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UNIT 2: THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Vocabulary

catechumen: someone learning about the Catholic Faith in preparation for initiation into the Church

initiation: an introduction or a welcoming of a new member into a group

Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist. The reception of these three Sacraments initiates a person fully into the Catholic Church.

LESSON 4: INITIATION INTO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH



Learn more about the importance of the Sacraments by reading YOUCAT 173.

Sometimes when a person applies to become a member of a certain group or organization, that person goes through an initiation. As initiation is a kind of introduction or welcoming of a new member into a group.

For example, some of you might have fathers, uncles, or grandfathers who are members of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men's organization. Each man who wants to become a member of the Knights of Columbus goes through an initiation. After going through the ceremony, a man is officially a full member of the Knights of Columbus.

The Church's Sacraments of Initiation make a person officially a full member of the Catholic Church. The Sacraments of Initiation are Baptism, Confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist. Once we have received or celebrated these three Sacraments, we are full members of the Catholic Church. We are fully initiated Catholics.

It is important to note that being initiated into the Catholic Church is like no other initiation. Other initiation ceremonies make people members of a purely human group or organization. The Sacraments of Initiation do much more for us. Baptism, Confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist make us full members



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of the Church, which is both a human and a divine organization. Remember, the Church and Christ are mysteriously united as one. The Church is Jesus' Mystical Person and Jesus is both man (human) and God (divine). The Church too, then, is both human and divine.

When we become members of the Church, we are united to Jesus Himself. Saint Paul tells us this in many of his writings. For example, he writes to the church in Galatia: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27–28). We are all one in Christ through the Sacraments of Initiation because through these Sacraments Christ shares His life with us, uniting us to Himself.

So, initiation into the Catholic Church is like no other initiation because, through the Sacraments of Initiation, Jesus personally meets us, welcomes us as members of the Church, and makes us one with Him by sharing His life with us. No other initiation can claim to do anything close to what the Sacraments of Initiation do for us!

LESSON 5: THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

For most of us, the celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation happens over a number of years. Most of us receive the Sacrament of Baptism as infants. Our parents and godparents bring us to church, and we are baptized either at a Mass or at a ceremony apart from Mass.

However, parents who present their children for Baptism must promise to raise their children in the practice of the Catholic Faith. Parents should not have their children baptized and then neglect to educate them in the very meaning and purpose of Baptism, which is to clothe oneself in Christ and to live as a Christian. Such neglect would betray a lack of reverence for the Sacrament and would be unfair to the children.



Learn more about infant Baptism by reading YOUCAT 197.

Usually we celebrate the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist for the first time when we are about seven or eight years old. This Sacrament is preceded by the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. First Holy Communion initiates us into the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine.

Finally, usually in junior high or high school, we receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. At this time we make a commitment to spread and defend our Catholic Faith in a mature way. With this Sacrament, our full initiation into the Catholic Church is completed. By the time we are in our early teens, we are fully initiated members of the Catholic Church.

Another way of celebrating the Sacraments of Initiation occurs when a person becomes a Catholic as an adult. If a person who has not been baptized wants to become Catholic, that person usually receives all the Sacraments of Initiation on the same day. Read the following story about someone who celebrated the Sacraments of Initiation in just this way.

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A Mother Celebrates the Sacraments of Initiation

Susan was born in the United States. Her father was a United States citizen, but her mother was from Japan. Susan's father and mother met in Japan when her father was in the United States Armed Forces and was stationed in Japan. Susan's parents fell in love and were married.

After her father's tour of duty in the service was completed, Susan's parents decided to settle in the United States. Susan was the first child to be born to her parents, and then came Peter and little Mary.

When Susan was old enough, she began to attend Mass on Sundays with her parents. Susan soon noticed that, when it came time to go to Communion, her father would go to Communion, but her mother would not. Susan was curious and asked her mother one day after Mass why she did not go to Communion.

Her mother answered that she was not Catholic and therefore was not able to receive Communion. In fact, Susan's mother had not been baptized in any religion. She had been raised in a religion different from the Catholic religion. Susan's mother went on to explain that she had learned something in Japan about the Catholic Faith by attending Mass and catechism lessons with a Catholic friend of hers.

As the years went by, Susan and her family prayed together, and on Sundays they attended Mass together. One day, when Susan was just beginning eighth grade, Susan's mother had a surprise for Susan. Her mother told Susan that she was going to attend the catechumenate program at their parish, Saint Joseph's.

Susan's mother explained that the catechumenate program is for people who are interested in becoming Catholic. Through several months of instruction and liturgical ceremonies, a person is prepared to celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist) at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday (the evening before Easter Sunday). This year Father Hughes would be teaching the classes, which would meet every Thursday evening.

Susan was excited for her mother. Susan offered to help her father take care of Peter and Mary while her mother was at class. Susan also prayed every day for her mother.

Susan enjoyed listening to the things that her mother was learning in the catechumenate classes. Since English was not her mother's native language, Susan helped her to understand some of the ideas that Father Hughes taught in class. Susan was also able to share with her mother the things that she was learning in her religion classes at Saint Joseph's School.

As part of the catechumenate program, there were several liturgical celebrations that all the catechumens attended. These celebrations were usually during Sunday Masses. During these liturgies, the congregation prayed for all the catechumens at Saint Joseph's. Susan attended each celebration and prayed especially hard for her mother.

Soon Holy Saturday evening arrived. It was time to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It was also time for the catechumens to be initiated fully into the Church. Susan's mother was very nervous as the family prepared to go to the Easter Vigil ceremony. Susan noticed her mother's uneasiness, and, as the family left the house, Susan gently squeezed her mother's hand and gave her a big smile.

When the family arrived at church, Susan's mother went to be seated with the other catechumens. Susan and the rest of the family were seated close by the catechumens.

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The Easter Vigil liturgy was beautiful. Susan was so happy for her mother. After the homily, Father Hughes called the catechumens, with their sponsors, into the sanctuary. After the litany of the saints, Father blessed the water that would be used to baptize Susan's mother. Then Susan's mother and the other catechumens expressed a desire to turn away from sin in their lives. They also made a profession of faith, proclaiming their belief in all that the Catholic Church teaches.

Finally, the moment for Baptism arrived. Tears came to Susan's eyes as she watched Father Hughes pour water over her mother's head and speak the words of Baptism. Susan looked at her father and her brother and sister, all of whom smiled at Susan with tears in their eyes.

Because Father Hughes had prepared Susan's mother for reception into the Catholic Church, he was permitted to confirm her, too. This he did by anointing her forehead with chrism and saying the words of Confirmation.

After the Confirmation, Susan's mother and the others who were newly baptized and confirmed returned to their pews. The Mass continued. Then the time came for Holy Communion. Father Hughes had made arrangements for the newly initiated and their families to receive Communion together.

Now, for the first time, Susan and her mother could go up to receive the Body of Christ together. Again, this was a very emotional moment for Susan and her entire family. After many months of study and prayer, Susan's mother had completed her full initiation into the Catholic Church. This was an occasion for a joyous celebration.

When Mass was over, there was a reception in the parish center for the newly initiated. Many of the parishioners came to congratulate Susan's mother. For her congratulations, Susan gave her mother a big hug. This was one of the happiest moments in Susan's life (and in her mother's as well)!

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