

Common Canonical Issues in Christian Initiation

RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation)



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COMMON CANONICAL ISSUES IN CHRISTIAN INITIATION

Part I. THE CANDIDATE FOR SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Adult and adolescent (ages 14 through 17) or *child of catechetical age* (ages 7 through 13) *who desires to be baptized* (Canon 851, 1°; Canon 852§1; and see Canon 97§2). For Confirmation and Communion, the prior reception of Baptism is required.

Who is properly disposed and not prohibited by law from receiving these sacraments. (Canon 843§1)

Who are prohibited by law from receiving these sacraments?

- a) Without baptism, no one can receive any other sacraments (Canon 842§1)
- b) Those who have already been validly baptized cannot be baptized again (Canons 864 and 869 §§ 2 and 3)
- c) After baptism: Those who have been excommunicated and “others obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin...are not to be admitted to holy communion.” (Canon 915)

Who are properly disposed? Those who;

- a) Have been properly prepared (Canon 851) and instructed (Canon 865): for baptism, this includes participation in RCIA
- b) Have the intention to receive the Sacrament (Canon 865)
- c) Have been catechized/instructed about the Sacrament (Canons 889 and 913) and have sufficient understanding (Canon 913)

Children and adolescents from age 7 through 17 follow the canon and liturgical law on baptism for adults, with adaptations determined by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (*National Statutes for the Catechumenate* - NSC).

Adults, and adolescents from age 14 through 17 who are not baptized enter the *sui iuris* church (Rite) in which they are baptized, without qualification. For the special circumstances involving infants and children of catechetical age, see part V, below.

SPECIAL QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE ELIGIBLE CANDIDATE:

- 1. When is parental permission required for children and adolescents to be baptized?**
Almost always, to be safe.

The canons on baptism, which equate children of catechetical age with adults, clearly do not require parental permission for these baptisms, but reference has to be made to other places in our church law.

Canon 98§1 considers as minors children from age 7 to 17, and says that they are subject to the authority of their parents except where exempted by divine law or canon law. When children are placed in the care of guardians, the civil law determines the extent of the authority of the guardians over those children, and we are to respect that authority. This canon can apply not only to baptism but also to Confirmation and First Communion.

Children from age 7 through 13 as minors are presented for baptism by their parents or may request it on their own with permission of the parents. (RCIA #306, RCIA #252.) Adolescents 14 through 17 request baptism on their own with permission of their parents.

When one parent permits the baptism and the other refuses, what is to be done?

By canon law (Canon 868§1,1º) the consent of one parent is sufficient for the baptism of an infant, and this should be true for the baptism of older children; but unless the infant/child is in danger of death, the RCIA director or proper pastor should consult the diocesan authority for direction. The circumstances in these cases vary widely.

N.B. In danger of death any adult, child or infant may be baptized even without parental permission; and any adult or child so baptized should also be confirmed. (Canons 889 §2 and 913 §2).

*Reference is made also to Statutes 224 through 235 of the Statutes of the Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Trenton, Revised and Promulgated, December 8, 2014. Hereafter this reference will be cited *Fourth Synod, revised*.*

2. *What if the adult candidate has been previously married and divorced?*

Is the candidate prohibited by Canon 915 from receiving Holy Communion?

Probably not, unless the candidate has remarried “outside the Church” while his/her former spouse is still alive.

Is the candidate otherwise restricted from the sacraments of initiation?

According to a reply of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith on July 11, 1983 (*Canon Law Digest* 10:139): “Persons who are invalidly married because they or their present spouse or both had previously been married may become catechumens. However they may not receive the sacraments of initiation unless they are free to marry by obtaining a declaration of the nullity of previous marriages or dissolution in favor of the faith.” (Ref. Huels, *The Pastoral Companion*, page 45.)

Divorced persons whose prior spouses have died are free to marry as are all widows and widowers.

Pastoral consideration: Divorced persons *who have not remarried*, while fully eligible for the Sacraments of Initiation, should be assisted to present a case to the diocesan tribunal to determine whether they can obtain a church annulment or dissolution, so that when the opportunity to marry arises, they will be able to marry in the Church.

