

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
INITIATION OF CHILDREN OF CATECHETICAL AGE

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I. Introduction

The initiation process for children of catechetical age is based on the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Often misunderstood as a program of “sacramental catch-up,” the process for children, like adults, is a spiritual journey of conversion as they grow in their relationship with Jesus and his Church. Thus, the process includes: introducing children to the life of Jesus; inviting them to a life of prayer and discipleship; engaging them in an extended process of formation that may even last several years; and addressing the broader needs of their families. As in the adult rite, the RCIA process adapted for children encompasses the four-fold approach to formation: catechetical, communal, liturgical, and apostolic witness.

This document offers parish initiation ministers further insights and ideas gained from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* as adapted for children. Additionally, it provides a basis for dialogue between pastors, Catholic school principals, DRE’s, and initiation coordinators as they develop the process of initiation of children of catechetical age.

II. Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age (RCIA, Part II.I)

From the Ritual Text:

▪ A Process of Conversion

#252 *This form of the rite of Christian initiation is intended for children, not baptized as infants, who have attained the use of reason and are of catechetical age.... The process of initiation thus must be adapted both to their spiritual progress, that is, to the children’s growth in faith and to the catechetical instruction they receive.*

#253 *The Christian initiation of these children requires both a conversion that is personal and somewhat developed, in proportion to their age, and the assistance of the education they need. The process of initiation thus must be adapted both to their spiritual progress, that is, to the children’s growth in faith, and to the catechetical instruction they receive. ...as with adults, their initiation is to be extended over several years, if need be, before they receive the sacraments of initiation.*

For Pastoral Consideration:

The process for initiating children should look like the process of initiating adults. The process involves participation in the four periods of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (precatechumenate, catechumenate, purification and enlightenment, and mystagogy) and all that those periods suggest about formation. This process is quite different from a parish religion program for children. While children who are catechumens may benefit from the parish or school formation program, it may not adequately provide for their particular formational and spiritual needs. As with adults, the formation process generally requires at least a year and often longer (*National Statutes for the Catechumenate* #6).

- **Parental and Communal Involvement**

#252 *They [the children] seek Christian initiation either at the direction of their parents or guardians or, with parental permission, on their own initiative.*

#254 *The children's progress in the formation they receive depends on the help and example of their companions and on the influence of their parents. (Cf. #254.1 and #254.2 for further development of this directive.)*

For Pastoral Consideration:

It is important that children and their parents be interviewed once a child and/or parent has expressed interest in the Catholic Church. During this interview, the catechumenate coordinator or other appropriate person must discern with the family the kind of formation suitable for the child. This discernment will be based on several factors: age of the child, baptismal status, catechetical experiences of the child and the family (not only formal religious education, but also involvement in the life of the Church, participation in religious services, etc.).

The rite envisions that parents remain involved throughout the formative process. However, it is frequently the case that children requesting the sacraments of initiation are the sons and daughters of non-practicing Catholics and even of non-Catholic parents. The participation of children in the RCIA is a perfect opportunity for Catholic parents to renew their faith and return to active involvement in the Church, and for non-Catholics to grow in their relationship with Christ and learn about the Catholic Church along with their children.

In addition to the parents, the rite suggests that the peer group of the children to be baptized participate in the process as companions in the catechetical sessions and during the celebration of the rituals. (cf. #254.1)

Sponsors are another form of support for the child(ren) and the family, particularly if the family is uncatechized or has not been actively involved in the Church for some time. Ideally, the RCIA coordinator will recruit hospitable sponsor families who can introduce the children and their families into the parish's life, form a relationship with them, and model what it means to be a domestic church (cf. #254.2).

With the above in mind, children who are catechumens, accompanied by their parents, would greatly benefit from intergenerational catechesis providing formation for the entire family. Other members of the community, such as sponsors, godparents and peers should be invited to participate in the process in order to support the children's formation and journey of faith. Inclusion of the child's peer group is very important, and developing creative ways for them to participate in the process not only helps the catechumens, but also the entire peer group. In addition, a parish may need to develop a process that meets the needs of older children (teens) who do not necessarily "fit in" with adults and need something quite different than younger children. Remember that any adaptations made in this regard should be consistent with the adult process and should contain all the formational and liturgical components of the rite.

