

GUIDELINES
FOR
THE CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF
NON-BAPTIZED
CHILDREN AND YOUTH
OF A CATECHETICAL AGE
IN THE DIOCESE OF OAKLAND
(Approximate ages: 7-18)

Christian Initiation Committee
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INTRODUCTION

Preliminary Considerations

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is the process that brings us to full stature as Christians and enables us to carry out the mission of God's people in the church in the world. The process includes various aspects of a person's total formation: believing with the Church community (doctrinal formation), living with the Church community (practical formation), praying with the Church community (liturgical formation and personal prayer), and serving with the Church community (apostolic formation). This process becomes the norm for the sacramental initiation of adults and children.

Major elements of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Children of Catechetical Age are identified in Part II, Chapter I, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, November 1986.

Non-baptized children are seeking a place in the life of the Church in the Diocese of Oakland. They are coming with their parents or loved ones who are themselves catechumens; they are being brought by significant adults who are experiencing a return to the Church and/or an awakening of responsibility for the faith development of the child; they are coming on their own, with or without family support, as a result of an evangelizing experience.

The Child

Any process by which children and youth are welcomed into the Church must be marked by an awareness of who they are. The family, as well as pastoral, catechetical, and liturgical ministers involved in the Christian Initiation of children and youth, must recognize and consider the characteristics, needs, and life experiences of those whom they welcome. The process of initiation itself needs to reflect the uniqueness of the young people involved. The children and youth seeking membership in the Christian community are welcomed for who they are, not simply for what they will become. Their identity as full persons as well as their own particular state of growth must be respected.

Significant relationships with persons of faith and meaningful experiences leading to a response of faith are central to the process of initiation of children and youth. A growing recognition of God-with-us, a deepening awareness of the sacred in the ordinary moments of life, and a sense of and movement toward belonging are primary. The process by which children and youth are initiated is not academically oriented; a program which is classroom-centered or based on a school model is inappropriate and inadequate. A fuller understanding of the Gospel message and participation in the life of the community are enriched through learning experiences which relate to the whole child (or youth) and his/her life. Some of these experiences may take place within a classroom or a program, and should involve a group of the child's peers. However, the language of and approach to the process of initiation of children and youth must relate primarily to their spiritual growth and to their relationship to the faith community as a whole.

The National Catechetical Directory includes descriptions of human development during childhood and adolescence (NCD, #178-180), and provides guidelines for the catechesis of children and youth (NCD, #181) in light of the characteristics of each stage of development. The implications for catechesis at each stage are also explored. Some of these implications are (NCD, #181):

"A correct understanding of experiential learning includes recognition that the entire faith community is an important part of the experience of children and youth: parents, catechists, and community all have roles in the catechesis of the young."

"Effective catechesis takes into account the fact that the child's comprehension and other powers develop gradually."

"Catechetical materials are adapted to the stages of intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical development."

"Catechesis also provides experiences to live faith and apply the message of salvation to real-life situations. It encourages the use of imagination, as well as intelligence and memory. It stimulates not only exterior but interior activity—a prayerful response from the heart. Fostering a sense of community is also an important part of education."

MINISTERS AND MINISTRIES

The Family

Conversion contains a dynamic evangelical dimension. The preparation of a child for acceptance into the Catholic faith can become an occasion for the spiritual growth of the entire family, and may awaken beliefs attuned to Catholicism in one or more family members. Interactions between the child and his/her family may thus become occasions of evangelism, and must be fostered by those charged with the child's preparation for initiation.

A. Religious Background of the Family

The particular religious beliefs of the family must be taken into consideration insofar as familial support of the child's indicated religious desire is concerned. These beliefs should not be the determining factor in preparation of a child for sacramental initiation, once parental consent has been given. It is vital that the family realize its obligation/responsibility in regard to support of the child's religious preparation following such consent. Some pastoral supervision to this end is therefore advisable, both on a one-to-one level with the child's parent(s) and in group situations.

