

Celebration of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation

(Praenotanda 206-217; Ritual Sequence 218-243)

Main Thrust of the Rite

This liturgical sequence celebrates the Sacraments of Christian Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) for adults no matter when initiation occurs. Ordinarily, initiation takes place as the Church enters Easter. You will notice, in fact, that immediately after the title for this celebration the ritual text says, parenthetically, “Easter Vigil.”

Adults can be initiated outside the Easter Vigil for pastoral and compelling reasons, such as grave illness. Otherwise, the Easter Vigil is the location for initiation precisely because the Vigil, as a Liturgy, is designed for this purpose.

Easter, moreover, is the preeminent season in the Church year where we resoundingly proclaim the Death and Resurrection of the Lord, *the* saving event into which the elect are baptized. Each week on the Lord’s Day, the Church commemorates the Resurrection of Christ. But once a year at Easter the Church honors this Resurrection with even greater solemnity.

In preparing for the celebration, you will need to consult two books: the ritual text and the Sacramentary. See the praenotanda and ritual sequence in the Sacramentary entitled “Easter Sunday, During the Night, the Easter Vigil.” Follow the directions for the first two parts of the Easter Vigil (the Service of Light and the Liturgy of the Word) given in the Sacramentary. While the Sacramentary includes some directions for part three of the Vigil, entitled “Liturgy of Baptism,” you will want to read that particular section in tandem with the more detailed praenotanda and subsequent ritual sequence given in the RCIA. For the fourth part of the Easter Vigil, you would continue with the directions given in the Sacramentary as well as the important rubrics contained in the ritual text in paragraphs 241–243.

The praenotanda in the ritual text are extensive enough that they are organized around headings, which delineate the major actions of initiation

(Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) with highlights and important insights regarding the three sacraments conferred on this holy night. These notes bear repeated reading and study. Notice the three major headings in the praenotanda each contain the word *celebration*. It is as if the framers of the ritual text wanted to emphasize that on this night, the night of the Vigil, we have not one celebration but three. As you prepare for the Vigil, you will want to do all you can to make it an unfolding, multi-phased celebration, each part building to the next and leading to a grand crescendo culminating in the Eucharist.

The ritual sequence itself is fairly elaborate. Familiarize yourself with the outline given prior to paragraph 218 in the ritual text.

Celebration of Baptism

The sequence for initiation begins after the homily. The first note at paragraph 218 underscores the participation of the entire assembly in the Baptism.

If the font is located outside the Church proper and, therefore, not in view of the faithful, Baptism can take place in the sanctuary. The ritual text says that in such a situation, a “vessel” is prepared prior to the celebration, which can mean any combination of a container and bowl, including a temporary immersion pool.

Presentation of the Baptismal Candidates (The Elect)

Three options are given in the ritual text for gathering the elect, bringing them forward, and converging at the font for Baptism. The options exist because some parish baptismal pools and fonts are now located just inside the entrance to the Church in view of the assembly. Others fonts are located to the side of the sanctuary or within it. Still others are located beyond the Church in a separate chapel or in the narthex, not visible to the worshipping assembly.

Whichever option is chosen, a few reminders are in order. Once the elect and their godparents are gathered at the place of Baptism, they should arrange themselves in such a way so as not to block the view of the assembly. This may require someone present who can kindly gesture them into proper position. Notice also that in option B, the Easter candle leads the procession to the font. The parenthetical notes seem to presume that it is not already situated there. In other words, the Easter candle is situated, once it has led us into the Church during the Service of Light, in a prominent place other than the font, perhaps near the pulpit or the altar.

Invitation to Prayer

The priest presider introduces the litany. The sample invitation at paragraph 220 specifies that he refers to the elect by name as he invites everyone to pray.

Litany of the Saints

The Church invokes the holy men and women who have gone before us in faith, exemplars of its practice, as we prepare to baptize the elect into this same faith. If there is a procession to the font, the Litany of Saints is sung as the Easter candle, the elect, their godparents, and the priest presider and ministers move there. The litany is long and can include the patron saints of the elect. There is no need to rush the procession.

The Sacramentary contains a concluding prayer which is said after the litany. This concluding prayer is not found in the ritual text.

Prayer Over the Water

The ritual text includes three options for this blessing prayer, but Option A is to be used when Baptism is celebrated at the Easter Vigil. Paragraph 222 gives specific directions for the proper use of the various options.

If the priest presider sings, a chant pattern for the Option A blessing prayer is available in both the ritual text and the Sacramentary. Notice also the wonderful ritual action with which the blessing of the water is concluded where the Easter candle is lowered three times into the waters of the font. The ritual text mentions convenience as a determining factor in omitting this action, but consider the dramatic impact that it has as prelude to the baptismal Trinitarian formula.

Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith

Three options are given for the Renunciation of Sin in the ritual text at paragraph 224. This paragraph also offers two ways in which the Renunciation may be done: collectively or individually by the elect.

