldly affairs and the duality between the two spheres is problematic. The majority of Catholics believe that the life of the resurrection awaits them on the other side after death. This conception prevents them from investing so much in "breaking down the social, economic, ethnic/racial and gender-related walls of division and separation implied in baptism" (Johnson, 2003: p. 25). They should be made to understand that eternal life begins when one loves God and fellow humans here and now. Love of one another is a power that speaks of a hope for that which is not yet possessed.

Socioculturally, the Basoga as a tribe is patriarchal, characterized by control especially by men, demanding obedience from women, children and subjects. This phenomenon concurs with the institutional Church that exercises similar control over her adherents, particularly, the laity. Many a time the baptized in Busoga region do not even have a say in the legislation of the Church's discipline and, therefore, only receive the laws as passive participants. Obviously, this presumes a tradition that has put in place particular ecclesiastical laws by which the members abide. It was not until the 1995 diocesan synod in which the laypersons participated in the legislation on many aspects of Church life for the diocese of Jinja. In addition, the Church designates itself a power structure rather than a communion. Hierarchy, then, although taken as a blessing, has been a curse, particularly, to the lay people. The Church even designates its bishops as ministers, priests as backbenchers and laity as party members, whose role is to pray, pay and obey. This leads many laities to passivity, walking away, becoming angry and frustrated. Baptism as instituted by Christ means that it is not only a human, but also a divine institution (Osborne, 1987). Baptism, then, is an empowerment by God. God graces and empowers humans.

In most cases, a Christian name given to the baptized may not bear the communicative power that lasts or surnames have. Actually, first names/surnames for

Africans are the names that Westerners regard as last. For example, on my home village people prefer to call me Bukyanagandi to Anthony, because the former has the communicative meaning of “each new day comes with different news” (Bukyanagandi, 2007: p. 45). A name or naming is an identity to a new-born child. Not any name is given, but a name of an ancestor in the Christian faith or African culture. A name of an ancestor carries a specific meaning and with it is power. The baptism name many a time has no correspondence with the meaning of one’s last name. This causes confusion within an individual Christian.

Naming leads to flourishing of a candidate. In other words, naming is empowerment. A name shows how one is a fruit of the past, how one belongs to the present and a parents’ dream for their child for the future. Names can be signs of our destiny. For example, Nelson Mandela (1996: p. 7) was given the name Rolihlahla, which connoted “trouble-maker” which played out well in his life to the extent of winning the political independence of South Africa. Nevertheless, some Christian names given to children do not confer on them any feeling of empowerment. Therefore, the choice of a given name should have a serious consideration. Given that some Christian names do not display much meaning to their bearers, a good number of Christians have kept their names at the periphery by preferring to be called by their last names.

From Sunday afternoon to Saturday afternoon of the next week African Christians, in general, fall victims of syncretism by visiting witch doctors, medicine men and diviners for protection, prosperity and asking the gods and ancestors for good life (Mpigi, 2002: p. 126). They either do not know or forget that a baptism card or certificate is a pledge of loyalty until death and that sharing the very life of God in baptism is so empowering that they need not fear anything that befalls them. Their human experiences go against the Creed.

Practically, the Church reserves the duty of baptizing people to the ordained minister, either deacon, priest or bishop, although baptism can validly and fruitfully be administered by a layperson as an emergency (Odoobo, 2021). The Church, then, is responsible for limiting the powers to ordained ministry, hence, not giving enough empowerment to lay people. In its teaching and practice, the church gives little or no power at all to her faithful within the sacramental celebration, which disempowers them out there in the socio-economic and political realms.

This study brings out the idea that the specific barriers are institutional, theological, doctrinal, psychological, and practical. It is unique and critical of digging up another factor that inhibits the translation of the liturgies of the Word and of baptism into the liturgy of ethics such as lack of mentors or role models whom society needs to give guidance to Christians who would like to live out their lives concretely.

## 4. Results

Endeavour to address the above specific barriers to lay participation is an ongoing realistic process by the Church. This sub-section envisages a more participatory

role of the laity in the liturgies of the Word, sacraments, particularly, baptism and ethics; role modelling; and liturgical inculturation.