B. Consent of the Parent(s)

A decision to begin preparation of a child for Christian Initiation requires the consent of the child's parent(s). (Included in the term 'parent(s)' are those who have parental responsibility for the child in the absence of his/her natural parents.) Some form of assent to the child's request for sacramental preparation must be obtained from those individuals who are most influential in and directly responsible for the development of the child.

C. Participation of the Family and Child

Because of the relationship between family and child, it is advisable that participation of the child's family be encouraged in the many catechetical, social and liturgical facets of preparation for initiation. Both the family and the child will greatly benefit from the wealth of experiences presented throughout the process.

1. Catechetical—Many parishes successfully use family-based processes for the sacramental initiation of a child. It is recommended that family-child shared catechetical experiences be provided frequently throughout the child's preparation as an aid to the spiritual and familial growth of all concerned. Interaction with catechetical and liturgical ministers aids parents in their understanding of the Catholic faith.
2. Liturgical—As with adults seeking Christian Initiation, the various stages and periods of the initiation of children are marked with and enriched by liturgical rites. It is highly recommended that the parent(s) be included in all celebrations, participating as fully as is deemed pastorally advisable in the particular situation.
3. Social—The benefits of gathering families with children in the preparation process together for social as well as catechetical and liturgical experiences should be explored. Careful preparation should be made before such a gathering to ensure maximum positive experience for the families, children and other persons involved in the preparation process.

The Community

The Christian community must, of necessity, concern itself with the spiritual growth of the individual seeking initiation and his/her family. The Christian community at large can offer its support to these individuals through extending warm hospitality, through prayer, through fasting, and through the example of Christian living.

Sponsors (Spiritual Companion)

Each child/youth entering the Catechumenate is to be accompanied by a man or woman identified as a sponsor. A parent may be the sponsor.

The person with responsibility for the Christian Initiation of children in a parish must see that a qualified sponsor participates with the child/youth in the journey of initiation into the faith. This responsibility extends to the training and inclusion of the sponsor in the process with the child/youth.

Sponsors should be people of strong and active faith. This sponsor's role is to be a man or woman who knows the candidate, helps him/her, and witnesses to his/her morals, faith, and intention. This sponsor is to be a fully initiated and practicing Catholic.

The Catechumen may choose his/her sponsor. In the absence of the Catechumen making such a choice, or if the faith life of the child's family appears to be relatively weak, the parish shall provide a qualified sponsor.

Godparents

The godparents are to be chosen before Election by the child or youth with the assistance of sponsors and staff.

Each catechumen must have at least one godmother or godfather; the word "godparent" is used to describe either or both—a catechumen may have one of each.

When a particular culture leads catechumens to seek more than two godparents, it is the responsibility of the catechumen to determine the principal godparents for the Church's record.

Godparents should:

- A. be old enough to undertake the responsibility of their office—usually 16 years of age;
- B. have celebrated the three sacraments of Christian Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist;
- C. be a member of the Catholic Church and leading a life in harmony with the duties of godparent;
- D. not be the father or mother of the one to be baptized (Can. 874);

A baptized person belonging to a non-Catholic and ecclesial community may be admitted only as a witness to the baptism and only along with a Catholic godparent. (Can. 874, sec. 2)

A godparent's responsibility is the nurturing of the life of faith. The ministry of Godparent is not viewed by the Church as merely an honorary position, nor does this presume the physical or financial support of the person being initiated. It is preferable that the godparent(s) live in close proximity to the catechumen and his/her family to take an active part in the faith life of the newly initiated. (Can. 872, 873, 874)

Peer Group

The child's peer group may be loosely defined as those who are of similar age and/or are in the same classroom/school situation. Children are strongly influenced by their companions and depend on them frequently for example and statement of social mores pertaining to experiences both present and future. For these reasons, care must be taken to provide children with opportunities for interaction with others engaged in preparation for initiation.

Youth Ministry

Adolescents depend on their peers for example and guidance, as well as for companionship.

