

REVISED EDITION 2002

A PASTORAL LITURGICAL COMMENTARY

J. Michael McMahon

The Rite
of Christian
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Initiation
of Adults



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Foreword

This revised edition of the FDLC commentary on the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* appears at a critical and promising juncture in the Church's life. We have just undergone a kind of "first generation," post-Council experience of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. The first English edition of the rite was issued in 1974. This was followed in 1988 by the present edition in use in the United States.

Some parishes and dioceses have been working with the rite since the mid-1970s, others for a dozen years or so. There is then a wealth of pastoral experience to draw upon as we look to the next generation of implementation. This revised commentary helps to bridge the wisdom contained in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* and the experience we now have of putting that wisdom into practice.

Readers will discover that this commentary invites us to look again and more attentively to the rite itself for our orientation and direction. This ritual book, as much as the present Order of Mass and perhaps more than any of the other revised rituals resulting from the Second Vatican Council, brings forward the ancient and lived wisdom of our ancestors in faith. The rite offers a vision and structured means of forming newcomers to Christian faith in the ways of living that faith. Not coincidentally, this vision also prepares the way for the transformation of communities of faith as they seek out and embrace these newcomers to Christ.

From the beginnings of the implementation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, visionary Church leaders have seen the possibility of this rite renewing the Catholic way of life in our dioceses and parishes. Rooted in the vision of an evangelizing community of faith, the rite embodies a way of being Church that focuses on building up the Body of Christ for Christ's mission in the world. This is a vision of evangelization leading to initiation leading to mission.

Further, something is being learned here that is critical for the initial and ongoing formation of all members of the household of Christ. The experience of the catechumenate brings a recovery of the ancient and perennial sources and means of Christian formation: the Word of God, liturgical celebration, the full life of the community of faith, and apostolic mission and service by that community (see RCIA, no. 75). In sum, it is about a way of being in the world and for its salvation in Christ, a world so beloved of God.

As this revised commentary attests, adaptation has been and will continue to be a large part of the implementation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. The rite invites adaptation for the very reason that such an extended process of formation and integration must reflect the realities of the Spirit working in the flesh and blood lives of those coming to faith and of the community that is forming them in its way of life. The commentary invites us to look again at the rite's openings and orientations to adaptation. With these once again in mind, we will be better equipped to consider afresh how we are adapting the rite in order to continue to keep faith with the rite's vision.

The insights of this commentary help prepare pastoral ministers for the second generation of work implementing the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. The wisdom found in these pages reflects a sure grasp of many of the strengths and weaknesses of the first generation of implementation, a glimpse of which can be found in a recently completed national study. Conducted throughout the United States between 1997 and 2000, this study of the implementation of the rite was sponsored by the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops with the assistance of The North American Forum on the Catechumenate. A report is available under the title *Journey to the Fullness of Life*. This report offers a very positive view of the success of the recovery of the catechumenate. Dioceses and most parishes have implemented the rite, many enthusiastically, and have found it a source of new life.

A few areas for ongoing development that emerged from the national study can be highlighted.

Evangelization

Of those coming through the catechumenal process, nearly 80 percent become interested because they are married to a Catholic spouse. This is good, but we are beginning to learn to reach beyond those already in touch with us through marriage, to realize that our neighborhoods and workplaces are peopled with those hungering for the Lord, sometimes unknowingly.

Liturgy

Many of those who knock on our door do so because of an experience of Catholic liturgical life. They tasted something of God and God's people in the experience. As "source and summit" of the Christian life, liturgy is clearly central to the whole process of the rite. Continuing and strong effort needs to be put into our liturgies, the Sunday liturgical celebration in particular.

Christian Teaching

Three-quarters of our parishes still have a process of less than a year, often following the school calendar. The rite assumes no less than a full liturgical year for the period of the catechumenate alone. At stake is formation in the full paschal mystery of Christ, which is unfolded through the Church's cycle of liturgical celebrations over the course of a whole liturgical year. From this unfolding the life-giving teachings of Christ and the Church emerge.

Community

Because initiation ministers realize that initiation is the work of the whole community, they often wonder how to get more people involved. The community regularly exercises its formative role in the Sunday liturgy, where newcomers are formed at the community's celebration of the liturgy of the word. Good proclamation and preaching are critical. In addition to this regular liturgical experience, these apprentice members of the household of faith should be immersed in the other aspects of the life of the community, e.g., outreach and service. In this way the community exercises its essential formative role in the Christian way of life.

Ecumenism

Local statistics vary, but nationally for every catechumen (unbaptized) going through the initiation process, there are two candidates (already baptized). There is need to do better distinguishing candidates who are catechized from those who are uncatechized. Already-catechized candidates, for example, fully practicing Christians seeking full communion, come to the eucharistic table as soon as they receive whatever formation is needed. Only uncatechized candidates belong in a catechumenate-like process adapted to their needs, with suitable formation and liturgical celebration. The ecumenical teaching of the Church is at stake in this.

