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HISTORY OF THE MODE OF BAPTISM.

About three years ago THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY (Vol. XIII, No. 4) published an article on the various baptisms practiced by the people of God under the old dispensation. The article in question was part of a paper read before a pastoral conference. The resolution of said conference that the paper be published in its entirety in this periodical has not fully been carried out by the essayist chiefly because of the great length of the paper. This second installment contains the history of the mode of baptism from the beginning of the second century to the beginning of the Reformation. The reader will notice that the right to speak has in the main been given to literary and monumental evidence.

In the year 1873, Bryennios, then Metropolitan of Serra, discovered a very old volume in the monastery of the Holy Sepulcher. This ancient treatise bears the title *Didache ton Dodeka Apostolon*, that is, the "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles." Many critics place its date between A. D. 90 and 100, and none later than 165. In a chapter on Baptism the *Didache* directs: "If you have not living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot baptize in cold water, do so in warm; but if you have neither, then pour out water on the head three times in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."¹) This oldest evidence regarding the

1) Ἐὰν μὴ ἔχῃς ὕδωρ ζῶν, εἰς ἄλλο ὕδωρ βάπτισον· εἰ δ' οὐ δύνασαι ἐν ψυχρῷ, ἐν θερμῷ· ἐὰν δὲ ἀμφοτέρα μὴ ἔχῃς, ἔκχεον εἰς τὴν κεφαλὴν τρεῖς ὕδωρ εἰς ὄνομα πατρὸς καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ ἁγίου πνεύματος. (Chap. VII, p. 23.)

manner in which Baptism was to be administered at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second clearly shows that the ordinary manner was immersion. But it shows with equal clearness that in extraordinary cases pouring was to be used. If you have neither cold nor warm water in sufficient quantity, "then pour water on the head," says the *Didache*. This direction explodes the oft-repeated claim of the immersionists that immersion was the only baptism known for more than two hundred years after Christ.

In the *Pastor of Hermas*, probably written between 110 and 140, we read: "For before a man receives the name of the Son of God, he is consigned over to death; but when he receives that seal, he is delivered from death and assigned to life. Now, that seal is water, into which men descend bound over to death, but ascend out of it assigned to life."² Here the reference seems to be to plunging or immersion.

Justin Martyr, died 165, says in his *First Apology*, which was written before 139: "Then they are brought by us to a place where there is water, and are regenerated [i. e., baptized] in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated [baptized]. For they then receive the washing with water in the name of the Father of the universe and Lord God, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Ghost."³ This also seems to point to immersion.

Tertullian, converted 190, died between 220 and 240, writes: "And indeed it is not once, but three times, that we are immersed."⁴ Again: "We little fishes, after the example

2) Antequam enim accipiat homo nomen Filii Dei, morti destinatus est: at ubi accipit illud sigillum, liberatur a morte, et traditur vitæ. Illud autem sigillum aqua est, in quam descendunt homines morti obligati, ascendunt vero vitæ assignati. (*Pastor Hermas*, lib. 3, simil. 9.)

3) Ἐπειτα ἄγονται ὑφ' ἡμῶν ἐνθα ὕδωρ ἐστὶ, καὶ τρόπον ἀναγεννήσεως, ὃν καὶ ἡμεῖς αὐτοὶ ἀναγεννήθεμεν, ἀναγεννώμεθα. Ἐπ' ὀνόματος γὰρ τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν ὀλων καὶ δεσπότου Θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ πνεύματος ἁγίου τὸ ἐν τῷ ὕδατι τότε λουτρὸν ποιοῦνται. (Chap. 61; cf. chap. 62 and 65.)

4) Non semel, sed ter tinguimur. (*Against Præxas*, chap. 26.)

of our Ichthus (Fish) Jesus Christ, are born in the water.”⁵⁾ In the same treatise Tertullian says: “When we have come out of the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction.”⁶⁾ And again: “When we are going to enter the water, but a little before. . . . Hereupon we are thrice immersed.”⁷⁾ Once more: “For who will grant to you, a man of so false repentance, one single sprinkling of any water whatsoever?”⁸⁾ This is spoken to such as sham repentance, and thus get Holy Baptism by stealth. The statement obviously contains an antithesis, and does not necessarily imply that Baptism was at that time administered by a single aspersion or sprinkling. We who use pouring would express Tertullian’s sentiment by saying: Who would grant to you so much as one drop of water? No sensible person would infer from this that we administer Baptism by putting one drop of water on the candidate.