Those involved with ministering to the youth of the parish should: welcome the catechumen and invite the young person to participate in youth activities of the parish; be included in the catechetical aspects of initiation; be present whenever possible to lend support and the implied consent of the youth community at all liturgical rites involving youths who are catechumens.

Not to be overlooked is the importance of continuing support of the young catechumen. Following initiation, additional effort should be made on the part of the Youth Minister and the youth community to welcome the young neophyte into all activities of the group. This will benefit both the young initiate, who has witnessed to the validity and import of the faith through his/her journey, and the youth community, whose own faith-journey may be challenged and reaffirmed by the new member of the community.

Catechesis

The three catechetical groupings to be conscious of throughout the process of initiation are:

- the non-baptized children;
- the non-baptized children with the group of their companions, who will often be in preparation for confirmation or the eucharist;
- the non-baptized children and their companions with their parents and other family members.

The catechesis involved in the process of initiation of children and youth should include the four elements of catechesis (message, community, prayer, and service) and should reflect good catechetical process through exploring life experience, sharing our faith tradition, providing for discovery, reflection, integration, and allowing for a response of faith. "The source of catechesis, which is also its content, is one: God's word, fully revealed in Jesus Christ and at work in the lives of people exercising their faith..." (NCD, #41) "Effective catechesis takes into account the fact that the child's comprehension and other powers develop gradually." (NCD, #181) The catechesis, therefore, in its approach and content, needs to respect the child's age, circumstances, and level of maturity. The presentation of religious truths must relate to the child's capacity for understanding.

In regard to the presentation and development of the catechetical message, the following points are to be considered:

1. Catechesis may take place in the parish setting or in homes. A hospitable atmosphere, comfortable for children, is more desirable than an academic setting. If the catechesis takes place in homes, care should be taken that the children have the opportunity to become familiar and at home with the parish facilities. Through catechesis and other aspects of the process of initiation, faith formation is taking place.

2. Catechesis associated with the process of initiation, and preparation for Sacraments in general, should take place within the context of the parish community rather than in the parish catechetical program or parish school. The catechesis involved in Christian Initiation as well as any sacramental preparation, is ideally separate from and in addition to the school or parish catechetical programs. A child preparing for Sacraments of Initiation should be enrolled in and regularly attending the school or parish religious education program, unless deemed pastorally inadvisable. These programs complement and enrich the sacramental preparation or catechesis for Christian Initiation.

3. Catechetical groupings for the process of initiation of children should be kept small. The groups should be large enough to provide for interaction among the children and with the catechist (several children should be grouped together), but small enough to allow for relationships to grow and individual attention to be provided. Groups should be limited to no more than 10-12 children. It is most important that all catechetical groupings allow for each child to interact with a group of his/her companions. The help, example, and companionship of the child's peers is essential for the initiation process.

 In regard to liturgical celebrations of the various stages of the rite, it is important that several catechumens be grouped together whenever possible, so that they may help one another in the conversion process. Such a practice may state more forcibly than a catechist's words the communal aspect of Christian worship and liturgical celebration. It is strongly recommended that this practice be considered the norm, rather than the exception when preparing children for initiation.

4. The process of initiation, or preparation for Sacraments in general, should not be "linked" to the academic calendar or necessarily associated with the school year, but rather the liturgical year.

5. One approach to the catechesis involved in the Christian Initiation of children is the Children's Liturgy of the Word. The catechesis, based on the proclamation of God's Word, would take place in this context. The children involved in the process would gather for their own Liturgy of the Word, and then may, on occasion, join family members and/or the larger community for the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

With God's Word as the source and content for the catechesis, the principal elements of the Christian message for catechesis includes the elements described in Chapter V of the National Catechetical Directory. The approach to each, as well as the depth at which each of the elements or themes is dealt with, will vary according to the ages and circumstances of the children involved.

Period: Inquiry or Precatechumenate
Themes: The Mystery of the One God
 Creation
 Initial Proclamation of the Gospel.

