

## SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL R. HOYT

## SACRAMENTS OF INVITATION

**Y**ou won't find the word *initiation* in your Bible. And you won't find it in the *Baltimore Catechism*. But if you look at contemporary Church documents there are many references to initiation, Christian Initiation and the Sacraments of Initiation. You'll find them, for example, in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the rites of the Catholic Church, the Code of Canon Law, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

All of these documents name the Sacraments of Initiation "Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist" while most Catholics reading this article received these sacraments in this sequence: Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation. What are the reasons behind these changes? In this *Update* we'll take a brief look at the history and meaning of the Sacraments of Initiation to help answer this important question.

It is difficult to say why the New Testament authors do not speak of initiation. Perhaps they looked up initiation in their *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (or its first-century equivalent) and saw that initiation referred to "rites, ceremonies, ordeals or instructions with which one is made a member of a sect..." and immediately thought of the initiation ceremonies of the pagan religions. They saw little or no resemblance between becoming a disciple of Jesus and initiation into the mystery cults. To use the same word for both would have been confusing to their readers.

We become Christians by a process of conversion—*metanoia* in Greek, which means literally "turning around." Conversion is a process of turning from a life of selfishness and sin—a "Me First" life—to a life of Spirit-filled generosity and love. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John: "I give you a new commandment: love one another.

As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). And Christ, through the Church, has provided us with sacraments—ritual ceremonies—which help us appropriate and celebrate this conversion process. The Sacraments of Initiation are an ongoing invitation into this lifelong process of conversion.

Instead of the word "initiation" the New Testament authors speak of "taking the plunge" or "being dipped into"—using the Greek verb *baptizein*, from which we derive our term "baptism." Becoming a disciple of Jesus was not like joining a mystery cult, nor is it today simply joining one more club like the "Friends of Public Radio" or the "Classic Cars Club." It is a "joining" that is so radical that it has eternal consequences; we can never "un-join." Baptism is never repeated.

BY THOMAS RICHSTATTER, O.F.M., S.T.D.

## 'BE WHAT YOU SEE'

**T**he Sacraments of Christian Initiation celebrate and effect a plunge into the life, passion, death and resurrection of Christ; a plunge that is so deep and transforming that we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14). We receive the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit that directed, inspired and empowered Jesus himself so that we become members of Christ’s Body. The prayers of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist speak clearly of the transforming effects of this Spirit.

At **Baptism**, we pray over the water:

*“Father, look now with love upon your Church, and unseal for her the fountain of baptism. By the power of the Holy Spirit give to this water the grace of your Son, so that in the sacrament of baptism all those whom you have created in your likeness may be cleansed from sin and rise to a new birth of innocence by water and the Holy Spirit”* (Christian Initiation of Adults, #222A).

At **Confirmation**, we learn what this new life in the Spirit implies:

*“All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence”* (Christian Initiation of Adults, #234).

This prayer names the “seven gifts” of the Holy Spirit. The prophet Isaiah taught that these seven gifts would be the sign of the Messiah, the one anointed by the Holy Spirit. The word *Messiah* (*Christos* in Greek) means “anointed.” Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the one filled with the Holy Spirit. At Confirmation we are anointed with that same Holy Spirit.

At the actual anointing during Confirmation we hear the words: “Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.” We are sealed with the gift of, that is, the gift which is the Holy Spirit.

At **Eucharist**, with our sins washed away and clothed with the Spirit, we are led to the banquet table of the Lord’s Supper. At each Eucharist we ask God to send the Spirit upon the bread and wine so



that they become for us the Body and Blood of Christ. Then we pray that the Holy Spirit come upon us—we who eat and drink—so that we may become the Body of Christ.

Each Eucharist sustains our ongoing conversion, our ongoing faith journey into the Mystery of Christ. At each Eucharist we are invited to enter ever more deeply into the Body of Christ. The saying, “You are what you eat,” certainly holds true here. St. Augustine said: “If then you are the body of Christ and his members, it is your sacrament that reposes on the altar of the Lord...Be what you see; and receive what you are” (*Sermon 272*).

Those individuals whose only experience of “eating” is eating alone, often rapidly, simply to get rid of the desire for food will have difficulty appreciating this sacramental dimension of “meal.” But those of us who



have had rich and positive experiences of shared meals know that much more goes on at a meal than just eating, consuming food. Meals bring us together; they are signs of love and signs of forgiveness. It is no wonder that Jesus chose this human sign as the sacrament of the perfect union with his Father which he demonstrated for us on the cross.