#### 4.1. A More Participatory Approach among the Laity

Pope Francis advocates for synodality in his papacy as a way of making a revolution towards narrowing the gap between the clerics and the laypersons. By synodality is meant walking together of both the clergy and the laity in terms of meeting, listening to each other, debating, holding conversations on what deeply affects people, praying and making decisions (Fitzgibbon, 2017). Francis' idea of walking together on the way to sanctity builds on the image of the Church as pilgrims journeying in a foreign land, and led by the Holy Spirit (Flannery, 1996: pp. 6, 173). In this journey, the people sometimes go on high speed or slowly, experience fatigue, joys and sorrows, and moments of enthusiasm and ardour. The Pope champions the concept and practice of collegiality, which discards the attitude of "we have always done it this way" in favour of the open, dynamic and missionary engagement through participation and dialogue. In this way of each deeply listening to and consulting the other, the Gospel reaches everyone, thus, making every baptized person an agent of evangelization. Listening, consultation, participation and formation result in renewal of the Church, in general, and of individual Christians, in particular. In this vein, Pope Francis (2013: p. 97) argues:

"In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28: 19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, no one who has truly experienced God's saving love needs much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus."

This paradigm shift from a passive recipient of the gospel to an evangelizer empowers every evangelized with becoming an evangelizer (Irwin, 2005). In 1995, the first diocesan synod, involving the then Bishop Rt. Rev. Joseph Willigers, parish priests, heads of parish councils, representatives of men, women, seminarians represented by the researcher, youths, lay apostolic movements and associations convened (Willigers, 1995). Prior to and a few years following the synod, the laity were more spectators of building construction and other projects at parish headquarters since much of the money for these causes used to come from Europe and the benefactors, friends, and relatives of then Bishop.

The situation, however, changed tremendously in which case the current Bishop Rt. Rev. Charles Martin Wamika has brought the laity on board to such an extent that most of the local resources for newly created parishes, the upcoming

Uganda Martyrs' Hospital on Rubaga Hill now come from the laity. The lay people are now involved in giving financial support to the Major seminarians (Wamika, 2013). The parents, other relatives and friends of a candidate to the priesthood contribute to shs. 350,000 UGX per semester as cost sharing for seminary fees, and each parish contributes an amount prescribed by the diocese per semester. While the minimum amount given by some rural parishes is shs. 800,000 UGX every semester, the urban parishes contribute shs. 2,000,000 UGX. The contributors receive due recognition from the diocesan authorities who issue them payment receipts and publication of their names in diocesan magazines. The laity, too, contribute their labour, time and tangible items such as food for the builders, bags of cement, land, bricks, water, firewood, and housing for the workers, with which much progress has been registered and more laity are involved in many respects. The laity in the diocese now occupy almost an equal stance with the clerics by belonging to, organizing themselves and serving on such councils as guilds for the men, women, people with disabilities, youth, choir, children, and priests.

Since 2014, the parishes have two financial accounts, one whose signatories are the parish priests to take care of the priests' upkeep, and another account has a parish priest and a chairperson of a parish council that take care of the general running of a parish's activities (Wamika, 2014). As for the Bishop's pastoral visit to any given parish in the diocese of Jinja, the practice is that a month or two prior to the occasion, the parish priest, chairperson and a few other members of the parish council, visit the Bishop's office physically. They brief him on a well-written programme of activities for the day; present him the financial contribution of a minimum of shs. 1,500,000 UGX, collected by the lay Christians, meant for Mass intentions and transport to the parish in question to be visited. On the very day of the Bishop's visit, the lay Christians again give confirmation fees for their children (shs 15,000 UGX per confirmand), contributions of shs. 200,000 UGX per outstation, an equivalent of a goat for the Bishop and shs. 100,000 UGX from every Catholic-founded school as a gift to the Bishop. All these gifts enable the Bishop further and accomplish such building projects of St. Gonzaga Minor Seminary, in Iganga, the Uganda Martyrs' Hospital at Rubaga Hill, Jinja and other running costs of the diocese (Wamika, 2020).