Period: Catechumenate
Themes: Jesus Christ
 Holy Spirit.
 Church
 Sacraments

Period: Mystagogia
Themes: The Life of Grace
The Moral Life
Mary and the Saints.

PERIODS AND STEPS OF INITIATION

First Step: Acceptance Into The Order Of Catechumens

Prior to enrollment, the child should be growing in awareness of Jesus Christ and experiencing his Church. It is important that the discernment process for a child's acceptance into the catechumenate be based not upon a catechetical text or a "checklist," but rather upon the child's lived faith experience as expressed, observed, and shared. The process must keep in mind the child's level of maturity and understanding. The child's faith response is the best indicator of his/her integration of the message. The role of the parish prior to acceptance into the catechumenate primarily involves welcoming, the initial proclamation of the Gospel, and the decision to admit to membership. A fuller catechesis takes place during the catechumenate.

The Rite of Becoming Catechumens is celebrated with children and youth with a small but active congregation. The children's parents or guardian should be present whenever possible, as well as their sponsors, who may or may not be parents of the candidates. The children's companions, the larger parish community, and other adults involved in the children's initiation process should be represented. "The celebration takes place in the church or in a place that, according to the age and understanding of the children, can help them to experience a warm welcome." (RCIA, #261) The time chosen for the celebration of the rite should also be determined with the children and their experience of the rite in mind.

In the celebration of the rite, the celebrant dialogues with the children concerning their intentions and with the parents or guardians concerning their support; the child is signed with the cross which now becomes the mark of faith; the Word, which will be central to catechetical formation, is ritually proclaimed and explored; the scriptures are presented; general intercessions are prayed. The celebration is not normally combined with celebration of the Eucharist.

The Presentations: The Creed And The Our Father

The Rite of Christian initiation of Adults includes the formal presentations of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer to the Elect during the week(s) immediately following the first and third scrutinies respectively. In the days of the early Church, these presentations were the first exposure the Elect had to the deepest and most sacred beliefs held by those who followed Jesus. The impact of these presentations is of significant value.

These presentations are not considered to be essential to the period of Election. Rather, it would seem that they would be more appropriately considered during the catechumenate in the following manner:

The Lord's Prayer should be presented to all catechumens at a liturgical celebration early in the catechumenate, which could well be in a catechetical session devoted to an explanation of the Our Father in terms easily understood by the particular group.

The presentation of the Creed should be reserved for older catechumens who will be more equipped to comprehend the adult beliefs contained therein.

Second Step: Election or Enrolment of Names

The RCIA, Part II Chapter I, includes an optional Rite of Election or enrolment of names for children. This is an important part of the process if the children's rites are to closely follow those of adults.

The rite gives children and youth preparing for initiation the opportunity of acknowledging their preparation thus far, that they have been strengthened by the community's example and prayers, and that they are ready to publicly state their firm intention of celebrating the Sacraments of Initiation.

This parish rite would be celebrated at a parish Eucharistic Liturgy on the First Sunday of Lent. After the homily the person in charge of the initiation of children and youth would explain to the congregation that these catechumens are approaching the end of their preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation. He/She would call them one by one, by name, and have them come forward with their godparent(s).

The celebrant would ask the godparents if they were convinced that these catechumens were ready to celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation. If desired the celebrant could ask the assembly for its assent. He would then ask the catechumens to declare their intention of celebrating the Sacraments of Initiation at Easter.

The celebrant would ask to have the names of the catechumens enrolled. These could be written by each catechumen. If there is a large number of catechumens, a list of the names could be given to the celebrant. The assembly prays for the catechumens and the celebrant, with hands extended over them, then concludes the rite with a prayer.

The Celebration Of The Scrutinies

The process of initiation would not be complete without some type of penitential rites to acknowledge the presence of evil in the world and its effects on our lives. The adult rite includes three scrutinies. The purpose of these rites is spiritual. It is to teach us about sin and our desire for redemption. In the adult rite the catechumen encounters the Lord Jesus more intimately as Redeemer. The congregation prays with and for the catechumen that she/he may be liberated from evil and the effects of its spirit, strengthened in her/his spiritual journey, and be opened to receive the gifts of Christ's spirit.