Obstacles

The national study revealed that the two most common obstacles to people completing initiation are irregular marriage situations and inflexible scheduling. We are working to do better in our pastoral practice by these people. Canonists and other ministers need to coordinate their handling of marriage cases and look to early, faithful, and pastoral solutions. As for scheduling, we do well to recall the direction given in the rite (see RCIA, no. 5), that is, that initiation is a work of the Spirit—and the Spirit works on the Spirit's time schedule within the flesh and blood realities of individual lives. We need to stretch and be as responsive as possible to individual needs, for example, work schedules, multiple job situations, and family circumstances.

Congratulations and gratitude are owed to the FDLC for the excellent timing of this revised commentary and to Dr. J. Michael McMahon, its author. If the challenge of the next generation of work with the rite is to make a good thing happening in our midst even better, the insights in these pages will go a long way toward this goal. They will help us focus our attention once again on the inherent wisdom of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* and its great promise for the future of our Catholic community of faith.

James M. Schellman

The North American Forum on the Catechumenate

Introduction

When the first edition of this book appeared in 1986, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* had been published just over ten years. Parishes in English speaking countries at that time were using a provisional translation of the Rite that had been prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) in 1974. In the United States, pastoral ministers had been encouraged by the bishops to experiment with the rite, so that eventually the preparation of a definitive edition of the ritual book for this country might benefit from broad pastoral experience.

In preparing its new translation of the RCIA, ICEL rearranged some of the material in the ritual book to allow for greater ease of use by pastoral ministers. Meanwhile, the U.S. Bishops Committee on the Liturgy established a committee to recommend adaptations to be included in the American edition of the Rite, taking into account the experience of parishes that had been using the provisional text as their guide. After the committee had completed its work, the U.S. edition of the RCIA was approved by the full body of the bishops and confirmed by the Holy See. This new edition was published in 1988, and has gradually been taking root throughout the U.S.

This second edition of the liturgical commentary has been expanded to include the new material that is now part of the U.S. edition of the Rite, and to reflect the pastoral experience of communities where the Rite has been celebrated with care. The historical sections have been revised to take account of more recent scholarship in the field, and the bibliography has been updated to provide readers with access to some fine newer works on initiation.

This edition also takes account of two important pastoral issues that have emerged as major concerns in the implementation of the RCIA in the United States. First, a substantial number of parents have presented for initiation children who have reached the age where they can be catechized and make their own profession of faith. The formation of these children for initiation and the celebration of their faith journey in the midst of the community have become major concerns of pastoral ministers.

Second, in the U.S. there are far more baptized candidates seeking to become Catholics than there are adult catechumens seeking baptism. Early in the process of implementation, many parishes began to use the rites of the catechumenate for these baptized candidates without much attention to the ecclesial, catechetical, liturgical, or pastoral problems that such a practice posed. The U.S. edition of the Rite has sought to address these problems by including norms for the formation of baptized candidates and adapted rites appropriate for them.

As implementation of the RCIA has proceeded, it has become clear that this effort requires attention to every aspect of parish life. The Rite presumes not only a lively liturgical life, but also solid catechetical formation, strong community bonds, thoughtful pastoral care, commitment to evangelization and service, and ecumenical sensitivity. Since the liturgical aspects of the Rite are so strongly related to the other dimensions of the life of the Christian community, I have called this second edition a “pastoral liturgical commentary,” and have attempted throughout the book to point out important connections.

This book is primarily intended for those who prepare the rites of Christian initiation and for other pastoral ministers concerned with the implementation of the RCIA in their communities. The book might also be helpful for students in universities, seminaries, and ministry formation programs who are interested in a general overview of the liturgical and pastoral issues involved in preparing catechumens and candidates for initiation and in celebrating the rites. The study questions at the end of each chapter also are included for liturgy committees or adult study groups that might find this book helpful in increasing their own understanding of the Rite, its background, and the issues involved in its pastoral implementation.

The historical material offered in this book is meant only to give the reader a general background for the RCIA and its various periods and steps. Those who would like to study the rather complex history of Christian initiation would benefit greatly from the excellent books cited in the bibliography, particularly the works of Maxwell Johnson and Paul Turner.

The documentation included in this book is quite complete, but does not include the actual texts of the rites nor every pertinent paragraph from the Church's documents. It will be helpful for readers to have a copy of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* close at hand, especially so that they can refer to the prayers and other texts not found in this book.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, which invited me to undertake this project, and to all who have supported me in it: Lawrence Johnson, who edited the first edition; Michael Spillane and Joseph Skeffington, who suggested this second edition; Hillary Hayden, OSB, and Thomas Morris, who read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions; Glenn Byer, who edited the present edition; Richard Gibala, who offered much needed encouragement; and James Schellman, who provided an illuminating foreword to this edition. My gratitude extends also to the many women and men with whom I have been privileged to serve in the initiation ministry, especially to my colleagues and friends at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Community in Alexandria, Virginia; St. Mark's Parish in Vienna, Virginia; and at the North American Forum on the Catechumenate.

