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Paul Turner

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ON PAPER AND ON AIR: THE BOOKS AND BROADCASTS OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION IN THE AGE OF POPE FRANCIS

Paul Turner

The Roman Catholic community celebrates its liturgies publicly even while its liturgical books undergo more clandestine revisions. The ceremonies that Catholics in the pew watch in their sanctuaries almost always diverge in some degree from the liturgical books. Consequently, the state of the Catholic liturgy always lies within the nexus of theory, praxis, and revision.

The rites of Christian initiation are a case in point. The Rite of Baptism for Children (RBC) and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) were published in 1969 and 1972 respectively in Latin, and vernacular translations followed. Some small adjustments have appeared, but neither underwent the more deliberate updating of content evidenced in the second Latin edition of the Order of Celebrating Matrimony (1990) or the third Latin edition of the Roman Missal (2002 and 2008).

Pope Benedict XVI authorized a change in the RBC just before leaving office in 2013. Formerly the presider said to infants, “The Christian community welcomes you with great joy.” Now he is to say, “The Church of God welcomes you with great joy,” because they specifically become members of the Catholic Church, not the generic Christian community.¹

The International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) has begun work on a revised English translation of both adult and infant initiation rites.² Because the content has changed so little, the work primarily affects words. However, the revised English-language RCIA may look considerably different from its predecessor because the translation in force expanded and rearranged the content of the Latin edition. Permission to do so no longer holds favor.

Meanwhile, priests are accepting adult catechumens, baptizing infants, and celebrating other parts of the initiation rites. These ceremonies, public in any neighborhood Catholic church, are also celebrated at the heart of Roman Catholic worship, the papal liturgies at St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican. The Vatican’s own television network livestreams these events; other networks simultaneously broadcast them with commentary. Videos of past

ceremonies can be viewed online, and participation aids can be retrieved from the Vatican's website.

This article will examine the rites of Christian initiation as they exist on paper and on air: the books as they have been published, the broadcasts that show how the Vatican uses them, and expectations for the revised translation of the rites of initiation in the age of Pope Francis.

Booklets

The faithful gather in the dark of Holy Saturday each year to celebrate the Easter Vigil at St. Peter's. Each receives a participation aid published by the *Typografia Vaticana*, and edited by the *Ufficio delle Celebrazioni Liturgiche del Sommo Pontefice*.³ The booklets' design underwent slight changes during the final year of Benedict's papacy. Formerly, the Easter Vigil's four parts each began with a page devoted to artwork, but these disappeared after 2011. In the same year, an English translation first appeared in the booklet together with Latin and Italian. Although one may have guessed that Francis favored a diminished emphasis on art and increased commitment to linguistic diversity, both these trajectories began under Benedict. There has been one exception. In 2016, the program cover carried the logo for the Year of Mercy.

Readings

The scripture readings that fill Part II of the Easter Vigil present a final catechesis on Christian Initiation for the elect. After the Second Vatican Council, the church revised the number and choice of readings, offering seven from the Old Testament, one New Testament epistle, and a Gospel account of the resurrection. Initially, the postconciliar missal allowed a community to reduce the number of Old Testament readings to two, though one of those had to be the story of the Exodus. The third edition of the missal requires a minimum of three and changes the reason for reducing the number from "pastoral circumstances" to "serious pastoral circumstances." The missal requests that all nine readings be proclaimed whenever possible.

Under Benedict, the Vatican's Easter Vigil included four Old Testament readings: the creation (Gen. 1:1–2:2), the sacrifice of Abraham (Gen. 22:1–18), the Exodus from Egypt (Exod. 14:15–15:1), and the prophecy of a new heart (Ezek. 36:16–17a, 18–28). These were proclaimed in four different languages; in 2011, for example, in French, English, German, and Spanish respectively. The epistle was proclaimed in Italian, and the Gospel in Latin.

In 2013, with Pope Francis in office only a few weeks, changes happened. The number of the Old Testament readings was reduced to three, eliminating the sacrifice of Abraham. The number of modern languages was also reduced by omitting German. The story of creation, the longest reading at the Vigil, was compressed to its shorter form: a mere seven verses (Gen. 1:1, 26–31). The same selections persisted until 2017, when Baruch 3:9–15, 32–4:4 replaced the reading from Ezekiel. Even though the missal pleads for all nine readings, the Vatican offers five under Francis.