Basic principle: *Anyone with a prior marriage and divorce needs proof of a church annulment/dissolution or death certificate of the former spouse to be able to marry in the Catholic Church. Contact the diocesan tribunal.*

3. When should invalidly married candidates have their marriages validated?

There are no canons in the Code of Canon Law that directly address this, nor are the Synodal statutes on this specific point. But because invalidly married Catholics are supposed to absent themselves from receiving communion, it would follow that ordinarily the invalid marriage should be rectified (convalidated or sanated) before receiving the sacraments of initiation. One clear exception would be the Privilege of the Faith, Petrine or Pauline, when the Privilege itself requires that baptism precede the convalidation.

Definitions: “Convalidation” = a simple wedding ceremony in which the couple exchange the wedding vows before an authorized priest/deacon and two (2) witnesses. “Sanation” = the retroactive validation of marriage granted by the diocesan bishop when “convalidation” is impossible.

4. *If a candidate for baptism or reception into full communion is already married, and his or her spouse is not Catholic, must anything be done about their marriage?*

If theirs was the first marriage for both, or if one or other was a widow/widower when they married, nothing needs to be done. Otherwise, follow the directions above for divorced persons in second marriages. For more complicated situations contact the diocese for guidance and assistance.

5. *What should be done if the candidate has already been baptized?*

- a) Baptized in a Catholic Church** (i.e. Catholic Churches of the Latin Rite and Eastern Catholic Churches in union with our Holy Father, the Pope). A certificate of the candidate’s baptism establishes the fact of baptism. Individuals once baptized in the Catholic Church are never baptized again, even if they left the Church, joined another church and were baptized there (or not), and are coming back to the Catholic Church. Baptized, uncatechized adults participate in those Rites designed for Catholics completing their Christian Initiation. (Statute 232, *Fourth Synod, revised*)

*Individuals – adults, children and infants – baptized in Eastern Catholic Churches are always confirmed (chrismated) at baptism and almost always receive Holy Communion at baptism. Individuals who have been chrismated are **not** to be confirmed as they already have this Sacrament.*

b) Baptized in an Eastern Non-Catholic Church

The term “Eastern non-Catholic Churches,” sometimes called “Orthodox Catholic Churches” is applied to churches belonging to the major Patriarchates of Eastern Christendom not in union with our Holy Father, the Pope. In these churches Baptism, Chrismation (our Confirmation) and Communion are always administered at the same time, even to infants. Their Sacraments are valid and recognized by us. Proof is had by a certificate of Baptism which may or may not mention the other sacraments. Those baptized in an Eastern non-Catholic Church do not need the RCIA for the Sacraments. They come into the Catholic Church *upon profession of faith*, which is usually made privately with the parish pastor. Upon entry into the Catholic Church they are considered as belonging to the corresponding Eastern Catholic Church, not the Latin Church. (*Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* Canon 35) *They are not to be re-baptized, even conditionally; and they are not to be confirmed.*

c) Baptized in a non-Catholic church or denomination:

Some non-Catholic baptisms are **presumed valid** by the Catholic Church because they are administered with the same matter (water) and form (words) and intention as in the Catholic Church – for example, baptism in the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist churches. There is a complete list found in *The Pastoral Companion*, page 380. Individuals whose baptism the Catholic Church accepts as valid enter the Catholic Church upon profession of faith and at that time should receive the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist. (NSC # 35) For this reason these individuals complete the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil or on Pentecost Sunday. (Statute 234, *Fourth Synod, revised*) Note that this is a permitted departure from NSC #33 and should be in keeping with NSC #34, which sees the baptized non-Catholic being received into full communion at the same Easter Vigil at which other candidates are baptized.)

Some non-Catholic baptisms are **presumed not valid** by the Catholic Church because they are not administered with the same words (Trinitarian formula) and intention as in the Catholic Church. For example, Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Iglesia ni Kristo (Philippines), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Salvation Army, Unitarian. There is a complete list found in *The Pastoral Companion*, page 381. These individuals always participate fully in all the rites of the RCIA and receive all the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil.