We have heard that the *Didache* permitted pouring where immersion was impossible. Are there any such exceptional cases on record? Yes. *Walafrid Strabo*, a German monk and writer (808—849), tells us that St. Lawrence, a Roman deacon who suffered martyrdom in the persecution of Valerian about 258, baptized one of his executioners with a pitcher of water. “One of the soldiers, Romanus by name, fetching a pitcher of water, sought opportunity to give it to St. Lawrence that he might be baptized.”⁹⁾ Again: “He (Lawrence) poured water on his (Lucillus’) head.”¹⁰⁾

5) Nos pisciculi secundum *IXΘΥΝ* nostrum Jesum Christum in aqua nascimur. (*On Baptism*, chap. 1.) *Ἰχθύς* (Fish) is an acrostic composed of the initial letters of our Lord’s several names and titles: *Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ*, i. e., Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior.

6) Exinde egressi de lavaero perungimur benedicta unctione de pristina disciplina. (*On Baptism*, chap. 7.)

7) Deline ter mergitamur. (*On the Crown*, chap. 3.)

8) Quis enim tibi tam infidæ poenitentiae viro aspergionem unam cujuslibet aquae commodabit? (*On Repentance*, chap. 6.)

9) Unus ex militibus, Romanus nomine, urceum afferens cum aqua, opportunitatem captavit, qua eam offerret B. Laurentio, ut baptizaretur. (*Acta Laurentii*. Strabo, *De Rebus Ecclesiasticis*, cap. 26.)

10) Fudit aquam super caput ejus. (*Ibid.*)

In the middle of the third century we also hear of *clinic baptism*, that is, Baptism administered to persons on a sick-bed or death-bed. *Eusebius*, 260—339, relates that Novatian, who later became the leader of the sect called Novatians, was "*perichuthais*," that is, he had the baptismal water poured over him while lying on his sick-bed.¹¹⁾ On the subject of clinic baptism we have a letter written by *Cyprian*, Bishop of Carthage, in 255. Cyprian writes to Magnus: "You have asked also, dearest brother, what I think of those who obtain God's grace in sickness and weakness, whether they are to be accounted lawful Christians, because they have not been washed (*loti*) with the salutary water, but have only had it poured over them (*sed perfusi*). In this matter my vercundity and modesty prejudices none, so as to prevent any one from thinking what he wishes and doing what he thinks best. So far as my poor understanding comprehends the matter, I think that the divine benefits can in no respect be mutilated and weakened, nor that anything less can there be obtained where with full and entire faith, both of the giver and of the receiver, those things are accepted which are drawn from God's gifts. For in the salutary sacrament the spots of sin are not washed away in the same manner in which the filth of the skin and of the body are washed away in a carnal and secular bath, so that there should be need of soap and salts and other helps, and of a large jar, and a pool (*piscina*) wherewith the body may be washed and cleansed. The breast of the believer is washed one way, the mind of man is cleansed another way by the merit of faith. In the salutary sacraments, when necessity compels and God grants His indulgence, the divine abridgment conveys the whole benefit to believers. Nor ought it trouble any one when the sick are seen to have water poured over them (*perfundi*), when they obtain the Lord's grace, since Holy Scripture says and declares by the Prophet Ezekiel (36, 25): "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols will

11) Liber 6, cap. 43.