I dedicate this book to my parents, John and Helen McMahan, and to Rev. Thomas A. Casey, who have helped to form me in faith. As they have died with Christ, may they share his resurrection.

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1. The Christian Initiation of Adults: An Historical Sketch

The New Testament

In the New Testament, becoming a Christian meant becoming a member of the Christian community through insertion into the Christ event, which is the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Paul reminded the Romans that:

[we] were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

One becomes a part of the community bearing Christ's name by participating in the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

In the earliest writings of the New Testament, the letters of Paul, baptism is pivotal for an understanding of the Christian life. Baptism into Christ brings about a radical change in a person, and therefore a radical change in one's way of life. Paul is fond of pointing out the contrasts between the old self and the new self that has been baptized into Christ and thus transformed: "For just as through the disobedience of the one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Through our death with Christ in baptism, we have become one with him. Our old sinful self is destroyed, and we who have died with Christ now "believe that we shall also live with him" (Romans 6:8).

Our lives are transformed in baptism and now as "children of light" we are called to put aside "the fruitless works of darkness" (Colossians 3:8-14). For Paul, initiation bears strong ethical implications. Once we have shared in Christ's death, there is no turning back to our former way of life. We have put on Christ (cf. Galatians 3:27) and cast off our old selves. Paul concludes,

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. (Colossians 3:12-14)

The New Testament regards water baptism as the only ritual act by which one may become a member of Christ's body, the Church, with the exception of those who were the original witnesses of the Christ event. The apostles and a number of other men and women who followed Jesus had seen the risen Lord and received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. By virtue of their direct experience of the Risen One, they had already been initiated into Christ's death and resurrection. But for those who came to faith through hearing the proclamation of the good news, water baptism was necessary for entry into the Christian community.

The New Testament provides us with no handbook for the liturgical usage of the early Christian communities. We have no detailed accounts of the process by which a person was initiated or of the rites that were celebrated at initiation. This is not to say, however, that the New Testament is completely silent on the pattern of initiation. A careful reading of the evidence suggests the following points.

1. *Adult baptism as normative.* The New Testament reports only the baptism of adults. While there is no prohibition against the baptism of children, all of the baptismal accounts in the Acts of the Apostles concern adults capable of making a response of faith to the word proclaimed. Nonetheless, several New Testament passages speak of a household being baptized, which some assume to include children (see Acts of the Apostles 16:15; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Even in

these cases, however, baptism is given based on the mature faith response of the adults who headed the household.

2. *Proclamation.* Baptism is always preceded by the proclamation of the *kerygma*, the good news about Jesus Christ. A classic formulation of the *kerygma*, the kernel of the Christian profession of faith, can be found in Peter's sermon to the crowd on the day of Pentecost:

You who are Israelites, hear these words. Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him. But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it.... Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts of the Apostles 2:22–24, 36)

All the baptismal stories in Acts include a proclamation of this message: Jesus, the Crucified One, has been raised up by God, and is now exalted as Lord.

3. *Catechesis.* In addition to the proclamation of the *kerygma*, baptismal preparation included catechesis in the mystery of Christ. Peter's sermon on Pentecost, for example, reflected on the connections between the Christ event and the traditions of Israel. The resurrection of Jesus is understood in light of Psalm 16:

Therefore my heart has been glad and my tongue has exulted; my flesh, too, will dwell in hope, because you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, nor will you suffer your holy one to see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence. (Acts of the Apostles 2:26–28; see Psalm 16:9–11)

For Luke, the author of Acts, the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection is brought out by searching the writings of the Old Testament. In their preaching, the apostles followed the lead of the Risen One himself, who opened the minds of the disciples on the road to Emmaus by explaining the meaning of the scriptures, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" (Luke 24:27). Even the Ethiopian eunuch who was baptized somewhat abruptly by Philip had already been studying the prophets, and was opened up to their true meaning by Philip's instruction (see Acts of the Apostles 8:26–40).

The Letter to the Hebrews also makes reference to initial catechesis in the Christian life. The author chided his hearers, who needed once again to hear "the basic elements of the utterances of God"; they were in need of "milk, [and] not solid food" (Hebrews 5:12).

4. *Conversion.* Throughout the New Testament, initiation is linked to conversion. Those who hear the proclamation of the good news make a response of faith in the risen and exalted Lord, a response which includes a thorough change in their way of life. Since believers are baptized into the death of Christ, they put to death the old sinful self and put on the new person, recreated in Christ (see Galatians 3:27).

In the Acts of the Apostles, repentance is regarded as the mark of conversion. After the people had listened to Peter's proclamation on Pentecost, they were "cut to the heart" (Acts of the Apostles 2:37) and asked what they should do. Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit" (Acts of the Apostles 2:38). A faith response which includes a reorientation of one's life always precedes water baptism.

