

THE RITE OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS: SEVEN ISSUES TO CONSIDER

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Based on the responses to the CARA Survey of parish practices and the consultation on the National Statutes, here are seven issues—there are many more—which need to be understood theologically before being worked out ritually and pastorally. Taking seriously our *lex orandi* and our *lex vivendi*, we must be clear as to what our *lex credendi* proclaims we believe.

The Initiation of Children

What is the expectation of the Church for the initiation of children who have reached what is called the age of reason; that is, age seven or eight. Simply, the Church and the rites expect them to be fully initiated. Theologically, anyone who has a simple understanding of the Eucharist and makes their First Communion is not only capable but expected to be fully initiated with Baptism and Confirmation before receiving Communion. While it is true that this puts the delaying of Confirmation of the greater majority of young people at odds with this practice, maybe the ancient theology of Eucharist being the completion of initiation needs to be taken absolutely seriously. This is a clear case of imposing a pastoral practice on a fuller theology of the integrity of the order of initiation, a pastoral practice that cannot be easily defended theologically.

Mixing of Catechumens, Candidates, and the Rites

I simply used the word candidate as it is often the common word used in the rites, even if sometimes misleading. Catechumens (and then the Elect) have a right to be called by their proper ecclesial designations. However, there is the deeper problem of mixing not only the unbaptized and the baptized-but-uncatechized, but a whole assortment of baptized non-Catholics and unconfirmed Catholics. Theologically, the rites call for the baptisms of non-Catholics, if validly done, to be recognized and respected. While these can certainly benefit from any further catechetical process, what are we saying about their baptismal dignity if we simply mix them in all the additional rites, especially the Rite of Election and the Vigil? Theologically, pastoral practice does an injustice to these baptized and catechized members of the Church. Yes, they already share the dignity of baptism. The rites and statutes both expect those to be received into the Church to be received at a time other than the Vigil. The Vigil is the pristine time for baptism. Any Sunday, especially the Sundays of Easter, may be a better time for reception. And Catholics lacking Confirmation need to be accommodated with suitable catechesis. One size does not fit all, especially theologically.

Duration of the Process

Third, both the rites and the statutes expect a length of catechetical process which approaches almost two years, beginning at any time and continuing with Mystagogy until the anniversary of their initiation the following year. We have conveniently collapsed the process into a school year, beginning in September and ending at the Vigil, most often in early April, so not even a full school year. And since the time of catechesis is expected to be finished by the Rite of Election, the First Sunday of Lent (Lent being a time of reflection and prayer), in actuality the time of catechesis is closer to six months. This is simply too short. And when the time of Mystagogy is either nominal or non-existent, this is a serious disservice to our catechumens who deserve so

much more. While pastorally the school year is certainly easy to accommodate, the faith lives of many of our catechumens does not follow such a minimal approach.

The Disappearance of the Scrutinies

Fourth, in some parts of the country, the Scrutinies are not celebrated in their fullness (or not at all). These ancient rites are just too important to minimize or omit. Yes, these do make Mass “a little longer.” Yes, we may have to schedule them at different Masses on successive Sundays. Yes, the homilist may have to prepare two homilies in Years B and C. But the great lessons of these traditional gospels – the Samaritan woman at the well, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus – are aimed at the fruitful prayer of the entire parish. Likewise, the silence called for during each scrutiny, addressed first to the assembly and then to the Elect, is a powerful reminder of the importance of letting that Word of God search our hearts. This is then followed by one of the great exorcisms -- praying to God the Father, to the Spirit, and to Jesus to purify our hearts. Maybe this concept of exorcism is one some may find uneasy. Yet this is precisely what proclaiming the Word, and preaching it, is supposed to do. We must not try to domesticate the power of God’s Word.

Anointing before Baptism

Fifth, this poor anointing has had a difficult time surviving. It is to be done during the time of the catechumenate; that is, before Election, and it can be repeated. But perhaps because it was being omitted, the third edition of the Roman Missal mandates that it be done at the Vigil if it had not been done before. Theologically, this anointing carries with it all the historical power of purifying and protecting the catechumens on their way to baptism. The exorcism prayer calls for their ears and hearts to be opened and for their minds not to be troubled. The prayer of anointing is simply the old prayer used in the baptism of children which calls for strength. Perhaps the concept of an exorcism sounds too foreign for us, but properly understood, it is a tremendous source of solace for those still unsure of God’s grace.

The Great Paragraph 75

Sixth, this paragraph is central to whatever we try to do in our catechesis, and if understood and followed, would by necessity improve our process. It calls for the catechumens to be brought to maturity in four ways. The first is, of course, by the Word of God. While lectionary catechesis perhaps needs some further doctrinal additions, we must always begin with the Word of God, specifically that Word proclaimed any Sunday by the Church. The second way demands the support of the entire community. People are initiated into the Church, of which the local parish is a full part. This begs the question of those parishes where only one Mass time is even aware of the catechumenal process. The third way is the role liturgical rites play in their growth. We have to trust the rites, especially the Scrutinies, to help them grow. The final way is apostolic work. The Church not only has a mission, it is mission. We are sent. Perhaps this is the most overlooked area for our catechumens. They need to get involved in some of the many ways we are a Church that serves the poor.

Mystagogy, the Forgotten Period

Lastly, there is mystagogy. Everybody talks about mystagogy but few do it or even know what it really is. Mystagogy is simply the reflection on what God has done for us in the mysteries we have celebrated and are continuing to celebrate. Thus, it is truly never finished. While it is true

that both RCIA teams and neophytes are simply tired after a long catechumenal process and a beautiful Holy Week and Vigil, the Easter season is in itself our renewal of mystagogy, a renewal enhanced by those who have just joined us. It seems that we often just rejoice and take a long break until the next year. The end of the Easter season and Pentecost are often victims of early summer vacation plans. However, theologically the rites expect that we use the Easter season, especially the readings from year A, to celebrate so-called Masses for Neophytes. Readings from the vigil of Pentecost seem perfect for these neophytes. Finally the rites call for an anniversary celebration of their baptisms.

We have always maintained that the Church renews herself with the initiation of those coming to the faith. In what ways do we deprive ourselves of this central theological truth?