

The Pope's Adaptations: A Case Study in Initiation

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Ten anxious catechumens, each from a different country, representing five continents, ranging in age from 14 to 32, gathered together at the end of a hot summer's day in 1997 at the Longchamp stadium outside Paris, where they met the pope. That Saturday evening, while leading a teeming multitude in a service of the word, Pope John Paul II baptized and confirmed all ten. The next morning, Sunday, August 24, they shared communion for the first time at the mass concluding World Youth Day.

This extraordinary event used the ritual for the Christian Initiation of Adults in Exceptional Circumstances (RCIA 331-369). But the pope did not slavishly follow the rite. He adapted it.

Adult baptism normally takes place at the Easter Vigil after several formational periods and liturgical steps, but the order of initiation foresees an extraordinary occasion when adult baptism may take place at another time of year. The exceptional circumstances are either events that prevent the candidate from completing all the steps of the catechumenate or a depth of Christian conversion and a degree of religious maturity that lead the local bishop to decide that the candidate may receive baptism without delay (331). Examples of reasons for this rite include sickness, old age, change of residence, [and] long absence for travel (332). If a priest wishes to use the rite for exceptional circumstances, he is supposed to secure permission from the bishop in each case (see, for example, 34/4, 331, 332).

This version of adult initiation appears in the ritual text because of a pastoral decision by those who composed the restored catechumenate after the Second Vatican Council. The Church's most recent memory of adult initiation was a celebration that had conflated all the stages of the catechumenate into one liturgy. The framers of the restored catechumenate realized that by separating the stages again, they would challenge those comfortable with the old model. They included this one-step version of initiation in exceptional circumstances, then, partly because it most resembled the former rite of adult baptism. But it also met the pastoral need of those requesting baptism at a time of year apart from Easter and without its sequence of preparatory rites.

It was hoped this ritual would not be used much. When the provisional text of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults appeared in English in 1974, this ritual was entitled, Simple Rite of Adult Initiation. The title was changed for the 1988 edition, in hopes that it would be seen as exceptional, not simple. The revised French edition also uses the word exceptional. The restoration of the catechumenate in stages has met with such happy success that the rite for exceptional circumstances is little noted and little celebrated, as it should be.

Still, Pope John Paul II pulled it out in August 1997 and celebrated the rites of initiation at World Youth Day, making many adaptations.

The very context altered several norms:

- The day: Normally initiation is to take place at the Easter Vigil (17, 23, 26). The exceptions noted in #331 allow initiation at another time of year either when something prevents the candidate from participating at Easter or when the depth of conversion and religious maturity is unusually strong. But it appears that neither of these conditions prompted an August celebration of adult initiation. The reason was World Youth Day.
- The location: Normally, initiation takes place at the parish or cathedral of the catechumen, not at a public stadium outside Paris.
- The minister: Normally, the pastor or bishop is the minister of baptism. None of the ten catechumens came from Rome, where the pope serves as bishop.
- The two-part ritual: The order of adult initiation always places baptism in the context of the celebration of the Eucharist, except in danger of death. The Paris liturgy placed baptism and confirmation in a word service, moving the eucharist to the following day. Nonetheless, the word service, involving *two* sacraments, was subtitled, Celebration of the Sacraments of the Christian Initiation of Adults.

Receiving the Candidate

The first part of the ritual, Receiving the Candidate, is to include a greeting, an opening dialogue, the candidate's declaration, an affirmation by the godparents, and an invitation to the liturgy of the Word. This part of the ceremony condenses the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens and the rite of election.

In Paris, these adaptations happened:

- Location: The opening rites may begin outside, as the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens does, but it may also begin inside. Due to the large numbers of the faithful gathered at an outdoor arena, there was little choice. The entire ceremony was outside. This accommodated the liturgy to the real needs of the people, but necessarily sacrificed the symbolic crossing of a threshold.
- Greeting: The presider is to greet the catechumens and godparents, and is to tell the assembled friends about the catechumens spiritual journey. At Paris, after the pope greeted each catechumen and godparent, two catechumens and one godparent themselves gave testimony on behalf of the group.
- Opening dialogue and candidate's declaration: The presider then asks the catechumens what they are seeking and receives their reply. He comments on their answer and then asks if they have listened to the word, resolved to keep Christ's commandments, shared the Christian way of life and joined in prayer. The catechumen answers once to all these questions. In Paris, however, the pope followed an adaptation found in the French edition of the rite. He asked these questions in sequence, and received an affirmative answer to each of them.
- Invitation to the Celebration of the Word of God: After questioning the godparents, the presider is to invite the catechumens into the church to hear the word. This invitation was omitted in Paris, because there was no movement of catechumens from outside to inside the building.

Liturgy of the Word

The papal ceremony continued with readings from scripture. The rite for exceptional circumstances asks that these be drawn from the lections for baptism. This happened at Longchamp, where the community heard Ezekiel 36, 24-28; Psalm 23 (22); Romans 6, 3-11; and John 3:1-6.

After the Pope's homily, a piece of choral music was added to the liturgy.

The rite for exceptional circumstances then offers intercessions for the candidates. The penitential rite of mass may follow, but it may be omitted. An exorcism is then prayed, and the catechumens are anointed with oil, if this has not preceded. At Longchamp, none of these rituals was included.

Celebration of Baptism

The liturgy at Paris introduced the Litany of the Saints at this point. The rite for exceptional circumstances has no such litany. The list of saints included many who came from France - like Irenaeus, Hilary, and Joan of Arc - as well as some recently canonized from other parts of the world, like Paul Miki and companions, and the Ugandan martyrs.