5. *Water Baptism.* It has already been noted that the New Testament regards the water bath as the central ritual act for entrance into the Christian community.

The practice of the water bath was by no means unique to Christianity: it was practiced in other cultures in which Christianity developed and into which it spread. The New Testament itself recounts the baptismal practices of John the Baptist and describes the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan

River. Although this baptism of Jesus is not the same as the baptism that Christians receive, it suggests a pattern: As he emerges from the water, Jesus receives the Holy Spirit and is proclaimed Son of God. Succeeding generations of Christians have likewise regarded their own baptism as adoption as sons and daughters of God through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' time Judaism made use of a number of washing customs, among which was the baptism of Gentiles who became Jews. Of course, the New Testament regards Christian baptism quite differently from these other Jewish baths, but there are undeniable similarities as well.

The baptismal bath gives ritual expression to the experiences of conversion described above.¹ The believer is completely transformed in the waters of baptism. Our sins are washed away and we are made new (see 1 Corinthians 6:11). Just as the people of Israel had been "baptized into Moses" (1 Corinthians 10:2) in their passage through the Red Sea, so in the bath of baptism a person is baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts of the Apostles 19:5), an act by which we become sharers in Christ's death (see Romans 6:1–11).

Because we have not had an immediate experience of Christ, it is through baptism that we join the company of those who were the original witnesses to the risen Lord. Out of the water we rise as members of a new people, joined in the one body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

6. *The Gift of the Holy Spirit.* The New Testament understanding of baptism would be quite incomplete without mention of the unbreakable connection between baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christian baptism is not of water only, but of the Spirit.

On Pentecost, in response to his hearers' question, "What are we to do?" Peter drew together the three elements of repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts of the Apostles 2:37–38). Those who were willing to change their lives and be baptized would receive from God the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Although Acts is quite consistent in its inclusion of the Spirit in its various conversion stories, it is quite inconsistent with regard to its position in the initiatory sequence. After the Ephesians were baptized, Paul laid hands on them and then they received the Holy Spirit (see Acts of the Apostles 19:5–6). But it was only *after* the Holy Spirit had come upon the Gentile Cornelius that Peter was convinced that he and his household could be baptized (see Acts of the Apostles 10:44–48). In a different vein, Samaritans who had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus received the Holy Spirit only when Peter and John had been sent from Jerusalem to lay their hands upon them (see Acts of the Apostles 8:14–17).

As in Acts, the entire New Testament regards the gift of the Holy Spirit as intimately connected with water baptism. It is unclear, however, whether there was a consistent, separate liturgical rite that ritualized the giving of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen from Acts, the laying on of hands is explicitly referred to in connection with the gift of the Spirit. In other places anointing is mentioned. Just as Jesus had been made the *Christos* (Greek, "the Anointed One"), so God has "put his seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment" (2 Corinthians 1:22).

The Spirit then is the "seal" of our initiation into Christ and into the community of those who have experienced the Christ event, awaiting in joyful hope the fulfillment of the messianic hopes. It is the Spirit who binds together the whole body: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

¹ For more information on the water bath, see Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rites of Christian Initiation*, Studies in the Reformed Rites of the Catholic Church, Volume 1 (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1978), 28–30.

Second Century

The writings of the second century add very little to the New Testament understanding of Christian initiation. For the first time, however, we are given accounts of *how* initiation was celebrated.

The *Didache*, known also as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, originates from Syria in the late first or early second century. The first section of this document concerns “the two ways”: the way of life and the way of death. There is disagreement among scholars as to whether or not this body of moral instruction formed the basis for catechetical instruction in preparation for baptism.

After its treatment of the two ways, the *Didache* turns to the procedure for baptism.² In preparation for baptism, there was to be a fast by the candidate, the minister, and (if possible) by the whole community. Baptism was preferably to be by immersion in cold, running water and given “in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

A somewhat more detailed account than that of the *Didache* is found in the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr, written in Rome around the middle of the second century. We can infer from Justin’s description a preparation of some length which led the candidate to a confession of faith and to conversion of life:

As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them.³

As in the *Didache*, the immediate preparation for baptism included prayer and fasting by the candidate and the community. Because Christians assembled in private homes during this period, Justin tells us that the candidates were “brought by us where there is water” to be baptized in the name of the Trinity.⁴

The newly baptized of Justin’s community were led to the place of assembly where for the first time they shared in the community’s common prayer, the kiss of peace, and the eucharistic fellowship.⁵ Here for the first time we find the eucharistic sharing mentioned explicitly as an integral part of the initiation event.

Justin’s second century account of Christian initiation affirms the New Testament elements of repentance, faith and conversion. In addition, we find here the practice of a pre-baptismal fast and an explicit connection between baptism and the eucharist as sacraments of initiation.

