

Baptism

I lost count, but I think I baptized 22 people at the Easter Vigil this year. I have a multicultural community; we have two weekend masses in English and two in Spanish. We have Vietnamese immigrants faithfully at church even though few people can converse with them. We have refugees from the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; a few filipinos; Catholics from Haiti; a guy born in Germany. At the Easter Vigil this year I baptized in three languages: English, Spanish and French. I also offered a few prayers in Vietnamese. I don't understand what I'm saying in that language, but my parishioners who speak it tell me that they do. I've been studying Vietnamese off and on for 3 years. I don't know if I'm getting better or they're just being polite. I like to reserve the Easter Vigil for baptisms. I conduct the Rite of Reception of Validly Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church at other times of year, as soon as we judge that each candidate is ready. This was clearly the original intent of the RCIA, a vision that the third edition of the Roman Missal preserves.

When the initiation rites were being revised after the council, the study group at work on them created one general introduction to cover the two different ritual books - the Rite of Baptism for Children and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Here is what the General Introduction on Christian Initiation says about the ministry of bishops and priests:

“12 Bishops are the chief stewards of the mysteries of God and leaders of the entire liturgical life in the Church committed to them. This is why they direct the conferring of baptism, which brings to the recipient a share in the kingly priesthood of Christ. Therefore bishops should personally celebrate baptism, especially at the Easter Vigil. They should have a particular concern for the preparation and baptism of adults.”

Note the connection not just between confirmation and the bishop, but baptism and the bishop. He is the father of the people of God, just as he shepherds them from their home church, the cathedral. When we baptize we are sharing in the bishop's ministry, and baptism is one reason why people call us “Father”.

Note also the theme of sharing in the “kingly priesthood of Christ.” This alludes to 1 Peter 2: 9, which calls Christians “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Verse 5 says, “Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The fathers of Vatican II applied this passage to the mass as well as to the ceremony of baptism. A proper understanding of ecclesiology and liturgy requires a meditation on 1 Peter chapter 2. It underpins the seminal call to full, conscious, active participation.

The introduction continues: “13 It is the duty of parish priests (pastors) to assist the bishop in the instruction and baptism of the adults entrusted to their care, unless the bishop makes other provisions. Parish priests (pastors), with the assistance of catechists or other qualified laypersons, have the duty of preparing

Baptism

the parents and godparents of children through appropriate pastoral guidance and of baptizing the children.”

I ask others to conduct the prebaptismal sessions, though I have opinions about their content. For example, I want parents to think about one of the first questions they will hear in the ceremony: “What do you ask of God’s Church for [your child]?” What are they asking of the Church? Life in Christ? A community of believers? Moral support? Guidance in a dark society? Education? Example? What really do they want of God’s Church? When parents hear that question at the baptism, I’d like them to tell our people what they want as the ceremony begins. Also in the preparation sessions I want families to learn ways that they can stay connected to our parish in the months after the baptism is completed.

I do not visit with every parent, but I do ask for an appointment if there is some red flag; for example, if they do not have a marriage in the Catholic Church. I’d like to visit with them about their circumstances and hear more about what led them to request this baptism. If marriage is in their plans, I want to explain the steps that will help them get there. I don’t want to force them; they have to enter marriage freely. But sometimes they admit there is nothing keeping them from marriage, it is what they want, but they just haven’t done it. I explore these intentions, and, perhaps make an appeal on behalf of their children that they marry to safeguard their family. I keep a record of this conversation in my address book, so that, if they come back three years later with another child and still no marriage, I know how to build on the previous conversation.

The general introduction goes on: “15 The celebrant of baptism may be assisted by other priests or deacons and also by laypersons in those parts that pertain to them, especially if there are a large number to be baptized. Provision of this is made in various parts of the rituals for adults and for children.”

I like to do baptisms during mass. Another parish near me has nearly 50 baptisms a month, so they cannot possibly do the same. They get many babies because they do not ask many questions. We do. We even ask for parish registration. I want to know who these people are and to have some way of keeping in touch. After all, they will be keeping track of us. When it’s time for first communion, parents assume that they’re registered because we baptized the same child.

The hispanic community is not used to registration, and people tell me I’m fighting a losing battle. Yet registration helps many people if they need a letter to support their application for a better immigration status, a school or a job. In our diocese of 99 parishes, only 8 offer services in Spanish. So the boundaries of these parishes are fluid. Some hispanic Catholics pick one church that has the better mass time this weekend, another church with less expensive first communion preparation, and still another that asks fewer questions when you need a baptism. Instability does not help any of the hispanic parishes. It is hard to get this message out, but I keep saying it.

I’ve shown you some quotes from the General Introduction to Christian Initiation, the document that covers both children and adults. The *Rite of Baptism*

Baptism

for Children adds to this particular citation in paragraph 7: “In addition to what is said about the ordinary minister of baptism in the General Introduction to Christian Initiation nos. 11-15, the following should be noted:

“1) It is the duty of the priest to prepare families for the baptism of their children and to help them in the task of Christian formation that they have undertaken. It is the duty of the bishop to coordinate such pastoral efforts in the diocese, with the help also of deacons and lay people.