- **Prayer over the Water:** In the rite for exceptional circumstances, the presider then blesses the water according to one of the formularies. In Paris, two youth poured water into the font immediately before the blessing. After the pope gave the invitation to prayer, a French bishop sang the main text of the blessing. The pope then placed his hand in the water and prayed the last part, invoking the Holy Spirit.
- **Profession of faith:** In the rite, the presider asks the catechumens to renounce Satan and profess their faith using a traditional threefold formulary. In France, the pope interpolated a renewal of baptismal promises for the entire assembly. He asked, You who are going to be baptized, do you renounce Satan? The catechumens answered, I do. The pope then asked, And all of you? The entire assembly of youths responded, I do. Then the pope moved to the second question, And all his works? First the catechumens responded, and then, at the pope's prompting, the assembly responded as well. He observed this sequence of questions throughout the renunciation and profession. There is no precedent for this in any liturgical book in the history of baptism.
- **Baptism:** Baptism may be administered by immersion or pouring in the Catholic Church. The General Introduction on Christian Initiation calls immersion more suitable as a symbol of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. The National Statutes for the catechumenate in the United States prefer immersion (17). The pope poured water on those being baptized.
- **Explanatory rites:** In the rite, godparents place a new garment on the newly baptized. Godparents also receive a lighted candle and present it to the newly baptized. In Paris, a deacon assisted each godparent with the candle. The flame from the candles was then passed to the entire assembly while all sang Awake, o sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. At the Easter Vigil, this lighting would precede the renewal of baptismal promises. But neither the renewal of promises nor the lighting of the assembly's candles appears in the rite of initiation for exceptional circumstances.

Confirmation follows. In Paris, there was no adaptation to the ritual. Where the rite says, A minister brings the chrism to the celebrant, a deacon performed this function at Longchamp.

After confirmation, though, the liturgy at Longchamp took its strongest deviation from the rite of initiation in exceptional circumstances. According to the ritual text, the liturgy continues with the Eucharist. But at Longchamp, the newly baptized stood around the altar while the godparents returned to their places. The pope joined the neophytes at the altar and invited all to pray the Lord's Prayer. He then gave a blessing and invited everyone to spend the night in rest and prayer. He led the assembly in singing the Magnificat.

Eucharist

At the Sunday Eucharist, the Pope's introduction to the mass recalled the baptism and confirmation of the night before. He drew the presidential prayers from the ritual mass for baptism, not the Sunday in Ordinary Time (338).

The scripture readings were specially chosen for the event, coming neither from the lectionary for that Sunday nor from the readings for Christian initiation: Deuteronomy 7, 6-11; Psalm 26 (25); 1 Corinthians 1, 18-25; and John 1, 35-45.

After proclaiming the gospel, the deacon brought the book to the pope, who venerated it and gave a blessing with the book while all sang the alleluia again. The ten neophytes also venerated the book of the gospels, held in the hands of the pope. After the homily, the choir inserted a song.

The pope led a renewal of baptismal promises in place of the creed. The newly baptized encircled the font and responded with the assembly as the pope asked the traditional questions. Instrumental music punctuated this profession of faith.

Before mass ended, the pope led the assembly in the angelus.

Observations

The pope. One of the ecclesiological issues surrounding the present papacy concerns the relationship of the pope to the Church at large. At the beginning of Catholic Church history, the pope was largely perceived as bishop of Rome. But in recent centuries, many people perceive him as bishop of the entire Church. Pope John Paul II has tacitly accepted that interpretation in many subtle ways, including his presiding over the initiation rites in Paris for a group of catechumens representing five continents. The ten catechumens had not been formed as a group. They did not even speak one another's languages. The celebration of their initiation took place apart from their local communities. Their initiation signified the global ministry of the pope more than the evangelical ministry of local churches.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in Exceptional Circumstances. Compared with the full rites of initiation, the rite for exceptional circumstances looks truncated. But in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, it would have looked normal. The rite is designed for exceptional circumstances, and clearly states its preference that a longer form be

used either the full rites of initiation or an expanded version of the abbreviated form. Merely to use the abbreviated form of the rite. . . could mean a spiritual loss for the candidate, who would be deprived of the benefits of a longer preparation for the sacraments of initiation (332). Even though the pope followed this ritual at World Youth Day, its usage should remain exceptional. If the full rites of initiation cannot be used, an expanded form is preferred over the abbreviated version celebrated at Longchamp (334).

The papal adaptations. Any time the rite is adapted, it is subject to criticism. Some of the adaptations at Longchamp were laudable. Others are questionable. It is disappointing to many in the field of initiation that World Youth Day became a venue for initiation, which should normally take place at a cathedral or parish church at the Easter Vigil. The rarely used rite for exceptional circumstances received unusually public notice. The pope also missed an opportunity to promote baptism by immersion. The separation of baptism from the Eucharist is hard to justify. But some adaptations were quite positive, including the expansion of questions in the opening dialogue, the testimony by representatives of the catechumens and godparents, the expanded role of the deacon, and the placement of the catechumens and neophytes around the table and the font, as well as their veneration of the gospel book.

Principles of adaptation. These adaptations took several principles into account. They plumbed the liturgical, initiatory and musical traditions of the church to fashion new expressions based on old practices. They employed a variety of ministers. They let the length of the liturgy serve the purpose of the liturgy, eliminating some parts that seemed inessential, adding some features to enhance the role of the participants and the assembly. They made practical accommodations for the setting, the architecture and the size of the assembly.

Need for adaptation. If the ritual at Longchamp teaches nothing else, it proclaims the need for adaptation in all circumstances. Sometimes the shapers and users of liturgical books fear that adaptations may diminish the force of the liturgy. But adaptations allow a liturgy to breathe and grow. They permit a more personal relationship between the rite and the community. They invite a spirit of creativity that can enliven prayer and awaken the community's sense of the divine. And adaptations begin to shape new traditions for future generations. Even the pope seems to agree.

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