

CATHOLIC INITIATION OR CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS?

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Christian initiation should be just that: initiation into the Christian way of life. But in the Catholic Church, the practice of initiation bears the marks of the Catholic culture.

Adults may join the Catholic Church either through the baptismal rites of Christian initiation or through the Rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. If they have never been baptized, adults celebrate the rites of initiation: baptism, confirmation and first communion all together, normally at the Easter Vigil. If they have already been baptized in another Christian community, the Catholic Church will probably recognize their baptism. [1] Persons validly baptized cannot be baptized again in the Catholic Church. As members of the Christian faithful, they may be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church in a simple ceremony, followed by confirmation and their first communion. Whereas the baptism of adults in the Catholic Church should take place at the Easter Vigil, the rite of reception may take place at any time of year.

When adults are baptized in the Catholic Church, they become Christians. But they also become Catholics. Although the liturgy of the Church stresses that baptism makes one a Christian, the initiating community explicitly works to make the newcomer a cultural Catholic. The two goals are not opposed to each other, but the primary goal of Christian initiation is sometimes obscured by the cultural goal of Catholic initiation.

When baptized adults are received into the Catholic Church, Christian initiation does not adequately define what happens to them. The baptized have already been initiated into another Christian family. And their reception into the Catholic Church has more to do with becoming Catholic than it has to do with being Christian. The influence of a Catholic culture should be more easily seen in the case of the baptized Christian coming for reception, but it is evident even in the case of the formation of the unbaptized.

Motivation and evangelization

Many motives inspire people to join the Catholic Church. Once a relationship has been established, Church ministers or volunteers offer catechetical formation and a series of liturgical rites to assist inquirers on their way.

According to a recent study, the primary reason why anyone wishes to join the Catholic Church is to unify the religious faith of the family. Not all those wishing to join the Church are married. But of those who are, fully 83 percent have Catholic spouses. [2] The second strongest reason people cite is a spiritual need and hunger related to family, health, death of a loved one, a feeling of emptiness or an inspiring experience. Third, people may feel lonely or a need for an authentic community. [3]

People have found themselves drawn to the Catholic Church through a variety of means: personal invitation, Catholic spouses and family, sacramental preparation, Catholic schools, inquiry meetings and classes, bulletin notices and announcements, Catholic revivals, parish

fairs and socials, newspaper and radio spots, billboards and flyers, mailings, bring a friend events, pew cards for visitors, censuses, and home visits. [4]

The Catholic Church is notoriously poor at evangelical efforts that other Church communities perform well. Whereas other Churches send their membership door to door to solicit recruits, or telephone homes to announce their presence, Catholics typically wait for people to say they'd like more information about the Church. However, as indicated above, when Catholics do reach out to their neighbor, they yield positive results.

Evangelization should be part of every Christian's life. But the Catholic culture does not evangelize well, perhaps out of some desire to be different from Churches who do, perhaps out of some smugness that the most excellent products should not need marketing in order to be sold. The Catholic culture limits the amount and kind of evangelization that Catholics do.

Precatechumenate: Catholic apologetics or evangelization?

The unbaptized interested in joining the Catholic Church go through a period of formation called the precatechumenate. Then they establish a formal relationship with the Church through a ritual called the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. Once the Church designates them as catechumens, they are considered members of the household of Christ and enter the period properly called the catechumenate. [5]

Baptized adults seeking to join the Catholic Church cannot enter a precatechumenate properly called because they are already baptized. However, most parishes invite them into a preliminary stage of spiritual reflection and simply blend them into the sessions called the precatechumenate.

During the precatechumenate, faithfully and constantly the living God is proclaimed and Jesus Christ whom he has sent for the salvation of all. [6] According to the rite, the focus of the precatechumenate is quite narrow. It is pure evangelization, bringing the gospel to those who may not yet have heard it. The precatechumenate proclaims the living God and Jesus Christ. It intends to determine if those who are interested in the Church have the most fundamental of beliefs: a belief in a God who lives, and in Jesus Christ, whom God has sent for the purpose of salvation.

At first, this purpose of the precatechumenate may seem unnecessary. For those who grew up in a Christian milieu, it might seem ridiculous to inquire whether or not people believe in God or in Jesus. But these foundational points are absolutely critical in baptismal preparation. Faith rests on these pillars.

Consequently, the liturgy of the Church directs that the content of the precatechumenate should be evangelical. However, many parish catechumenate programs, aided by published catechetical manuals, stress another goal during the precatechumenate. They use this period to describe what is unique about the Catholic Church, a kind of Catholic apologetics.

