

# **CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE REACHED CATECHETICAL AGE GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

## **PHILOSOPHY**

“The sacraments of Christian initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist – lay the *foundations* of every Christian life.” (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1212)

The norms established for the Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age are outlined in Part II, Chapter 1 of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA #252-330). The rite 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. They seek Christian initiation either at the direction of their parents or guardians or, with parental permission, on their own initiative. Such children are capable of receiving and nurturing a personal faith and of recognizing an obligation of conscience.” (RCIA #252)

The initiation of children of catechetical age is a process based on their personal conversion. It is adapted to their spiritual progress and growth of faith rather than on cognitive knowledge. Because the criteria for initiation are based on assessing conversion of heart and action (RCIA #42 and 75), there is no time-line for initiating these children. It could take several years, if necessary. “The duration of the catechumenate will depend on the grace of God and on various circumstances...” (RCIA #76)

“The Christian initiation of these children requires both a conversion that is personal and somewhat developed, in proportion to their age, and the assistance of the education they need. 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. Accordingly, as with adults, their initiation is to be extended over several years, if need be, before they receive the sacraments.” (RCIA, #253)

## **GOALS**

1. Children of catechetical age and adults will be brought to the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist through the development, promotion, and implementation of the initiation process presented in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. This liturgical rite of the church is the official norm to be followed in the initiation of adults and children who have reached catechetical age.

- a) The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* includes “not simply the celebration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist, but also all the rites belonging to the catechumenate.” (RCIA Introduction, #1) When the sacraments of initiation are celebrated for children who have reached catechetical age, it is assumed that they will also celebrate all of the rites belonging to the catechumenate. The Code of Canon Law states, in Can. 852, that “The provisions of the canons on adult baptism apply to all those who, being no longer infants, have reached the use of reason.” Thus, children from approximately the age of seven years to around fourteen to eighteen years are to be considered of “catechetical age.”

Children, like adults, travel a journey of faith based on their spiritual progress. Various rites mark their growth in faith and culminate with the celebration of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. In general, children follow the same path towards initiation as adults. There is one initiation process for both adults and children.

- b) b. As with adults, initiation of children is marked by several stages: Pre-catechumenate, Catechumenate, Purification and Enlightenment, and Mystagogy. These stages in the initiation of children are marked by liturgical rites: Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens (RCIA #260-276), the optional Rite of Election (RCIA #277-290), penitential rites or scrutinizes (RCIA # 291-303), and the celebration of the sacraments of initiation (RCIA # 304-329). “Corresponding to the periods of adult initiation are the periods of the children’s catechetical formation that lead up to and follow the steps of their initiation.” (RCIA #253)
- c) c. While children follow the same journey of faith as adults, there are distinctions and differences based on their age and developmental stages. In many ways, then, the rite cautions that “...they cannot yet be treated as adults because, at this stage of their lives, they are dependent on their parents or guardians and are still strongly influenced by their companions and their social surroundings.” (RCIA #252).

2. Parents, guardians, and families of children preparing for initiation will be fully involved in the process. Their care, support, and example are necessary for the faith life of the children to grow and flourish.

- a) It is vital that parents, guardians, or other family members be included in the full process of initiation of children. Without the cooperation and support of parents, guardians, or family, initiation of children through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist cannot achieve its full potential for a life-long growth in faith.
- b) Strong and active participation of parents and families in the initiation process of their children will be encouraged by offering them guidance, support, and adequate adult formation opportunities.
- c) Likewise, the community of faith into which the children are being initiated has a responsibility to support, sustain, and encourage the children and their families. “Initiation...is the responsibility of all the baptized...Hence, the entire community must help the catechumens and candidates throughout the process of initiation.” (RCIA Introduction, #9)
- d) Sponsors are those who accompany “...any candidate seeking admission as a catechumen.” (RCIA #10) In initiation of children, parents or guardians usually assume the role of “sponsor”, i.e., the ones who accompany their children and present them at the liturgical rites (Rites of Acceptance or Welcoming, Scrutinies and Penitential Rites, and the Rites of Election or Continuing Conversion). If parents cannot for various reasons do this, sponsors or sponsoring families from the parish may take on this responsibility (RCIA #260). Godparents, who may be persons other than the parish sponsor, may be chosen for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation.

3. Catechetical principles as presented in the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) and the *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005) will be followed, noting the role of the baptismal catechumenate as inspiration for catechesis (*GDC* #90 – 91 and *NCD*, pp.115 - 118).

