

THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

The initiation of children into the sacramental life is for the most part the responsibility and concern of Christian parents. They are to form and gradually increase a spirit of faith in the children and, with the help of catechetical institutions, prepare them for the fruitful reception of the sacraments of confirmation and the eucharist. The role of the parents is also expressed by their active participation in the celebration of the sacraments.

History of Christian Initiation of Children

It can be truthfully said that the early Church existed largely in major cities and towns of the Roman Empire.

The early practice of the Church, both in the East and in the West, is quite clear. Adults and infants alike were initiated into the Church in a single celebration, usually as part of the Easter Vigil (the night before Easter Sunday). On that night they would be baptised, anointed with the Oil of Chrism and be welcomed to the table of the Eucharist. Infants who could not yet take solid food would receive the precious blood by the minister dipping his finger in the wine and the baby would suck the drops from his finger.



Baptism in the early Church



Example of an ancient baptismal font.



Scriptural Reference

Lord's Supper (1Co 11:20), called also "the Lord's table" (1Co 10:21), "communion," "cup of blessing" (1Co 10:16), and "breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42).

In the early Church it was called also "eucharist," or giving of thanks (Compare Mat 26:27), and generally by the Latin Church "mass," a name derived from the formula of dismissal, Ite, missa est, i.e., "Go, it is discharged."



Easton's Illustrated Dictionary

Art: The Last Supper

From about the **middle of the fourth century**, the Church enjoyed a privileged status throughout the empire. Soon, urban populations were mainly Christian.

The missionary effort of the Church then turned to people living in the remote regions of the country side.

The isolation of some rural segments of the community from their urban centres meant the inability of many Christian communities to gather in a single assembly for any occasion. People were unable to make their way to the bishop's town for Sunday Eucharist or even for Christian initiation. This new situation gave rise to a pastoral problem.



The problem of Sunday Eucharist was solved by expanding the role of presbyters. "Presbyters originated as advisors to the bishop, ordained to assist in the administration of the diocese. As dioceses became too large, presbyters were delegated to preside over local communities, making the bishop's presence felt when he could not personally be there. (Today presbyters are most often referred to as 'priests')."

For initiation, however, the problem was more complex.

In the fourth century, the Roman emperor, Constantine, divided the empire between his two sons, creating an Eastern Empire (Byzantine) and a Western Empire (Roman). This division led to the emergence of very different traditions and deep theological disagreements.



In the East, presbyters were sent out from the bishop with authority to carry out the entire initiation process. This meant that local communities, urban and rural alike could celebrate full initiation at the Easter Vigil. The disadvantage was that the bishop, 'papa' of the diocesan 'household', could be present only in the town although the presbyter was seen to make him present elsewhere.



In the West, presbyters were sent out from the bishop with authority only to begin the initiation process with baptism; the bishop himself would **confirm** and admit to Holy Communion as soon as he was free. The 'papa' of the diocesan 'household' personally anointed each and every individual and welcomed them to the Eucharistic table. The disadvantage was a time gap in the celebration of the rites.

By the early medieval period the bond between the Easter Vigil and the initiation rites had disintegrated.

As the world became more Christianised, there came a time when most candidates for initiation were infants born to Christian parents.

In view of the obvious innocence of these infants, the meaning of 'baptism for the forgiveness of sins' came under closer scrutiny. The concept of 'original sin' was more broadly discussed and articulated. Concerns about cleansing infants from original sin became the over-riding factor in scheduling the celebration of baptism that was celebrated all year round and privately.

In the West, in the course of the centuries, the practice of sharing communion from the cup declined.

With the loss of communion from the cup for the laity, infants could no longer share in communion. Completion of their initiation by admission to the Eucharistic table had to be postponed until they reached the age of discretion, namely, the age at which they could be depended on to eat the consecrated bread properly.

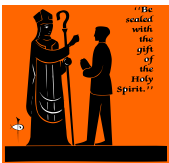


In Roman law, seven was the age at which a child achieved legal status, possessed rights and assumed public responsibilities.

The 1907 Code of Canon law, stated that confirmation might be postponed until about the age of six, the seventh year of life.

The period between the baptism of infants and their confirmation and first sharing in communion eventually became a number of years, sometimes approaching adulthood.

The celebration of confirmation and first Holy Communion at an even later age, such as sixteen or eighteen, was merely the natural outcome of other factors: the increased size of dioceses, the difficulty of travel, and in some cases, the neglect of pastoral duties.



By the middle of the nineteenth century the rites of Initiation had become disengaged from each other in popular thinking and in Church practice and were perceived as three isolated sacramental moments, each with its own prerequisites and effects. Often, Confirmation and First Communion, though administered in the traditional sequence, were not administered in the same celebration, but were in fact separated by a number of months or years.



It is not surprising then that, in **1910**, when Pope Pius X's decree, *Quam singulari*, lowered the age of admission to Eucharist to the age of discretion, it was not universally recognised that confirmation must go with it. Thus, the practice of confirming after Holy Communion is a recent development and then only in small pockets of the Western Church.

The outcome of this complex historical evolution is that until very recently, in most Australian dioceses, children baptised in infancy were admitted to the Eucharistic table at the age of discretion and confirmed some time during adolescence.

The current policy for the preparation and initiation of school-aged children in the **Archdiocese of Adelaide** has restored the sacraments of Christian initiation to their original order and reflects their intimate connection to the feast and season of Easter.



We are joined to Jesus in his passage through death and resurrection: **Baptism**.

His ascension in his humanity to glorious, Spirit-filled lordship: **Confirmation**.

Joined to Jesus through baptism and confirmation in his passage to the life of glory, we celebrate with him the banquet feast of the kingdom, which is nothing less than a foretaste of shared life in God (Holy Communion). The **Church's Eucharist** brings the world to its destination; it brings us home.



Why A Family/Parish Based Sacrament Program?

The *Rite of Baptism for Infants* clearly proclaims the Church's hopes and expectations for the blossoming of a child's faith, which begins within the family. In the opening dialogue of the celebration, the family clearly declares the wish that the child share in the faith of the Church. And the Church pledges itself to provide a welcoming home, a nourishing environment and a place of dignity within the community.

It is within the domestic Church, the family, that the child first experiences this welcome, spiritual nourishment and dignity through the parents, brothers, sisters and other family members. And through the ministry of godparents, the community expresses its intention to support the family in the spiritual formation of these young Christians.

The family passes on the Christian story by living it. It is observing family members that children learn values and virtues. The influence of the family on values and priorities is most profound.



From the moment of baptism, the child has a rightful place in the Sunday assembly and a right to be welcomed, recognised, acknowledged and empowered as an active participant in the liturgy.

Given support, the children grow in liturgical participation modelled on the involvement of the elders of the community.

The celebration of the Eucharist (Mass) is described as the source and summit of the Christian life and is the focal place for learning and faith formation. Each week we encounter Jesus in Word and Sacrament.



Each week the children hear the Gospel and learn more about Jesus and their relationship with him will grow.

The readings of the day will be available to the families with some ideas for family faith sharing.

As the children learn about the rituals and symbols of their faith tradition, they will also grow in their desire to share in them.

The mystery of Christian initiation and Christian life is an ever-deepening engagement with the richness and challenge of Christ, the gospel and the Eucharist. This continual call to conversion is a life-long journey it does not end with initiation.



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