

Is the RCIA for Anyone Except Those Who are Both Unbaptized and Uncatechized?

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Introduction

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults by its very title provides a means for uncatechized and unbaptized inquirers to pass through the sacraments of initiation. This conference has requested a presentation that poses the question, “Does the RCIA make a place for others?” Some inquirers have a valid baptism, and some have received catechesis. Do they fit?

The RCIA treats validly baptized persons in three groups: those who are Catholic, those who are Eastern Orthodox, and those baptized in another Western denomination. In each case, some have already received extensive catechesis; others, very little. As with the unbaptized, appropriate rituals follow once these persons can be called “catechized”.

Among those who are Catholic, the RCIA makes further distinctions. Some were baptized as infants and through their adulthood have missed either the sacrament of confirmation or their first holy communion—or both. If they have received either confirmation or first communion, the RCIA does not make a place for them. Those Catholics only need one last sacrament of initiation, so they are to receive the appropriate catechesis for it. Then, to receive confirmation, they present themselves to the bishop; to receive first communion, they present themselves to a priest at Mass.¹ However, if baptized Catholics need both confirmation and first holy communion, the RCIA does make a place for them.²

Regarding those who belong to an Eastern Orthodox Church, the RCIA respects the three sacraments of initiation that they have already received and requires only an informal profession of faith. If such persons seek a transfer to

¹ See Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* 87, “First Communion should always be administered by a Priest and never outside the celebration of Mass.” https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html.

² *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* 400 (RCIA—these paragraph numbers refer to the books published by authority of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), *Ordo initiationis christianæ adultorum* 295 (OICA). *Rituel de l’initiation Chrétienne des Adultes* (RICA) 300.

the Latin rite, that is a completely separate matter that requires the involvement of the Apostolic See.³ However, such a step is unnecessary to participate in the Catholic sacraments, and it strays from the ecumenical desire to safeguard membership in the Eastern Catholic Churches.

Regarding persons validly baptized in another Christian denomination of the West, when their catechesis is complete, they undergo the Rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church, which includes the sacraments of confirmation and first holy communion.⁴

This presentation will explain some of the pastoral and theological considerations of the way that the RCIA goes beyond catechumens. It will then explain the contents in the liturgical book among several different conferences of bishops. Finally, it will note some questions moving forward.

Beyond Catechumens

Regarding baptized, uncatechized Catholics, the Latin typical edition of the RCIA considers their situation within the main body of the ritual book. The first and longest chapter deals with the catechumenate *per se*, and the next two chapters consider special situations that abridge the rites for the unbaptized.

The fourth chapter of the typical edition deals squarely with the pastoral situation of those who were baptized Catholics as infants but never received the sacraments of confirmation or the eucharist, nor the appropriate catechesis for them.⁵ The entire chapter is only two pages long. Coming immediately after three chapters pertaining to the unbaptized, and just before the chapter on unbaptized children of catechetical age, Chapter IV balances the lack of catechesis with the presence of baptism. The typical edition sees similarities between uncatechized Catholics and unbaptized inquirers. It recommends a plan of catechesis for Catholics that corresponds to the one for catechumens. However, it cautions that those responsible for the formation of these Catholics should “take into account that these adults have a special status because they are already baptized.”⁶

The other two groups of candidates, those from the Eastern Rites and Western ecclesial communities, are treated together in the appendix, not in the main body of the typical edition. Members of Eastern Rites appear in a single sentence stating, “no liturgical rite is required, but simply a profession of Catholic faith.”⁷ The rest of the appendix is the liturgical rite that applies to validly baptized Christians of other denominations of the West.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Orientalium ecclesiarum* 25 and 4.

⁴ RCIA 473, OA 1, RICA 309.

⁵ OCIA 295-305.

⁶ RCIA 402, OCIA 297, RICA 302.

⁷ RCIA 474, OICA *Ordo admissionis valide iam baptizatorum in plenam communionem ecclesiae catholicae* (OA) 2, RICA 310.

History

That liturgical rite resulted from the direction that the bishops of the Second Vatican Council set in their Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*.⁸ Paragraph 69 called for the revision of two separate rites. The second of these was for admitting those validly baptized into the communion of the Church. However, the same paragraph opens, somewhat surprisingly, with a call to revise the ceremonies supplied after the emergency baptism of an infant who survived a crisis. One usually does not consider miracle Catholic babies and adult Protestant Christians in the same paragraph. The Council did. In both cases the Church is dealing with a valid baptism, upon which some further ritual takes place without casting any doubt whatsoever upon the validity of the baptism itself.