“2) It is also the duty of the priest to arrange that baptism is always celebrated with proper dignity and, as far as possible, adapted to the circumstances and wishes of the families concerned. All who perform the rite of baptism should do so with exactness and reverence; they must also try to be understanding and friendly to all.”

The first point suggests a diocesan plan for baptism preparation. This would be hard to do not just because of the diversity of our parishes, but the diversity of our pastors. We pastors are notoriously independently minded when it comes to diocesan policy-making. But we should be willing to follow at least some general directives.

The second point ranges from dignity, exactness and reverence to adaptation, understanding and friendliness. All in a day’s work, I guess. Both ends of this spectrum are important. We need to perform the ceremony the right way, but we also need to be courteous and kind. There are a number of rubrics in this ritual, the RCIA, the *Rite of Penance*, and the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* that ask the priest, please, to treat people kindly. It’s in the rubrics. You can tell that the Vatican II study group preparing all these ceremonies knew that priests had a reputation for being cold in our dealings with Catholic laity.

The RCIA also includes a number of paragraphs with instructions aimed at priests. “40: During the precatechumenate period, parish priests (pastors) should help those taking part in it with prayers suited to them, for example, by celebrating for their spiritual well-being the prayers of exorcism and the blessings given in the ritual.”

Now, there’s a right and a wrong way to do this. Upon meeting an unbaptized adult you don’t want to lead off saying, “Come to our church anytime, I’d be glad to give you an exorcism.” Not a good pickup line. But it does suggest that our role during the precatechumenate is to be a leader of prayer, not much different from our role every Sunday. I like to visit with everyone interested in joining our church. But our numbers are so great that I don’t accomplish this very well. Sometimes it’s not just numbers, but language that poses a problem. Last year the father of one of our African refugee families asked me to baptize his youngest child. I can conduct basic conversation in French, but we have no one who could offer baptism preparation for parents in French or in his native African language. But he kept asking us, week after week, to baptize his child. After a while, our director of religious education and I decided that his repeated request was sufficient for us to know he was sincere. And he was in church every Sunday with his kids. He walks - over a mile - to go to mass. He has no car. He has no

Baptism

driver's license. He also had no job at the time. He was hoping to get some little compassion from his church, and he could not understand why we hesitated to baptize his child. So finally I told him after mass one week, "OK. Come next Sunday, and I'll baptize your child." Then I realized I'd never seen his wife. I asked about her. He said, "She's a Methodist." "Oh," I said. "Is this all right with her?" "Yes," he assured me. I figured I'd still better do due diligence. I paid a visit to their home, partly to see how refugees live, and that's another whole story, and partly to get his wife's approval. They live in a very simple apartment, clean, but virtually no furniture. She was gracious and fine with the baptism. I said to the father, "OK. I'll baptize your child next Sunday." He said, "Good. Now, when can I be baptized?" Refugees have so many needs that we lowered our catechetical expectations in his case. Again because of a lack of French-speaking catechists in our parish - and in our diocese, let me point out - I initiated the man at the Easter Vigil, having done virtually no catechetical preparation.

While I'm confessing, let me add this. I do not have a large RCIA team. St. Anthony's has a couple of volunteers who help in the English community, but our program is not well developed. And the few unbaptized adults whom we have all come at the most inconvenient times. A couple of years ago, I received in February a call from a young woman who was looking for a church where her fiancé could get baptized. I said, "Congratulations to both of you. And I'm delighted to hear that your fiancé wants to become a Christian." She said, "We've tried two other churches, but they both tell us we have to begin in September." "Where do you live?" I asked. She told me the address, and it's a short walk from our church. I said, "I will visit with you." When they came in, I explained that our church prefers to do adult initiations at the Easter Vigil, but this man was coming at a time when we could not adequately assess the case prior to Easter that year. He said, "But we're getting married in September at my fiancé's family's church in Pennsylvania. I'd like to be baptized before I get married. I'd like to start married life with a clean slate and a place in the church." Well, the RCIA permits baptisms apart from the Easter Vigil for exceptional circumstances, so I bargained with him. I said, "Let's start your preparation now. I have a catechist who can meet with you right away. Maybe she could get you ready by this fall. But if after a month or so we discover and you discover that rushing is not a good thing, I'd like to be able to say to you, "Let's wait until next Easter." He said that was fair. So we began. This story has a very happy ending. I took him through the scrutinies and the rites of initiation in the off season. The two of them have been faithful churchgoers. They are both active in liturgical, catechetical and advisory ministries of our parish - all because somebody listened to a reasonable request.

Another guy has been off and on in his preparation. I decided I had to visit with him one on one just to find out what was going on, but we had a hard time agreeing to a date. His desire for baptism was sincere, but the day we finally got together to assess his spiritual progress was the day after the Rite of Election. He had a few more questions, so I decided not to include him in the Easter baptisms. But he's another one I decided could be baptized at another time of year. In some ways our small RCIA team makes us more flexible with unusual candidates.