This is not completely out of line. Inquirers are indeed wondering what makes Catholics different. Why do Catholics pray to Mary? Why are the saints so important? Why can't priests

get married? Why do you stand, sit and kneel so much at church? Why do Catholics confess their sins to a priest? And so on. Inquirers may not so forthrightly ask questions about the Church's sexual mores, but they certainly wonder about these matters: Why is sex outside of marriage wrong? Why is homosexuality wrong? Why is birth control wrong? Why doesn't the Church recognize divorce and remarriage more easily? And so on.

The precatechumenate should handle the basic questions of faith posed by inquirers. They may set the agenda during this first period of formation. But the liturgy has more basic issues in mind: God and Christ. The period of the precatechumenate is the initial indicator that the community has two goals in initiation: Christian initiation and Catholic initiation.

Symbols of the pre-baptismal and baptismal rites

A series of rites precedes baptismal initiation. After the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, catechumens may experience word services that include anointing with the oil of catechumens. At the end of their formation they attend the Rite of Election, usually at the cathedral under the presidency of the bishop. The bishop formally calls them to be among God's elect, those chosen for baptism. During the period of purification and enlightenment, which usually coincides with Lent, they undergo the three scrutiny rites and celebrate the presentations of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. They also celebrate preparation rites on Holy Saturday morning.

These rites entail an expansive use of symbols. In the Rite of Acceptance, for example, those to become catechumens gather outside the door of the church, a symbol of their crossing over a threshold of faith. They receive a sign of the cross and are invited to reverence a book containing the gospels. Both events signify evangelization: catechumens are becoming acquainted with Christ and his holy Word.

In other rites, oil will signify sealing in good catechesis and sealing out evil influences. The names of the catechumens, symbols of their very selves, will be called aloud at the Rite of Election. They will hear the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, two texts that define the community's belief and inscribe its central prayer.

In the rites of initiation those being baptized will experience the cleansing, destructive and restorative power of water. They will be anointed and consecrated with perfumed oil. The imposition of hands will signify the calling down of the Holy Spirit. These neophytes will receive special clothing: a white garment, the uniform of the body of Christ. They will hold a lighted candle, a sign of the risen Christ who personally fills their lives of faith. Most gloriously, they will share in the eucharist, the body and blood of Christ under the forms of bread and wine, symbols of the staff of life, sacrifice, and the joy of sharing a meal.

All these symbols help unfold the meaning of the rites they accompany. But they do something else. They announce a foundational spirituality of Roman Catholicism. We are a religion of concrete symbols. We use the stuff of the earth: fire, water, oil, bread, wine, threshold and word. We use natural symbols. The preponderance of these symbols expresses what makes us culturally Catholic, not just Christian. This connection with the earth is one reason why the Church's liturgy seems Luddite. It eschews slick electronic media. It has accepted sound

reinforcement and electric lights, but never to the elimination of live music and candles. Even the pipe organ remains a preferred musical instrument over its electronic cousins because it relies on metal, wood and air to produce its sound.

Baptized candidates for reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church have an optional set of parallel rites in the United States, but they do not explore the full range of symbols listed above. They do celebrate confirmation and communion at the time of their reception.

The rites of Christian Initiation, then, are celebrated by means of very Catholic symbols a panoply of them, all rooted in the natural elements of the created world. In every way, they announce belief in a Creator who constantly intervenes in human life.

However, even though all these symbols profess a very Catholic piety, and even though catechetical formation centers for a large part on how Catholics differ from other Christians, the liturgy of the Church is very clear about its goal for the catechumenate: the Christian initiation of adults. One is baptized into the body of Christ. No baptismal formula states, I baptize you into the Catholic Church in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism primarily concerns a relationship to Christ and the Church in the broadest definition of Church. All Christian baptisms accomplish what Catholic baptism does on its fundamental level: it makes someone a Christian. And that is the primary goal of initiation.

Full Communion

Nonetheless, the Catholic Church sees itself as the primary expression of Christianity. American culture, however, disagrees. American culture tends to neutralize the differences among Christian Churches and between Christians and other believers. It is not uncommon to hear even a faithful Catholic say about divergent believers, Well, we all have the same God. Or, We all travel different roads, but we are seeking the same goal.

The Catholic position was reiterated during the jubilee year of 2000 in *Dominus Iesus*, a document that ironically caused very little jubilation among other Christian denominations. The document, authored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, states that the Catholic Church is the continuation of the Church Jesus founded upon Peter.

