

Preparing the Candidates for the Call to Continuing Conversion

Introduction

The RCIA states that participants in the *Rite of Calling Christian Candidates to Conversion* are those who are “baptized but previously uncatechized adults who wish to complete their Christian initiation through the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist or who wish to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church” [RCIA 466]. In simplest terms, this rite is a change of membership from a Christian faith tradition to the Roman Catholic Church. Since the Candidates are baptized, they are counted already among the Elect, which is why they do not sign the Book of the Elect. Since they are counted among the faithful baptized, they participate in the Universal Prayer, and if it is discerned that the uncatechized Candidates are to be dismissed, they are dismissed on Sundays following the Universal Prayer, while the Catechumens are dismissed after the homily.

In their culmination of research in the document, *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States*, the five U.S. bishops’ committees conclude: “The study indicates a concern on the part of the bishops that sufficient distinction be made in both the formation and in the ritual between the baptized and unbaptized persons coming forward for initiation” (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 2000; p.31). The concern of the bishops is rooted in the vision of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. In particular, the RCIA cautions that “anything that would equate (the baptized) candidates for reception with those who are Catechumens (unbaptized) is to be absolutely avoided” [RCIA 477].

Theologically, the Church believes that the Holy Spirit is birthed into the heart of the human person being baptized and the Holy Spirit is sealed in the *Sacrament of Confirmation*. The Church believes, that even though an infant is baptized at a very early age, the child receives the gift of the Spirit. We might say this is the sowing of the seed of faith. Over time, many of us have that seed of faith nurtured in the home and in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly. Some of us never had that opportunity. We might have been baptized, but were never catechized or practiced our faith. The Church believes God works in the sacrament of Baptism, even though we might not be able to articulate what has happened. The **1983 Code of Canon Law** reminds us that the “Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through Baptism, have been constituted as the people of God, for this reason, since they have become sharers in Christ’s priestly, prophetic and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each one” [Canon 204].

Mystagogy (or post-baptismal reflection) is a process we all continue to go through until we die. On the Christian journey, we repeatedly unfold the mission of God, which is to bring about the reign of God in the here and now. Experientially, anyone who has ever participated in a well-prepared *Rite of Baptism* has sensed the work of God. God's presence is manifested with "careful" gestures: marking the senses of the child with the sign of the cross; proclaiming God's marvelous deeds in the Word of the prayers and scriptural readings; dipping the child in living water; singing an exuberant "alleluia" as the child is lifted from font and presented to the liturgical assembly. Whether conversion blossoms over time in the Christian assembly or one was never given the opportunity to grow in faith, we are to have faith that indeed God does marvelous things in *Baptism*. As the Introduction to the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* states, "*Baptism is a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been signed by it. Because of that unchangeable effect (given expression by the anointing of the baptized person with chrism in the presence of God's people) the Rite of Baptism is held in highest honor by all Christians. Once it has been validly celebrated, even if by Christians with whom we are not in full communion, it may never lawfully be repeated*" [RCIA 4]. In sum, to paraphrase the third century African theologian, Tertullian, in Baptism, Christians are made, not born.

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