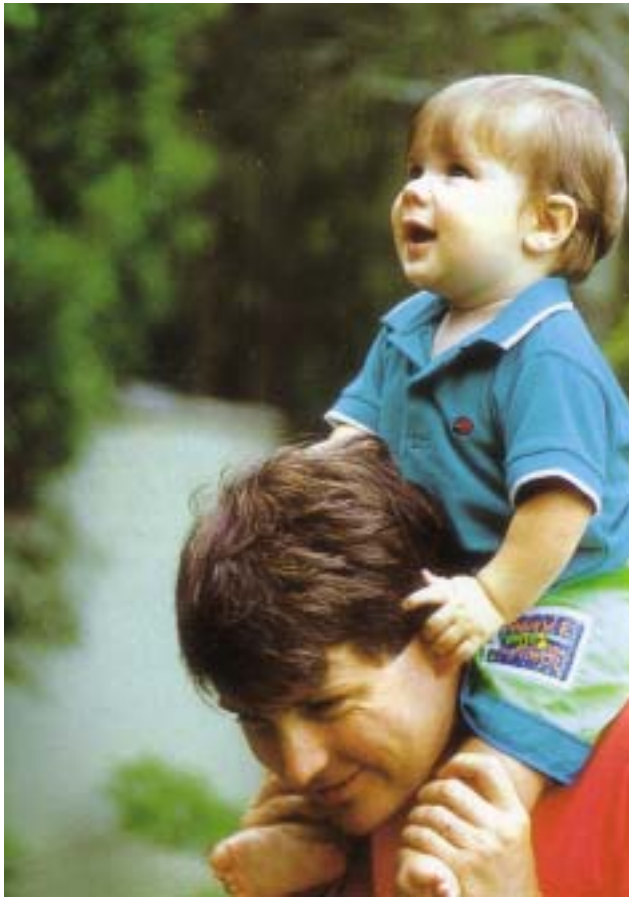


# Entering life to the fullest

## *The Sacraments of Initiation*



Have you ever heard a new-born baby and marveled at the miracle of new life? This little creation is a person in his or her own right. And yet, in another sense, the child is caught up in a web of relationships. He is somebody's son... she is someone's daughter... already interacting with the human race and with a whole life ahead! Yes, birth can certainly evoke a sense of a profound mystery at work in our lives.

It is as something akin to this experience that Christians view the sacrament of baptism. In baptism we are 'born' into a new life with God. Of course, from one perspective, our lives are like any other: we breathe the same air, share the same soil, perform many of the same human activities. And yet, for Christians, conversion to Christ results in a new way of seeing and responding to all that life offers. St Paul spoke of it as 'putting on Christ' (Gal 3.27). 'He who is in Christ is a new creature. For him the old things have passed away; a new world has come' (2 Cor 5.17). We are 'new creations' because whoever welcomes Christ into their heart is freed from the power of sin and comes alive through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The passage from death to life occurred in a mighty way in the life of Jesus, who underwent the suffering of the cross and the victory of the resurrection. Through baptism, we who enter into a relationship with him are also drawn into this passage; we 'die to sin' and 'rise to new life' in Christ. We become 'sons and daughters of God'. What a wonderful gift to propel us through life!

The place where this new life is experienced and lived out is in the community of believers called the Church. The sacrament of baptism, then, is celebrated as a ritual by which a person formally enters into the life of the Church. It involves a commitment to God through a specific community. A baptised person says 'Yes, I want to be one with you; I want to live a life

### Approaching the Topic

*'Marriage transformed my whole view of life. "I" became "we". "Mine" became "ours". I look back on our wedding day as the beginning of a whole new life.'* (Craig)

It might seem surprising to begin a leaflet on baptism with a statement about marriage! However Craig's comment offers a helpful analogy. An adult baptised into the Church enters into a relationship. He or she no longer lives as an individual entity, but as a member of the body of Christ. Like a wedding, the baptismal ceremony marks the beginning of this new life of union and ongoing commitment. Two other rituals, confirmation and Eucharist, complete this process by which a person becomes part of the Catholic Church. Together the three are known as the 'sacraments of initiation'

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faithful to the Gospel'. Likewise, the community pledges itself to be one with that person. Baptism is a commitment to a profound sharing of life.

## Initiation in the early church

Water is a powerful symbol of new life and cleansing. In fact, to baptise means, literally, to plunge into water. The Israelites, before the coming of Christ, had cleansing practices analogous to baptism. John the Baptist, the prophet who immediately preceded Jesus' ministry, invited people to give a sign of their repentance by going into the river Jordan and being baptised by him. In the wake of Christ's resurrection, the early Christians understood that they were to baptise people in his name. 'Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matthew 28.19-20). Through baptism, they saw themselves as entering very personally into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection/ It was the gateway leading to eternal life with God. Baptism became the key initiation event through which believers were welcomed into the Christian community.