With other non-Catholic baptisms there needs to be research done to find out whether the baptism was with flowing water, the Trinitarian formula, and the intention as in the Catholic Church. Usually the candidate or the parents can explain how the baptism was done, or can ask a minister of that church to explain how baptism is done. If there is any doubt about the validity of a baptism in another church or denomination, the candidate is to be baptized anew, conditionally, in the Catholic Church. See *The Pastoral Companion*, pages 380-381 for examples and explanation. Conditional baptism is always conferred apart from the public celebration of the Easter Vigil. Also, because it is conditional it does not carry with it the faculty to confirm.

d) Persons baptized privately – e.g. in a hospital, a home, or elsewhere, even by a lay person: Unless the baptism has been recorded in a Catholic Church and a certificate of the Catholic baptism has been obtained, follow the directions for non-Catholic baptisms above. If the baptism has not been recorded anywhere, you need testimony (of the baptized person, or the parents or godparents, or even the minister of the baptism) to describe how the baptism was administered. If there is any doubt whether the baptism took place or whether it was valid, a new baptism, at least conditionally, needs to be celebrated in a Catholic Church. Conditional baptism is always conferred apart from the public celebration of the Easter Vigil. Also, because it is conditional it does not carry with it the faculty to confirm.

e) *How does one prove the fact of baptism when no certificate is available?*

Testimony is given by a parent or a godparent for those baptized in infancy or early childhood. The individual who was baptized as an adolescent or adult testifies to the fact and manner of baptism and belief about baptism. Canon 876 provides this guidance: “To prove the conferral of baptism, if prejudicial to no one, the declaration of one witness beyond all exception is sufficient or the oath of the one baptized if the person received baptism as an adult.”

f) *How should a “Certificate of Dedication” be considered, in reference to baptism?*

“Dedication,” a rite practiced in some Christian denominations, is definitely *not* baptism. A “Certificate of Dedication” should never be accepted as proof of baptism. Persons “dedicated” in any Christian denomination celebrate all the rites of the RCIA and receive all the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil, unless they received baptism later on in life, and then we follow the directions above.

N.B. Non-Christian religions do not practice baptism – e.g. Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hindu, Shinto, Zoroastrian, etc. Individuals from these religions celebrate all the rites of the RCIA and receive all the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil.

N.B. What is said above about baptism applies only to baptism. Except for Chrismation at the time of Baptism in Eastern Catholic Churches and Eastern non-Catholic Churches, no other rite called “confirmation” in any other church is recognized as the Sacrament of Confirmation in Catholic Churches, Latin or Eastern.

Part II. SPONSORS/GODPARENTS FOR SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Qualifications for Sponsors/ Godparents for Baptism and for Confirmation

The following apply to all Godparents and Sponsors regardless of the age of the candidate: (Canon 874§1, 1°through 5°)

- Be designated by the candidate, or by the parents of the infant/child
- Be at least sixteen (16) years of age
- Be a fully initiated Catholic – i.e. has all three Sacraments of Initiation
- Be leading a life of faith in harmony with the duty undertaken
- Not be under any canonical penalty
- Not be the parent of the candidate/infant/child

For baptism “there is to be only one male sponsor or one female sponsor or one of each.” (Canon 873)

For confirmation, only one sponsor (Canon 892), who assists the confirmed to live as a witness for Christ and to fulfill the obligations “inherent in this sacrament.” Also “It is desirable to choose as sponsor the one who undertook the same function in baptism.” (Canon 893§2)

SPECIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT SPONSORS/GODPARENTS:

Can a non-Catholic be a Sponsor/ Godparent?

No. A baptized non-Catholic “who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community” participates “together with a Catholic sponsor” but “only as witness to the baptism.” (Canon 874§2) However, a person belonging to an Eastern non-Catholic church is admitted as a godparent along with a Catholic sponsor. (*Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* [CCEO], Canon 685§2)

In the Diocese of Trenton how does one determine that sponsors/godparents are qualified for that responsibility?

Statute 224 of the *Fourth Synod, revised* makes clear that the canons cited above are to be applied to make that determination.

Huels, *Pastoral Companion*, page 55 acknowledges the difficulty of pastors or pastoral ministers to determine eligibility of sponsors/godparents and emphasizes the importance of instructing the parents (for infants and children) or the candidates themselves (all adults, and adolescents of 14 to 17 years of age) on the requirements for sponsors/godparents, to ensure that they choose eligible sponsors/godparents.