One can only speculate on the reason. Perhaps he wanted to reduce the length of the service because of his age, though he is younger than Benedict. Perhaps he thought that a shorter service would find more appeal as an evangelical tool. Perhaps a more complete catechesis for catechumens was deemed inessential within the liturgy. It is hard to know.

No Rite of Reception

The third part of the Easter Vigil features the rites of initiation. In the United States, the RCIA offers a combined rite that includes previously baptized candidates with the unbaptized. Although widely used throughout the English-speaking world, no such combined rite exists in Latin. The typical edition offers rites for unbaptized adults and children of catechetical age and, in an appendix, one finds the Rite of Reception of Validly Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. The original edition never envisioned that these would be celebrated together. Its ecumenical sensitivity kept baptized Christians separate from the elect. Even the Roman Missal keeps the liturgies apart. The third edition has updated the rubrics for initiation at the Easter Vigil, but it never envisions the simultaneous reception of baptized candidates. In American parishes, however, catechetical practicalities overpower ecumenical sensitivity. Both groups usually receive catechesis at the same place and time. The movable date of Easter determines when both the elect and baptized candidates celebrate the sacraments together.

The Easter Vigil at St. Peter's Basilica follows the vision from the missal. Each year, the pope presides only over the initiation of adults and children of catechetical age. (Traditionally, the pope baptizes infants on the Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord at a mass in the Sistine Chapel.) It is doubtful that the planners ever considered it any other way. Even the Italian *Rito dell'Iniziazione Cristiana degli Adulti* keeps the initiation rites separate from the reception of baptized Christians. Had the liturgies been combined at the Vigil under Benedict, one could only imagine the outcry from ecumenists. Under Francis, reserving the Easter Vigil for the initiation of the elect maintains respect for the baptism of other Christians.

The Elect

Commentators on the videos tell the native countries of the elect. Even under Benedict, the group was quite diverse: In 2012, for example, he baptized people from Turkmenistan, Italy, Albania, the U.S., Germany, Slovakia, Cameroon, and Germany. In 2013 Francis baptized only four, one of whom wore a hearing aid, but in 2014 he baptized ten representing nations such as France, Senegal, Lebanon, and Vietnam, two of whom were children of catechetical age. In 2015 the list included four Italians, three Albanians, and one each from Cambodia, Kenya, and Portugal. The youngest was 13; the oldest, 66. In 2016 Francis baptized twelve from countries such as Albania, Cameroon, Italy and China. Although Francis is better known as the pope

who goes to the margins, even Benedict ministered to them at St. Peter's Basilica.

The Renewal of Baptismal Promises

The missal envisions that the faithful renew their baptismal promises after the baptism and confirmation of the elect. However, another option exists (40). If the number of those to be baptized is large, the assembly may renew its baptismal promises while the elect are making theirs. This saves a little time, but it obscures the significance of the promises made by those who have undergone the scrutinies of Lent and now state publicly that they renounce Satan and profess faith in God. Benedict used the combined option, which continues under Francis. At a recent ICEL meeting, the bishops learned that Francis informally spoke his preference for combining the promises at the Vigil. In the Vigils of 2015 and 2016, apparently speaking off-script, he invited the elect to unite their voices with those of the entire community.⁴ He appears to extend hospitality to the elect, but the full voice of the assembled faithful dulls the impact of the elect's individual decisions to believe.

For some years the Vatican's ceremony had introduced a slight adaptation to the profession of faith. In 2011, after the three renunciations, everyone sang a response to the questions about belief: "Credo." The music changed in 2012 to accompany "Credo, Amen." However, in 2017 this music disappeared, and the people spoke their reply, as typically happens in any Catholic parish. The simplification fits the style of other modifications to the Vigil under Francis.

Between the renunciation and the profession, the missal calls for anointing catechumens with oil if this did not take place earlier in the day. The elect have not been anointed in any of these celebrations at the Vatican; presumably, that ceremony took place earlier. (In the U.S., the conference of bishops eliminated this anointing both at the Easter Vigil and at the preparation rites earlier on Holy Saturday, a particular law that overrides the rubric in the missal.)