- **Rites**

#253 *Also as with adults, their initiation is marked by several steps, the liturgical rites of acceptance into the order of the catechumens (nos. 260-276), the optional rite of election, (nos. 277 – 290), penitential rites or scrutinies (nos. 291- 303), and the celebration of the sacraments of initiation (nos. 304-329); corresponding to the periods of adult initiation are the periods of the children’s catechetical formation that lead up to and follow the steps of their initiation.*

For Pastoral Consideration:

The children should be included in the ritual celebrations along with the adult catechumens and candidates. When preparing rites that include children, keep in mind the simpler ritual language that is found in the rites adapted for children (Part II.1). Moreover, the children are to be dismissed from the Eucharist along with adult catechumens. Generally speaking, it is helpful if the children have a separate dismissal session; however, the adults and children should be dismissed at the same time. Dismissals from the Sunday Eucharist also suggest that children who are catechumens and who attend Catholic schools should be dismissed from school Masses after the homily. The same holds true for parish formation program Masses. Because the liturgy forms us, this practice is another way to catechize Catholic school children about the Christian initiation of children who were not baptized as infants and the call as Church to support them on their journey of faith otherwise.

NB: The rite suggests that rituals for children be celebrated with a small group rather than with the full assembly (cf. #257 and #260). However, Balthasar Fischer, one of the principal authors of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, notes that this suggestion comes from the European experience in which children would rarely take part in adult activities. In contrast, children in the United States are often included in adult activities. It is customary in the United States that these rituals are celebrated with children and adults together in the midst of the full assembly, unless particular circumstances dictate otherwise.

- **Sacraments of Initiation**

#256 *... if is preferable that, if possible, the final period of preparation...coincide with Lent and that the final step, the sacraments of initiation, take place at the Easter Vigil....*

National Statutes:

#18 *They [the children] should receive the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist at the Easter Vigil, together with the older catechumens.*

Pastoral Considerations:

Since children of catechetical age are to be baptized, confirmed, and receive Holy Communion normally at the Easter Vigil, some parish and peer catechesis about the various paths of initiation in the Church may be helpful.

As mentioned above, it is beneficial to invite the peer group to participate in the celebration of the Easter Vigil (or other Easter celebration) when the child is being initiated into the Church.

If a pastor determines that a child would be better served to receive only one or two of the sacraments of initiation, he must ask permission from the Archbishop to delay the other sacrament(s).

III. Other Issues and Concerns

What about children who are baptized, but uncatechized?

Again, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* is the foundation for children's initiation. Therefore, children of catechetical age who are baptized either as a Catholic or in another denomination, but are uncatechized, should be formed according to the principles set forth in Part II, Chapter 4 of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults: Preparation of Uncatechized Adults for Confirmation and Eucharist*. Simply put, whatever you do with adults who are baptized and uncatechized, you do with children of catechetical age. Please note that Archbishop Schnurr normally reserves the right to confirm children already baptized as Catholics.

What do we say to people who are concerned about children receiving all three sacraments of initiation at one time?

There are different patterns of initiation in our Church today. One pattern is the baptism of infants with confirmation and eucharist to follow at a later time; another is the initiation of adults; another is the completion of initiation of those who are baptized but uncatechized. It is important that sacraments be understood as encounters with Christ by those responding to the movement of the Spirit in their lives. Sacraments are not meant to be "celebrations of graduation," but celebrate the various points in one's life of faith. Unfortunately, sacraments have become more a reward for completion of a program, and less a celebration of the faith of an individual and the community. In the Church there are different processes by which people receive the sacraments of initiation; one is not better than the other, they are just different. According to the Code of Canon Law (CCL # 852, #866), children who are of catechetical age, are to receive all three sacraments of initiation at baptism, just as prescribed for adults.

What should teachers in Catholic schools or religious formation programs be doing with children who are unbaptized or children baptized in another tradition?

- Identify those children who are unbaptized or not of the same religious tradition.
- Recognize the different catechetical needs, particularly if a child is unbaptized and/or unchurched.
- Children who are unbaptized and uncatechized and desire to become Catholic will require a broader formation beyond the classroom setting. The appropriate pastoral minister (e.g. RCIA coordinator) should be notified.
- If it is clear that a child is interested in becoming Catholic, discern with them and their parents if this is the appropriate time to admit them into the children's Christian initiation process.
- Directors of the Catechumenate, DRE's, and principals should plan how to best attend to the needs of these children.
- Because their peer group is important, cooperation between school staff and the catechumenate coordinators is essential throughout their formation.