Third Century

Up to the beginning of the third century, we have no evidence of a formalized catechumenate operating in the various churches. Second century sources, however, do point to a preparation of sufficient length to elicit in the candidate a faith response marked by reorientation of one’s life toward God in Christ.

During the third century the catechumenate, as a formalized period of preparation integral to the initiation process for adults, began to take root in churches throughout the Christian world. Commenting on the differing theological emphases and structures of the catechumenate in various churches in the third century, Maxwell Johnson makes the following observation: “Nevertheless in both East and West, the overall purpose of the catechumenate appears to be that of formation in Christian living, rather than training in doctrinal content.”⁶ The documents that we have from this

² *Didache* 7 in E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, second ed. (London: SPCK, 1970), 1.

³ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, ed. Alexander Robert and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), 183.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 87.

period reflect a variety of traditions concerning preparation for baptism and the various ritual practices that preceded and followed it.⁷

The initiation practices of the church in Alexandria, Egypt are described by Origen, the great teacher and director of the catechetical school there. His descriptions, however, provide few details and leave us with many questions. Some of the students in Origen's school were preparing for baptism, and these candidates are referred to as catechumens. During the course of their preparation they were instructed in Christian beliefs and way of life, and received exorcisms. The length of the catechumenate in Origen's community is unclear, because his references to three years of instruction probably refer to the general course of study at the catechetical school. The actual preparation of catechumens may have taken place only during the forty-day fast prior to baptism.

Origen is silent about whether baptism was celebrated at Easter or on any special day. The catechumens were required to make a renunciation of false gods and to make a profession of faith before they were baptized in water in the name of the Trinity. Anointing for the gift of the Holy Spirit accompanied the ritual of the water bath, but interestingly it appears likely that this anointing was given immediately before baptism rather than after. It is likewise unclear whether or not the celebration of the eucharist or any other rite followed immediately upon baptism. Significantly, Origen speaks approvingly of infant baptism and regards it as an apostolic custom.

In his *De Baptismo* ("On Baptism"), the third-century theologian Tertullian attests to the existence of the catechumenate in the north African city of Carthage, near present-day Tunis in Tunisia. Noting that Christians are made, not born, Tertullian described a catechumenate at Carthage that lasted for a significant period of time, probably several years. Although he regarded Easter as the pre-eminent time for baptism, Tertullian says that the celebration of initiation could take place on Pentecost or even at another time. The baptismal rite included a blessing of water, a renunciation of sin, and a three-fold profession of faith. The newly baptized were anointed with oil, signed with the cross, and had hands laid on them for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Finally, they participated in the celebration of the eucharist, where they received not only the eucharistic elements, but also a mixture of milk and honey.⁹ Unlike Origen, Tertullian was strongly opposed to the practice of infant baptism.¹⁰

One of the most complete records of the catechumenal process from this period is found in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus. This document had been thought at one time to date from as early as 215, reflecting the practice of a Christian community in Rome. Unfortunately, the original Greek text exists only in fragments, and so the document comes to us only through later translations. Scholars now suspect that the text we have today may include material from a somewhat later period. For this reason, and because the original text itself may have come from a small schismatic community, it is not clear to what extent the description found in this document corresponded to mainstream practice. Whether or not the *Apostolic Tradition* represents early third century Roman practice, the section on Christian initiation is extraordinary for its detail and is consistent with fourth century developments in the practice of initiation. This document was also quite influential during the development of the current *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*.

The process of initiation described by Hippolytus took place in stages. Before people were even admitted as "hearers of the word" (in Greek, *catechumanoi*), inquiry was made as to their state in life:

⁷ For a more detailed account of initiation practices in the writings of Origen and Tertullian, see Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: the Liturgical Press, 1999), 56–66; also Paul Turner, *The Hallelujah Highway: A History of the Catechumenate* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000), 26–35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19

⁹ Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3, in Whitaker, op. cit., 9–10.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, 18, in Whitaker, op. cit., 8–9.

whether they were married or unmarried, slaves or free persons. Hippolytus also directed that the community examine the professions of prospective candidates.

Even before the community received a person as a hearer of the word, there was concern to determine the individual's reason for embracing the faith. Candidates were to be brought by community members who could testify "that they are competent to hear the word."¹¹

Catechumens normally were to spend three years as hearers of the word. During this period they came together for regular instruction with the rest of the community, not in separate sessions for them alone. After the instruction, which took place in a liturgical setting, the catechumens prayed separately from the rest of the assembly and refrained from giving the kiss of peace. At the conclusion of this gathering, the catechist, whether a cleric or a layperson, laid hands on the catechumens, prayed over them, and dismissed them.

After three years of formation in God's word, catechumens were to be examined again to see if they were ready to be chosen for baptism. They were judged suitable if their sponsors could testify to their conversion of life, "whether they have lived soberly, whether they have honored the widows, whether they have visited the sick, whether they have been active in well-doing."¹²

If they were now ready to be admitted to baptism, these elect ("chosen ones") were permitted to hear the gospel. Each day hands were laid on them in exorcism, so that they could be purified in preparation for baptism.