I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you.' Likewise in Numbers (19, 11 f.): 'He that toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean. But if he purify not himself the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean. And that soul shall be cut off from Israel, because the water of separation was not sprinkled upon him.' And again (Numb. 8, 5): 'And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying: Take the Levites from among the children of Israel, and cleanse them. And thus shalt thou do unto them to cleanse them: Sprinkle water of purifying upon them.' And again (Numb. 19, 9): 'For a water of separation: it is a purification for sin.' From this it appears that the sprinkling also of water is of equal value with the salutary bath."¹²)

This letter establishes the following facts: 1. At the middle of the third century, immersion was the customary mode of administering Baptism. 2. Only in exceptional cases, such as sickness and extreme danger of life, was this mode departed from in favor of pouring or aspersion. 3. Magnus and others were troubled about the validity and complete efficacy of clinic baptism and about the legitimacy of the Christianity of those who had received it. 4. Cyprian, however, defended and justified pouring and sprinkling as a valid form in cases of necessity.

Several councils discussed this clinic baptism and adopted rules with reference to such as had received it. The *Council Neo-Caesarea*, held in 314, says in Canon 12: "If any man is baptized only in time of sickness, he shall not be ordained a presbyter." Note that his baptism is not declared null and void, nor is it said that he is not a legitimate Christian. He is merely to be barred from the ministerial office. And why? "Because his faith was not voluntary, but, as it were, of constraint." Canon 47 of the *Council of Laodicea*, held about 360, appointed such clinics, if they recovered, to learn the

¹²) *Epist.* 69, cap. 12 sq.; quoted in Baier III, p. 446, edition of Walther. (See also Walther's *Pastorale*, pp. 118 f.)

creed; but it did not annul their baptism and order them to be rebaptized by immersion.

Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, 329—379, speaks of trine immersion.¹³⁾

Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, died 386, says: "For as he that goes down into the water and is baptized and surrounded on all sides by the water, so the apostles were baptized all over by the Spirit."¹⁴⁾

Chrysostom, 347—407, says in reference to the great commission: "Christ delivered to His disciples one Baptism in three immersions of the body, when He said to them, Go, teach all nations, baptizing them," etc.¹⁵⁾ Again he writes: "To be baptized and to sink down, then to rise again, is a symbol of descending into the grave and of coming up from it again."¹⁶⁾

Gregory of Nyssa, 332—395, says: "We cover ourselves in the water, as Christ did in the earth, and this we do three times to represent the grace of His resurrection performed after three days."¹⁷⁾

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, died 397, writes: "You were asked, 'Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?' And you answered, 'I believe'; and you were dipped, that is, buried."¹⁸⁾ Again: "Naked we are born in the world, naked also we come to the font."¹⁹⁾ That all persons were baptized *naked* appears also from *Cyril of Jerusalem*. "As soon as you came into the inner part of the baptistery, you put off your clothes, which is an emblem of putting off the old man with his deeds; and being thus divested, you stood naked."²⁰⁾

13) *De Spiritu Sancto*, cap. 27.

14) *Catech.* 17.

15) Ἐν τρισὶ καταδύσει τοῦ σώματος ἐν βάπτισμα τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ μαθηταῖς παραδέδωκε κτλ. (*Homil. de Fide.*)

16) Τὸ γὰρ βαπτίζεσθαι καὶ καταδύεσθαι, εἶτα ἀναεῦναι, τῆς εἰς ἕδου καταβάσεως ἐστὶ σύμβολον καὶ τῆς ἐκεῖθεν ἀνόδου κτλ. (*Hom. 40 in 1 Cor.*)

17) *De Bapt. Christi.*

18) Interrogatus es: Credis in Deum, Patrem Omnipotentem? Dixisti: Credo, et mersisti, hoc est, sepultus es. (*De Sacram.*, liber 2, cap. 7.)

19) Nudi in saeculo nascimur, nudi etiam accedimus ad lavacrum. (*Sermo 20. Cf. Sermo 41.*)

20) *Catech. Mystag.* 2.

Likewise from *Zeno*, Bishop of Verona, in the third or fourth century: "Rejoice, for you went down naked into the font, but soon rose from it, clothed in a heavenly white garment; and whoever has not defiled this, will possess the kingdom of heaven."²¹⁾ Similar statements are found in *Chrysostom*²²⁾ and *Athanasius*.²³⁾ The men, women, and children were usually baptized apart in separate apartments of the baptistery.