(If you would permit me an aside comment: I think that one of the most important things parents can do for the religious education of their children is to give them rich and positive human experiences of words such as “father,” “family” and “meal.” Without these experiences it is difficult for a catechist to speak of God as “father,” Church as “family” or Eucharist as “meal.”)

## 'WASHING UP': A THREEFOLD SEQUENCE

**R**ecent historical investigations into the origins of our sacramental rituals reveal a rich diversity in the early Church. It is difficult to trace with precision how the Church, acting under the direction of the Holy Spirit, elaborated the sacramental rituals instituted by Christ. But in its simplest outline, the development happened along the following model.

In prophecy and parable Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as a banquet—a great eating together. “I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11). God has invited the whole human family to join in a great heavenly banquet. We respond to this invitation through the Sacraments of Initiation.

Consider for a moment what you do when you are invited out to eat. Let’s say that you have been out working in the garden and a friend calls and asks if you would like to come over for dinner and you accept the invitation. What happens next? Probably, three things: First, you would take off your work clothes and wash up, perhaps taking a shower or a bath. Second, you would dry off and put on clean clothes. And third, you would go out to eat.

This sequence of events is perhaps the simplest way to understand the

Sacraments of Initiation. God has invited each of us to dine with Christ at the eucharistic banquet. When we come to this table for the first time, we *first* put off the “old self” (see for example Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22 and Colossians 3:9) and wash away the stain of Original Sin. This is the sacramental bath of Baptism. *Second*, we dry off. In the first and second centuries, however, Romans would rub their bodies with oil after bathing to moisturize the skin and to dry off. In our sacramental system the bath of Baptism is followed by the oil of Confirmation. And, *third*, clothed with the Holy Spirit, we are invited to the eucharistic table.

This three-step sequence can help us understand some of the contemporary developments and understandings of the Sacraments of Initiation, for example, the sequence of the three sacraments when they are celebrated together in our parishes at the Easter Vigil. Of course, the historical development of the rites is much more complex, especially the development of the rite we call Confirmation.

We do not find much written specifically about Confirmation in the early Church, because when the early Christian authors wrote about Baptism they often implied both the water bath and the anointing with oil, what we would call Baptism and Confirmation. For example, if you invited me out to eat and I said, “Let me wash up first, and then we’ll go,” by “washing up” I would imply both the washing and the drying; there would be no need to specifically mention the “drying off” (or anointing, if we were ancient Romans).

Baptism and Confirmation are also intimately related in another way. When we take a bath, we get clean by washing off the dirt. We can speak of “getting clean” and we can speak of “washing off dirt” but, actually, removing “dirtiness” and receiving “cleanliness” go together. They are two ways of looking at one action. In a similar way, early Church writers described Baptism with the “washing off” metaphors and spoke of Confirmation with the “getting clean”

metaphors. Baptism washes away all sin, Original and Actual; and Confirmation gives us the grace and presence of the Holy Spirit. Of course, taking away sin and being filled with grace are but two ways of speaking of the same action, something like “washing off” and “getting clean.” The two actions go together even if we call them by different names: Baptism and Confirmation.

This analogy of “washing up, drying off, going to eat” works especially well for



“Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist” when they are celebrated in that sequence—as they were in the early Church, and as they are today in most of the non-Roman rites (or liturgical families) of the Catholic Church, and as they are in the Roman Catholic Church for adults and children of catechetical age at the Easter Vigil.

## SACRAMENTS DIVIDED

**H**owever, the analogy does not seem to fit as well when Confirmation is separated from Baptism by a number of years, and especially when it comes after Eucharist rather than before—as is usually the case with children baptized as infants in the Roman Catholic

Church. How did Confirmation come to be separated from Baptism?

The bishop (*episcopus* = overseer) was the original minister of all the sacraments. In the fourth century, when (for various reasons) priests (*presbyteros* = elder) began to baptize and preside at the Eucharist, the anointing after Baptism which conferred the Holy Spirit began to be reserved to the bishop in those Churches that followed the liturgical customs of Rome. Because the dioceses of central Italy were very small, this was usually a separation of only a few weeks or months. But as the customs of Rome were extended to the whole Western Church, the separation between the two parts of the rite increased from weeks to years.