Immediate preparation for baptism included a bath on the Thursday before their baptism and a fast on Friday. On Saturday the bishop laid hands on them once again in exorcism before they began the night vigil, during which they listened to readings and instructions.

The celebration of baptism took place as Sunday dawn drew near. The bishop prayed over the baptismal water and then the elect removed their clothing. Children were baptized first, then the men and finally the women. Baptism was performed by immersion, with the candidate standing naked in the water. As they came out of the water, their bodies were immediately anointed with perfumed oil.

When the newly baptized were brought back into the assembly, they were anointed with the "oil of thanksgiving" by the bishop. Then for the first time they joined in the common prayer of the community, gave the kiss of peace, and shared in the eucharist with the rest of the faithful.

As in Tertullian's community at Carthage, the newly baptized drank from three cups, one filled with water, a second with milk and honey, and the third with the consecrated wine. Drinking from these cups gave expression to the transformation brought about by incorporation into Christ.

The preparation for and celebration of sacramental initiation in Hippolytus' community was meant to be lived out in the lives of the neophytes. Each of the newly initiated was to "hasten to do good works, and to please God and to live aright, devoting himself to the church, practicing the things he has learned, advancing in the service of God."¹³

Fourth and Fifth Centuries

The pastoral situation of the churches began gradually to shift at the beginning of the fourth century as Christianity's legal status changed from persecution to toleration to official state recognition.

While the Edict of Milan issued by the Roman emperor Constantine in the year 313 opened the way for Christians publicly to proclaim their faith without fear, this development ultimately led to a far weaker sense of commitment on the part of so many who sought to enter the catechumenate. Not only were new candidates free from fear of personal danger, but now there were considerable numbers of Christians. As Christianity became the religion of the empire, more and more people sought to become catechumens, so that they could bear the title of "Christian." The initial conversion required of candidates before admission to the catechumenate began to fade, and baptism tended to be postponed

¹¹ Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 16.2, trans. Burton Scott Easton (Archon Books, 1962).

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.1

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.11

until later, even to the end of one's life. Some of the best known saints of this era, including Ambrose, Augustine and John Chrysostom, were enrolled in the catechumenate early in life, only to be baptized much later.

As a result of these changes in the Church's pastoral practice, the formative character of the catechumenate itself was lost. It could last anywhere from two years to a lifetime. Consequently, greater emphasis came to be placed on the final weeks of preparation for baptism at Easter. As Lent drew near each year, bishops encouraged catechumens to turn to Christ and to be baptized. John Chrysostom was among those who attempted to reverse the trend toward later and later baptism: "Is it not the utmost stupidity to postpone the gift? Listen you catechumens and you who put off your own salvation until the last gasp!"¹⁴

The catechumens wishing to be baptized at Easter gave over their names to the bishop at the beginning of Lent. The Spanish nun and traveler Egeria described the public examination of candidates that took place in Jerusalem on the second day of Lent.¹⁵ Each candidate came with his or her sponsor before the bishop and the presbyters. The bishop then inquired of the candidate's neighbors about his or her way of life before election for baptism. At one time this sort of initial examination had taken place before admission to the catechumenate.

During Lent, which lasted eight weeks in Jerusalem, the candidates met daily for an exorcism and a three-hour catechetical session. For the first five weeks they were instructed on the whole Bible (beginning with Genesis and ending with the resurrection, Egeria informs us), and for the next two weeks on the Creed, taken article by article.

During Holy Week the immediate preparation for baptism took place, culminating in the Easter Vigil, which was celebrated much like it had been described in the *Apostolic Tradition* of the third century.

In addition to the Lenten catecheses preceding baptism, the fourth and fifth centuries saw the development of the great post-baptismal or mystagogical catecheses, given during Easter week.

These baptismal homilies, which the neophytes heard in the days after the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, helped them to understand the meaning of the rites that they had experienced. Churches during this period allowed only the fully initiated to know the details of the sacramental rites. Even the texts of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer were not taught to catechumens until just a few weeks before their baptism. Because of this *disciplina arcani* ("discipline of the secret"), they knew very little about the rites of initiation that they were to experience. Since only baptized members of the faithful were permitted to be present for the liturgy of the Eucharist, their first experience of the full eucharistic celebration would be on the night of their baptism.

The mystagogical catecheses of bishops like Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Jerusalem, and John Chrysostom provide us with a wealth of information on the way that baptism, anointing (confirmation), and the eucharist were celebrated in various communities of this period. At the same time, we are heirs to their marvelous catechetical instructions on these sacraments, which focus not only on the meaning of each specific rite, but also on the implications of these rites for the Christian life.

The great teaching bishops of these centuries were above all pastors. Faced with large numbers of mediocre catechumens, these bishops reshaped the formation process to call people to personal faith in the risen Lord as members of the Christian community. Given a situation unlike that of preceding generations reaching back to the New Testament communities, these bishops continued to proclaim

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, trans. Paul W. Harkins, Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 31 (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1963), 179.

