

THE DOUBLE MEANING OF "INITIATION" IN THEOLOGICAL EXPRESSION

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INTRODUCTION

Baptism, confirmation, and eucharist are commonly called "sacraments of initiation" in the contemporary Roman Catholic Church. The term appears in ordinary discourse among Catholics and has also taken its place within the church's official documents. Although the concept of initiation rites is quite ancient, and although the play of the term within Christianity also shares primitive roots, the contemporary Catholic church applies the expression to situations quite diverse from its traditional anthropological and even original Christian usage. Even though the post-Vatican II Roman church zealously accepted the designation of three sacraments as "initiation rites," the term has become increasingly puzzling to the theologian, if not downright troublesome.

The term "initiation" came to Christianity through pagan traditions. Its anthropological employment generally refers to a coming-of-age ritual within a tribe, rather than to the transfer of a person's allegiance from one tribe to another.

This renders the comparison of tribal initiation to Christian initiation inexact. Adult baptism as initiation relates more to acceptance of new citizenship than to growing into adulthood. Furthermore, the classic anthropological studies of initiation have focused on males; female initiation rites enjoy a different expression, and Christian initiation rites make no gender distinction.¹ In paleo-Christian times the mystery religions practiced initiation rites to welcome new members; Christianity eventually borrowed the vocabulary.

The Christian history of the term "initiation" has been helpfully traced by Pierre-Marie Gy.² In the intervening years since the publication of his articles, the use of the expression has continued to grow in Catholic circles. In the light of the publication of additional foundational documents, notably the code of canon law and the catechism, and by means of the continued development of pastoral practice, more understanding about the use of the term may now be gained, permitting another critical reflection.

EARLY USAGE

The term "initiation" entered Christian discourse because of its pagan origins. Early Christian apologists anxiously

¹Cfr. CATHERINE VINCIE, "Rethinking Initiation Rituals: Do Women and Men Do It the Same Way?", in *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy* (Valparaiso, 1995):145-170.

demonstrated the superiority of Christianity over the pagan religions. To do so, they compared rites. Gradually they adopted the terminology of initiation.³ Justin of Rome (+165) complained that the Mithraic cult imitated the Christian eucharist by presenting bread and water in its "ceremonies of initiation."⁴ Tertullian of Carthage (155-220) accepted the term "initiations" in reference to both Christian and pagan rites.⁵ Origen of Alexandria (c. 183-253) very explicitly referred to those "initiated into the mysteries of Jesus."⁶ Both Justin⁷ and Tertullian⁸ detailed the Christian baptismal rites in signature treatises; Origen's descriptions, scattered through his many writings, are more fragmented.⁹ Nonetheless, all seemed aware of a baptismal ritual through which new Christians would pass immediately to the eucharistic table in one grand rite which they gradually called "initiation".

Among the Greek fathers, John Chrysostom (c. 344-407) frequently used the language of initiation.¹⁰ For example, he

²"La Notion Chrétienne d'initiation: Jalons pour une enquête," in *La Maison-Dieu* 132 (1977), 33-54; and "The Idea of 'Christian Initiation,'" in *Studia Liturgica* 12, 2-3 (1977), 172-175.

³Cfr. GY, "Notion," 34-35.

⁴*Apology* 1:66,4.

⁵*Apology* 7:7.

⁶*Against Celsus* 3:60.

⁷*Apology* 1:61 and 65.

⁸E.g., *Baptism*.

⁹E.g., *Principles* 1:3,2; *Fragments on John* 3:3; and *Homily 6 on Leviticus* 5.

¹⁰GY, "Notion," 36-38.

contrasted the faithful with "uninitiated catechumens."¹¹ The postbaptismal catecheses (380-390) traditionally ascribed to Cyril in Jerusalem (but more probably delivered by his successor John) style themselves "mystagogic" catecheses -- instruction inspired by the mysteries, possible only after the celebration of the baptismal rites. Once again, the descriptions of baptismal liturgies of the period are quite detailed, and it seems clear that the fathers understood the entire baptismal complex as initiation into the Christian mysteries, notably the celebration of the eucharist.

Gregory of Nazianzen (c. 330-390) borrowed the idea of initiation when he defended the baptism of infants in danger of death, but recommended a delay for others.