These penitential rites, which are among the main events of the catechumenate for children are similar to the scrutinies of the adult rite (RCIA, # 125-133, 137-143, 154-164) but should be adapted for the child and his/her family or peer group who will be celebrating the rites with the child. The penitential rites should be celebrated once during Lent. There may be additional celebrations if those responsible for the formation process determine it would be of spiritual value.

The ritual has a simple structure with an opening prayer, proclamation of the Word, homily of the Word, prayer of exorcism and imposition of hands or anointing with the oil of catechumens and a dismissal.

The catechumens take part in these rites along with their godparents and members of the catechetical groups. Everything should be adapted to those present, so that the penitential celebrations are also of benefit to those who are not catechumens. During this celebration some children who have already been baptized and are members of the catechetical group may celebrate the Sacrament of Penance for the first time.

Third Step: Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation

In explaining the third step of the process, the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, we quote directly from the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Part II, Chapter 1, #304-308:

In order to bring out the paschal character of baptism, celebration of the sacraments of initiation should preferably take place at the Easter Vigil or on a Sunday, the day that the Church devotes to the remembrance of Christ's resurrection (see Rite of Baptism for Children, Introduction, no. 9). But the provisions of no. 256 should also be considered in determining when to celebrate the sacraments of initiation.

At this third step of their Christian initiation, the children will receive the sacrament of baptism, the bishop or priest who baptizes them will also confer confirmation, and the children will for the first time participate in the liturgy of the eucharist.

If the sacraments of initiation are celebrated at a time other than the Easter Vigil or Easter Sunday, the Mass of the day or one of the ritual Masses in the Roman Missal (Sacramentary), "Christian Initiation: Baptism" is used. The readings are chosen from those given in the Lectionary for Mass, "Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation apart from the Easter Vigil"; but the readings for the Sunday or feast on which the celebration takes place may be used instead.

* In the Diocese of Oakland, we recognize, in the case of non-baptized children of a catechetical age, the ideal proposed by RCIA # 281. It is our position, however, that the bishop or priest may confer confirmation at this time in the case of such children, when deemed pastorally appropriate, and that the children will participate in the eucharist.

All the children to be baptized are to be accompanied by their own godparent or godparents, chosen by themselves and approved by the priest (see no. 11; Christian Initiation, General Introduction, no. 10).

Baptized children of the catechetical group may be completing their Christian initiation in the sacraments of confirmation and the eucharist at this same celebration. When the bishop himself will not be the celebrant, he should grant the faculty to confirm such children to the priest who will be the celebrant. For their confirmation those previously baptized children of the catechetical group are to have their own sponsors. If possible, these should be the persons who were godparents for their baptism, but other qualified persons may be chosen.

In the Rite of Baptism of children and youth, baptism by immersion—the more suitable symbol of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ—is the preferred method to be used with these persons wherever possible as with adults and infants. This recommendation is in harmony with the guidelines for the Christian Initiation of Adults and the guidelines for the Baptism of Infants. As is done with adults, children and youth should be clothed in white garments and given candles appropriate to the occasion as symbolic gifts of the welcoming community. ("Guidelines for the Christian Initiation of Adults in the Diocese of Oakland," p. 9)

In the Eucharistic celebration it is most desirable that the newly baptized children, together with their godparents, parents, and catechists, receive communion under both kinds. (RCIA, #329)