¹⁵ Egeria, *Peregrinatio*, 45, Egeria's Travels: Newly translated with supporting documents and notes, third edition (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1999) 161-162.

the good news of Christ and to call forth from their hearers a spirit of repentance, a confession of faith in the risen and exalted Lord, and a conversion of life.

Because the writings of the Fathers during this era are so extensive and detailed, these centuries are sometimes regarded as a “golden age” of the liturgy and of Christian initiation. Yet the seeds of decline are already evident. As we have seen, admission to the catechumenate had lost its connection to conversion. No longer did becoming a catechumen necessarily signify one’s desire for baptism and for new life in Christ.

Bishops attempted to adjust catechumenal structures to address the new pastoral situation. The enrollment of names at the beginning of Lent had once been the time when the Church called to the sacraments those who had experienced a deepening of their initial conversion through three years of reflection and formation. Now the enrollment of names was celebrated for those who were persuaded to make their first turn toward Christ. The formation which had once begun with acceptance into the catechumenate now began with the enrollment of names, and was shortened from a period of years to a period of weeks.

Sixth Century through Middle Ages

The decline in the catechumenate, begun in the fourth and fifth centuries, proceeded rapidly in the sixth century and beyond.

Candidates for baptism were now presumed to be infants. The connection between the rites and the faith experience of the candidates slipped even further. A rite developed for use with adults marking a commitment arising from a mature faith continued to be celebrated for the admission of infants to the catechumenate with godparents speaking in their name; elaborate ceremonies then took place during the period of Lenten preparation.

The theology of original sin also began to take hold and led to the celebration of baptism as soon as possible after birth because of the high rate of infant mortality. Baptism thus came to be celebrated at any time of the year, obscuring the connection between initiation and the Easter celebration of the paschal mystery. In thirteenth century England, only those children born within eight days before Easter or Pentecost were baptized on those feasts.

In the Western church, the rite of anointing by the bishop after baptism, which gradually came to be known by the name *confirmation*, also gradually became separated from the celebration of baptism and Eucharist. Parish priests baptized and gave communion to infants as soon as possible after birth, with confirmation postponed until the bishop could next make a visit to the parish. In the Eastern church, infants continued to receive baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist in one single celebration.

By the Middle Ages the catechumenate was virtually dead. As various missionary efforts went forward, however, voices were sometimes raised in support of a suitable preparation for adult converts. When in the eighth and ninth centuries, for example, Charlemagne demanded mass conversions in areas added to his empire, Alcuin devised a catechetical program that would provide a preparation program of seven to forty days.

Even such praiseworthy efforts were a far cry from the catechumenate of old, which began with the proclamation of the good news and led to a response of initial conversion, an extensive period of formation, and a process of initiation which took place in stages. No longer did Christian initiation bring together the elements of liturgy and catechesis, ritual and faith experience.

Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries

The Reformation might have been expected to bring about some positive changes in the practice of adult Christian initiation. With few exceptions, however, baptism in Reformation communities

continued to be celebrated almost exclusively with infants, though with simplified rites in the vernacular.¹⁶ Thus, little attention was paid to the initiation of adults.

The Counter-Reformation saw the launching of great missionary efforts among Catholics. In the sixteenth century, Catholic missionaries from Europe found their way to America, Africa, and Asia. Perhaps foremost of these was the Spanish Jesuit, Francis Xavier, who baptized tens of thousands of converts in Asia with little thought of preparation or pastoral care. Although efforts were made by the Augustinians and provincial councils in Latin America to restrict the times for baptism, these reform efforts were largely ignored and thus proved ineffectual.

Following the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and its call for new liturgical books, the first thoroughgoing approach to the Christian initiation of adults in several centuries was undertaken by Cardinal Giulio Santori.¹⁷ In his proposal for a new adult initiation rite, Santori included a formal rite of admission to the catechumenate, a formation period of forty days, and the integral celebration of the three sacraments of initiation, if possible at the Easter Vigil or on Pentecost. Unfortunately, Santori died in 1602, the same year in which he completed work on the ritual. Although it was never implemented, it influenced a somewhat similar work by the Carmelite Thomas of Jesus, who in 1613 published *On the Manner of Procuring Salvation for All Pagans*. This latter work incorporated the ritual drawn up by Santori, and added catechetical material for the instruction of catechumens. This work by Thomas of Jesus was given by the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to missionaries leaving for Asia.

As eighteenth and nineteenth century missionaries in Africa began to wrestle with the issue of adequate preparation for baptism, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, founder of the Missionaries of Africa, known also as the “White Fathers” because of their white habit, provided the impetus for the restoration of the catechumenate in Africa. Beginning late in the nineteenth century, his vision led to a gradual process of preparation for baptism that took place in stages over a period of four years. This process was rooted in Lavigerie’s conviction that conversion occurs step by step and that adequate time is required for the journey of faith.

