

CHRISTIAN INITIATION FOR THE CHILD OF A ROMAN CATHOLIC/BAPTIST COUPLE

Is there any way of reconciling within one Christian family the two traditions of *believer's* baptism and *infant* baptism?

It is generally agreed today that Christian initiation is a *process*. Where parents are both Baptists, this process is generally marked by a dedication service soon after the birth of a baby, followed by the baptism of the growing child as a believer and a welcome into the membership of the local church. In some countries this baptism and welcome happens as young as 7 or 8; in England it is often around the age of 12-14 or later, depending entirely on the particular individual. This tradition has not answered the question: what is the relation of the unbaptised child to the church?

Where parents are both Roman Catholics, the process of initiation is generally marked by infant baptism, followed by communion and confirmation for the growing child (the order and the usual age for these sacraments which complete initiation differ according to diocese). This tradition has not answered the question: if baptism makes the child a member of the church, what is confirmation? Or the question: how is infant baptism related to the candidate's faith?

However, it is now generally recognised in the Roman Catholic Church that the baptism of adults is an entirely accepted norm and it is in relation to the baptism of adults that the baptism of children should be understood. The Second Vatican Council prescribed the revision of the rite of baptism of adults and decreed that the order of catechumenate should be restored for adults undergoing a period of instruction in preparation for baptism. This period was to be marked by various liturgical rites and the resulting *Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults* (RCIA), published in 1972, offers the possibility of adaptation for the Christian initiation of the child of Catholic/Baptist parents.

First step: acceptance into the order of catechumens

There would seem to be some striking similarities between the status of an infant whose parents have brought him/her to a dedication service in a Baptist church and a person who has been accepted into the order of catechumens in the Catholic Church. This acceptance is a public ceremony witnessed by the church community. The candidates declare their intention of proceeding to baptism, and the Church "accepts them as persons who intend to become its members" (RCIA 41). "The rite consists in the reception of the candidates, the celebration of the Word of God, and the dismissal of the candidates. (44) "It is desirable that the entire Christian community or some part of it, consisting of friends and acquaintances, catechists and priests, take an active part in the celebration. The presiding celebrant is a priest or a deacon. The sponsors should also attend."(45)

"After the celebration of the rite of acceptance, the names of the catechumens are to be duly inscribed in the register of catechumens, along with the names of the sponsors and the minister, the date and place of the celebration." (46)

"From this time on the Church embraces the catechumens as its own with a mother's love and concern. Joined to the Church, the catechumens are now part of the household of Christ, since the Church nourishes them with the Word of God ... One who dies during the catechumenate receives a Christian burial."(47)

Of course the Rite of Acceptance would have to be adapted to replies given by parents rather than by the candidate, e.g. "What is your name?" would become: "What is your child's name?" and "these candidates" could be replaced by "this child" in the question: "Are you, and all who are gathered here with us, ready to help these candidates find and follow Christ?", and the question could be asked of parents and sponsors together. The main question is whether the Catholic Church would give the status of a catechumen to the child of Catholic/Baptist parents who asked for this.

The catechumenate is an indeterminate period; the Presentations of the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the *Ephphetha* Rite can all take place during this period, and would make a lot of sense in the development of a growing child. The second big stage, the Rite of Election, would need to take place at a time when the child was more immediately preparing for baptism.

For parents who wanted (because of their two distinct traditions) both that their child should be welcomed into the church community and that the community should accept responsibility for contributing to his/her nurture in the Christian faith, and also that their child should have the experience of being baptised as a believer who could respond in faith to the call of Christ, this might be a way forward. The age at which baptism should take place would not be pre-judged; it might be at the time when the child's contemporaries were celebrating their First Communion; it would depend on the child's own faith journey.