Although the Confirmation part of initiation came to be delayed in the Western Church, Eucharist remained an integral part of the ceremony. While initiation by Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist continued to be the norm in the East, infants, children and adult converts in the Western, Roman Church received Baptism and Eucharist. Infants received their “First Communion” at their Baptism until about the 12th century, when changing Eucharistic understanding and devotion began to worry pastors that the infants could not have the necessary reverence

to receive the Eucharist. Furthermore, to avoid any danger that the infant might “spit up” the consecrated host, infants began to be given only the Precious Blood at Communion time. (A few years ago when I was studying in Egypt, with my limited American understanding of the world and the Church, I first thought it very strange to see the priests in the Coptic churches give infants Holy Communion. When parents carrying infants approached the priest for Holy Communion, the priest would dip his little finger into the consecrated wine and place it on the lips of the infant.)

When, in the 12th and 13th centuries Communion from the cup was withdrawn from the laity in general in the Roman

Church, it was also denied to infants. However, since infants did not receive the Bread, this in effect meant that they no longer received Communion at each Eucharist from the time of their Baptism and had to wait for their "First Holy Communion." Communion was delayed until after a period of catechetical formation, often at the age of 14 or 15.

Usually during the course of these 14 or 15 years, the bishop had the opportunity to visit the parish or the parents had the opportunity to bring the child to the cathedral and so most of these children receiving First Holy Communion had already been confirmed. Even though the Sacraments of Initiation were spread out over a number of years, the sequence remained Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist.

In 1906 Pope Pius X encouraged children as young as six or seven to receive the Holy Eucharist. While lowering the age for First Communion had many positive benefits, it also caused many children to receive Eucharist before Confirmation. The explanation of "Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist" as "washing up, drying off and going to eat" doesn't seem to fit any more because we "go out to eat" several years before we "dry off."

As Confirmation became separated from Baptism by a number of years, teachers and preachers began to speak of the meaning of Confirmation apart from the meaning of Baptism. Confirmation began to be described as a sacrament of "strengthening." The embrace of welcome and "kiss of peace" (which had become a "love pat" in the case of infants) now became a "slap on the cheek" to remind those being confirmed that they had become "soldiers for Christ." Other explanations of Confirmation were developed which were especially suited to needs of the adolescents receiving the sacrament.



This was the context for the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, as they are presented in the *Baltimore Catechism*.

## RCIA: A NEW LOOK

In the years preceding the Second Vatican Council, Church leaders looked carefully at the current state of our initiation rites in the light of this long and rather complicated history and decided that some changes in emphasis should be made to better adapt these sacraments to the pastoral needs of the contemporary Church. Following the discussion of these matters at the Council, the Church published four documents: *Christian Initiation: General Introduction*, *Rite of Baptism for Children*, *Rite of Confirmation* and *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (which has come to be known by its initials, RCIA). Each of these revised rites, and especially the RCIA, has had a profound effect on Church life in the United States.

The RCIA restores the order of Baptism-Confirmation-Eucharist and emphasizes the interconnectedness of these three sacraments (as we saw above: washing up, drying off, going to eat). These rites are neither separate nor are they static; they are part of an ongoing process. The RCIA speaks of our faith journey. And this journey does not end at Baptism or First Communion, or even at Confirmation, but continues throughout our Christian life. The Sacraments of Initiation are a continual invitation to continued conversion.

This faith journey is not merely a matter of learning about the faith, not merely instruction, but also a true conversion process. It involves the whole life of the candidate and the whole life of the Church. These sacraments are not private events. They affect the whole Church. Conversion

takes place in community. Conversion implies initiation into that community, initiation into the Body of Christ.

In 2000 the bishops of the United States published *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States*. The results of this comprehensive study make it clear that the RCIA is renewing the life of the Church in the United States, say the

bishops. "This study also affirms that faith formation is a lifelong process....The image of a journey is one that is often used in reference to the RCIA and that fits with an understanding of catechesis/adult faith formation as a lifelong process." Again and again the report stresses that the initiation of catechumens is a "gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful."

We are each members of that "community of the faithful." Are we an inviting community? Do we live lives that others would want to imitate? Each time I see the catechumens dismissed from Sunday Eucharist, I ask myself, "Why would anyone want to join this parish?" And I know that

I am personally responsible, along with the other members of the parish, for creating the kind of parish that makes it easy to answer that question. ■

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## UPDATE

### Question Box

- 1) How is RCIA present in your parish?
- 2) Explain how the order of the sacraments of initiation changed.
- 3) Why is Baptism a "once-in-a-lifetime" event?