In the African model, a candidate would spend two years as a postulant and two years as a catechumen in preparation for baptism. Ceremonies marked the stages of this process, but the rites were not linked to the faith experience of the candidates. Rather, they consisted more in the giving of rosaries, medals, or crucifixes at various steps.

As the African missionary efforts were to provide the impetus for a restored catechumenal process for adults, so European liturgical scholarship was to provide models for ritualizing it, models rooted deeply in the Church’s own tradition.

In April 1962, just months before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, the Sacred Congregation of Rites approved a new edition of the Roman Ritual which included a rite for the initiation of adults in seven stages. This was accomplished by dividing the existing baptismal ritual into seven parts. At long last the Church gave official recognition to the need for an adult initiation process including stages marked by liturgical rites. A more thorough reform of adult initiation would take place in the wake of Vatican II.

Vatican II and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

The restoration of the catechumenate was mandated by the Second Vatican Council in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (nos. 64–66), the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops (no. 14), and the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (no. 14). The Council also made reference

¹⁶ The only notable exception in the sixteenth century to the Protestant acceptance of infant baptism was a small sect known as Anabaptists (Greek for *re-baptizers*), which refused to acknowledge the authenticity of infant baptism.

¹⁷ See Paul Turner, *The Hallelujah Highway*, 130–134.

to the catechumenate in the Decree on Priests (no. 6) and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (no. 14).

The catechumenate for adults was to be comprised of distinct steps marked by liturgical rites. The Council's vision included not merely a doctrinal preparation for baptism, but "a formation in the whole of Christian life and sufficiently prolonged period of training."¹⁸ Once again, initiation was connected to the Lent-Easter cycle, with a recovered sense of baptism finding its proper place within the Church's annual celebration of Christ's death and resurrection. Initiation was envisioned by the Council as the concern of all the baptized, not only of catechists and priests.

After the Council, experimental drafts of a rite for adult initiation were issued in 1966 and 1969. These eventually led to the promulgation of the Latin text of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in 1972.

U.S. Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

A provisional English translation of the RCIA was issued in 1974 by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), and was subsequently adopted by the bishops of the United States. The bishops wisely encouraged parish communities to make generous use of the options and adaptations of this provisional version of the rite in an effort to address the various pastoral needs of adults seeking to become Catholic Christians.

The Latin version of the RCIA is a collection of rites intended for use with those who have never been baptized. As parish communities began to implement the provisional version of this rite in the 1970's and 1980's, pastors and other pastoral ministers faced large number of women and men who had already been baptized, but were in need of a conversion based process that would lead them to full sacramental participation in the Church. Some of these candidates had been baptized in the Catholic Church as infants, but had never been catechized or completed their sacramental initiation through confirmation and eucharist. Some adults seeking to become Catholics had already been baptized in other Christian churches. Pastoral ministers faced the tension between the ecumenical importance of recognizing the significance of the common baptism that we already shared with these candidates, and the need for some form of pastoral formation for those seeking to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church.

Under the leadership of Christianne Brusselmans, a group of over two hundred pastoral ministers and diocesan leaders came together in Estes Park, Colorado in 1981 to consider together the ways in which the RCIA could be implemented more broadly in North America. The participants of this meeting established the North American Forum on the Catechumenate, and asked Father James Dunning to serve as its leader. Forum began to offer institutes throughout the United States and Canada for clergy, catechists, sponsors, liturgists, musicians, and other pastoral ministers who worked in the ministry of adult initiation. Forum served not only as a vehicle for training ministers in the theology and practice of Christian initiation ministry, but also served as a "forum" for sharing the grassroots experience of implementing the vision of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

After ICEL had prepared its normative edition of the RCIA in 1985, the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops established an ad hoc committee to listen to the experience of implementing the provisional version of the rite and to take a hard look at the pastoral issues involved in ministering to adults seeking Christian initiation. The work of this committee yielded a much expanded version of the RCIA for use in the United States. Not surprisingly, this version contains various adapted rites for use with baptized but uncatechized candidates, along with combined rites in communities that have both (unbaptized) catechumens and baptized candidates. After approval by the U.S. bishops, and confirmation by the Holy See, the new edition of the RCIA was mandated for use in the dioceses of the United States in 1988.

¹⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, 14, DOL 146.

Study Questions

1. What are the implications of the New Testament teaching on baptism for the lives of Christians today?
2. What do the New Testament writers mean by conversion?
3. What significance did the baptismal bath carry in the New Testament?
4. What significance does the New Testament attach to the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism?
5. What would it be like to undergo the sort of formation process described in the Apostolic Tradition and to experience the initiation rites described there?
6. What were the forces that led to the dissolution of the rites of initiation?
7. What are some of the forces around us today that have brought about the recovery of a community based, conversion oriented process of adult Christian initiation?

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