

# What about the RCIA for Children?

CHILDREN OF CATECHETICAL AGE AND THE CATECHUMENATE (RCIA)

## **Who Are the Children?.. that belong in the Catechumenate (RCIA)**

Because children of catechetical age are considered, for purposes of Christian initiation, to be adults (canon no. 852.1), they are included in the norms set forth by the RCIA. Children of catechetical age are old enough to hear and understand the call of Christ, and to respond with faith at their own age level. Consequently, their initiation is not based, as is the Baptism of infants, entirely on the commitment of the parents and the faith of the Church, but requires a genuine faith response on the part of the child. At the same time, the child is still dependent on his or her parents, and will need continued nurturing in faith. Children of catechetical age are those who have reached the age of reason, which is generally considered to be **age seven**. The category of "children of catechetical age" extends up to the fourteenth year.

The initiation of young people fourteen years and older should follow the rite for adults in every respect (Part I for the unbaptized, and Part II, Chapters 2-5 for the baptized), rather than following the adaptations for children that are found in Part II, Chapter 1 of the RCIA.

### A. Unbaptized Children of Catechetical Age

This is the primary group of children involved in the catechumenate. The Part II, Chapter 1 of the rite, addresses their special concerns. They should without exception participate fully in the children's catechumenate, and celebrate all three of the sacraments of initiation together. (See RCIA no. 305, NCCB Statutes nos. 18–19, and canons 852.1 and 866.)

### B. Baptized Non-Catholic Children Seeking Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church

This group is included in the norms set forth by the RCIA. Their situation is addressed in part by the description of the catechumenate for children found in Part II Chapter 1 of the rite. Their situation is also addressed in Part II, Chapter 5 of the rite, which concerns the reception of baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. The priest who presides at the reception of these young candidates receives from the law the faculty to confirm them (canon 883.2), and must use it (canon 885.2; see also NCCB Statutes no. 13). Therefore, children who are received into the Church and who have not been validly confirmed must be confirmed at the time of their reception. The process of formation for these baptized children may be carried on in the catechumenate, with the clear understanding that they are candidates, not catechumens. Just as the participation of baptized adults is allowed in the adult catechumenate for pastoral reasons, so the participation of baptized children is allowed in the children's catechumenate. If the parents of these children are also being baptized or received into the Church, their children should be received at the same time, depending on their readiness.

### C. Children Younger Than Catechetical Age - **DO NOT BELONG IN THE CATECHUMENATE!**

Unbaptized children younger than catechetical age are to be baptized according to the Rite of Baptism for Children, which is the rite used for infant Baptism. Their Confirmation and Eucharist are then deferred until a later age, according to parish and archdiocesan policy.

Baptized children younger than catechetical age whose parents are being received into the full communion of the Catholic Church do not participate in a catechumenate. They are received on the same date as their parents. Although no rite is required of them, these children should be warmly welcomed and may be recognized in various ways at the celebration of their parents' reception.

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Notation of their reception and record of the date and place of their Baptism should be made in the parish baptismal register at the time of their parents' reception. They then receive the remaining sacraments of initiation with their Catholic peers. Baptized children younger than catechetical age who were baptized in a non-Catholic Church, and whose parents are Catholics, are considered to be received into the Church at the time of their reception of first communion, with no additional rites required of them. The date of their first reception of Eucharist should be noted in the parish baptismal register as their date of reception, and record of the date and place of their Baptism should also be entered. They should participate with their Catholic peers in catechesis and the sacraments, and should not take part in a catechumenate.

## **The Relationship of the Rite for Adults to the Rite for Children**

The catechumenate as it is described for an adult is the model for the catechumenate for children. What is contained in the section devoted to children (RCIA Part II, Chapter 1) is a set of adaptations to render the adult catechumenate better suited to the pastoral needs of children. It does not constitute a different model. Whenever the introductory material in the chapter on children does not provide enough information or guidance concerning the periods or the rites, the reader should refer to the corresponding section of the rite for adults for more information. From apostolic times, families have come to the grace of Baptism together. Families that are undergoing initiation should, as far as possible, celebrate the rites of the catechumenate and the sacraments of initiation together as a family, provided that each member is ready for the next stage of the process. When there is a mixed group of children and adults, the adult rite is followed, with appropriate adaptations made for the children who are participating. The catechumenate for adults and children is a single reality. Adults and children may always participate in the rites together. When the children's parents are not part of the catechumenate for adults, however, the parish may celebrate the rites for them in gatherings separate from the adult catechumenate, where the fullest use of the adaptations for children may be exercised. This is a pastoral decision.

## **Special Needs of Children in the Catechumenate**

The Christian initiation of children of catechetical age must therefore take special care to evaluate the following elements of the child's conversion, so that the child's special needs may be met:

- A. What is the attitude of the child's family? Is there a commitment on their part to help the child grow in faith and in the community of the Church? Can this commitment be developed?
- B. What is the child's relationship to the parish community and to Sunday worship? Is there an on-going relationship? Can such a relationship be developed?
- C. Has the child expressed faith in Christ? Does the child want to belong to the Church? Can a personal relationship to Christ and to the Church be developed?

## **Role of the Family in the Children's Catechumenate**

The catechumenate for children should incorporate ways for the family of the young catechumen to be involved in the process of initiation. The catechumenate director or pastor should meet with the family and enlist their active support from the beginning of the process. A commitment to bring the child to the catechumenate gatherings is essential. The director or pastor should make clear what the process involves for the child, and that the family is expected to participate with the child in the rites and the catechetical process. Families today take a great many different forms, due to the prevalence of divorce and remarriage in our society. The family structure also varies according to culture. Families today are frequently subject to economic pressures, and experience time pressures due to both parents working outside the home. The Church should take these factors into account in determining reasonable expectations for family involvement.