Baptism

After the profession of faith, Francis has been asking each of the elect, "Do you wish to be baptized?" This question does not exist in the ritual in Latin, Italian, or English. The question did appear, however, in the preconconciliar rites. Before baptizing, the priest or deacon asked the infant the question, and the godparent responded. Adults answered for themselves. In the postconciliar RBC, the priest or deacon asks the parents if they wish the child to be baptized. But the RCIA carries no similar question for adults. Francis brought the question back in 2015 and 2016. It is not clear if this was deliberate or if it was an off-script remark that he adapted from the RBC. (He probably baptized more infants than adults in his pastoral ministry.) The RCIA seems to consider the question tautological.

Baptism in the Catholic Church is administered either by immersion three times or by pouring three times, while the baptismal formula is recited once. Even in Italian, the words clearly accompany three separate actions. Catholic liturgical documents consistently offer the two options in the same order: immersion or pouring. Usually in such a listing, the first is preferable. However, the pope baptizes by pouring. Many Catholic parishes in the U.S. now have fonts large enough for the immersion of children and adults, but pouring remains more popular, even by popes. Surprisingly, neither Benedict nor Francis pours water three times on every candidate. The pope usually pours a single long stream of water from a metal shell while reciting the formula. An unverified story has it that Pope John Paul II baptized the same way at World Youth Day exercises in France one year, so alarming one of the priests in attendance that the cleric privately rebaptized each of the youths afterwards with three separate pours. The videos from St. Peter's show undeniably that the popes pay scant attention to this rubric. Each pours once on one person, and two or three times on another. After baptism, the godparents draped a white cape over the shoulders of the newly baptized, a practice retained under both popes. The clothing appears dignified and sensible.

Under Benedict, the rites included several songs: "*Isti sunt agni novelli*," during the baptisms; and "*O filii et filiae*," during the lighting of candles. Under Francis, the songs have been removed, and the organ plays underneath the ceremonies, abbreviating the service.

Confirmation

Sung music during the confirmations also disappeared under Francis. While Benedict confirmed, the choir led the "*Veni, creator spiritus*." Instrumental music now replaces it.

During the prayer of confirmation, the RCIA calls for the presider to extend hands over the neophytes. Benedict, however, extended his hands outward in the *orans* position used for other presider's prayers. Francis uses the proper epicletic gesture. Twice in Acts of the Apostles, after someone has baptized a group of believers, apostles lay hands on them to impart the Holy Spirit (8:17 and 19:6). This inspired the practice of hand-laying during the conferral of confirmation. Many people presume that the presider's gesture accompanying the confirmation prayer—arms outward and directed toward the candidates, palms down—references the biblical hand-laying without physically placing hands on each candidate's head. However, Pope Paul VI corrected this notion in his Apostolic Constitution on the Order of Confirmation, *Divinae consortium naturæ*. He distinguished the imposition of hands during the prayer that preceded the anointing from the imposition of a hand during the anointing. Paul said that the anointing "in a certain way represents the laying on of hands practiced by the Apostles."⁵ The nuance is often lost because the extension of hands over the group of candidates is more visible than the placement of the bishop's hand on the head of the candidate during the anointing.

Even Francis seemed to miss the distinction in 2014 when he introduced the confirmation prayer. Priests who concelebrate are invited to raise their

hands while the bishop recites this prayer only if—due to the large number of candidates—they are going to assist him in confirming. However, Francis invited all the priests present to make the gesture with him. Furthermore, in going off-script to inform them, Francis drew undue attention to the gesture: “I invite all the priests here present to make together with me the gesture that the Apostles made when they asked in prayer for the Holy Spirit to come.”⁶ But Paul VI linked the hand-laying from Acts of the Apostles with the placement of the bishop’s hand on the candidate’s head during the anointing.

The bishop is to anoint the forehead with the sign of the cross, but Francis deploys a more robust gesture. He traces the cross on the neophyte’s forehead with his thumb, but then he rubs the oil generously in a repeated circular motion from brow to brow. Hand-laying is hard to see.

Both popes used the neophytes’ baptismal name while confirming. Although special confirmation names are popular in some countries, they are unknown in the Order of Confirmation, the Code of Canon Law, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The liturgy presumes that the person is confirmed with the name given at baptism.

A bishop is to offer each candidate a sign of peace to conclude this ceremony. Benedict touched their left shoulder. Francis kisses their right cheek.