Baptism

In the hispanic community most catechumens are children of catechetical age. This is beautiful and frustrating. Some parents delay the baptism of their children until the kids reach an age when they are eligible for all three sacraments of initiation. If parents have more than one child, they may wait until all the children have reached that plateau. They bring the kids for one year of religious education. They participate in one Easter Vigil. They have one fiesta. And they're done. Years later we wonder why hispanic adolescents and young adults don't have a better understanding of their faith. The lack of interest that hispanic parents demonstrate in the continual religious formation of their children is a scandal in the church. As you know, statistically, this is the cohort that will dominate the population of our church for years to come.

OK. Off my soapbox. Back to priests. RCIA 98: "During the period of the catechumenate, a rite of anointing the catechumens, through use of the oil of catechumens, may be celebrated wherever this seems beneficial or desirable. The presiding celebrant for such a first anointing of the catechumens is a priest or a deacon. The anointing ordinarily takes place after the homily in a celebration of the word of God (see no. 89), and is conferred on each of the catechumens; this rite of anointing may be celebrated several times during the course of the catechumenate. Further, for particular reasons, a priest or a deacon may confer the anointing privately on individual catechumens."

I do this once a year at a Sunday mass so that our people can see our catechumens and pray for them. It is hard connecting the catechumens to the greater community. My parish church has a tiny vestibule, about the size of your hotel room here. A more gracious gathering space would give us a place where people could greet one another on their way out the door. But our building makes it hard to be friendly before and after the service.

RCIA 122 "Within the rite of election the bishop celebrant or his delegate declares in the presence of the community the Church's approval of the candidates. Therefore to exclude any semblance of mere formality from the rite, there should be a deliberation prior to its celebration to decide on the catechumens' suitability. This deliberation is carried out by the priests, deacons, and catechists involved in the formation of the catechumens, and by the godparents and representatives of the local community."

The RCIA presumes that I know enough about the catechumens to judge their worthiness for baptism. I rely on the help of others. But I also know that catechists are likely to judge worthiness on one main factor: attendance. If people show up for catechetical sessions, we will probably baptize them. But we should do some form of deliberation, just as we do with engaged couples, to make sure that this is the right step for them and for us. Our judgments need to be suitably informed so that the bishop's declaration of election retains its integrity.

RCIA 144: "In the rite of exorcism (nos. 154, 168, 175), which is celebrated by a priest or a deacon, the elect, who have already learned from the Church as their mother the mystery of deliverance from sin by Christ, are freed from the effects of sin and from the influence of the devil. They receive new strength in the

Baptism

midst of their spiritual journey and they open their hearts to receive the gifts of the Savior.”

This quotation comes from the description of a scrutiny. You can tell from this that the scrutinies presume that unbaptized persons are not completely responsible for their sin. They have lived without the benefit of membership in the body of Christ, so they are more susceptible to the antics of Satan. Scrutinies are trying to open their hearts to receive the gifts of the Savior.

When we complete the initiation rites with first communion, both the RCIA and the missal ask priests to give a final catechesis on the eucharist just before inviting the community to receive. This exhortation should say something about our understanding of the eucharist over which we preside, and the ministry of catechesis in which we share.

Here’s one that I wrote, quoting a line from St. Augustine: “My brothers and sisters who are newly baptized, we now come to the moment you have been waiting for. We too have hungered to have you share with us at this table. What we share here is the body and blood of Christ. It guides us and centers us. It is the reason we live. ‘Be what you see, and receive what you are.’ Behold, the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world....”

Here’s one that Pope Benedict XVI started using, and Pope Francis continues the custom: “Dearest sons and daughters, I turn to you who in this glorious night, reborn by water and the Holy Spirit, receive for the first time the bread of life and the cup of salvation. / May the Body and Blood of Christ the Lord always make you grow in his friendship and in communion with the whole Church, may it be the constant food for the journey of your life, and a pledge of the eternal banquet of heaven.” I think that these words are lovely, and they help us assert our priestly ministry at the end of a very long Easter Vigil, bringing the final rite of initiation to its summit.

Finally, a word about mystagogy. I have a fairly laid back approach to mystagogy. I think people are trying too hard to create something that doesn’t work very well in many parishes. Here’s what RCIA 247 says: The “main setting” for mystagogy “is the so-called Masses for neophytes, that is the Sunday Masses of the Easter season.”

Look at that. The main setting for mystagogy is not more catechetical sessions. The RCIA never called for that. The main setting is mass, and mystagogy is nothing more than the Sunday homily. Even this is hard to achieve. Sundays in May are competing for attention from Easter, Mary, Mothers’ Day, Memorial Day, first communions, diocesan appeals, graduations, and farewell addresses from pastors who just learned they’re going to be moved in June. It’s nearly impossible to give mystagogical catechesis in the homily every week. But that is what the RCIA was hoping for.

Priests have diverse responsibilities in the ministry of initiation. Even though our ministry is complicated by parents, canon law and refugees, when we get to visit with people about committing their lives to Christ, initiation is some of the most satisfying work we do.