

Catechesis: Sacraments

The liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Sacraments, with the Eucharist at the center. (NDC, no. 35A) "The Sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church," by which divine life is given to us and celebrated. (CCC, no. 1131)

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Sacraments of Initiation and Sacramental Preparation

The three Sacraments of Initiation have a central and essential place in the life of the community.

Baptism incorporates us into Christ and forms us as God's people. This first Sacrament pardons all our sins, rescues us from the power of darkness and brings us to the dignity of adopted children, a new creation through water and the Holy Spirit.

By signing us with the gift of the Holy Spirit, **Confirmation** makes us more completely the image of the Lord and fills us with the Holy Spirit, so that we may bear witness to him before the entire world.

Coming to the table of the **Eucharist** we eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man so that we may have eternal life and show forth the unity of God's people. By offering ourselves with Christ, we share in this universal sacrifice.¹



Programs of preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation, no matter the age of the candidate, create an awareness of spiritual openness on the part of the community, the family, and the candidate. Sacramental catechesis is intended for all members of the Christian community, takes place within the community, and involves the whole community of faith, particularly the parents in the preparation of their children for the sacraments.² Sacraments of Initiation are a beginning, a welcoming, and an invitation to life-long growth and formation in faith. Sacraments of Initiation do not mark a completion or a graduation, but rather a renewed beginning with an emphasis on the celebration of the continuing journey of faith within the parish community.

Because the recent past included mandatory periods of formal religious education and parish and diocesan requirements for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation, families and assemblies put more emphasis on what must happen before a sacrament is "earned" than on the Sacrament as gift of grace and initiation into involvement with the community of faith. Our renewed theology of the Sacraments of Initiation is rooted in the model of initiation from the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Preparing children of catechetical age becomes a focus on sharing with them our joy in the life and ministry of Christ and our best hopes that they will join us on the journey of formation for discipleship.

¹ CIGI, no. 2

² NDC, no. 35B


BAPTISM

In the Sacrament of Baptism for Infants, the model of preparing parents, godparents, and assembly to undertake the formation of a new Christian is clear. Before the event, parents and godparents receive catechesis to understand the promises they will make publicly to raise their children in the faith of the Church. As with the RCIA, baptismal catechesis is best carried out by a team of clergy, other pastoral staff, and parents.

The Rite of Infant Baptism takes place in the liturgical assembly, and the Rite itself helps the assembly understand that it is promising to support the family in this responsibility. Even when a Baptism is done privately, the godparent represents the community in this pledge of support.

From the early days of the Church, infant children of believers have been presented for Baptism. Since infants cannot make a profession of faith or promise to live a Christian life, it is necessary that:

- At least one parent consents to the Baptism
- There is founded hope that the child will be raised Catholic, and
- The parents and godparents make a profession of faith during the rite.³



In the years that follow an infant's Baptism, it is the job of parents to provide the environment where a young disciple of Christ can grow. It is the responsibility of the parish to provide parents with support as they seek to fulfill their role as evangelizers and Christian models. The formation that takes place in the early years of baptized infants will naturally lead to readiness for participation in the Eucharist.

³ RBC, nos. 5, 18

CONFIRMATION

In the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, a child baptized as an infant may be Confirmed after the completion of the sixth grade. Following the guidelines for Catechesis for Confirmation from the NDC, parishes are to provide catechesis that:

- Teaches that Confirmation increases and deepens the grace of Baptism, imprinting an indelible character on the soul.
- Teaches that Confirmation strengthens the baptismal conferral of the Holy Spirit on those confirmed in order to incorporate them more firmly in Christ, strengthen their bond with the Church, associate them more closely with the Church's mission, increase in them the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and help them bear witness to the Christian faith in words and deeds.
- Teaches about the role of the Holy Spirit, his gifts, and his fruits.
- Is developmentally appropriate and includes retreat experiences.
- Includes instruction on the Rite of Confirmation and its basic symbols: the imposition of hands, the anointing with Sacred Chrism, and the words of the sacramental formula.
- Ensures that parents and sponsors are involved in the catechetical preparation of the candidates for Confirmation.
- Teaches that the bishop is the ordinary minister of the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church⁴

The above guidelines from the NDC are for the proximate, or immediate, preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation. This preparation readies a candidate of any age for the "full, conscious, and active participation" in the reception of the Sacrament. Formation for Confirmation is not a time for an intense fact-based program of concentrated catechesis in the faith. Candidates should be participating in ongoing catechesis in parish religious education programs or in Catholic schools. Rather, this is a time for immediate preparation for the Sacrament itself.

As a parish program of Sacramental preparation is planned, parish leaders should consult the Liturgical Guidelines of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston for the current regulations and rituals for the parish celebrations of the Rite of Confirmation with the Bishop.