Part III: THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Place of the Celebration of these Sacraments

For Baptism: A church or oratory (Canon 837); the parish church (Canon 858§1); another church or oratory within the boundaries of the same parish (Canon 858§2); or another church or oratory (Canon 859). Baptism is not to be conferred in private homes or in hospitals except in case of necessity or if the diocesan bishop has given permission. (Canon 860)

For Confirmation: in a church ordinarily. For a “just and reasonable cause” it can be celebrated in another worthy place. (Canon 881)

For the Most Holy Eucharist: “In a sacred place unless in a particular case necessity requires otherwise, and in such a case, the celebration must be done in a decent place” (Canon 932§1), and “on a dedicated or blessed altar; outside a sacred place a suitable table can be used, always with a cloth and a corporal.” (Canon 932§2)

Time for the Celebration of these Sacraments

For Baptism: Preferably on Sundays, including Easter and the Easter Vigil (Canon 857). Age and other qualifications are treated above. Full initiation for adults and those equated to adults takes place normally at the Easter Vigil. But following NSC 24, 26 and 27 full initiation could take place on Sundays other than Easter.

For Confirmation: “At the proper time” (Canon 890). Canon 891 refers to the age to be determined by the Conference of Bishops. Statute 226 of the *Fourth Synod revised* sets the age at 14 years, after suitable instruction, proper disposition and the renewal of baptismal promises. Canon 866 requires that an adult who is baptized is to be confirmed immediately after baptism.

For the Most Holy Eucharist: “during the Eucharistic celebration itself” and “outside the Mass...to those who request it for a just cause with the liturgical rites being observed. (Canon 918) Statute 228 of the *Fourth Synod, revised* sets the age for first communion at seven (7) years minimum with proper preparation and after sacramental confession. Canon 866 requires that an adult who is baptized is to “participate in the Eucharistic celebration also by receiving communion.”

The proper Minister(s) for the Sacraments of Initiation

The Minister of Baptism: “The ordinary minister is a bishop, priest or deacon” (Canon 861§1), with the baptism of adults and adolescents (age 14-17) the bishop is deferred to the diocesan bishop when he decides this should be done. (Canon 863)

The Minister of Confirmation: A bishop, priest with the faculty to confirm given either by the law itself or by the bishop. (Canon 882) By canon law (Canon 883, 2°) the priest who “by virtue of office or mandate of the diocesan bishop baptizes one who is no longer an infant, or admits one already baptized into full communion.” has the faculty to confirm those individuals at that same ceremony. *N.B.* “office” means the pastor or the parochial vicar of the parish; anyone else needs a “mandate” or “delegation” by the diocesan bishop – make sure to request it in advance!

Part IV: REGISTRATION AND NOTIFICATION OF SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Where is the FACT of the reception of these Sacraments to be recorded?

For all three sacraments – In the Sacramental Register(s) of the Parish where the respective Sacrament was received (Canon 877 for baptism; Canon 895 for confirmation; Statute 141 of the *Statutes of the Fourth Synod*, revised and promulgated on December 8, 2014 for first communion.)

What exactly must be recorded in the respective Sacramental Register?

- The full name of the recipient of the sacrament
- The date and place of the reception of the sacrament
- The full name of the Minister of the sacrament
- The name(s) of the godparent(s)/sponsor(s) (Baptism and Confirmation)
- The names of the parents of the candidate (Baptism and Confirmation)
- The date and place of birth of the candidate (Baptism only)

(Canons 877 and 895)

Who is responsible for recording the sacraments? For each sacrament, the Pastor. (See the canons and statute cited above.) However, in nearly every parish someone other than the Pastor actually records the sacrament. It is essential that the information to be recorded be provided legibly to the one who will enter the record in the register.

For Confirmation, in some dioceses in the world, the record is kept at the diocesan chancery. (Canon 895)

What notifications must be made? Notification of Confirmation must be made to the church of the candidate's Baptism (Canon 895), where the fact of Confirmation must also be recorded in the baptismal register entry. N.B. First Communion is normally *not* notified to the church of baptism. There is no canonical requirement to do so.

How can sacramental records be found when no one can remember where these sacraments were recorded? If the candidate has received Confirmation, and knows where that took place, the record of Confirmation should show the church of Baptism (Cf. Canon 895). In the United States many First Communion registers also note the place of baptism.