Sacrosanctum concilium called for the restoration of the catechumenate just earlier in paragraphs 64 to 66. The bishops of the council set their treatment of non-Catholic Christians apart from unbaptized adults.

As the Consilium developed the drafts of the revised Rite of Reception, the work appeared in fascicles separate from what became the RCIA.⁹ These two rites first occupied the same volume only in the 1972 typical edition, never in the drafts. As *Sacrosanctum concilium* had separated its paragraphs dealing with the unbaptized from those dealing with validly baptized non-Catholic Christians, so the typical edition put its treatment of these two groups at its opposite ends.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the ceremony had different titles: In the thirteenth century, William Durandus called it the Order for Reconciling an Apostate, a Schismatic or a Heretic.¹⁰ The Roman Ritual changed it to The Reception of Converts and Profession of Faith.¹¹ It recommended a conditional baptism for those whose baptism was doubtfully valid, a practice that became widespread. The preconciliar rite required the convert to make a profession of faith and admit holding errors contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church; it asked the convert to condemn all that the Church has condemned. The priest's prayer absolved the converting heretic from the bond of excommunication and restored unity with the holy Church. The priest then imposed a penance, as he would after hearing a confession.

After the Second Vatican Council, those who revised the Rite of Reception took into account the Council's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. This decree repudiated the assumptions of the former ritual and stated firmly,

⁸ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

⁹ Paul Turner, *When Other Christians Become Catholic*, pp. 55-64.

¹⁰ *Le Pontifical Romain au Moyen-Âge III, Le Pontifical de Guillaume Durand*, Studi e Testi 88, ed. Michel Andrieu (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana: Vatican City, 1940), p. 616.

¹¹ *The Roman Ritual* Trans. Ed. Philip T. Weller, Volume I, The Sacraments and Processions, pp. 576-580.

“The children who are born into these [separated] Communities and who grow up believing in Christ cannot be accused of the sin involved in the separation, and the Catholic Church embraces... them as brothers [and sisters], with respect and affection.”¹²

Theology

The revised ritual received a new title to reflect an updated theology. It is not a reconciliation of heretics, but the Rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. In this concise description several absences are noteworthy: the preposition “with”, conditional baptism, and the word “convert”.

In the rite’s title, the preposition “into” is important. Some people casually and erroneously speak about non-Catholic Christians being received into communion “with” the Catholic Church, as if they remain outside of it. (In fact, the English translation of *Sacrosanctum concilium* on the Vatican’s website mistakenly uses “with” instead of “into”.)

The distinction became clearer in 2000 when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, which states that “there exists a single Church of Christ,” that ecclesial communities not sharing in the episcopacy and the eucharist “are not Churches in the proper sense,” though they “are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church.”¹³ Many Christians found this language offensive. Still, it embraces a more placid teaching: Catholics and Protestants do not belong to many churches; there is one Church in which all have a certain communion. For Catholics, the Rite of Reception admits a validly baptized person not into communion “with” a different Church, but “into” the full communion of that one Church.

The instances of conditional baptism have diminished, but perdure. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued its Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism in 1993. It states in regard to those baptized in other communities of the West, “where an official ecclesiastical attestation has been given, there is no reason for doubting the validity of the baptism conferred in their Churches and ecclesial Communities unless, in a particular case, an examination clearly shows that a serious reason exists for having a doubt.”¹⁴ A 2014 survey in the United States, however, showed that 61% of responding parishes held a conditional baptism that year, and even though such baptisms are to take place in private and after consultation with the bishop,

¹² *Unitatis redintegratio* 3. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html

¹³ *Dominus Iesus*, 17. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

¹⁴ 99c. <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/documenti/testo-in-inglese.html>.

29% of parishes performed them at the Easter Vigil and another 2% at Sunday Mass.¹⁵

The RCIA avoids using the word “convert” for those who are already baptized, and the National Statutes of the bishops of the United States say that the word should never be used of baptized Christians being received into the full communion of the Church.¹⁶ However, the bishops did not supply a replacement, so many people retain the word “convert”, even in reference to themselves.

Baptized, Uncatechized Catholics

Chapter IV, the treatment of Catholics who had been baptized as infants but then received no further catechesis, is new to liturgical history. It addresses a pastoral concern in regions such as Latin America, where the number of baptisms is large but the amount of catechesis is small. In any country the concern persists. Some parents arrange the baptism of their child because of genuine faith, family pressure, or social expectation, but then do not continue the catechetical formation of the child, nor participate in the Sunday eucharist.