Although Confirmation sometimes is referred to as the "Sacrament of Christian maturity"⁵, this does not mean that the Sacrament marks the attainment of adulthood, the end of Christian conversion, the completion of religious formation, or the reception of the Holy Spirit for the first time. Candidates for Confirmation should be encouraged to participate in Christian service activities with their families and parishes. *However, contracts that include required hours of*

⁴ NDC no. 36, 2

⁵ CCC, no. 1308



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service should be avoided. Service hours give the impression that one can “earn” the Sacrament by good behavior and that once the hours are done, the young Christian need no longer serve his or her community. The goal of participating in acts of service during the time of preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation is to further instill the call to discipleship in the individual.

EUCCHARIST

The Sacrament of Eucharist is the culmination of the three Sacraments of Initiation, and the faithful are called to honor it as the “source and summit of the Christian life”.⁶ Eucharist is the Sacrament that the faithful celebrate again and again, always growing in understanding that they become what they receive, and the great implications for how they live and act. Formational catechesis for Eucharist is lifelong and celebrates the Paschal Mystery of Christ and the ritual memorial of our communion in that mystery.⁷

Children’s preparation for the first reception of the Eucharist begins in the home. The family has the most important role in communicating the Christian and human values that form the foundation for a child’s understanding of the Eucharist. Children who participate with their family in the Mass experience the Eucharistic mystery in an initial way and gradually learn to join the liturgical assembly in prayer.⁸ Catechesis offered to parents helps them grow in their own understanding and appreciation of Eucharist and enables them to catechize their children more effectively.

Although formal and proximate catechesis for the Sacrament of First Eucharist is appropriate for children who have attained the age of reason, it is not an age in years nor a grade in school that determines a child’s readiness to receive a sacrament. Because reception of the Eucharist is integral to the child’s full incorporation into the ecclesial community, the pastor has a responsibility to determine every child’s readiness to receive First Communion.⁹

Candidates for First Communion are to be led to “full, conscious, active, participation” in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Such participation is “their right and duty by virtue of their Baptism.”¹⁰ Becoming a communicant means more than “receiving communion.” As the culmination of Christian initiation, this act invites the candidate into full participation at the table of the Lord, that is:

- Self-offering along with Christ
- Taking one’s place with the “whole community of the redeemed” in the “universal sacrifice offered by God,” and
- Coming to the table of the Eucharist ... so that we may have eternal life and show forth the unity of God’s people.¹¹

⁶ LG, no. 11

⁷ NDC no. 36, 3

⁸ NDC no. 36, 3a

⁹ NDC no. 36, 3a

¹⁰ SC, no. 14

¹¹ CIG, no. 12

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The time of formation includes the whole period following the child's Baptism. Parents are to help their children develop a life of prayer, a knowledge and love of Jesus Christ and his teachings, and a practical relationship with the local Church.¹²

Catechesis for candidates for First Communion is intended to assist and augment the formation they receive at home. It should comprehensively present the teachings of the Church, and be adapted to the specific needs and abilities of the candidate.

Before they receive their First Communion, candidates should receive the Sacrament of Penance.¹³ They need to be taught about the Sacrament and helped to develop and to examine their consciences. Parishes should present catechesis for the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance that helps children to:

- Acknowledge God's unconditional love for us
- Turn to Christ and the Church for sacramental forgiveness and reconciliation
- Recognize the presence of good and evil in the world and their personal capacity for both
- Recognize their need for forgiveness, not only from parents and others close to them, but from God
- Explore the meaning of the symbols, gestures, prayers, and Scriptures of the Rite of Reconciliation
- Understand how to celebrate the Rite of Reconciliation
- Understand that "sacramental Confession is a means offered children of the Church to obtain pardon for sin, and furthermore that it is even necessary *per se* if one has fallen into serious sin"¹⁴

In discussion and publication, care should be given to appropriate titles and descriptions of the Sacrament. The formal title is the "Sacrament of Penance"; the liturgical ritual can be called the "Rite of Reconciliation."

Parents of candidates need to receive catechesis that leads to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist in the life of the Church and in their own lives. It should also help them appreciate the relationship between communion and the call and dignity of Baptism and the importance of the Sacrament of Penance.

After children receive their First Holy Communion it is important that they continue their journey of faith through ongoing formation in the home and in formal religious education programs.

¹² RBC, no. 55; RC, no. 3; CJC, no. 914


¹³ CJC, no. 914

¹⁴ GDC, Addendum, no. 3

Readiness of Candidates for Sacraments of Initiation (for children Baptized as infants)

As parents approach the Church requesting Baptism for their child, they embark on a life long journey of sharing faith. For this reason, readiness for Baptism is rooted in the hope that these parents will insure that their child will be nourished in the faith, hope and love of the Christian family. The Christian family, in turn, is rooted in and sustained by the parish community. In time, through participation with the family in the Church's celebration of Eucharist and formation by their parents who are the first teachers, the child becomes more and more aware of the invitation to the encounter with Christ in the Eucharist.