This initiation was a joyous community event. Upon hearing the Gospel message proclaimed and accepting the call to conversion, believers repented of their sins, opened their hearts to Christ and were immersed in water. Since baptism meant that the person lived life anew in the Holy Spirit, an anointing with oil was introduced to confirm this presence of the Spirit. The process of initiation was completed as the newly baptised were led to the Eucharistic table to partake in the body and blood of Christ with the rest of the assembly. This initiation process normally took place at Easter. The newcomers proceed to live the Christian life with the rest of the community.

As this ritual of initiating adults into the Church (the 'catechumenate' as it was known) continued to develop, the period of formation before and after the actual baptism was

extended. Further liturgical rites were included and sacramental initiation because a longer process of conversion, reflection on the scriptures and communal celebration.

From about the fourth century, however, shifting social circumstances caused this sacrament initiation process to break down in the Western Church. Instead of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist forming a unity, they started to be celebrated as three separate sacramental events. It is in three such separation forms that most Catholics today have experienced these sacraments.

## Initiation today

Until recently in the western Church, this separation in the celebration of the initiation sacraments has been taken for granted. Today, infants are still baptised soon after birth. At about age seven they receive their first Holy Communion (Eucharist) and at about the onset of puberty they receive the sacrament of Confirmation.

In the last few decades, however, the Church has urged a greater awareness of the connection between these three sacraments. In the case of adults, the Church has gone even further and taken the radical step of restoring the ancient practice of the catechumenate as the normal way in which adult Catholics are welcomed into the Church. We shall return to this point later.

## Stories

### What some newcomers have said...

'Being baptised at the Easter Vigil was one of the greatest events in my whole life. Afterwards I felt fresh, as if I had been reborn. I felt free. There was a change in my life. In the past, I worried a lot. I have had some very difficult financial burdens to deal with. But since my baptism I find that, although I still have problems, I don't seem to worry so much. My mind is freer to concentrate and plan ahead.' (Lim)

'I can't quite describe my first experience of Holy Communion. It was a very emotional time. We had a session beforehand during which we talked about what was going to happen. I recall a reflection sheet which asked some questions. A phrase kept recurring in my mind: God is within. That was it for me – encapsulated in a nutshell. Receiving communion that night, with the realisation that I was receiving the body of Christ, was absolutely brilliant. I don't think I came to that realization of its true significance until the point

where I actually participated.' (Jim)

'I'm a very shy person and a lot of the Easter Vigil was lost on me because I was so nervous! But I remember we started outside the doors of the Church where there was a big fire alight symbolising the light of salvation. Then we all walked into the Church holding candles. We were made to feel very special. People went to a lot of trouble to make candles and robes for us. There were lots of photos and gifts. Afterwards we got together at someone's place and partied on until some ridiculous hour.' (Sue)

For the fuller account of the experiences of Lim, Jim and Sue and for more stories from newcomers to the Catholic Church, read 'Becoming a Catholic: Journeys of Faith', by Teresa Pirola (Collins Dove, 1992)

## Symbol... Sign... Reality...

For Catholics, baptism, confirmation and Eucharist are sacraments of the Church. A sacrament is a sign or symbol that communicates God's presence in a special way; it actually 'makes present' within us the reality of God's love which is signified.

**'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come'  
(2 Cor 5.17)**

### What happens in Baptism?

In the early Church, those to be baptised were fully immersed in water as a sign of their cleansing from sin and rising to new life. More often, today, water is poured on the head of the person being baptised with the words: "I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Christians believe that, through this sacred action, Christ draws us into the saving power of his death and resurrection.

After this, a white robe is placed on the person with these words 'You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ.' Other symbols, oil (chrism) and a lighter candle are further signs that this person is one with Christ and has entered the life of salvation.

When an infant is presented for baptism, the parents and godparents

make a commitment of faith into which they ask to have their child baptised. In the presence of the witnessing community, they promise to raise the child in an environment where he or she can grow in the Catholic faith and so be prepared to make a personal faith commitment to Christ upon reaching maturity.

Baptism is considered to be an unrepeatable event in a person's life. When members of the Church fail in their baptismal promises through sin, they are never 're-baptised', but rather seek forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation and renew their original baptismal commitment. Repentance and renewal are particularly encouraged during Lent, the six week period prior to Easter. In the early Church, Lent originated as a time of repentance for those preparing to be baptised. Today it is considered a time of repentance and renewal for the whole Church.

Holy Spirit'.