The directions for the Profession of Faith at paragraph 225 seem to prefer that each individual elect is questioned individually, with the option for a collective response mentioned parenthetically. Some parishes have each elect stand in the baptismal pool, where possible, for the Profession of Faith.

Baptism

Following each Profession of Faith, the elect is baptized by immersion of the body or head, or by pouring of water. The godparent(s) assist by touching the elect as the Baptism takes place.

Since Confirmation is not separated from adult Baptisms, the first of the explanatory rites is omitted as directed in paragraph 228 of the ritual text.

Clothing with a White Garment

Paragraph 229 says that this explanatory rite may be omitted, but it is such a rich symbolic action that evokes numerous New Testament Scriptures that it makes sense not to skip it. If copious amounts of water have been used in the baptismal pouring or if the elect have been immersed, then obviously the newly baptized might not be putting on the white garment immediately after the Baptism. Instead, the priest presider can say the formula and hand the garment to the newly baptized (or to the godparent).

Presentation of a Lighted Candle

As they hold their new garment, the elect can be given the lighted candle by their godparent. This needs to be choreographed carefully, especially given the size of some Easter candles. As paragraph 230 indicates, the priest presider touches the Easter candle as he says the first part of the presentation formula, the godparents catch a light and then the newly baptized receive their candles from their godparent(s) as the priest presider finishes the formula.

Then, ushered off by their godparent(s), the newly baptized can change into a dry set of clothes and put on the white garment, or confirmation may follow immediately before changing.

Celebration of Confirmation

Paragraph 231 mentions that a hymn may now be sung. This would certainly give the newly baptized time to change and be ushered back to the place of Baptism. Singing a hymn at this point also allows the priest presider, if he has gotten into the immersion pool, time to dry off and retrieve shoes, and so on. Then, as paragraph 233 says, an invitation to pray is made by the priest presider. Silence is observed.

Then all the priests present extend hands outstretched over those to be confirmed and the priest presider prays as directed in paragraph 234.

Anointing with Chrism

Once again, the godparent(s) touch by putting their right hand on the shoulder of the one to be confirmed. The priest presider anoints with Sacred Chrism, making the sign of the cross on the forehead with his right thumb, saying the formula at paragraph 235. The newly confirmed respond to his “Peace be with you” by saying, “And also with you.”

Renewal of Baptismal Promises

Paragraph 236 and the following paragraphs indicate that the renewal of baptismal promises by the assembly and their sprinkling with baptismal water takes place immediately after Confirmation. They hold lighted candles lit from the Easter candle.

After the Renewal of Baptismal Promises, some parishes invite everyone to come forward to dip their hands into the font and sign themselves as a hymn is sung. If a hymn has not been sung between Baptism and Confirmation, this would be an opportune time for the newly baptized and the priest presider (if he has been in the baptismal pool) to go and change into dry clothing.

Once the sprinkling (or the assembly procession to the font) has taken place and the concluding prayer of paragraph 240 is made, then the newly baptized and confirmed are ushered to their places in the eucharistic assembly.

General Intercessions

The General Intercessions begin next. This is the first time that the neophytes have participated in these prayers. Afterwards, the neophytes present the gifts to the altar.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

It is, of course, the first time that the neophytes participate in receiving the Eucharist. Paragraph 242 points out that there are special interpolations given in the Sacramentary when Eucharistic Prayers I, II, or III are used.

Paragraph 243 indicates that communion under both kinds is most desirable and appropriate on this night—for neophytes, godparents, parents, spouses, and catechists, if not for everyone present. Also, before saying “This is the Lamb of God,” the priest presider may (briefly) instruct the neophytes of the preeminence of the Eucharist, the climax of initiation and the center of the Christian life.

Tips and Implications

1. If Baptism occurs by immersion, it may be best for the elect to start the Easter Vigil in some sort of simple robe (not white). Purple or a dark gray might work for this and provide a contrast to the white robes they will put on after they are baptized. Their “good clothes” can be set aside in the changing room along with some towels. They will not have a lot of time to change. You will need to clue them in ahead of the Liturgy, reminding them that they do not need to come out of that changing room with perfect hair, and so on.
2. These notes are intended for the parish priest who presides and not for a cathedral Liturgy where the bishop is the main celebrant. It is worth noting that the ritual text intends that whoever administers Baptism also administers Confirmation—to show the unity of those two sacraments. Provision is made for a large number of confirmation candidates (see paragraphs 232 and 14).
3. A “combined rite” exists for the celebration of initiation at the Easter Vigil and of the rite of reception into full communion (praenotanda starting at paragraph 562 and ritual sequence starting at 566). More and more, parishes are separating out the two and receiving candidates into full communion at appropriate Sundays in the Church year or during one of the Sundays of the Easter Season or at its conclusion, at Pentecost.