The typical edition’s new Chapter IV addressed this situation in a way that the revisers probably thought was liturgically astute and pastorally effective. In two short pages, they recommended that baptized Catholics undergo catechesis similar to catechumens and receive their missing sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. However, this pastoral solution raised a canonical problem: Parish priests do not have the authority to confirm adults who were baptized Catholic as infants. Priests have to obtain permission from the bishop to confirm a Catholic. This extra step honors the bishop’s traditional role as the ordinary minister of confirmation, but it has confused many Catholics who presume that all confirmations at the Easter Vigil are alike.

The appendix puts the reception of baptized Christians in a whole different light. The typical edition never recommended that such Christians be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil. It envisioned them joining the church one by one on Sundays throughout the year. By contrast, the RCIA does suggest sacraments for uncatechized Catholics at the Vigil.

Conferences of Bishops

The translation of the typical edition into vernacular languages quickly became more than a matter of finding the right words. Some translations also rearranged the chapters and introduced new material that framed catechesis and ritual according to different conferences of bishops.

¹⁵ Paul Turner, “The Amen Corner: On Conditional Baptism.” *Worship* 91 (January 2017):4-11, citing a CARA survey, <https://paulturner.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/amen-corner-conditional-baptism.pdf>.

¹⁶ See RCIA, National Statutes for the Catechumenate Approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on 11 November 1986, 2.

In Italy, the vernacular translation faithfully follows the outline of the typical edition. Indeed, both books are published in Vatican City. The translation rearranges nothing; it adds nothing. Its treatment of baptized but uncatechized Catholics occupies two pages of chapter IV. The reception of non-Catholic Christians with a valid baptism dutifully appears in the appendix.¹⁷

The same holds true in Spain, where the ritual simply translates the contents of the typical edition.¹⁸ That translation is widely used throughout Latin America as well because many conferences have not published their own translation of a book that they use infrequently.

German-speaking conferences have published the RCIA in separate volumes. The first volume translates only the first chapter of the typical edition, the catechumenate of the unbaptized. A second volume combines, translates, rearranges and reimagines other circumstances from the typical edition.¹⁹ Its first chapter concerns the initiation of the unbaptized who are in danger of death, a translation of the third chapter of the typical edition. Its second chapter concerns a pastoral situation that the typical edition did not conceive: adults who were catechized but never baptized. It admits them into a shorter period of formation coinciding with Lent. Its third chapter concerns baptized but uncatechized adult Catholics. Its fourth chapter is the Rite of Reception for those baptized in other Christian denominations. Thus, the second volume first considers the unbaptized, both the uncatechized and the catechized, and then it considers the baptized, first Catholics and then other Christians. Although it put these last two groups in consecutive chapters, they remain distinct. In fact, the Rite of Reception was first published in German in a separate fascicle, completely apart from any rituals pertaining to the unbaptized.²⁰

In French the 1974 translation put the first chapter of the typical edition into six separate fascicles.²¹ In 1996 these were revised into a single book, where the second part makes minor adjustments to the typical edition.²² It removed the rites for school-age children into yet another fascicle,²³ and it kept the treatment of baptized but uncatechized adult Catholics in a chapter separate from the Rite of

¹⁷ Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, *Rito dell'Iniziazione Cristiana degli Adulti*, Ristampa (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994).

¹⁸ Conferencia Episcopal Española, *Ritual de la Iniciación Cristiana de Adultos*, Reimpresión (Madrid: Libros Litúrgicos, 2012).

¹⁹ Die Liturgischen Instituten Deutschlands, Österreichs und der deutschsprachigen Schweiz, *Die Feier der Eingliederung Erwachsener in die Kirche*, Teil II: In besonderen Situationen (Trier, 2008).

²⁰ *Die Feier der Aufnahme Gültig Getaufte in die Volle Gemeinschaft der Katholischen Kirche* (Freiburg and Basel: Herder, 1974 and 2001).

²¹ *Rituel du Baptême des Adultes par Étapes* (Paris: A. E. L. F., 1974).

²² *Rituel de l'Initiation Chrétienne des Adultes* (Paris: Desclée/Mame, 1996).

²³ *Rituel du Baptême des Enfants en Age de Scolarité* (Paris: Chalet-Tardy, 1993).

Reception, which, as in German, is the final chapter, not an appendix. French-speaking Canada adopted the same books.