Universal Prayer

The universal prayer, or the prayer of the faithful, bears importance for the newly baptized, who offer them for the first time as the priestly people of God. The RCIA encourages a regular dismissal of catechumens before the universal prayer, partly because their unbaptized status limits their capacity to offer them. Under Benedict, the 2011 Vigil omitted the universal prayer. This may have resulted from a misunderstanding concerning the litany of the saints. In the ordination rite, for example, the litany replaces the universal prayer. This is not true, however, in baptism. In 2012 the universal prayer returned to the Vatican’s Vigil. The intentions may be freely composed, and the Vatican’s list has changed from year to year. For example, Benedict’s 2012 Vigil included prayers for the church, the baptized, the suffering, the entire world, and the gathered family of God. In 2013 the petitions under Francis listed the church, the baptized, all people in the world, those persecuted for their faith, the poor, and the afflicted. In 2014 the list included the church, civil authorities, married couples, sinners, and a final group of those who have lost faith, the dying, and the dead.

The style of the petitions changed in 2015. Instead of addressing the people with five grammatically complex sentences, the deacon addressed ten shorter phrases directly to God: “Give your beauty to the Church. Revive with your charity the ministry of priests. Sanctify with your Spirit the life of the baptized.” And so forth. This breaks from the preferred style of these petitions. The list of intentions is more properly addressed to the people, including the newly baptized, who, now aware of the need, say something like, “Lord, hear our prayer,” or, as in 2015, “*Kyrie, eleison*” (Lord, have mercy). This is supposed to be the prayer of the faithful, not the prayer of

the deacon. Nonetheless, this is the style that has perdured through the 2017 Vigil.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

The newly baptized are invited to process with the gifts to open the fourth part of the Easter Vigil. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says very little about who brings gifts to the sanctuary, though it assigns the task to “the faithful” (73). Those who have been baptized take their place among the priestly people by presenting the gifts for the offering of sacrifice—gifts that will be transformed and returned to them in communion. Both popes received the gifts from neophytes. Benedict received quite a few items. Although video footage is unclear, he seems to receive bread, wine, several vessels, and even the corporal, an item that the missal never recommends for this procession. Under Francis, only two neophytes bring gifts to the altar: the paten with the presider’s host and the cruets of wine and water. This simplifies the procession and focuses on the primary gifts for the celebration. Both popes have prayed Eucharistic Prayer III, and both inserted the intercession proper to a mass that includes baptism.

The sign of peace, one of the symbols leading up to their sharing of Eucharistic communion, bears special significance for the newly baptized, who offer it as members of the body of Christ for the first time. The moment passes almost without notice at the Vatican’s Vigil, though in 2011 under Benedict, the deacon used his own words to encourage people to share peace “in the spirit of the resurrection.” No other deacon has done the same.

Neophytes receive communion by intinction from the pope. The RCIA commends communion under both kinds to the newly baptized. In Catholic parishes in the U.S., this usually means drinking from the cup. At the Vatican, communion from the cup is rare. Whereas communion by intinction may be disappointing to an American Catholic, it is generous at a papal liturgy.

The RCIA and the missal both have the presider give a final catechesis on the Eucharist before the neophytes receive communion. This precedes the general invitation to communion, “Behold the Lamb of God.” Both Benedict and Francis have read the same scripted catechesis. Absent a sample from the RCIA and the missal, the pope’s remarks are appropriate and inspiring: “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.”⁷

On the whole, the Vatican’s celebration presents a fine exemplar of the intentions of the RCIA and missal, at times moving, at times disarmingly ordinary. Perhaps the most notable change to the initiation rites under Francis is the abbreviation of the entire ceremony. Indeed, from Benedict’s three-hour Vigil, Francis completes the same liturgy in about two hours and forty minutes.

Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, 2013

Apart from the evidence from annual celebrations of the Easter Vigil, auxiliary data may be gleaned from the singular occasion when Pope Francis celebrated a rite marking an earlier stage in preparation for initiation. The RCIA contains an entire suite of ceremonies for those on the road to Christian initiation. The first of these is the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. On November 23, 2013, near the conclusion of the Year of Faith, for the first time in history, a pope presided over this ceremony on the porch of St. Peter's for an internationally televised broadcast.⁸ Francis, in his first year as pope, gathered a group of 500 inquirers from forty-seven nations.⁹ This pope who encourages the church to preach at the margins thus admitted seekers into the liminal stage of the catechumenate.

Francis called about thirty-five of the candidates by their first name.¹⁰ He signed them on the forehead while presumably their sponsors signed the other parts of the bodies to the accompaniment of his prayers. (The video is inconclusive about this and about how the hundreds of other inquirers were signed.) In the U.S., sponsors may also trace the cross on the inquirers' hands and feet; mention of these extremities is absent from the Italian translation and hence from Francis's ceremony.