Jerome, 340—420, declares: "We are thrice dipped."²⁴⁾ Again: "Immersing the head three times in the font."²⁵⁾

Augustine, baptized 387, died 430, has this to say: "After you professed your belief, three times did we submerge your heads in the sacred font."²⁶⁾

Leo the Great, made pope in 440, died 461, wrote: "The trine immersion is an image of the three days' burial, and the rising again out of the water is an image of His rising from the grave."²⁷⁾

The literary evidence which we have heard shows that up to the year 461 immersion was everywhere the regular mode of baptism. In exceptional cases pouring was practiced. The Church considered pouring a valid method.

Besides this literary evidence there is also a mass of *monumental evidence* at our disposal. Let us examine some of it. From the *Didache* it appears that in the beginning the converts to Christianity were baptized in the open air in running water. But before long baptisteries were erected, perhaps as early as the first century. H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Dean of Gloucester, Professor of Ancient History in the Royal

21) Gaudete, in fontem quidem nudi demergitis, sed aetherea veste vestiti, mox candidati inde surgitis, quam qui non polluerit, regna coelestia possidebit. (*Invitat. 2. ad Baptis.*)

22) *Hom. 6. in Col.*

23) *Epist. ad Orthodoxos.*

24) Ter mergimur. (*Liber 2. in Ephes. 4.*)

25) In lavaero ter caput mergitare. (*Against Lucifer*, chap. 4.)

26) Postquam vos credere promisistis, tertio capita vestra in sacro fonte demersimus. (*Hcmil. 3.*)

27) Sepulturam triduanam imitatur trina demersio, et ab aquis elevatio resurgentis ad instar est sepulchro. (*Epist. 4. ad Episcop. Siculos.*, cap. 3.)

Academy, says in his *Early Christians in Rome*: "Quite recent investigations and discoveries have now satisfied Marucchi, the last explorer and student of the catacombs, long the assistant and disciple of De Rossi, that the Cemetery of Priscilla [on the Via Appia] must be identified as the locality of the preaching and teaching of St. Peter . . . , that the Cemetery of St. Priscilla was the 'Coemeterium ad Nymphas beati Petri ubi baptizaverat.' Marucchi has with infinite pains and scholarship proved his point, and has shown to a wondering group of interested scholars the very pools still filled with water in the dark crypts of St. Priscilla in which the great apostle probably baptized the first converts to the religion of his Master."²⁸) Again: "A very remarkable feature in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla are the reservoirs of water which evidently served in very early days as baptisteries. The most considerable of these reservoirs or tanks is on the upper story of the cemetery, and is communicated with by a broad staircase of over twenty-five steps. Marucchi describes it as 'une vaste piscine encore pleine d'eau [a spacious pool still filled with water], desservie par un petit canal.' . . . Another large reservoir of water has been found on the second story of this vast catacomb; other and smaller tanks have also been found."²⁹) Spence-Jones quotes the following from the ancient *Acts of Pastor and Timotheus*: "They [the daughters of Pudens] desired to have a baptistery in their house, to which the blessed Pius (the Bishop of Rome, A. D. 142—157) not only consented, but with his own hand drew the plan of the fountain. There at the festival of Easter 96 were baptized."³⁰) The largest number of baptisteries were erected in the fifth and sixth centuries. They were built in rotunda form after the pattern of the Roman baths. In the inner space there was a fountain, or pool, called kolumbethra, piscina, and (later) nataoria. After the ninth century few were erected. This is to be accounted for by the fact that the baptism of adults had by

28) *The Early Christians in Rome*, p. 267.

29) Spence-Jones, p. 270.

30) p. 264.

that time grown less frequent. For the baptism of infants large fonts were introduced. Webster's Unabridged Dictionary shows a cut of one of these spacious fonts.