Originally, the laity, in the event of death, used to form groups known as "Ssekiriba kya Taka", a kiganda phrase, translated as condolence for bereavement by the members in form of funds and tangible objects such as foodstuffs, water, firewood, and building funds and materials for the grave. As time went by, most of these groups have vanished due to the dishonesty of some of the members. Some section of the members appropriated the funds collected, which led to the natural collapse of these groups. In fact, today a good number of Catholics belong to other social groups, which do not typically belong to the Catholic Church, but operate for the same cause.

## 4.2. Christian Role Modelling

(Wakeman, 2012: p. 15) beholds Jesus Christ as a role model for his followers. Saint Paul admonishes Christians of Philippi, Thessalonians, and Christians, in



general, to be good role models to one another, just as he has been to them (Phil. 4: 8-9; 1Thess.1: 6-10).

Christian role models face various challenges that can impact on their effectiveness and influence. According to [Horsburgh and Ippolito \(2018\)](#),

“lack of continuous exposure to any one role model or parent, means that students could not truly analyse role model’s behaviours or evaluate the impact of that behaviour on others” (p. 1).

By implication, the lack of continuous exposure to Christian role models makes it difficult for children and aspirants to the Christian faith to adopt acceptable Christian behaviour. Said differently, the absence of Christian role models renders other people incapable of copying and living a Christian lifestyle. Christianity, therefore, survives with the help of very few role models. Another challenge is that the world pressures and expects Christian role models to live a perfect life, which is far beyond their efforts and, in many instances, the world’s standards and expectations run counter to their biblical values ([Sauls, 2015](#): p. 24). In addition, Christian role models are beset by personal weaknesses and struggles in form of temptations, doubts, power and fears, which impedes maintaining a strong witness. Besides, [Meng \(2024: p. 2\)](#) posits that today’s digital age exposes people, including Christian role models, to constant scrutiny so much, so that their good personal image is tarnished and magnified in the midst of any mistake. [Walach \(2017\)](#) maintains that Christian role models, too, are torn into two opposites, namely, seeking spiritual nourishment by way of praying, doing good to others, reading the Bible and the secular responsibilities such as taking care of their children, doing business, leadership and teaching. Furthermore, they must be open to new cultural and social challenges that require them to adapt to new situations. On one hand, [Schweitzer \(2000: p. 167\)](#) considers pride as a virtue since a Christian rejoices in having been created in the image of God and having been saved by Jesus Christ. On the other hand, he views pride as a sin because as a role model innocently makes an effort to live a genuine and inspiring Christian life, he/she ends up seeking public attention, admiration and self-individual salvation. In short, Christian models become actors at the expense of being authentic bearers of the Christian faith. Consequently, as they attend to their constant prayer, study, obedience to Scripture and authentic Christian expression, the people with whom they interact criticize them heavily and even reject them, for they see them as judges of their misbehaviour.

Despite these challenges, many role models find ways to stay faithful to their calling and continue to inspire and guide their communities.

### 4.3. Liturgical Inculturation

This is a major concern that requires that celebrations bring about liberation in all forms to those who participate in it. In other words, liturgy should produce social justice and economic progress ([Chukwudezie, 2005](#): p. 65). It should challenge the socio-political and economic concerns in the world. It offers tremendous

courage and hope in the face of death. Liturgical spirituality greatly contributes to and challenges globalization, social justice, class distinction, justice for women, wars, political unrest, environmental pollution, conflicting interests, use of the internet, and the scourge of HIV/AIDS. It trains people in appreciating differences and the unity between the sacred and secular. The sacred should not be exclusive, but should pervade the secular domain. According to Sarpong (2002), while the priests and other preachers preach in such a way that does not overemphasize the sacred at the expense of the secular, the laity in one way or another, preach to the priests and their fellow laity through witness of daily life.

The Catholic diocese of Jinja, in Busoga region, Uganda, established a Cultural Research Centre (CRC) in 2008 in Jinja city, at Plot 5, Nile Gardens, 80 kilometres from Kampala, in order to study the Basoga cultural elements that can be incorporated into liturgical life to have more meaningful liturgical celebrations and religious life (Kayaga, 2021). On a positive note, a lot has been achieved in terms of findings that are written down. In addition, liturgical celebrations are now conducted in the local people's mother tongue, Lusoga. The only snag is that the marriage between cultural and liturgical elements still has a long way to go (Bukyanagandi, 2007: p. 79). The dycastery (department) for divine worship in Rome has to sanction the cultural symbolisms to be employed in liturgy. Although essential elements like the white cloth do not convey a concrete cultural meaning, they have to be maintained for the sake of unity and uniformity of the Roman rite of baptism.