It is better to be sanctified without consciousness than to die without the seal and initiation. . . . Concerning the rest, I advise this way, that after waiting three years, or a little shorter or longer space of time (for then they are able to hear and respond to something about the sacrament, and though they may understand less fully and exactly, they may still be initiated and instructed). Then they finally

¹¹Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Catechesis* 2:8.

sanctify their souls and their bodies in the great sacrament of perfection.¹²

Augustine (354-430) also employed the term. In recalling his own birth, for example, he recounted that his childhood illness nearly provoked his mother to have him "initiated and cleansed with the saving sacraments."¹³

In Syria, the baptism of Rabbûlâ, the bishop of Edessa from 411 to 435, is described in his biography, probably written by a follower. The description follows the development of the terminology:

But when he had been given communion with the holy mysteries of the body and blood our Lord, and had been fully initiated in the whole divine mystery, he returned to his own city.¹⁴

Although Origen remarked that one was initiated into the mysteries, an alternate sense, perceptible in Augustine and in this reference from Syria, implies that the mysteries accomplished initiation.

Throughout the early period of the church, whenever the fathers employed the term "initiation" they had in mind the

¹²"Prayer" 40:28.

¹³*Confessions* 1:11. Cfr. also GY, "Notion," 40.

¹⁴ANONYMOUS, "Life of Rabbûlâ," in *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, trans. R. H. Connolly, *Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature* 8:1, Cambridge: University Press, 1909, xlv, alt.

entire baptismal complex, especially its relationship to the eucharistic mysteries.

LATER USAGE

Initiatory language enjoyed less usage in the centuries which followed.

The Gregorian Sacramentary suggested an insert to the Roman canon at the easter vigil, the traditional day for baptism. The prayer, dating from about the turn of the eighth century, still referred to initiation:

We ask you, Lord, accept the prayers of your people with the offerings of sacrifices, so that the initiations into the paschal mysteries may obtain the remedy of eternity for us by your action.¹⁵

Thomas Aquinas once called baptism "a kind of initiation" of the sacraments of grace.¹⁶ However, his influential work did nothing to reintroduce the early Christian concept of initiation.

For the most part, sources in the middle ages no longer used the expression "initiation" to refer to the baptismal complex. Baptism, of course, had changed. In the early church, when "initiation" was used to describe the baptismal rites, the rites included the eucharist, even for infants. However, by the

¹⁵*Gregorian Sacramentary* 378.

fifth century the initiatory fragment of handlaying and anointing had mutated into confirmation by a bishop on an occasion separate from baptism, and by the thirteenth century the first reception of communion was being deferred to "the age of discretion," variously interpreted across a range of youthful ages. Consequently, only in rare instances did the traditional "initiation" ever happen; these materialized when the bishop presided over the baptism of an adult at the easter vigil. More widespread was the celebration of infant baptism, over which a presbyter presided shortly after the child's birth. The medieval church commonly celebrated these sacraments on separate occasions, but they never referred to them as initiation, whether they were celebrated at once or over a period of years. It is possible that the term was simply lost, but it is also possible that the term was understood to refer to a liturgical event which was then happening only rarely: the baptism and confirmation of the unbaptized at a eucharist over which the bishop presided and during which the new Christian would receive communion. Since the event was so rare, so was its descriptor.

The *Roman Ritual* of 1614 recovered the term, but only to describe confirmation when it was administered by the bishop at the baptism of an adult:

¹⁶*In quartum sententiarum*, D. 2, q. 2, art. 1, qc 1. Cfr. GY, "Notion," 44.

If a bishop who may legitimately offer it is present, the neophytes are initiated by him with the sacrament of confirmation. Then if the hour is convenient, mass is celebrated, at which the neophytes take part and receive the most holy eucharist devoutly.¹⁷

Again, the linking of initiation with the mysteries of baptism and the eucharist had been lost.

Although sporadic references to "Christian initiation" can be found in subsequent centuries,¹⁸ the return of the term to common parlance can best be assigned to Louis Duchesne. In his late nineteenth century work, *The Origins of Christian Worship*, Duchesne entitled one chapter, "Christian Initiation." The expression, he said, treats "three essential rites: baptism, confirmation, and first communion." Although he drew the term from antiquity, he applied it to certain expressions of these rituals for the first time: confirmation apart from baptism, and first communion as an independent event. When the early church commonly used the term "initiation" the anointing and first reception of communion were still part of the baptismal rite; when these rituals split apart from baptism, they were never called "initiation". Since the celebration of these three sacraments on the same occasion was rare in the late nineteenth

¹⁷*The Roman Ritual*, "The Baptism of Adults."