Of the pictorial evidence Bennett has said in his *Christian Archaeology* (p. 407): "It is most noteworthy that from the second to the ninth century there is found scarcely one pictorial representation of baptism by immersion; but the suggestion is always uniformly either of sprinkling or of pouring." This would be noteworthy, indeed, if it were true. It would flatly contradict the uniform literary testimony which we have heard. A statement by another writer is to the same effect: "The testimony of the catacombs respecting the mode of Baptism, so far as it extends, is strongly in favor of aspersion or affusion. All their pictured representations of the rite indicate this mode, for which alone the early fonts seem adapted; nor is there any early art-evidence of baptismal immersion."³¹ The results of our limited investigation have led us to just the opposite conclusion. On the cover of a fourth century sarcophagus in the Lateran, John is indeed represented as pouring water on the head of Jesus from a bowl. But it has been pointed out by an eminent critic that this portion of the sculpture is a later restoration. The same is true of a mosaic in the Baptisterium Ursianum at Ravenna. I have seen two reproductions of pictures representing the baptism of Christ, both of which suggest immersion. One of the cuts may be found in the *Britannica*, sub voce "catacomb." It is taken from a fresco in the Catacomb of Pontianus on the Via Portuensis on the right bank of the Tiber. Pontianus was a wealthy Christian who lived toward the end of the second century. "In this catacomb there is an ancient baptistery of considerable size, which was richly decorated in the sixth century," says Spence-Jones; others say, probably in the middle of the fifth century. The picture covers one of the walls above the reservoir or tank. The Savior is standing waist-deep in water, His arms hanging at His side submerged halfway between the wrist and elbow.

31) Withrow, *The Catacombs of Rome*, pp. 535 f.

The Baptist, standing on dry ground and leaning forward, holds a cross in his left hand and arm, while his right hand is resting on Christ's head as if about to dip it forward into the water. The other picture is reproduced in Spence-Jones, p. 245. The original is found in the ancient crypt of Luciana. It represents John as aiding Jesus to step out of Jordan in which he is still immersed almost up to his middle. —

We now return to take literary testimony at the period where we left off. The first is that of *Gennadius*, of *Marseilles*, 495. Comparing Baptism and martyrdom, Gennadius remarks: "The one after his confession is either sprinkled with water or else plunged into it; and the other is either sprinkled with his own blood or else plunged into fire."³²⁾

Gregory the Great, 542—604, writing to a bishop in Spain, says: "The reason why we use three immersions [at Rome] is that we may signify the mystery of the three days' burial, so that, whilst the infant is raised three times from the water, the resurrection on the third day may be expressed. . . . There can be nothing reprehensible in an infant's being immersed either thrice or once."³³⁾

The fourth *Council of Toledo* in Spain, held under *Honorius I*, in 633, has the following in Canon 6: "The immersion in water is, as it were, the descending into the grave, and the rising out of the water a resurrection."³⁴⁾

In 754, the question was put to *Pope Stephen II*: "Whether it is permitted in case of necessity to pour the water on the head of the infant lying in sickness with a cup or with the hands, and to administer Baptism in this manner?" He re-

32) *Baptizandus confitetur fidem suam, et post confessionem vel aspergitur aqua vel intingitur etc. (De Dogmatibus Ecclesiasticis, cap. 74.)*

33) *Nos autem quod tertio mergimus, triduanæ sepulturæ sacramenta signamus, ut dum tertio infans ab aquis educitur, resurrectio triduanæ temporis exprimitur. Reprehensibile esse nullatenus potest, infantem in baptisate vel ter, vel semel immergere. (Liber I, Epist. 43. [41.] ad Leandrum. See Walther's Pastoral, p. 117.)*

34) *In aquis mersio quasi ad infernum descensio est: et rursus ab aquis emersio resurrectio est.*

plied: "This baptism, if done in the name of the Holy Trinity, will remain immovable, especially when also necessity demands that he who is detained by sickness, having in this manner been regenerated, may be made a partaker of the kingdom of God."³⁵⁾

The 11th Canon of the *Council Celichyt.*, 816, forbids pouring in ordinary cases. "The priests should know that, when administering Holy Baptism, they should not pour the water on the head of the infants, but they should always be immersed in the font."³⁶⁾

Walafrid Strabo, 808—849, wrote: "We must bear in mind that many have been baptized not only by immersion, but by affusion, and may yet be so baptized, if necessary."³⁷⁾

Thomas Aquinas, 1224—1274, while declaring that Baptism may be performed not only by immersion, but also by pouring, prefers the former as the common and safer mode. "It is safer to baptize by immersion, because general custom has it thus."³⁸⁾

The *Synod of Angers*, 1275, is said to have held that trine immersion or pouring was the general custom of the Church.