With the expression *subsistit in*, the Second Vatican Council sought to harmonize two doctrinal statements: on the one hand, that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, and on the other hand, that outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth, that is, in those Churches and ecclesial communities which are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church. But with respect to these, it needs to be stated that they derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church. [7]

According to the Congregation, the Church Christ founded exists fully only in the Catholic Church, and imperfectly in other faith communities. Elements of sanctification and truth can be found outside the structure of the Catholic Church, but the fullness of Christ's Church, the Congregation states, is found only in the Catholic Church.

The document made no reference to the ecumenical dialogue that continues between the Catholic Church and many other ecclesial communities. These dialogues had been given much life after the Second Vatican Council issued its Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. *Dominus Iesus* said nothing much different from the Decree on Ecumenism, but it took a different tone. The Second Vatican Council's decree admitted past failures and promoted discussions and prayer leading toward unity. It catapulted Catholics into ecumenical dialogue. *Dominus Iesus* seems to curtail discussion. It takes a more authoritarian tone, where the council's document was more conciliatory. *Dominus Iesus* admits that inter-religious dialogue presupposes equality, but only in regard to the dignity of human persons, not to doctrinal content. It says the Church must be primarily committed to proclaiming the truth definitively revealed by the Lord. [8] Thus, in the opinion of *Dominus Iesus*, evangelization comes first, dialogue second.

The language of *Dominus Iesus* shed light on the very title of the rite used for receiving baptized Christians into the Catholic Church. The first English translation of this rite called it Reception of Baptized Christians into Full Communion with the Catholic Church. [9] But the final translation changed the title to the Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. [10] The change of preposition from with to of revealed a world of theology. Christians baptized in another ecclesial community do not enter communion with the Catholic Church. They enter the communion of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church does not share sacramental communion with other Christians. Those who are in the ecclesial communion of the Catholic Church share sacramental communion.

To the theologians of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, when people join the Catholic Church they are not just transferring over, as the occasional politician switches from the Republican to the Democratic party or vice versa. Rather, a healing is happening. One who was outside full communion is received.

This thinking fits with the history of the rite of reception. The early Church also faced the dilemma of Christians inside and outside the orthodox Church. Some were baptized by schismatics or heretics of Christianity. Others joined another sect after baptism in orthodox Christianity. Schismatics were reconciled with handlaying by the bishop. Heretics were reconciled with handlaying and an anointing. [11] Although the Catholic Church does not formally label as heretics those who were baptized in other ecclesial communions, the rite of reception uses the historical and liturgical grammar that makes this assumption. For those involved in the ecumenical dialogue, this is not pretty. The rite of reception carries with it a tone of reconciliation.

The liturgy and theology of the Catholic Church, therefore, have a different interpretation of the rite of reception than the actual people who undergo it. Officially, the Church sees the rite of reception as a restoration to the unicity of the Catholic Church. But most baptized candidates in the average parish see this as a way to bring a common religion to their marriage and family. Their interest relates to the house church, not to the universal church.

The interests of Catholic culture should have free reign in the case of baptized Christians preparing for the rite of reception. The whole process is not a matter of Christianization, which has already happened. It is a matter of becoming Catholic.

A Catholic Culture of Initiation

There is, then, a Catholic culture influencing baptismal initiation and the rite of reception. Even though the rites of initiation for the unbaptized are called rites of Christian initiation, and even though their preparation assumes that inquirers are coming to Christ and only then by implication to the Catholic Church, the preparation for and celebration of initiation are unabashedly Catholic.

So are the results. In cases of both the unbaptized and the baptized, joining the Catholic Church aligns a person with all that the culture perceives to be Catholic. New members may get the uniformity they desire for the faith of their household, but they also acquire personal identification with everything that is Catholic.

The catechumenate is no longer a uniquely Catholic phenomenon. The Catholic Church pioneered its restoration in the wake of the evangelization of nations after the sixteenth century and of the liturgical renewal in the twentieth century. But other Christian Churches are now restoring the catechumenate as well. For example, the United Methodist Church has produced *Come to the Waters*. [12] And the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has published *Welcome to Christ*. [13] Both build on the work begun by the Catholic Church, broadening the catechumenate's appeal to Christians of other denominations.

The liturgy of the Church, echoed now by other Christian Churches, has as its aim the Christian initiation of adults. But the exercise of the catechumenate in the Catholic Church has also become an inculturation into Catholicism.

Managing the Catholic Culture

If its practitioners perceive Christian initiation as Catholic initiation, they will undo the heart of the rite. Inculturation into Catholicism must take place, but the overall goal should remain broad. It is a goal that all Christian Churches share: baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Catholic culture means to influence initiation, but it should be managed. Initiation should preserve its Christian center.