¹⁸GY, "Notion," 46-48.

century, Duchesne did not use the term in the same way the early church did, but assigned it a novel application.

THE VATICAN II CHURCH

In the years prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the practice of naming baptism, confirmation, and first communion "sacraments of initiation" began to spread. In France, for example, the Directory for the Administration of the Sacraments (1951) noted, "Historically, confirmation is the second step of Christian initiation."¹⁹

Noteworthy, however, is the reserve with which the council itself employed the term "initiation." *Sacrosanctum concilium*, the great document which launched the liturgical renewal, used the expression in a comment about confirmation: "The rite of confirmation should also be rethought so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with complete Christian initiation may appear more clearly."²⁰ The council fathers did not specifically call confirmation a sacrament of initiation, but appealed to its *connection* with "complete Christian initiation." The same document called for the restoration of the catechumenate rites for adults, and it foresaw the possibility - - in mission territory -- of admitting elements of initiation

¹⁹*Directoire pour la Pastorale des Sacraments* (1951), 31ff.

²⁰71.

outside the Christian tradition into the Christian rite.²¹
Again, the context for "initiation" was adult baptism, when confirmation and eucharist would immediately follow. Thus, *Sacrosanctum concilium* still used "initiation" in its original sense.

Ad gentes, the decree on missionary activity in the church, also adduced the expression:

Through the sacraments of Christian initiation, freed from the power of darkness, having died, been buried, and risen with Christ, catechumens receive the Spirit of adoption of children, and celebrate the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord with all the people of God.²²

Here again, the reference remains faithful to the original usage of the phrase, reserved to the complex of baptismal rites.

In *Presbyterorum ordinis*, the council stated that the priesthood of priests is conferred by its own sacrament, although it presupposes "the sacraments of initiation."²³ In this case, the expression does not imply the celebration of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist in the same ceremony. If

²¹65.

²²14.

²³2.

it did, it would make the unlikely assumption that candidates for priesthood were drawn from those baptized in adulthood.

The postconciliar work more clearly opened up the term "initiation" to include confirmation and first communion apart from baptism, as Duchesne had envisioned. Pope Paul VI's apostolic constitution on the sacrament of confirmation (1971), a statement which accompanied the rite of confirmation for those occasions when it is celebrated apart from baptism, expressed this new understanding:

The faithful are born anew by baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of confirmation, and finally are sustained by the food of eternal life in the eucharist. By means of these sacraments of Christian initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance toward the perfection of charity. . . .

The link between confirmation and the other sacraments of initiation is shown forth more clearly not only by closer association of these sacraments but also by the rite and words by which confirmation is conferred.²⁴

Whereas *Sacrosanctum concilium* noted the connection between confirmation and complete Christian initiation (implying some

separation between the two), Paul VI noted its association with the "other sacraments" of initiation (implying its participation with the other two).

The rite of confirmation imitated Paul's language: "Those who have been baptized continue on the path of Christian initiation through the sacrament of confirmation."²⁵ The decree which opens the document states strangely, "In the sacrament of confirmation. . . the initiation in the Christian life is completed."²⁶

Not surprisingly, the 1972 *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* directly adopted the expression:

In the sacraments of Christian initiation we are freed from the power of darkness and joined to Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. We receive the Spirit of filial adoption and are part of the entire people of God in the celebration of the memorial of the Lord's death and resurrection.²⁷

The same document stated further, "The initiation of Christians is nothing other than the first sacramental participation in the death and resurrection of Christ."²⁸

²⁴PAUL VI, *Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation*.

²⁵SACRED CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP, *Rite of Confirmation*, 1.

²⁶SACRED CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP, *Decree*.

²⁷*Introduction*, 1.

²⁸8.

Treating those occasions when baptism, confirmation, and eucharist are administered together, the order formerly called "of adult baptism," now calling itself "of *initiation* of adults," claimed the term "initiation" (naïvely? feebly? non-exclusively?) for itself.

Taken as a whole, the postconciliar work, then, accepted a double usage for the term "initiation" for the first time in the history of the western church. It applied both to the complete baptismal ritual (including eucharist and its preparatory rites) and to the celebration of the sacraments over a period of time.