The *Synod of Nemours*, however, held nine years later, 1284, restricted pouring to cases of necessity, saying: "If a vessel [*vas* = baptismal font?] is not to be had, the water may be poured on the head of the candidate."³⁹⁾

35) Si licet per necessitatem cum conche aut cum manibus infanti in infirmitate posito aquam super caput fundere et sic baptizare? Hoc baptisma, si in nomine S. Trinitatis peractum fuerit, firmiter permanebit, praesertim cum et necessitas exposcit, ut ille, qui in aegritudine detentus est, hoc modo renatus particeps Dei regni efficiatur.

36) Sciant etiam presbyteri quando sacrum baptisma ministrant, ut non effundant aquam super capita infantium, sed semper mergantur in lavaero; sicut exemplum per semet ipsum praebuit Dei Filius omni credenti, quando esset ter mersus in undis Jordanis, ita necesse est secundum ordinem servari et haberi. (Quoted by Hoefling, *Das Sakrament der Taufe*, I, p. 52.)

37) *De Rebus Ecclesiasticis*, cap. 26.

38) Tutius est baptizare per immersionem, quia hoc habet usus communis. (*Summa*, P. III, qu. 66, art. 7.)

39) Si vas haberi non possit, fundatur aqua super caput baptizandi. (Hoefling, *l. c.*)

We notice that at this period Baptism by pouring is beginning to overstep the old boundary of cases of necessity. The explanation may be found in the statutes of the *Synod of Luetic*, 1287: "In order that the baptizand be not exposed to danger, the head of the child is not to be immersed in the water, but the priest shall thrice pour the water on the child's head with a cup or any other clean and suitable vessel, holding the child discreetly with one hand."⁴⁰⁾

The *Council of Ravenna*, 1311, declared the two modes to be equally valid, and left it to the choice of the officiating priest to use either mode.

The statutes of the *Ecclesia Meldensis*, said to have been written prior to 1430, state: "Note that the modern custom is not immersion in water, but aspersion or pouring water on the head of the child."⁴¹⁾

The *Roman Catholic Agenda*, Mentz, 1513, says: "He shall pour (*fundat*) the water thrice on the head of the child, so that it shall reach his head and shoulders."

The *Roman Ritual*, from which Luther translated his *Taufbuechlein* (1523), states: "Though baptism may be administered either by pouring, or immersion, or sprinkling; yet, let either the first or the second mode, which are most in use, be retained, according as it has been the usage of the churches to employ the one or the other, so that either the head of the person to be baptized shall have a trine ablution, that is, either the water shall be poured on it, or the head shall be immersed."

In his *Sermon on Baptism*, printed in 1519, *Luther* says: "In many places it is no longer the custom completely to plunge or dip the children in the font," etc.⁴²⁾

40) Ut caveatur periculum baptizandi, non mergatur caput pueri in aqua, sed sacerdos super verticem pueri ter infundat aquam cum pelvi vel vase alio mundo et honesto, tenens puerum nihilominus una cum manu discrete. (*Ibid.*)

41) Nota quod usus modernus non est immersio aquae, sed aspersion aut effusio aquae super verticem infantis. (*Ibid.*)

42) "Wiewohl an vielen Orten der Brauch nimmer ist, die Kinder in die Taufe gar zu stossen und zu tauchen, sondern man sie allein mit der Hand aus der Tauf' begeusst" usw. (Walch X, 2593.)

When the Reformation began, immersion, which had been the rule, was in many places the exception. We are not to suppose, however, that this was everywhere the case. Erasmus wrote: “With us infants are poured upon; with the English they are immersed.” In England this practice prevailed till the reign of Elizabeth. In the great cathedral of Milan, Italy, it has survived to the present day.⁴³⁾ In the Eastern, or Greek, Church immersion was strictly adhered to, and is the regular mode up to the present time.⁴⁴⁾ The same is true of the Coptic, Nestorian, and Armenian Churches.

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