Otherwise, for persons who received the Sacraments in a Catholic Church, first find out as precisely as possible where the candidate was living when he/she received a particular sacrament, then ask the Catholic churches in that vicinity to look for a record in their registers. For persons who were baptized in other churches, see the directions above for proving the fact of baptism when certificates of baptism cannot be located.

How are certificates of sacramental records obtained? Ordinarily the person who received the sacrament (if adult) or the parent or legal guardian (of a child/adolescent) makes the request to the parish where the record is kept.

**Part V. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO SACRAMENTS FOR INFANTS AND
CHILDREN UP TO AGE 13 INCLUSIVE**

A. *Infant baptism in general*

1. *Infants* in Canon Law are those “who have not yet attained the use of reason” (Canon 852 §1 and also Canon 97 §2)
2. Ordinarily the use of reason is presumed by age seven (7) years; but older persons who lack the use of reason are also baptized according to the canons and rites for infants.
3. Infants are presented for baptism by their parents (Canon 851 §2) but are not yet eligible for the other Sacraments of Initiation. (Canons 889 §2 and 913 §1)
4. The parents (or at least one parent) must consent to the baptism and there must be a reasonable hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic faith (Canon 868 §1, 2°) Statute 225 of the *Fourth Synod revised* emphasizes the effort “to encourage the faith of indifferent and lapsed Catholics” who present a child for baptism. Only if there is *no reasonable hope* of the child being raised Catholic is baptism to be *delayed*.

B. *Infant/Child of parents, one whom belongs to an Eastern Catholic Church*

1. “Belongs to an Eastern Catholic Church” = is considered a member of an Eastern Catholic Church according to the Code of Canon Law or the Code of Canons of the Eastern Catholic Churches.
2. If this child was baptized in an Eastern Catholic Church, he or she was also chrismated (confirmed) and may have received Holy Communion. Carefully get the complete correct information before proceeding and consult with the diocese on how to proceed. *This child is not to be presented for Confirmation.*
3. If this child was baptized in a Catholic Church of our Latin rite, he or she may still belong to an Eastern Catholic Church. This also has to be determined. The child needs to receive the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Communion. However, receiving those sacraments does not change the church to which the child actually belongs. (Canon 112 §2)
4. If this child is being brought for baptism and is under 14 years of age, by baptism he or she will belong to the church of the father, unless both parents make clear before baptism that the child is to belong to the Latin rite (church). (Canon 111 §1) From age 14, the adolescent chooses the rite to which he will belong. (Canon 111 §2)

C. *Child of parents, one of whom is Catholic and the other belongs to an Eastern non-Catholic Church*

1. “Belongs to an Eastern non-Catholic Church” = is considered a member of an Eastern non-Catholic Church according to the Code of Canon Law or the Code of Canons of the Eastern Catholic Churches.
2. This child, if baptized in the Latin Rite, belongs only to the Latin Rite, not to any Eastern Catholic Church.

3. This child, if already -baptized in an Eastern non-Catholic Church, comes into the Catholic Church by profession of faith, is not confirmed anew, and belongs to the corresponding Eastern Catholic Church

D. *Child of parents, neither of whom is Catholic but one belongs to an Eastern non-Catholic church.*

1. “Belongs to an Eastern non-Catholic Church.” (See above, C.1.)
2. If this child was baptized in an Eastern non-Catholic Church he or she was also chrismated and received Holy Communion. Carefully get the complete correct information before proceeding and consult with the diocese. A child baptized and chrismated in an Eastern non-Catholic Church is *never* re-baptized or confirmed in our Catholic Church. This child comes into the Catholic Church by profession of faith and belongs to the corresponding Eastern Catholic Church. (CCEO Canon 35)
4. If this child was baptized in any other non-Catholic church, follow directions above (pages 4-5) to determine the validity of the baptism. Then proceed from that point as with an adult – i.e. full initiation if the child was not validly baptized; profession of faith if the child was validly baptized; conditional baptism if validity of baptism is not certain.
5. If this child was never baptized, but is to be baptized in the Catholic Church (Latin Rite), the child belongs immediately to the Latin Rite.