The term came to be used in this way in local churches as well. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States, for example, borrowed Paul VI's language: "Confirmation, as the sealing of the candidate with the Spirit, is linked with the other sacraments of Christian initiation, baptism and the eucharist."²⁹ And again, "As a sacrament of initiation, confirmation (chrismation) is intimately related to baptism and the eucharist."³⁰

In the 1980s the number of ecclesiastical texts adopting the double interpretation of "initiation" proliferated. The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* expressed it in this way: "The sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Most Holy Eucharist are so

²⁹*Basic Teachings* 11, appendix B, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, 1973.

interrelated that they are required for full Christian initiation."³¹ No distinction is made about the occasion for receiving the sacraments; the sacraments themselves constitute initiation. The 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sealed these developments by subdividing the seven sacraments into three categories for the first time since the church defined the sacraments at the Second Council of Lyon (1274): the sacraments of Christian initiation, the sacraments of healing, and the sacraments at the service of communion.³² The catechism's entire treatment of confirmation assumes that it is being celebrated apart from baptism.

Although this double interpretation of initiation has gained widespread acceptance in the western church, it has not settled problems with the east. The dialogue between Roman Catholics and the Orthodox produced this concern:

In certain Latin churches, for pastoral reasons, for example in order to better prepare confirmands at the beginning of adolescence, the practice has become more and more common of admitting to first communion baptized persons who have not yet received confirmation even though the disciplinary directives

³⁰*Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States* 118-119 United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, 1979.

³¹842/2.

which called for the traditional order of the sacraments of Christian initiation have never been abrogated. This inversion, which provokes objections or understandable reservations both by Orthodox and Roman Catholics, calls for deep theological and pastoral reflection because pastoral practice should never lose sight of the meaning of the early tradition and its doctrinal importance.³³

All these documents demonstrate the trend in the Roman church toward redefining by expansion the meaning of the term "initiation". As with any new decision, it bears consequences that were perhaps not immediately apparent when the shift occurred.

PASTORAL PRACTICE

The differentiation of modalities of initiation has created some peculiarities in pastoral practice.

Levels of membership. The twofold interpretation of initiation has introduced levels of membership in the Roman church. Although the levels have not been defined with terms, they unquestionably exist. When *Sacrosanctum concilium* acknowledged the state of "complete Christian initiation," it

³²1211.

³³The Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Church, *Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church* (1988), 37; 51.

seemed to refer to the complete baptismal ritual for adults. But the *Code of Canon Law* used the term "full Christian initiation" in a different way, to refer to the reception of all three sacraments at any time, even over a long period. As a result the code implies that there is a *partial* Christian initiation for those who have not received all three sacraments.

The consequences of that partial initiation are clear from the code. Those who have not been confirmed are ineligible to enter a seminary,³⁴ to be ordained,³⁵ to enter into the novitiate of a religious community,³⁶ and to perform the role of godparent at baptism³⁷ and sponsor at confirmation.³⁸ They are encouraged to receive confirmation before marriage.³⁹ Children who are baptized cannot be admitted to the eucharist without sufficient knowledge, faith, and devotion.⁴⁰ Even in danger of death, children who cannot distinguish the body of Christ from ordinary food may not receive the eucharist.⁴¹

These strata of membership derive from the practice of offering only baptism to infants, but requiring full initiation

³⁴241/2.

³⁵1033.

³⁶645/1.

³⁷874/3.

³⁸893/1.

³⁹1065/1.

⁴⁰913/1.

⁴¹913/2.

for full participation in the life of the church. The reason for the establishment of these criteria is the desire for children to attain some understanding, moral formation, and spiritual development before participating in the sacraments. But that desire has created a kind of provisional membership which was never promoted in the early church.

Reconciliation as initiation. The catechism recommends that children baptized as infants celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation prior to confirmation⁴² and again prior to first communion.⁴³ Although reconciliation has never been called a sacrament of initiation by any definition in the church ancient or modern, its placement within the sequence of the so-called "initiation" rites implies that it is. What else should one call a sacrament during an extended period of initiation? Most Catholic parents who prepare their young children for sacraments experience baptism, reconciliation, first communion, and confirmation as a unified group. The inclusion of reconciliation in the midst of initiation is a theological anomaly.