- a) The baptismal catechumenate inspires catechesis in the following ways (from *GCD* #90-91):
- The recognition that Christian initiation is of fundamental importance in the life of the Church.
  - The baptismal catechumenate is the responsibility of the entire Christian community.
  - The paschal mystery and the spirituality of Baptism permeates the baptismal catechumenate and inspires all catechesis.
  - The catechumenate is the “initial locus of inculturation” that receives and accepts all people.
  - The process of formation in the catechumenate is characterized by its comprehensiveness and integrity, gradual character expressed in definite stages, connection with meaningful rites, symbols, biblical and liturgical signs, and in its constant references to the Christian community.
- b) “The baptismal catechumenate is both ‘a process of formation and a true school of the faith.’ (*GCD* #91). It is a fruitful blend of instruction and formation in the faith; it progresses through gradual stages, it unfolds the Church’s rites, symbols, and biblical signs; and it incorporates the catechumens into the Christian community of faith and worship.” (*NCD* pg. 116)

4. Paragraphs 75 of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* will provide the rationale for catechesis of children of a catechetical age who are preparing to celebrate the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.

- a) “Suitable catechesis...planned to be gradual and complete... [is] accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the word.” Catechesis is to lead the children to an “appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts” but also instills a “profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate.” (*RCIA* #75.1)
- b) Catechesis that prepares for the sacraments of initiation helps the children “become familiar with the Christian way of life” as they learn from the “example and support of sponsors, godparents, and the entire Christian community.” They learn to pray, to witness to their faith, practice love of neighbor, and “in all things keep their hopes set on Christ.” (*RCIA* #75.2)

5. Children of catechetical age will participate in the all the liturgical rites of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, specifically those found in Part II, Chapter 1, *Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age* (# 252 – 330).

- a) Liturgical rites support and strengthen the faith of the children. They take part in the liturgy of the Word, and are “kindly dismissed” along with the adults to prayerfully consider the Word that has just been proclaimed to them. (*RCIA* 75.3) Blessings and anointings may also be used if adapted for children (*RCIA* #95 – 97).
- b) All the sacraments of initiation will be celebrated for children of catechetical age. Their initiation rites will consist of receiving the sacraments “...in a single celebration of the

three sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.” (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1233)

- c) The *Code of Canon Law* states, in regard to the sacrament of Confirmation, “What is prescribed in the canons on the baptism of an adult is applicable to all who are no longer infants but have attained the use of reason.” (#852) “The sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion unless the conference of bishops determines another age or there is danger of death...” (#891)
- d) The National Statutes on the Catechumenate states in #14: “In order to signify clearly the interrelation of the three sacraments, which are required for full Christian initiation (canon 842.2), adult candidates, including children of catechetical age, are to receive baptism, confirmation and Eucharist in a single Eucharistic celebration.” #18 concludes: “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.”

6. Archdiocesan programs will be established to train and form catechists, directors of children’s initiation, and parish personnel such as pastors, deacons, liturgists, and pastoral associates who will be engaged in the ministry of initiation of children.

7. Collaboration between the Archdiocesan Office for Worship and the Office of Religious Education will be welcomed and encouraged.

## **PROCESS**

Those engaged in the initiation of children of a catechetical age understand that these children are undergoing a conversion of heart, mind, and action. They have been brought by their parents to the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist, but because they are capable of participating fully in their own initiation, their consent and willingness to participate in the process is expected and they are indeed “...capable of receiving and nurturing a personal faith and of recognizing an obligation of conscience.” (*RCIA* #252)

Thus, initiation becomes a process that moves at its own pace, geared to the faith life of the children. It is not a program that begins and ends, or that has the expectation of “graduation” or the completion of a course of studies. This process occurs in stages and is marked by liturgical rites that celebrate the movement of faith that is happening in the lives of the children.

The catechetical process that is involved in the initiation of children is derived from the *RCIA*, #75. “Suitable” catechesis is “planned to be gradual and complete.” It is “accommodated to the liturgical year” and is “solidly supported by celebrations of the word.” This catechesis leads the children not only to “an appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts but also to a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate.”

To respect the rite’s insistence that catechesis be accommodated to the liturgical year and supported by celebrations of the Word, a form of “lectionary-based catechesis” is used in catechizing these children. The Sunday readings are used during the period of the Catechumenate as a basis for presenting the mystery of salvation as well as an introduction to “dogmas and precepts”. Catechists assist the children in a prayerful reflection on the lectionary readings, week by week, and thus lead the children

through a “gradual and complete” catechesis of the tradition in which the Christian community is grounded.

Various outcomes can be expected when children become familiar with the Christian way of life and are catechized gradually and by God’s Word. They turn to God in prayer. They begin to bear witness to the faith. They “keep their hopes set on Christ” and they “follow supernatural inspiration in their deeds.” They practice love of neighbor. The children are on a spiritual journey that is evidenced by a “progressive change of outlook and conduct.” In this way, conversion takes place that is personal and somewhat developed.