Although the Holy Spirit is received at baptism, confirmation focuses upon this gift by recalling the promise of Jesus to send the Spirit. After his ascension into heaven, the disciples experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit in a powerful way. At Pentecost they were filled with an enthusiasm, an energy and a boldness to speak openly about the Gospel. Throughout the ages, Christians have continued to experience this 'energising' presence of the Holy Spirit, sometimes in 'quiet' ways, sometimes more dramatically. But always this presence is accompanied by the 'fruits of the Spirit' such as joy and peace, patience and fidelity (see Galatians 5.22-26) and sometimes other gifts of the Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 12.4-11). In particular, confirmation underlines our commissioning to be apostolic; that is, bold witnesses to the Gospel.

### What happens in the Eucharist?

For Catholics, the sacrament of the Eucharist – the sacred meal wherein we break bread together and share the one cup – is the paramount sign of our unity with and in Christ. It has been described as the **source** and **summit** of the Church's life. When we receive the Eucharist each week, we believe that we receive the presence of Jesus in an extraordinarily intimate way: we take him into our very beings in the form of food and drink, that is, bread and wine. In doing so, we remember the way he died for us and rose again. The Eucharist not only commemorates past events, it draws us into the mystery of Christ right now and ultimately towards our eternal life with God. To eat and drink at the Eu-

### What happens in Confirmation?

As the name implies, the sacrament of Confirmation 'confirms' or strengthens the new life received at baptism. Symbolically, the bishop or priest makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one to be confirmed using an oil called 'chrism'. As he does so he says: '(Name), be sealed with the Gift of the





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charistic table completes the process of initiating an adult into the Church community. We will explore this sacrament in more detail in Leaflet 10.

## How does an adult become a Catholic?

Not so long ago in the Church, an adult was baptised, confirmed and given the Eucharist at a private ceremony in the presence of a priest and a few friends and relatives.

Today there is another way. On page 2 we described the early Christian 'catechumenate'. The increasingly preferred way of welcoming a newcomer into the Church today looks somewhat like that. In fact, the process is even called the Catechumenate:

The person seeking baptism (called a catechumen) meets regularly with a small group of people from the parish over a period of time suited to their circumstances. During this time, the catechumen reflects upon the scriptures, explores teaching about the Church, is invited to ask questions and to listen to the experiences of other Catholics. At the same time, they begin to participate in the overall life of the parish, and start to take on a Gospel lifestyle. During the lead-up to baptism the catechumen is invited to make a series of ever-deepening commitments, so there are plenty of oppor-



tunities to discern and review one's desire and readiness to make this life commitment. Different people from the local community are involved as sponsors, models, friends and helpers.

The catechumenate reaches a climax at Easter. In a joyful parish celebration, the catechumen receives the three sacraments of initiation. In the following weeks (the Easter season) there is a period of further formation and follow-up. This is designed to help the newly baptised Catholic more deeply comprehend the significance of their new life in Christ and to settle into day-to-day life as a Catholic.

A similar process to the catechumenate is available for people who have already been baptised into another Christian Church but who are seeking full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Since they are already Christians, they do not have to be baptised again but simply affirmed in their faith through confirmation and welcomed at the Eucharistic table.

## Experience is the best teacher

Describing the initiation sacraments is a bit like trying to explain marriage. One can speak about the actions of the ceremony, but it is in the living of it that the meaning of those symbols really hit home! The early Christians had a strong sense that the 'mystery' of baptism had to be experienced rather than explained. In fact, they spent more time talking about it with the newly baptised **in light of** their experience rather than in the lead up to it!

In a similar vein, you might like to consider going to the Easter Vigil at a parish where the catechumenate is operating and see some baptisms taking place. No written description can substitute for the experience of being present at such a celebration. Ask a Catholic friend for assistance in arranging this, or use the contacts offered elsewhere in this programme.

## Your Story

### Think About It

Jesus said: 'I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness' (John 10.10)

Through baptism we are invited into the life Jesus promises us.

- What does it mean to you to have 'life to the full'?
- Is there a 'dead' part of you that longs to be 'brought to life'?

### Talk It Over

'Who am I?' is a soul-searching question often asked by contemporary men and women. The Catholic approach poses a different question: 'Whose am I?' or 'To whom do I belong?' The first approach is I-centred. The second is relationship-oriented.

- What soul-searching questions arise in you?
- How would you answer the question: 'To whom do I belong?'

Published by

### CATHOLIC ENQUIRY CENTRE

80 Albion St, Surry Hills, NSW 2010. Tel (02) 9211 7416. Address correspondence to: PO Box 287, Darlinghurst, NSW. 2010.

Copyright: *The Australian Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church, 1994* (ACN 000 665 958)  
Nihil Obstat: Rev B. Byron, D.D., M.Th.  
Imprimatur: + Cardinal Edward Bede Clancy, Archbishop of Sydney  
Date: Sydney, NSW, 29/7/94

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