Sacraments of catechesis. Although the catechism takes pride in establishing three groupings for the seven sacraments, other groups are theoretically admissible. One could think of

⁴²1310.

⁴³1457.

marriage, baptism, and first communion as "social sacraments," occasions when the extended family gathers with its closest friends. Baptism, confirmation, and orders could be grouped as "transformation sacraments," since they may be received only once.

One could also think of reconciliation, first communion, confirmation, and anointing of the sick as "sacraments of catechesis," since they require basic catechetical formation before they may be celebrated. Children are expected to possess learning, judgment, discretion, reason, and some measure of maturity before they are allowed access to these sacraments. Designating such a grouping would render more honestly the situation of children than the infelicitous expression "initiation sacraments," when two of these are deferred from the baptismal rite.

Sequence of rites. No small debate has arisen around the sequence of the sacraments of initiation. Many dioceses and episcopal conferences are lowering their age of confirmation because of the belief that it should precede eucharist. Although there is some historical basis for this in the west and considerable support from the eastern rites, the contemporary Roman church remains unpersuaded by the arguments to make a stand. In *ad limina* visits, for example, episcopal conferences frequently ask about the proper age of confirmation, but the

Congregation of Divine Worship's interests lie with the significance of the sacrament, its distinction from rites of maturity, and the proper ministry of the bishop -- not its sequence with first communion.⁴⁴ Although the desire to celebrate the sacraments in their proper sequence has merit, it still does not resolve the predicament of celebrating the sacraments on separate occasions, something quite foreign to theological sensibilities in the eastern rites, and which has only recently merited the moniker "initiation".

Historical foundations. The appeal to the early church for determining contemporary initiatory praxis is fraught with difficulty. One cannot convincingly claim that the early church celebrated the three sacraments of initiation during the same ceremony. The statement is an anachronism. The early church spoke of the baptismal rites as "initiation" -- if it used the term at all. Syrian churches placed the anointing *before* the water rite, making it very difficult to establish an "original sequence" of the ceremony's parts. Furthermore, the earlier data from Acts of the Apostles and the *Didache* demonstrate no evidence for a baptismal eucharist at all. The thirteenth century identification of seven sacraments is quite late, long after confirmation had split from the initiatory complex as its own rite.

⁴⁴E.g. "Varia: 'Visite ad limina,'" in *Notitiae* 380-381, 3/4 (March-April, 1998), 119-131.

None of the early church sources identified "three sacraments of initiation" because they did not focus on three rites, they did not define sacraments as the church now understands them, they did not universally follow the same rites, and they did not all call what happened "initiation". When they did, of course, it referred to what the code of canon law now calls "full initiation," administered in one ceremony.

Ecumenical dialogue. The difference between initiation east and west has already been noted. Differences among ecclesial communities stemming from the Reformation also arise. They do not all regard the same seven sacraments as the Roman church does.⁴⁵ Many include a prayer for the sevenfold gift of the Spirit in the *baptismal* rite, not in the confirmation rite. Most of those who have confirmation accept it as a maturity rite, not part of initiation. The first reception of communion is often tied to the child's desire to receive, not to the knowledge of what the child is receiving.⁴⁶

Most of these pastoral issues result from the practice of calling two different sets of rites "initiation". They cause some confusion among the faithful, wonderment about the purpose

⁴⁵Cfr., e.g., the author's doctoral dissertation, *The Meaning and Practice of Confirmation: Perspectives from a Sixteenth Century Controversy*, Peter Lang, Bern 1987, directed by Ghislain Lafont.

⁴⁶Cfr., e.g. the author's *Confirmation: The Baby in Solomon's Court*, Paulist, Mahwah, 1993.

and age of confirmation, and unacknowledged classes of membership.

CONCLUSION

One can imagine the future of initiation in a way that could be more strongly rooted in the history of the term, open to present pastoral needs, and aimed toward a future in which those who can know God in Jesus Christ may find a full place in the church. The restoration of the original concept of initiation -- offering the complete ritual, including confirmation and eucharist, for candidates of all ages -- would give pastoral care and unify the celebration of the sacraments. It would link again the twin concepts of "initiation" and "mysteries" into a ceremony that would truly mark a single rite of passage, not an extended period of growth. A unified practice of initiation would restore coherence to its theological expression.

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