Sometimes personal names suggest one's vocation. A name of a patron saint given to a person at baptism invites the bearer to emulate that patron saint by way of lifestyle. Most important is that naming a child is a participation in the life of the church, saint, God and holiness, which is empowering. In the name is God's voice and call to the baptized until one sees God face-to face at the end of one's earthly existence (1Cor.13: 12). A name is such an identity that continues at confirmation, marriage or ordination to priesthood and it is written at one's tomb awaiting Christ's call to eternal life. As a way of promoting inculturation, the Church should consider names of local saints, like the Uganda Martyrs or even other people that live morally inspiring lives, like Matia Bateganya, who shed his blood in defence of the Church land at St. Kizito Catholic Parish, Namirali, in Iganga district, although he is not yet canonized (Wamika, 2022).

One of the ways of narrowing the big gulf between the clergy and the laity is making constructive adjustments in Seminary formation and ongoing formation of priests. The laity should be part of the formation team, not only in the parishes and Christian communities at various levels, but prominently in the minor and major seminaries. The seminarians, who are only trained by priests, miss and yet would learn a lot, especially, the humility that lay people are equal partners in the building and extending the kingdom of God here on earth. The witness of life by lay people contributes much to the training of the would-be priests. St. Gonzaga Minor Seminary in Iganga now has 13 priests, but the majority teaching and support staff are laypersons (Wamika, 2014). The priests badly need the prayers and

closeness of laypersons that provide affection and strength, which shapes them into shepherds according to God's heart (Francis, 2017).

As for homilies and sermons, the catechist, seminarian, deacon, priest and bishop integrate the sacred and the secular, in other words, should be relevant and down to earth. Sometimes, some preachers either merely entertain or under-nourish their congregations who come out of liturgical celebrations worse than they enter them. Since the majority of the hearers learn more concretely when the preachers act out Christ's message, the preachers should either prepare and act it out themselves or train others to dramatize the biblical and Christian message as long as it arouses the Christian faith. More participation of the lay people can be achieved by letting them be part of the preparation of a homily to enrich it. However, lay preaching even within the context of a Eucharistic celebration can be reinforced to build up the Body of Christ.

Several cultural factors within the Ugandan context significantly influence the effectiveness of baptism as a tool for empowerment. Positively, the Ugandan society exhibits a high regard and respect for authority, including cultural leaders, elders, parents, elders, brothers and sisters, political leaders and clergy. These authority figures command respect and obedience from their respective subjects, and things move faster and more smoothly in society (Ward, 1991). Negatively, however, the top-down movement and operation suffocates the subjects, thus, undermine lay empowerment and participation. Besides, by and large, given the religious foundation till now, Uganda has a strong spiritual heritage, in other words, Ugandans and the people of Busoga sub-region have a strong spiritual worldview. This means that they almost view every aspect from a spiritual lens, to the detriment of neglecting other essential elements that empower them politically and socio-economically.

It is also important to note that Busoga region or diocese of Jinja customizes baptism as an empowering tool, particularly, by instilling courage among its recipient to struggle against the socio-economic challenges such as abject poverty, ceaseless droughts and its resultant famine, and high rates of illiteracy. The Catholic Church in Jinja involves her adherents in planting trees, planting high-yielding seasonal crops that supply enough food and sugar cane growing for financial sustenance (Wanzala, 2024). Consequently, household incomes steadily and gradually rise, reinforced by the saving culture and households begin registering rising literacy rates among their children.

Additionally, Ugandans live interdependently as a community, sharing resources and adhering to community values in times of joy and sorrow. Living a baptismal communitarian life is quite empowering to the Church in the diocese of Jinja. Sadly, a lot of emphasis on the communitarian existence and interdependence suffocates individual empowerment.