With initiation into the Eucharistic communion of the Church, the young Christian begins a lifelong participation in the central mystery of our life in Christ. Readiness for First Communion is rooted in the child's *sufficient knowledge...to understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity so they can receive the Body of the Lord with faith and devotion.*¹⁵ Thus, parents, with support and assistance of the local parish are to help children develop a life of prayer, knowledge of Jesus Christ and his teachings, and a practical relationship with the local church.¹⁶



As young Christians grow in their Eucharistic identity, they journey toward their completion of initiation in Confirmation. Candidates for Confirmation are led to deeper conformity in the life and mission of Christ. Readiness for Confirmation is rooted in their capacity and desire to live the life of the disciple. Once confirmed in the faith of their Baptism, they continue on their life long journey to grow in the fullness of God's Spirit which they have received.


¹⁵ CJC, no. 913.1

¹⁶ RC, no. 3

The Children's Catechumenate: Preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation for Unbaptized Children of Catechetical Age

When children who have attained the use of reason and are of catechetical age approach the Church for Baptism, (either at the direction of their parents, or, with parental permission, on their own initiative) they are prepared for full initiation into the church through an adaptation of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, RCIA. The initiation process involves the children and their families in four phases, each of which has a specific goal and culminates in the celebration of liturgical rites in the worshipping community. These rites discern and ritualize stages of conversion leading to full initiation in the celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.¹⁷ Conversion is gradual and discerned, and is not attached to ages or grades. Preparation for and reception of the Sacraments of Initiation are only the beginning of a new way of life which leads a person through a journey of growth and conversion in faith at each step of spiritual development.

In the precatechumenate or period of inquiry, evangelization and initial conversion to Jesus are the goal. Pastoral experience has shown that the most effective precatechumenate processes are intergenerational and family centered. The help and support of the community of faith, the parents, and sponsors/godparents are fundamental to the initiation of children into the mystery of Jesus and the Church community.



After the Rite of Acceptance, the process continues with the Catechumenate period, where families come together with the worshipping assembly on Sundays. Catechumens participate in the Liturgy of the Word, then are dismissed after the homily to break open the word in groups. During this period, families and child catechumens continue learning about the teachings and practices of the Church. The content of the Catechumenate period should not be based on a religious text used for baptized children in a religious education setting. Rather, content and goals are based on paragraphs 75 through 117 of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults¹⁸ and are aimed at conversion of mind and heart. The initiation process can be extended over several years as needed, and is marked by deeper involvement in the Christian community. Moving through the process is based on the child and family's readiness and level of conversion.

The period of purification and enlightenment, which follows the Rite of Election on the First Sunday of Lent, is a retreat time marked by prayer and reflection and the celebration of at least one Scrutiny. This period is completed with the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation during the Easter Vigil.

The formation of the newly baptized, called neophytes, continues after the Easter Vigil with the period of mystagogia, a time marked by a deepening of the Church

¹⁷ Miranda, Ida Iris. *Christian Initiation of Children of Catechetical Age: The Children's Catechumenate*. Harcourt, Inc., 2007. p. 2.

¹⁸ RCIA, Study Edition, no. 75-117.




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teachings and involvement in works of charity and social justice within the community and in the world at large. Participation in the Sunday Liturgies, reflections on the readings, and works of justice can be done in groups of family and intergenerational groups of parishioners.

Strengthening the Vocation of Marriage across the Lifecycle

The very preparation for Christian marriage is itself a journey of faith. It is a special opportunity for the engaged to rediscover and deepen the faith received in Baptism and nourished by their Christian upbringing. In this way they have come to realize and freely accept their vocation to follow Christ and to serve the Kingdom of God in the married state.¹⁹

Reflecting on the wisdom of these words, the ministry of the Church in strengthening marriage must cross the course of our life cycle. The imprinting of one's definition, understanding and context for marriage begins in early childhood and continues through a child's formative years. In this context, preparing for Christian marriage has a remote phase. Initiatives in remote preparation for marriage would bolster important relationship and friendship skills in middle and high school age youth. They also provide parents with necessary resources and teach them the necessary skills in creating an environment where children may learn and grow in healthy and mature Christian relationships. Here, too, is the time to begin to teach discernment skills rooted in our Baptismal vocation.



Studies indicate that couples who bring a developed faith life and receive proximate marriage preparation that includes a pre-marriage inventory tool and a strong formation process have a greater likelihood for a Christian marriage that is lifelong. It is essential that these initiatives be done with a collaborative approach which involves priests, deacons, sponsor couples, relationship specialists, as well as the local parish community. The use of technology, gathered and non-gathered experiences will greatly enhance this experience for young adults in either parish or campus settings.

Studies indicate that the most vulnerable time in the life of a marriage is in the first five years and the most critical stressors are time, money and sex. As we seek to create a seamless approach to strengthening marriage across the life cycle, the role of sponsor couples is essential. Sponsor couples work with engaged and newly married couples before and through the early time of marriage to deepen spirituality for the vocation of Christian marriage, improve communication, and deepen appreciation of the vocation of the domestic church.

By locating formation initiatives for marriage preparation within the context of ministry across the lifecycle of marriage, we will have a greater likelihood of success in the important work of strengthening marriage in a culture that finds marriage in crisis.

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¹⁹ FC, no. 51