

The Christian Initiation of Children of Catechetical Age in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati

(Written by the Archdiocesan RCIA Consultation Group - Fall, 2000)



INTRODUCTION

The number of children of catechetical age being initiated through the catechumenate is growing at a rapid pace in our archdiocese. In March 2000, 405 children participated in the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion. The initiation process for children of catechetical age is often misunderstood as a program of “sacramental catch-up” rather than a process that is based on the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. The challenges of doing initiation with children are many: inviting children into a process of conversion, engaging them in an extended process that may even last several years, addressing the needs of families in multi-generational gatherings, and implementing a process that encompasses the catechetical, communal, liturgical, and apostolic formation of children. All these are part of the work before us.

This statement is intended to provide parish initiation ministers with further insights and ideas gained from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* as adapted for children. It is our hope that this statement will enable you to further develop your process for children of catechetical age. Moreover, we hope that this document will provide a basis of dialogue and implementation for pastors, Catholic school principals, DRE’s, and initiation coordinators.

WHAT DOES THE RITE SAY?

The adaptation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* for children is found in Part II, Chapter 1. It states, “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” (#252 *RCIA*). The Christian initiation of children is similar to that of adults (see *RCIA* #253); however, Part II, Chapter 1 of the rite provides for adapted language, catechetical process, and ritual celebrations that are more appropriate for children. Therefore, the process for children of catechetical age envisions the following:

Process of Conversion:

- A process that “requires both a conversion that is personal and somewhat developed” (#253 *RCIA*).
- “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 *RCIA*). Thus, the ritual envisions the catechetical process to be more than instruction; it is to be a time of conversion and growth in faith.
- “...their initiation is to be extended over several years, if need be, before they receive the sacraments of initiation” (#253 *RCIA*).

Rites:

- “...their initiation is marked by several steps, the liturgical rites of acceptance into the order of the catechumens, the optional rite of election, penitential rites or scrutinies, and the celebration of the sacraments of initiation” (#253 *RCIA*).
- The rite suggests that rituals for children may be celebrated with a small group rather than with the full assembly (See #257 and #260). However, Balthasar Fischer, one of the main 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. The rituals, then, could be normally celebrated with children and adults together in the midst of the full assembly.

Parental Involvement:

- The rite envisions that the child’s parents or guardians are involved in the process: “They seek Christian initiation either at the direction of their parents or guardians or, with parental permission, on their own initiative” (#252 *RCIA*).
- Not only do parents ask for or provide permission for initiation, but they remain involved throughout the formative process: “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” (#254 *RCIA*). (See #254.1 and #254.2 for further development of this directive.)

Parish Support:

- 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 would also be 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. Perhaps a family could sponsor the family that is being initiated. (cf. #254.2)
- By the time of the Rite of Election, godparents for children who are to be baptized must be chosen and will take their active role during this ritual: “in the rite of election, on the basis of the testimony of parents, godparents and catechists. . .”(#278). Their participation in the faith lives of the children is ongoing and lifelong from this point on.

Sacraments of Initiation:

- The rite envisions that all three sacraments of initiation are to be celebrated at the Easter Vigil (see #256 *RCIA*).
- In the *National Statutes for the Catechumenate*, the Bishops of the United States make this directive clear: “They (the children) should receive the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist at the Easter Vigil, together with the older catechumens” (#18).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR PARISH? SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:

1. 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. Clearly, this process is quite different from a parish religion program, which may not adequately provide for the formation and spiritual needs of the catechumen. As with adults, the formation process generally requires at least a year and often longer (*National Statutes for the Catechumenate* #6).
2. The children should also be included in the ritual celebrations along with the adult catechumens and candidates. Keep in mind the adaptations in the language that are made in the ritual text for children. Moreover, the children are to be dismissed from the Eucharist along with adult catechumens. It might be helpful if the children had a separate dismissal session; however, the adults and children should be dismissed at the same time from the liturgy. Dismissals from the Sunday Eucharist would also suggest that children who are catechumens and who attend Catholic schools should be dismissed from school Masses after the homily. Because the liturgy forms us, this practice would be a wonderful way to catechize our Catholic school children about the Christian initiation of children who were not baptized as infants and our call as Church to support them in their journey of faith.

3. Children who are catechumens could be involved in some multi-generational catechesis, providing formation for the entire family.
4. Parents must be involved in this process. However, this does not exclude other members of the community, such as sponsors, godparents and peers, from participation in the child's formation and support of the child's journey of faith. Inclusion of the child's peer group is very important, and developing creative ways to include them in this process is not only helpful for the catechumen, but for the entire peer group. All will benefit greatly from participation in this process.
5. A parish might 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 you make in this regard should be consistent with the adult process and should contain all the formational and liturgical components of the rite.

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 Catholic or in another denomination but are uncatechized, would 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.

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; 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 a kind of reward for completion of a program, rather than 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 Canon Law (CCL # 852, #866), children who are of catechetical age, must receive all three sacraments of initiation at baptism, just as prescribed for adults.

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

- First, it is important that the school identify those children who are unbaptized or not of the same religious tradition.
- Second, it is important to discern if there is desire on the part of the students to

become Catholic.

- Third, it is important to recognize their different catechetical needs, particularly if the child is unbaptized and/or unchurched. Children who fall into these categories should not be lumped into a religion class with a few extra “catch-up” classes for reception of the sacraments. Once these children have been identified, their names should be given to the Director of the Catechumenate (RCIA). If a child is seeking baptism or entrance into the Catholic Church, they should then be admitted into the initiation process. Directors of the Catechumenate, DRE’s, and principals need to 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.

How do we decide what formation a child needs?

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, Mass attendance etc.). Meeting individual needs is often a challenge, but it is the only way to foster true conversion in the hearts of each person, adult and child.