For the presentation of a book containing the Gospels, the catechumens received a hardbound copy of the New Testament. In pastoral practice, this is frequently the book of choice, primarily because of accessibility. The RCIA merely calls for a book containing the Gospels, not necessarily the entire New Testament, but such books are rare. Francis omitted other parts of the ceremony, such as the introduction to hearing the word of God and the incensation of the lectionary (RCIA 61). Still, it all took about an hour. Although the rite of acceptance fits the evangelical interests of Francis, he has not repeated its celebration in subsequent years.

Upcoming Ritual Revisions

ICEL's work on the RCIA and the RBC will provide some continuity of style, vocabulary, and spelling among the liturgical books. Twice a year, eleven bishops representing different English-speaking conferences gather in Washington, DC, to review the translations prepared by specialists as well as the comments on the work submitted by individual bishops, Vox Clara, and members of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDWDS).

So far, Francis has overseen few changes to the Latin editions of the liturgical books. However, he has introduced a renewed spirit of dialogue. The eleven bishops on the commission, perhaps sensing this openness and deeply aware of the freedoms that the CDWDS introduced into ICEL's translation of the missal in 2011, seem determined to make the words more accessible. At meetings, the bishops demonstrate more openness to gender-inclusive language and to breaking up Latinate sentences into shorter ones

more easily grasped by contemporary assemblies. They also scrutinize word order for the same purposes.

Meanwhile, Francis has expanded the number of consultants to the CDWDS,¹¹ drawing upon many bishops with experience with ICEL, and others who represent the margins of Christianity. He has also authorized a commission to review the principles of translation.¹²

The impact on a new translation has yet to be revealed. Judging from the changes to the initiation rites at the Vatican, one may anticipate more focused yet flexible ceremonies. Still, Pope Francis has not paid heavy attention to liturgical details, so he may not take much interest in the published books. He seems to believe in bringing the liturgy to the people as generously as God comes to them in Christ. Good liturgy can lead to better evangelization, which would happily increase the usage of the rites of Christian Initiation.

Paul Turner is pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City, Missouri, and director of the Office of Divine Worship for the Diocese of Kansas City–St. Joseph. He holds a doctorate in sacred theology from Sant’ Anselmo in Rome.

Notes

1. Catholic News Agency, “Change in Baptismal Rite Emphasizes Church’s Identity,” <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/change-in-baptismal-rite-emphasizes-churchs-identity/> (accessed August 23, 2013).
2. The author attends the meetings of the commission of bishops and makes a record of their discussion. Some of the material for this article comes from personal observation.
3. The booklets referenced here are as follows: 2011, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2011/20110423_veglia.pdf; 2012, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2012/20120407_veglia.pdf; 2013, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2013/20130330-veglia-pasquale-libretto.pdf; 2014, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2014/20140419-libretto-veglia-pasquale.pdf; 2015, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2015/20150404-libretto-veglia-pasquale.pdf; 2016, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2016/20160326-libretto-veglia-pasquale.pdf; and 2017, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2017/20170415-libretto-veglia-pasquale.pdf.
4. Videos can be viewed as follows: 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWS187mxZVY>; 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHHCzxf2YEM>; 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=deNd9h2sOSw>; 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3g3Ywzy7EsM>; 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfz_yQGSs0Y; 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPopGdeX_C0; 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foC0gcOwDTs>.
5. Pope Paul VI, “*Divinae consortium naturæ* [Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation],” https://archive.org/stream/paulvisapostolic00cath/paulvisapostolic00cath_djvu.txt.
6. Author’s translation from the Italian in the video.
7. Author’s translation from the Italian in the video.
8. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJMLUJspojM>. Pope John Paul II celebrated the same rite on his pastoral visit to Chicago in a mass at Grant Park in October 1979: <https://www.archchicago.org/obituary/-/article/2017/07/24/archdiocesan-priest-rev-ronald-john-lewinski-dies>.
9. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VINb9XKEWPQ>.
10. For the participation booklet, see http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2013/20131123-libretto-ammissione-catecumenato.pdf.
11. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20161109_membri-dicastero_it.html.
12. Gerard O’Connell, “Pope Francis Has Ordered a Review of the New Mass Translation Rules,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/01/26/pope-francis-has-ordered-review-new-mass-translation-rules>.