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.” The process takes whatever time is necessary for the children to experience and live out their new faith as they move towards the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.

Children who are in the initiation process can be catechized in groups according to their ages and stages of development. These groups consist of the initiation children alone (“It is advantageous, as circumstances allow, to form a group of several children who are in the same situation, in order that by example they may help one another in their progress as catechumens” *(RCIA #255)*). At the same time, a group of initiation children can be included with other children from the parish community who are of similar age but who are already baptized. If these baptized children are preparing for Eucharist or Confirmation, children preparing for baptism can progress “gradually and within the supportive setting of this group of companions.” *(RCIA #254)*

Thus, initiation children can be incorporated more fully into the life of the parish if there are opportunities for them to participate in activities with their companions. Any parish gatherings for children, including service projects, music performances, or seasonal workshops or entertainments should always include the initiation children. Baptized parish children can celebrate the Liturgy of the Word with initiation children on occasion.

After initiation and after the period of Mystagoga, child neophytes are incorporated into the parish catechetical programs. Attention should be paid to welcoming these children into already-established groups. Catechists need to be ready to receive these neophytes with gentleness and patience, realizing that they may require definitions and explanations with which the other children are already familiar.

Newly initiated children, however, often have much to teach their peers as they speak readily of their spiritual journeys and their conversion of heart. Part of the process of preparing children for Christian initiation is the recognition of their unique and special place in the Church. Those who minister with these children admit that their faith has often been strengthened by the faith of the children. Thus, the Christian initiation of children who have reached catechetical age is a great gift to the Church and to those who engage in this ministry.

# CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF CHILDREN

## Resources

### **Primary Resources**

Lectionary for Masses with Children. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988. This is the official ritual of the Church, and it is essential that all parish leaders be familiar with this text. It is available from several publishers, including Liturgy Training Publications, Liturgical Press, and Catholic Book Publishing Company. The Spanish edition (*Rito de la Iniciacion Cristiana de Adultos*) is available from USCCB and LTP.

Senseman, Rita Burns. A Child's Journey: The Christian Initiation of Children. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997. Examines the challenges of adapting the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* for children of catechetical age and offers solid, practical approaches for their initiation.

### **Other Resources**

Brown, Kathy and Sokol, Frank. Issues in the Christian Initiation of Children. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989. Articles by those involved in the initiation of children are helpful in determining parish policies and in preparing for effective catechesis and celebrations of the rites with children.

Celebrating the Lectionary. (series includes Pre-K - Adult). Resource Publications, Inc., 160 E. Virginia St. #290, San Jose, California 95112. Yearly publication.

Coffey, Kathy. Children and Christian Initiation: A Practical Guide (including additional series of texts for Precatechumenate, Catechumenate, Purification and Enlightenment, and Mystagogy). Denver: Living the Good News. 1997-2002. This series includes practical suggestions for preparing children for the rites of Christian Initiation, including the involvement of parents and sponsors.

DeVillers, Sylvia. Lectionary-Based Catechesis for Children: A Catechist's Guide. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994.

Duggan, Robert and Kelly, Maureen. Christian Initiation of Children: Hope for the Future. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991.

Exploring the Sunday Readings. Twenty-Third Publications, P. O. Box 180, Mystic, CT 06355. Yearly publication.

Foundations in Faith. Allen, TX. Resources for Christian Living, 1999. Various materials for the initiation of adults that can be adapted and used as a resource for catechists of children.

Long, Thomas L. and Filippi, Emily. Children's Catechumenate (series includes Director's Guide, Catechist Guide, and booklets for primary, intermediate, and upper level children). Orlando: Harcourt Religion Publishers, revised 1999.

Pflaum Gospel Weeklies. Primary, Intermediate, Jr. High. Peter Li, Inc. 2451 E. River Rd., Dayton, OH 45439, [www.pflaum.com/familypages](http://www.pflaum.com/familypages)

Pottebaum, Gerard, Freeburg, Paule, and Kelleher, Joyce. A Child Shall Lead Them. Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications, Inc., 1992. [treehaus@treehaus1.com](mailto:treehaus@treehaus1.com)

Searle, Mark. The Church Speaks About Sacraments with Children. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991.

Senseman, Rita Burns. When Your Child Becomes Catholic. Cincinnati: St. Anthony's Messenger Press, 2000.

Tufano, Victoria, ed. Readings in the Christian Initiation of Children. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994.

Wilde, James. Confirmed as Children, Affirmed as Teens. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989.

Wilde, James. When Should We Confirm? The Order of Christian Initiation. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989.