

Receiving Candidates One by One

Paul Turner

Baptized Christians should not have to wait until Easter to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church. Catechumens should be baptized at the Easter Vigil: an adult or a child of catechetical age needs a very good reason to be baptized on any other occasion. But baptized candidates may be received any time of year.¹

A typical parish Sunday mass makes a fine occasion for the celebration of the rite of reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church. The liturgy appears in Part II, section 5 of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA 487-498). Many parishes are more familiar with the combined rites of initiation (for catechumens) and reception (for candidates) as they appear in the appendix of the RCIA (566-594). But there are advantages to separating these events.

Advantages

The main advantages go to the candidates. They are eligible for reception whenever they are ready. Their case differs from that of catechumens, who are eligible not just when they are ready, but when Easter comes. We celebrate Easter on the Sunday following the first full moon of the northern hemisphere's spring. As the earth springs back to life from the death of winter, we commemorate the rising of Jesus from death. His resurrection foreshadows ours, and our participation in this unique life begins with our baptism, when we die to sin and rise with Christ. For these reasons, we baptize catechumens not just when we think they are ready, or when they think they are ready, but when the earth is ready, the sun is ready and the moon is ready. Their baptism resonates with the cosmos, which heralds the promise of new life that reaches perfection in the risen Christ.

However, candidates are already baptized. They have already participated in the primary sacramental symbols of resurrection. Consequently the occasion for their full communion has less to do with Easter and more to do with readiness. They are eligible for reception when they are ready, whenever that may be. The celebration is not tied to any moment in the liturgical year. When a parish offers the rite of reception at different times of year, it benefits the candidates, who may come to the table of the Lord without undue delay.

By receiving candidates apart from the Easter Vigil, we affirm their baptism. We distinguish them from those who are unbaptized by separating their respective ceremonies, and we honor the original paschal connotations of their baptism. So celebrating the rite of reception apart from the Easter Vigil benefits the candidate in terms of avoiding delays and clarifying the meaning of the ritual.

There are benefits to the parish as well. By celebrating the rite of reception at occasions apart from the Easter Vigil, the people of the parish welcome new members at various times of the year. They can give more personal attention to those who yearn for a share in our table. The parish proclaims its readiness to give individualized attention to those who seek full communion, and it encourages those who hunger for Christ to step forward, knowing they will receive immediate support and a timely welcome.

There are also advantages to the Easter Vigil. When the rite of reception is moved to occasions apart from the Vigil, the links between baptism, spring and resurrection bind more strongly. The rite of reception *may* be celebrated at the Vigil. You *may* also celebrate the rites of marriage, anointing of the sick, or ordination at the Vigil as well. It is not forbidden, but such celebrations threaten the unity of this liturgy. Without the rite of reception, the bond between baptism and confirmation is also easier to see: Immediately after their baptism and the conferral of the white garment and lighted candle, the still-wet neophytes are confirmed. As RCIA 215 points out, part of the significance of confirmation lies in its *conjunction* with baptism. The two sacraments *together* illustrate “the close link between the mission of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.” That “close link” is harder to see when those baptized as infants are confirmed many years later. It is briefly put on hold at Easter Vigils using the combined rite, for the confirmation of neophytes is delayed until baptized candidates have been received.

The reception of baptized candidates at the Vigil causes another inconvenience for neophytes: The renewal of baptismal promises for the candidates and for the entire community takes place before confirmation. So those who were just baptized are asked irrationally to renew their promises in the next few moments. Then all - including the newly baptized - are sprinkled with holy water as a reminder of their baptism. All this happens before confirmation, and the two groups are confirmed together.

The rite of confirmation uses the same words and gestures for the newly baptized and the newly received, but the meaning of the sacrament is slightly different. For the newly baptized, confirmation is part of the initiation complex, a strengthening of the gift of the Holy Spirit that comes in baptism. But for those who are already baptized, confirmation is part of their transfer from one manifestation of Christianity into the full communion of Roman Catholicism. It has less to do with their baptism and more to do with their membership and communion. These nuances are hard to grasp when the two groups are confirmed together.

For some parishes, the removal of the rite of reception from the Easter Vigil offers practical advantages. When the number of those being received unduly prolongs the liturgy, the Easter Vigil can be better focused and paced without the rite of reception.

The Easter Vigil is the single most important church service of the year. It proclaims our faith in the resurrection with an array of symbols: a fire that shatters darkness, a lilting Easter Proclamation (*Exsultet*), the many scripture readings that set the stage for baptism, the singing of the Glory to God, the return of the Alleluia, the gospel of the resurrection, the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, the renewal of the community's baptismal promises, and most profoundly the sharing of the first eucharist of this Easter season. All these elements proclaim that Christ is risen. When the rite of reception takes place at other times of the year, these symbols of the Vigil coalesce. The Vigil is not precisely a time when a small group of people become Catholic, but a time when a large group of people proclaim faith in the resurrection. If the reception of baptized Christians becomes too central, it may topple the symbolic balance of the liturgy.

