

Initiation: Inspiration for Catechesis

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Introduction

The past thirty-five years have seen some radical changes within our two thousand-year-old Church. One of the most notable changes has resulted from the introduction and implementation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation*. The *Rite*, which sprang from Vatican II and was first introduced in Rome in 1972, signaled that Initiation is the model for all catechesis, a notion that was practically unheard of three decades ago.

That point was underscored twenty-five years after the *Rite* was introduced, when the *General Directory for Catechesis* made the connection between initiation and catechesis with this remarkable statement: "Given that the *missio ad gentes* is the paradigm of all the Church's missionary activity, the baptismal catechumenate, which is joined to it, is the model of its catechizing activity." (90).

The implementation of the *Rite* and the catechesis it describes have had a profound effect on both catechumens and the communities who nurture them. After guiding catechumens through the Initiation process, sponsors and parish teams have often expressed a wish that more of the adults and children in the Church could experience it. And, in away, they can: By proclaiming that Initiation is the model for all catechesis, the Church challenges us to look through the *Rite* as if it were a prism for all parish catechesis. It affirms that conversion to the Person and message of Jesus is the agenda for catechesis.

Initiation

Initiation, the process by which a person is made a member of a community, is familiar to all of us. We have all been initiated into families, sports groups, schools, small and large community social and /or political groups which we love, participate in, are proud of, and enthusiastically welcome others to join. Our initiation into those communities always involves a process of storytelling, value bearing, symbol and ritual sharing, internalization, conversion, and outreach. The rules and beliefs of the groups are embraced and become one's own through affection and choice. We are formed and shaped by the members of the group and out of that comes the information we need to be a member. Initiation into a faith community has all the same characteristics and processes.

In times past, initiation into the Catholic faith community took place in families, communities, and neighborhoods that had a strong Catholic identity. It was a process to which no one gave a second thought. In many ways, it just happened. Prayers and devotions were learned at a parent's or grandparent's knee. Moral and ethical behavior was modeled in family and neighborhood. Catholic Action groups, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Charities, and other groups and institutions spoke to the Church's mission, as did the work of Catholic missionaries. The Church set the standard for moral behavior. At that time, religious instruction

that was based on a cognitive school model was appropriate because it was being done in the midst of a believing, celebrating, initiating community. That communal context for initiation broke down due to a very complex set of circumstances and set the stage for the establishment of *Rite of Christian Initiation*.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

About the time that breakdown was beginning to occur, the Church was involved in the revision of its rites, among them the restoration of the catechumenate. In 1972, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* was presented to the faithful as the process through which adults and children of catechetical age were to be initiated into the Church. The *Rite* was a radical document for many reasons. In restoring the catechumenate, it made Baptism the primary focus of Lent and the Easter season. It moved Christian Initiation from a rather private event to a very public event – Easter Vigil, the public event of the Church Year. It presented the norm for pastoral care to be conversion—a radical change of life and values—to be celebrated in the midst of the community. It also restored the order of the Sacraments of Initiation, Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist and called for their celebration for adult and child catechumens in one event.

The radical nature of Christian Initiation, which gave flesh to the Rite, caused one reflective liturgist to write: “The attempt to reform the rites of initiation has issued... a massive rejection of the presuppositions both of pastoral practice and of most churchgoers regarding the true meaning of church membership. This is a revolution quite without precedent, because the Catholic Church has never at any time in its history done such violence to its ritual practice as to make its rites so wholly incongruous with its concrete reality. Such an act is either a statement that rite is wholly irrelevant, or a statement that the church is willing to change, and to change radically, that concrete reality. Such an approach is either suicide or prophecy of a very high order.” (Keifer, Ralph. *Christian Initiation: The State of the Question, Made Not Born*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1976, pp.149-50.)

Given the blossoming of the Rite since its introduction and the profound effect it has had on catechesis, it is clear that the Church’s approach was not suicidal. On the contrary, the Rite has enlivened the Church and inspired her followers to a higher level of catechesis and a deeper connection to the Person and message of Jesus.

Despite its radicalness and the change it called for, the *Rite* was implemented throughout the universal Church. In North America, persons who were implementing the Rite began to see that the catechesis called for in the baptismal catechumenate was different in both content and method from what they were used to. The Rite called for Initiation to be done “in the midst of the community.” Parish catechists and team members were recruited and trained. They were asked to give a significant amount of their time to the ministry. Sponsors were asked to witness publicly for their catechumens and to walk a faith journey with them. Meditation on paragraph 75 of the *Rite* uncovered a holistic catechesis that included personal prayer, liturgy, apostolic witness, and apprenticeship. The primary emphasis and starting point for content were the Scriptures. The role of liturgical rites, such as Blessings, Anointings,

Celebrations of the Word as catechetical formation, and part of the content, was foreign for many, as was the process of discernment of readiness at each step of the journey—a process that involved the team with catechumens and sponsors. As catechists struggled against the resistance to change and incorporated liturgical prayer into catechetical sessions and discernment into meetings with catechumens and sponsors, they began to experience the grace and power of religious and spiritual conversions that led people and communities to mission and evangelization.

Conclusion

People noticed measurable differences in the faith expression of adults and children who had walked the Initiation journey. As it inspires total parish catechesis, we will see more intentional, small, faith-based communities, more emphasis on the Scriptures, more opportunities for prayer and reflection, more dialogue on how one is living his or her baptismal commitment in the world, more spiritual companionship, richer and more vibrant liturgies and homilies, and a deeper commitment to apostolic witness and social justice.