

When Do We Celebrate Confirmation and Eucharist with the Baptized, Uncatechized Catholic? A Continuing Conversation

The uncatechized Catholic is a wondrous anomaly. The Catholic Church baptizes infants based on the faith of parents and their promise to catechize the child. Sometimes catechesis does not happen due to family, job, home, or a weakened faith. Our church regrets this situation, but we tolerate it because we believe in the importance of baptism. We believe so strongly in the imperative to baptize all nations that we risk the absence of catechesis to share this sacrament with the young. The prevalence of uncatechized Catholics discomfits the state of catechesis, but it affirms the gift of baptism.

Usually the uncatechized Catholic was baptized in infancy but never celebrated other sacraments or received their corresponding catechesis. When uncatechized adult Catholics seek confirmation and eucharist, they participate first in formation.

So, "When?" When is the most appropriate occasion to celebrate sacraments with formerly uncatechized Catholics?

The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) is clear: Easter. "The high point of their entire formation will normally be the Easter Vigil. At that time they will make a profession of the faith in which they were baptized, receive the sacrament of confirmation, and take part in the eucharist" (409).

Or is it clear? The National Statutes for the Catechumenate approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops say, "Although it is not generally recommended, if the sacramental initiation of such candidates is completed with confirmation and eucharist on the same occasion as the celebration of the full Christian initiation of candidates for baptism, the condition and status of those already baptized should be carefully respected and distinguished" (26).

The question "When?" arises because of this discrepancy in the RCIA, but also because of the theology of baptism. As Maxwell E. Johnson argues, the Easter Vigil is most appropriate for baptism. Receiving baptized Christians at the Easter Vigil diminishes the very baptism we are trying to celebrate. Shouldn't the same be true of baptized, uncatechized Catholics?

Probably so, but RCIA 409 (Part II, Chapter 4, (Preparation of Uncatechized Adults for Confirmation and Eucharist) did not see it that way. In the American edition of the RCIA, paragraph 400 amplified the scope of Christians treated in 409 to include "adults who were baptized as infants either as Roman Catholics or as members of another Christian community." But the original Latin text simply refers to "adults who were baptized as infants." This section originally referred to Catholics, not to Christians baptized in another ecclesial community. Paragraph 409 speaks about making a profession of faith and being confirmed, but not about the act of reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church, which appears in chapter 5. Paragraph 409 addresses the condition of the baptized, uncatechized Catholic.

The RCIA's idea of celebrating Confirmation and Eucharist with recently catechized Catholics at the Easter Vigil is new. It was perhaps

inspired by the medieval tradition of reconciling penitents on Holy Thursday. But those being reconciled had been sharing communion before they became penitents. More likely, in the glow of the restored catechumenate, the framers favored sharing the Easter Vigil with others preparing for confirmation and communion. But there was no historical precedent. The Easter Vigil was the idealized time for baptismal initiation.

Paragraph 409 also has a bishop in mind. A bishop has to be at the Easter Vigil because he - not the priest in a parish - has the faculty to confirm a Catholic in this situation. "If, because neither the bishop nor another authorized minister is present, confirmation cannot be given at the Easter Vigil, it is to be celebrated as soon as possible and, if this can be arranged, during the Easter season." In practice, many bishops delegate a priest to confirm Catholics at the Easter Vigil in parishes, if these Catholics have shared catechesis with catechumens.

The practice causes the theology of confirmation to suffer. The initiatory meaning of confirmation is plain when neophytes are anointed with oil moments after baptism. The confirmation of baptized candidates plays like a reconciliation with the Catholic Church, with which they have had a certain "imperfect" communion (*Dominus Iesus* 17). The deferred confirmation of Catholics baptized as infants indicates they have reached deeper Christian maturity. In celebration, confirmation has three different focuses: initiation, reconciliation, and maturation of faith. Separating these confirmations will not eliminate the disharmony, but it will more plainly evince the meaning of this sacrament of initiation at the Easter Vigil if it is administered only to the newly baptized.

Easter is chosen for the initiation rites primarily because of baptism. The new Christian dies to a former way of life and lives for Christ, just as Jesus died and rose again. Confirming and sharing Eucharist with already-baptized Catholics bears no particular comparison to Easter theology. Granted, the Eucharist is the sacrament of the paschal banquet *par excellence*, but the Catholic has already been baptized and has some entitlement to the Eucharist.

A pastoral goal, it seems to me, is to help the baptized get to the table. In the Catholic tradition, it is appropriate to have the unbaptized wait for the solemnity of the resurrection to experience their first breath of Christian air. But the baptized and uncatechized are already late for dinner. They are hungry. Let's get them to the table.

When is the best occasion to celebrate Confirmation and Eucharist with formerly uncatechized Catholics? When they're ready. When the bishop is available. Or when he has delegated a priest to confirm in his absence. But why wait till Easter? Let's eat.

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