## 5. Summary

This paper studies the discrepancy between the empowerment promised by Christian baptism rituals and the passive role of laity in the Church, focusing on the

Catholic community in the Diocese of Jinja, Uganda. It explores how baptism rituals could be more empowering and involving the laity more actively in various church and community functions.

Specific Changes in baptism rituals and other concerns I propose that anticipate and directly enhance lay participation and empowerment:

- ✚ In a number of parishes, the candidates for baptism do wear white clothes prior to and throughout the baptism rituals, to signal the purity and holiness they have received since the original sin of Adam and Eve has been washed away, instead of a priest or deacon or godparent laying a white cloth on the baptized. Let this practice be done in all the parishes of the diocese.
- ✚ Celebrate baptism more in Small Christian Communities at a home of one of the Christians than in the local Church structure, as a way of breeding and enhancing the family spirit.
- ✚ Further active participation, say in baptism, can be expressed by the relatives, friends and family members of those to be baptized (Chupungco, 1992: p. 88). A relative can take a Scripture reading, while another serves as a godparent, another lights the baptismal candle, and yet another can preach, and the like. This practice can make the ceremony more colourful and involve more people. This brings out clearly the communitarian aspect that is typical to the African culture. The godparents, too, ought to present the child for baptism and light the baptismal candle other than the biological parents and the ordinary Minister for baptism.
- ✚ Catechists and other ministers who carry out pre-baptismal catechesis do not sufficiently stress the mystery of baptism as participation in Christ's death, burial and resurrection. If anything, this mystery is talked about, but not to the level of readying the candidates for facing death any time. The white cloth laid on the baptized does not communicate fully the message and teaching on the baptized as sharing in the paschal mystery (Chupungco, 1992: p. 167). The traditional bark cloth would carry this meaning of death and burial more vividly. Then, the bark cloth together with the white cloth would enhance the message of sharing in Christ's death.
- ✚ In the African setting, preaching is most successful when the preacher and the congregation or hearers sit down during a sermon or homily. The preaching ought to be done in such a way that leads to some practical act either within the liturgical celebration or beyond it. This means that the homily or sermon send its hearers on mission, namely, liturgy of ethics. One most important element is that the preacher ought to practise what he/she preaches. For example, one preaches more effectively on carrying his/her cross and following Jesus every day when seen giving consolation to the hospitalized, visiting sick people in their homes or in hospitals, visiting prisoners, consoling the bereaved and the like.
- ✚ As for the theological training as a potential area of improvement, the presiding minister, priest, deacon, or catechist should give liturgical formation to

his/his liturgical assembly whenever they meet for a liturgical celebration, either at the end of the homily/sermon or at the end of the liturgical celebration. Theological training, too, should, particularly, be given to choirs and liturgical music composers prior to and in preparation for a parish, deanery, diocesan, archdiocesan, or national liturgical celebration. This worked well when the diocese of Jinja animated the national Uganda Martyrs' Day celebrations on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2023. New and old hymns were fine-tuned, choirs were theologically and liturgically trained and the music itself was superb. In many liturgical functions around the diocese, these fine-tuned hymns are treasured and employed in various Church celebrations all over the diocese, a sign that the time, energy and financial resources invested in theological-liturgical trainings yielded abundant fruits. Further, a good number of choir leaders that involved themselves in these trainings move to many institutions especially schools training choirs for pastoral visits of the Bishop and feast days of their patron saints.

- ✚ The liturgical assembly plays a very active role, particularly, by providing hospitality to the catechumens and giving testimony to their faith (Vincie, 1993: p. 31). It should also be involved in the mystagogy by actively giving instruction to those who have received the sacraments. The fully initiated Christians should play a more active role in preparing others for the reception of the sacraments of initiation. It should not be limited to catechists. They should engage themselves more in the liturgical assembly, for instance, in the liturgy of the Word (Morrill, 2000: p. 27). Other roles include joining the choir, apostolic movements, taking leadership positions both in the Church and in civil society, cleaning the Church, acting as ushers, catechists, lectors, acolytes, sponsors, godparents, and receiving Holy Communion. In addition, even the catechumens should begin taking an active role into the ecclesial and liturgical life.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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