No conference made as many changes to the typical edition as did the bishops of the United States of America. With one powerfully positioned phrase, the English translation of 1988 integrated the formation of validly baptized Christians into the group of baptized, uncatechized Catholics.²⁴ Thus, where the typical edition recommends that all the ceremonies for such Catholics take place at the Easter Vigil,²⁵ the edition in the United States put other validly baptized Christians into that group as well. The ecumenical movement had hoped to avoid combining the rites, a practice that seemed to cast doubt on the validity of the baptisms that the Church was trying to affirm.²⁶ The typical edition requests that the reception of baptized Christians avoid any trace of “triumphalism”,²⁷ yet it is hard to imagine a more triumphalist liturgy than the Easter Vigil.

The edition in the United States thus expanded its Part II Section 4 to mix catechized, validly baptized Christians with uncatechized, baptized Catholics. The same edition created a series of preliminary rites for both groups, parallel to the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, the Rite of Election, and the Scrutinies. The compilers of the typical edition never envisioned such ceremonies and held that the Rite of Reception is to place with “no greater burden than necessary” for the establishment of communion and unity.²⁸ The edition in the United States moved the Rite of Reception from the appendix to Part II Section 5, making it appear that the adapted rites of Section 4 were preliminary for all validly baptized Christians being received under Section 5.

Even more controversial, the edition in the United States combined rites for the unbaptized and the baptized so that the members of all groups could pass through similar stages within the same liturgical ceremony. The most common ones are the combined Rite of Election and the Call to Continuing Conversion; as well as the Easter Vigil, where all these groups convene. It would have surprised the ecumenically sensitive theologians who revised the Rite of Reception that one day validly baptized Christians would be brought to the cathedral at the beginning of Lent to present themselves to the bishop, along with unbaptized catechumens, before their admission into full communion.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the recovery of stages for the catechumenate was intended to enhance the activity of missionaries preaching among groups in Africa and Asia who knew of multi-staged initiation ceremonies in non-Christian regions. Rites marking stages applied to people approaching

²⁴ RCIA 400.

²⁵ RCIA 408 and 409.

²⁶ Paul Turner, *When Other Christians Become Catholic* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), p. 57.

²⁷ RCIA 475, OA 3b.

²⁸ RCIA 473, OA 1, RICA 309.

baptism, not those already baptized. However, the United States created preliminary ceremonies, perhaps out of fascination with ritual and a search for equality. The absence of preliminary ceremonies intended to affirm the baptismal status of other Christians, but some leaders thought it cheated them.

Other English-speaking countries did not publish the same material. In English-speaking Canada, for example, the rearrangement of chapters from the typical edition resembles those in the United States.²⁹ However, the Canadian book did not add the phrase that combined validly baptized Christians with uncatechized Catholics. It also took a different approach to adapted rites, which it placed in its Appendix 3. It permitted these for both Catholics and other baptized Christians, but not in combination with rites for the unbaptized. It recommended formation during Lent, the reception of sacraments for Catholics at the Easter Vigil, and the Rite of Reception during Easter Time.³⁰ Even so, it provided instructions for combining the initiation rites with the Rite of Reception at the Easter Vigil.³¹

In England and Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, the English translation mirrors the structure of the Canadian book, though without the appendix of adapted rites.³² The edition does include an appendix combining the Rite of Reception with the rites of initiation at the Easter Vigil. The books of the conferences of bishops in Australia and New Zealand share the same contents.³³ Anecdotal evidence reports that many English-speaking parishes outside the United States have yearned for more ceremonies preliminary to the Rite of Reception. They have therefore photocopied the adapted rites of the American conference and use them in their own.

The rubrics within the typical edition of the RCIA permit many variations, perhaps more than any other liturgical book. Together with the practical experience of individual journeys of faith, this may have encouraged the different vernacular translations to adapt the contents to the situations of Christians who fall between unbaptized adults and baptized, catechized Catholics.

Moving Forward

The question that drives this presentation asks if there is a place within the RCIA for baptized but uncatechized adults who lack full initiation. Yes, there is a place, and some conferences multiply the places. Yet this very place poses yet another question: “Should there be a place?” Three more questions will help:

²⁹ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Ontario: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987).

³⁰ RCIA Canada 456, 461.

³¹ RCIA Canada Appendix 1.

³² *Rite of Christian initiation of adults: approved for use in the dioceses of England and Wales, Ireland, and Scotland* (London: Burns & Oates, 2004).

