

DON'T WATER DOWN THE EASTER VIGIL

At a typical Easter Vigil today you will witness the baptism of catechumens and the reception of candidates. Both groups will receive confirmation, and both groups will share communion for the first time. Sometimes adults who were baptized Catholic as infants receive confirmation and communion as well. It's tidy. You can take care of all these people at the same time. But it can be very hard for the assembly to figure out who is who. The distinctions among these groups are significant, yet they all may look alike at the Easter Vigil.

Back in 1986, Rome was worried that this might happen. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity sent a letter to the United States Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, saying that Catholics should not promote anything that would seem to deny the validity of the baptism of other Christians. The Secretariat thought that combining the rites for catechumens and candidates at the Easter Vigil would bring too close together ceremonies that were designed to be apart.

However, Catholic parishes in the United States were already combining the rites by 1986. The Secretariat then agreed that the Church should provide a guide for the celebration of a liturgy that was already taking place. The combined rites for the Easter Vigil were consigned to an appendix in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, probably in hopes that few would notice they were there. But they have become the bread and butter of the catechumenal rites in many Catholic parishes.

The very integrity of baptism remains at stake here. The Catholic tradition believes strongly that you can be baptized only once. To receive a previously baptized Christian into the Church in the same ceremony when catechumens are being baptized blurs the nature of the Easter Vigil. The baptisms are supposed to illustrate how the resurrection of Christ applies to believers. Baptisms exemplify the ritual passage from death to life, from dwelling in the darkness of sin and temptation to basking in the glory of grace.

However, when the baptisms are combined with the reception of other Christians, the focus of this part of the Vigil shifts from resurrection to Catholicity. It becomes not so much the ceremony when people become Christians, but when people become Catholics. The dying and rising with Christ is still present in the baptism of the catechumens, but the candidates already celebrated their dying and rising with Christ on another occasion. Their ritual is about full communion, not resurrection.

All this is permitted, but the combined rites have made it difficult for many worshipers to figure out what the Vigil is all about. In some parishes the Easter Vigil is primarily attended by its liturgical ministers and those associated with the catechumenate: catechumens, candidates, godparents, sponsors, team members and family members. Among the liturgies of Holy Week, the weakest attendance at many parishes is the Easter Vigil, yet it is the most significant liturgy of them all. It is often hard to see.

The combining of preliminary rites contributes to the situation. The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* combines the Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens with Welcoming the Candidates, as well as the two rites of Sending. The rite of Election is combined with the Call to Continuing Conversion at many a cathedral in the country. All these combined rites make distinction between the two groups, but they are subtle. Unless pastoral ministers are intentional about distinguishing catechumens from candidates, it will be difficult for worshipers to tell the difference.

Here are some things to keep in mind when celebrating rites with catechumens and candidates.

- The groups really are distinct. Even if a baptized Christian has had little or no catechetical formation, his or her baptismal status must be recognized.
- The rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church may be celebrated at any time of year. It need not take place at the Easter Vigil. The priest who receives other Christians into the Catholic Church confirms them at the same time, no matter what day the ceremony takes place. This rite can be celebrated whenever the candidate is ready – following the same principles we use to prepare children for confession and first communion, and adults for marriage. By celebrating all the rites of reception outside of the Easter Vigil, you honor each candidate's personal journey of faith and catechesis, and you preserve the symbolic link between baptism and the resurrection of Christ.
- You may celebrate the rites of Acceptance and Welcoming separately. For example, by choosing separate masses on the same weekend, you can invite catechumens to one and candidates to another. This will also let a greater number of people in the parish know that some of their number are beginning the formal process for membership.
- If some or all of your candidates celebrate the Rite of Reception apart from the Easter Vigil, they do not need to participate in the rites of sending or the Call to Continuing Conversion. If you wish, you may celebrate a Call to Continuing Conversion for them in your parish six weeks or so before they are received.
- With candidates, the rites of Welcoming, Sending, and the Call to Continuing Conversion are all optional. You do not have to celebrate them at all. Many people find them beneficial, but another way to distinguish the two groups is to reserve any preliminary rites for the unbaptized.
- If you celebrate the combined rites, some commentary may help make the distinctions clear. Separate the groups visibly – perhaps one on one side and one on another. You could also provide a list of names so that people in the assembly each know who is a catechumen and who is a candidate. You can never overdo identifying people by name in the parish.
- After a celebration of one of the rites, talk with some of the faithful who participated. What did they experience? How would they explain what happened? That should tell you how clear you were and how clear you need to be, especially when the liturgy itself allows distinctions to become blurred.

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[Top of page](#)