Period of Post Baptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy

During Mystagogia and beyond, the neophytes experience full participation in the life of the community. The mysteries of the faith are experienced, celebrated, and reflected on during this period. "It is a time for deepening sacramental awareness, for growing awareness of the paschal mystery in their lives and of the mysterious presence of God in the world." (Christian Initiation of Adults: A Commentary; NCCB, p. 73) This period involves postbaptismal catechesis, which focuses on reflection in the context of community. Appreciation, thanksgiving, and celebration characterizes the reflection of the neophytes. The role of the catechist during this period is to support the newly initiated in their deepening recognition of and response to God's presence in their lives. The catechist nurtures their appreciation of the mysteries by providing for supportive interaction among one another and within the community, by facilitating their reflection through meditation, the imagination, and the exploration of God's Word; and by encouraging their faith response. The community continues to welcome the newly initiated, and their fuller interaction with the community is mutually supportive. Ideally, the neophytes awaken within members of the community a sense of renewed faith and mission and, likewise, the community strengthens the new faith experience and mission of the neophytes. Youths who have been fully initiated should be encouraged to become active in appropriate parish ministries and organizations. Persons with responsibility for these activities should be invited to meet with the neophytes during this time.

The Easter season is the normal period for the mystagogical experience. In the case of newly initiated children and youth, it is appropriate that the mystagogical experience be extended beyond the Easter season. Special attention should be given to the ongoing nature of their formation, and their need for continuing involvement with their companions and the larger community. Continuity must be provided for in the ministries which effect these young members of the community. Contact with and support of their families must continue to be a priority.

It is desirable that some form of celebration be held around Pentecost for the young neophytes and their peers, the youth of the parish. While this marks the end of the Easter season, it will not, in this case, close the period of mystagogical catechesis. This catechesis is extended at least another year, during which time it should be stressed that religious formation, spiritual growth, and full participation in the life of the Church are lifetime commitments. "On the anniversary of their baptism, it is desirable that the neophytes gather together again to give thanks to God, to share their spiritual experiences with one another, and to gain new strength." (RCIA, #250)

APPENDIX

Introduction

The catechumenate is for the preparation and formation of adults, young people, and children of catechetical age for Christian initiation into the mysteries of baptism, confirmation, and the eucharist. (Roman Pontifical, Christian Initiation, p.3)

Pastors of souls and other Christian faithful in accord with each one's ecclesial office have the obligation of making provisions that those who ask for the sacraments are prepared to receive them through the necessary evangelization and catechetical formation in accord with the norms issued by competent authority. (Revised Code of Canon Law, #843, sec. 2); hence the purpose of these guidelines.

It is necessary that due preparations be made for the celebration of baptism; therefore:

an adult who intends to receive baptism should be admitted to the catechumenate. Such an adult, insofar as it is possible, should also be led along different stages to sacramental initiation in accord with the order for initiation adapted by the Conference of Bishops and in accord with particular norm issued by the Conference. (Revised Code of Canon Law, #851, sec. 1)

The prescriptions found in the canons concerning the baptism of an adult should be applied to all those who have attained the use of reason once they have left infancy. (Revised Code of Canon Law, #852)

The rite of initiation for children of catechetical age is intended for children (RCIA, Part II, Chapter I) unbaptized as infants who have reached the age of reason and are of catechetical age and who have been brought by their parents or guardians for Christian Initiation or have come of their own accord with parental permission. Such children are suitable candidates if they are already capable of receiving and nurturing a personal faith and of recognizing an obligation of conscience.

The process of introducing new members into the Christian community is a constantly on-going one and belongs to the whole parish, to parents and relatives of children in the first place, but also to the rest of the parish, not just teachers in a religion program. (Diocese of Oakland: Confirmation Preparation)

National Statutes for the Catechumenate

Since children who have reached the use of reason are considered, for purposes of Christian initiation, to be adults (canon 852:1), their formation should follow the general pattern of the ordinary catechumenate as far as possible, with the appropriate adaptations permitted by the ritual. They should receive the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil, together with the older catechumens.

Some elements of the ordinary catechetical instruction of baptized children before their reception of the sacraments of confirmation and Eucharist may be appropriately shared with catechumens of catechetical age. Their condition and status as catechumens, however, should not be compromised or confused, nor should they receive the sacraments of initiation in any sequence other than that determined in the ritual of Christian initiation.