The symbols of initiation need constant attention. Although the natural symbols will always speak to every human culture, cultural symbols will vary their meaning according to time and place. The rites of initiation call for symbols of affection, like a handshake, embrace or kiss. They call for accepting a cross and reverencing a book. They call for music. When the Catholic Church adapts these symbols to fit the culture, it affirms the overall work of Christian initiation, while it practices a very Catholic piety: the use of a culture's signs and symbols to express belief in God's plan of salvation through Christ.

As with any organization, the Catholic Church has developed its own vocabulary. Special terms help the Church express the uniqueness of our organization and beliefs. The vocabulary of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, however, is quite obscure. Terms unknown even to many

Catholics include catechumen, election, scrutiny, and mystagogy. The acronym RCIA confuses those unfamiliar with it but has remained strangely popular. Such terms lift the catechumenate out of everyday experience and suspend it in a realm that seems detached, unreachable. The retranslation of these terms into more common language might help the efforts of Christian initiation, while allowing the Catholic Church to spread the news by what it does best: connect the quotidian with the divine.

All Christian spirituality is rooted in community. Especially at the eucharist, the central celebration of faith, Catholics express belief together. In regard to baptism, the entire community of Christians shares the responsibility for the initiation of new members. [14] Inquirers will be joining a community of believers, not just a system of beliefs. The catechesis and rites of the catechumenate express this communitarian aspect of Christianity if they emphasize the role of all the people. Catholics, like other Christians, can be lulled into a privatized spirituality. Many find it difficult to think and pray as a community, rather than as individuals. But the catechumenate seeks this approach, formation in the midst of community, an essential ingredient of Christian spirituality, a particular challenge to the cultural Catholic.

Catholic spirituality could also be more faithful to its place within the broader Christian perspective. Parish teams working on the precatechumenate should keep the focus of this period on Christ. Many times these sessions leap into the kind of catechesis more properly the venue of the following period of formation, the catechumenate itself. During the period of the catechumenate the team has ample time to unfold the mysteries of Christ to catechumens. But during the precatechumenate, those interested in the Church ask their questions and the leaders keep refining their spiritual quest. Its goal is Christ. Keeping Christ at the center needs to be the core of all Catholic tradition.

Catholic culture can even be perceived in the gifts the newly baptized receive. After an Easter Vigil baptism the neophyte may receive gifts from friends and family. Many of these are praiseworthy items in and of themselves: missals, rosaries and lives of the saints, for example. But they reinforce a privatized spirituality that puts the newly baptized in prayerful isolation of the very community he or she has just joined. The best gifts for the newly baptized will help them integrate into the broader Catholic community not just by its devotional symbols but also by its communitarian life and worship.

Catholic initiation leaders will express their belief about baptism more clearly if they move the rite of reception out of the Easter Vigil and into another occasion during the year. Although adult baptisms should be celebrated at the Easter Vigil, receptions of baptized Christians may take place any time of year. It is preferable that the reception into full communion not take place at the Easter Vigil lest there be any confusion of such baptized Christians with the candidates for baptism, possible misunderstanding of or even reflection upon the sacrament of baptism celebrated in another Church or ecclesial community, or any perceived triumphalism in the liturgical welcome into the Catholic eucharistic community. [15] Celebrating these events separately will help nuance the precise nature of baptism, a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Conclusion

Adults joining the Catholic Church come unbaptized and baptized. The unbaptized go through a process culminating in rites called Christian initiation. The baptized culminate with reception into full Catholic communion. Catholic culture influences the way Catholics welcome new members the means of evangelization, the content of catechesis, and most importantly the ritual symbols of initiation.

Catholics think their new members are joining the Catholic Church more than joining the Christian Church. They tend to think themselves different from other Christians. Consequently, the specifically Christian thrust of the catechesis and liturgy that prepares for baptism sometimes eludes Catholic leaders.

In the end, a member of the Catholic Church is also a Christian. But the making of a Catholic belongs more to Catholic culture. The making of a Christian belongs to initiation.

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Footnotes:

[1] There are exceptions; for example, baptism in the name of Jesus and not in the name of the Trinity.

[2] Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000): 7.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 14.

[5] Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), passim.

[6] RCIA 36.

[7] 16.

[8] 22.

[9] Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1976.

[10] Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1988. Note, the Latin title had not changed. The English title was made more precise.

[11] Paul Turner, Sources of Confirmation from the Fathers through the Reformers (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press), pp. 85-92.

[12] Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996.

[13] Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997.

[14] Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults 9.

[15] #33, National Statutes for the Catechumenate, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986.