Contemporary practice

When the RCIA appeared in English in 1988, it placed the rite of reception in two places: as an independent rite to be celebrated at any occasion throughout the Church year, and as a ceremony combined with the rites of initiation at the Easter Vigil. Both versions are permissible. The Congregation for Divine Worship hesitated to include the combined rites in the published text. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity had already expressed concern that the combined rites could offend other Christians, whose baptism the Catholic Church was trying to affirm as part of the ecumenical movement. However, the parishes in the United States were already combining these rituals at the Vigil, so Rome thought it prudent to present a formula for its celebration. The combined rite was approved with the proviso that it appear in the appendix, not in the main text of the book.²

It didn't make much difference. Parishes with both catechumens and candidates in formation turned to the appendix for instructions on celebrating the sacraments for both groups. Many parishes ignored the independent rite of reception, and to this day it remains unknown to some practitioners.

Parishes were combining catechumens and candidates in catechesis as well as in liturgy. It seemed practical to move both groups through similar preparatory stages, obscuring the distinctions between who was baptized and who was not. Other rites were combined: acceptance into the order of catechumens with welcoming the candidates, sending of catechumens with sending of candidates, and the rite of election with the call to continuing conversion. It has been expeditious, but the liturgical distinctions between catechumens and candidates have been difficult to divine. Some clarifications emerge in the spoken ritual words, but much of it is lost on all but the most attentive churchgoers.

In catechesis, combining the two groups has simplified the preparation for instructional teams, but it has imposed the school year calendar and the liturgical calendar over the needs of baptized candidates. They are eligible for reception at any time of year, but reception is mainly offered to them at

Easter. Parishes strapped for qualified, flexible catechists have done only what they could do: Prepare both groups for Easter.

The ideal is different. The introduction to the rite of reception says “no greater burden than necessary” should be imposed on those who seek full communion (RCIA 473). The National Statutes for the Catechumenate in the United States differentiate baptized candidates by catechetical groups: those with “relatively little Christian upbringing” and those “who have lived as Christians” (31). Even those with relatively little Christian upbringing should be distinguished from the unbaptized, and those who have lived as Christians “should not be asked to undergo a full program parallel to the catechumenate.” The National Statutes prefer “that reception into full communion not take place at the Easter Vigil” (33).

These ideals are often sacrificed in parishes that combine the preparation of the baptized with the unbaptized, the catechized and the uncatechized. Many combined groups have bonded on their journey toward the sacraments, and parishes are hesitant to break up the small community of faith that forms each year. However, this value needs to be weighed against other values: the affirmation of baptism already received, the intelligent celebration of the Easter Vigil, the urgency for welcoming baptized Christians to the eucharistic table, and the bonding of newcomers to the *parish* community, not just with one another.

Strategies for implementation

A different vision may guide the preparation of baptized candidates and the celebration of their reception. If they have lived as Christians, “credits transfer.” They only need the formation necessary to celebrate the rite of reception with integrity: proclaiming the creed with the community, and stating that they believe and profess “all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God” (RCIA 491). Their catechesis, then, should make them familiar with the primary teachings of the Catholic Church, as well as the belief that the Church continues to proclaim what God reveals as true. When the leadership team is content that the candidate is ready, when the candidate believes he or she is ready, and when the candidate expresses the desire, it is time to celebrate the rite of reception.

The preparatory rites are optional. The rite of welcoming the candidates may be profitably celebrated so that parishioners formally meet those beginning their formation and so that the candidates formally proclaim their desire. But the ceremony may be omitted. If it is celebrated, the parish might consider some options that will distinguish these baptized from the unbaptized. For example, the combined rite may be abandoned in favor of the independent rite of welcoming (RCIA 416-433), which begins indoors, not outdoors, which does not include a formal invitation to hear the Word of God, nor a presentation of the cross. The signations could be simplified to the sole signing of the forehead without the other body parts (as the Canadian edition

proposes in 474), and the presentation of the bible could be omitted. Such simplifications could help the faithful affirm the baptismal status of candidates.

The call to continuing conversion is optional. It is designed to be celebrated at the beginning of Lent for those to be received at Easter (448, 451). Because the RCIA allows the rite of election to be celebrated at other times of year in exceptional circumstances (26), one could make a similar argument for celebrating the call to continuing conversion outside Lent. However, it is perhaps best omitted for those being received apart from the Easter Vigil. Indeed, the very idea of the combined rite of election and the call to continuing conversion deserves to be evaluated. Its celebration on the First Sunday of Lent establishes a timetable that expects baptized candidates to be received at the Easter Vigil. They may, but it is not always advantageous.

The dismissal of baptized candidates from the Sunday liturgy is also debated. The Canadian edition of the RCIA encourages the practice (485), but the American edition never does. If the baptized remain in the church for the liturgy of the eucharist, they distinguish themselves again from the unbaptized.

In its original Latin form, the rite of reception was written not for a group of candidates, but with one single candidate in mind. It did not envision preliminary rites. It recommended a celebration on a day not connected with any part of the liturgical year. Its interest was in the candidate, and it sought to bring that candidate to the eucharistic table whenever he or she was ready. Parishes can still grasp that vision when they offer pastoral, catechetical and liturgical care to baptized candidates one by one.

¹ For a fuller discussion, see the author's book, *When Other Christians Become Catholic*, Pueblo (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007).

² Dale J. Sieverding, *The Reception of Baptized Christians: A History and Evaluation*, Forum Essays 7 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001), pp. 144-145.