³³ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Strathfield: St Pauls Publications, 2003).

What is a Valid Baptism?

In recent years the Holy See has made clear that the traditional Roman baptismal formula is essential for the validity of baptisms. In the past an invalid baptism was considered one administered “in the name of Jesus” instead of in the names of the Trinity. There is tantalizing biblical evidence suggesting that some early baptisms used only the name of Jesus, though tradition has clung to the trinitarian formula based on the final words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel.

The Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has already expressed objection to formulas that replace the traditional names of the Trinity with surrogates such as “Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.”³⁴ More recently the Vatican declared invalid any baptisms administered in the plural, “We baptize you,” instead of “I baptize you.”³⁵

Other concerns may render a baptism invalid, such as the use of some other liquid besides water. In 2001 the same Congregation declared that Mormon baptisms were invalid—even though they used water and the correct formula—because their theology of the Trinity differs strongly from the meaning that Catholics accept.³⁶

Relevant to this, the prevalence of conditional baptisms deserves analysis. It appears that some pastors are not sufficiently trying to resolve the question of validity in individual cases. Before one can discern the place in the RCIA for the validly baptized, one must first determine the validity of baptism.

What is the Place of Catholics?

The typical edition of the RCIA integrated its treatment of baptized, uncatechized Catholics with that of unbaptized adults. There is therefore a place for them, but is this the right place? The catechesis that such Catholics require varies as much as the Catholics themselves. This is also true of catechumens. In practice, then, much of the formation can take place together. But is the Easter Vigil the best occasion for such Catholics to celebrate the sacraments of confirmation and first communion, as the typical edition recommends?

The Easter Vigil traditionally includes the initiation of the unbaptized. Baptism celebrates a participation in the resurrected life of Christ. However, those who have been baptized already share in the resurrection, so their participation in the other sacraments is paschal by association rather than by design. In those conferences where the combined rites at the Easter Vigil put the

³⁴ “Responses to Questions Proposed on the Validity of Baptism.” https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20080201_validity-baptism_en.html.

³⁵ “Responses to Questions Proposed on the Validity of Baptism.” <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2020/08/06/0406/00923.html#rispostein>.

³⁶ “The Question of the Validity of Baptism Conferred in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.” https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010605_battesimo_mormoni-ladaria_en.html.

newly baptized, the recently catechized Catholics, and the newly received Christians of other denominations into the same line for confirmation, the practice blurs the bright connection between the resurrection of Jesus and the baptism of a new Christian.

The ordinary minister of confirmation for these Catholic adults is the bishop. The RCIA acknowledges this difficulty,³⁷ but it does not offer an alternative solution: The same candidates could receive their first communion as soon as they are catechized and then present themselves to the bishop for confirmation at the earliest opportunity. For an adult who is already baptized and newly catechized, there is little theological reason to combine the celebration of confirmation and first communion at the Easter Vigil.

Do the Rites Respect the Baptisms of Others?

Baptized persons of other Christian denominations have a place in the RCIA, but that does not mean that they have a place at the Easter Vigil. Even the Roman Missal structures the Vigil around baptism, not Reception. In the eyes of many Catholics, the combined baptisms and receptions simply celebrate adults who are “joining the Church.” However, the Vigil is not the night for receiving new Catholics; it is the night of resurrection. One of its expressions is baptism.

Furthermore, the acronym RCIA does not stand for the Rite of *Catholic* Initiation of Adults, but the Rite of *Christian* Initiation of Adults. It pertains to finding Christ, albeit within the Church. It supports evangelizing the unbaptized.

Conclusion

The RCIA makes a place for Catholics who are baptized yet lack some catechesis to advance to the sacraments of confirmation and holy communion. It also makes a place for validly baptized Christians of other denominations. Conferences of bishops have translated the words of the typical edition, but they also reinterpreted its treatment of these categories, not always in keeping with the meaning of baptism, especially within the ecumenical movement.

The typical edition made a pastoral concession for baptized Catholics that, upon reflection, raised a similar theological question: Should not a person’s baptism strengthen the case for celebrating confirmation and communion apart from the Easter Vigil? However, as conferences of bishops weighed their options, instead of moving baptized Catholics out of the Vigil, several have moved other Christians into the Vigil with them.

The RCIA makes a place for these Catholics and other Christians needing sacraments. The Church would profitably reassess where is the appropriate place, and more importantly, when is the appropriate time.

³⁷ RCIA 409, OICA 304.