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For children to be initiated into the Church, it is always necessary to have the consent of their parents, or at least one of them, or those who lawfully take their place. Children who have the consent but not the active involvement of their parents in the process of initiation should not on that account alone be barred from the process. If these children have grandparents, responsible older siblings or other key family members who will support their conversion consistently; these factors should also be taken into account.

### **Role of Catholic Peers in the Children's Catechumenate**

The support of the child's community of peers and their families will strengthen the young catechumen's experience of the Church and of conversion, and should be sought whenever possible. The special role of a "peer companion" does not substitute for an adult sponsor, but can provide a helpful support for the catechumen and should be used judiciously.

If the child is enrolled in a Catholic school or catechetical program, the child's classmates should be made aware of the special journey of the child and invited to participate in liturgical celebrations of the catechumenate for their classmate whenever appropriate. This may take the form of participation in one of the major rites held in the parish Church, or one of the minor rites, which may be celebrated with a group of children in a school or catechetical center.

### **The Shape of the Catechumenate for Children**

Initiation is a gradual process for children as well as for adults, and care should be taken to allow enough time for the children to grow secure in their new faith and develop bonds to the Church community. Frequently, the time needed by the children is longer than the time needed by adults.

The catechumenate begins with an inquiry period that leads up to the celebration of the Rite of Acceptance (or the combined Rite of Acceptance and Welcome). The inquiry period, or precatechumenate, should introduce the child to ingredients basic to our faith: who is God, who is Jesus, what is the Church.

After the Rite of Acceptance, the process continues with the catechumenate period, which is linked with the Sunday Liturgy of the Word. This period includes dismissals and minor rites, as does the catechumenate period for adults. The child's experience of worship is very important to this period. Special attention should be given to cultivating a sense of wonder at God's presence in the central symbols of our faith: light, water, oil, bread and wine, and the people gathered to worship. Catechesis about what it means to follow Jesus in our daily lives springs naturally from the lectionary readings Sunday by Sunday in the course of the liturgical year. At least one full year should be devoted to the catechumenate period. The pastor, catechumenate director, catechists, and other members of the team should carry out a discernment of the children's progress and readiness for the sacraments of initiation. Those who are truly prepared then pass into the Lenten period of purification and enlightenment.

The Rite of Election is considered an optional rite for children. That does not mean that each child may decide whether or not to attend. Rather, the pastor and catechumenate director, in consultation with the catechumenate team, should decide whether and how the children who will receive the sacraments at Easter should participate. Careful consideration should be given to this question as a matter of parish policy. Children may participate in the archdiocesan Rite of Election. If the children do not participate with the adults at an archdiocesan celebration, another option is to hold a Rite of Election for children in the parish.

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During the period of purification and enlightenment, one or two Scrutinies should be celebrated with the children. These celebrations may be linked with services for the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation for the children's Catholic peers. Those children taking part in the catechumenate who are already baptized should be prepared to receive the sacrament of penance during this time.

The sacraments of initiation are celebrated for the children at the Easter Vigil, unless some serious reason prevents it, such as inordinately large numbers. Children whose parents are being initiated at the Easter Vigil should be included with their family members, provided they are ready.

If, for pastoral reasons, any of the children are not initiated at the Easter Vigil, they should receive the three sacraments of initiation as soon as possible thereafter, at the Mass of Easter day or a Sunday Mass during the Easter season.

Children should share in the joy of the fifty days of the Easter season, and be visible to the community at Sunday Mass with their godparents and the other neophytes, in a special place reserved for them in the assembly. They may attend the neophytes' celebration with the bishop, and should have a special celebration to mark the end of the Easter season, at Pentecost. For children, extended mystagogical catechesis will be provided by their ongoing participation in the parish religious education (catechetical / faith formation) program, and ongoing mystagogia through the parish catechumenate.

## **Adapting the Rites for Children in the Catechumenate**

When celebrating the rites for children, the ritual for children should be used and adapted to the needs of the particular children who will participate. Those who are involved in preparing the rites, especially catechists whose background in liturgy is not extensive, should take great care in adapting the rites. The following principles should be kept in mind:

- The adaptations for children offered by the rite should be read and understood in light of Part I of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*.
- It is the goal of any adaptation to preserve and highlight the central symbols of the rites.
- It is necessary to avoid adding additional layers of symbolism to the symbols that are already in the rite.
- It is necessary to understand the structures of the rites, and keep those structures intact.
- The rite as it appears in the ritual book is always our guide and reference point.

When children celebrate the rites together with adult catechumens, the adult rite is followed, with some adaptations for the children. In order to accomplish this successfully, the celebrant should prepare carefully, perhaps using a text prepared specially that combines the adult rite with the adaptations for children.

When combining adaptations for children with the adult rite, in celebrations where both adults and children will participate, the following guidance is offered:

- A. In the Rite of Acceptance, the opening dialogue with the children should ask the questions that appear in the rite for children, whereas the dialogue with the adults would ask the questions that appear in the adult rite.
- B. The Rite of Acceptance for children incorporates a special affirmation by the parents. This affirmation by the parents should be retained when the children celebrate with the adults.
- C. The Scrutinies for children, unlike those for adults, may be combined with an anointing with the oil of catechumens. If the Scrutinies for children are celebrated with the adults however, the anointing should be celebrated at another time.