



*B*ELONGING



Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.

Romans 6:3–6

Being Catholic

Have you ever been asked to list your “religious preference” when filling out an application, maybe for a scholarship or award? If you are beginning this book about the Sacrament of Confirmation, it is a safe bet to assume that you are able to write down the words “Catholic” or “Roman Catholic” when asked that type of question.

If so, how do you think of yourself as *Catholic*? What are some things that come to mind that define you as Catholic? You might say things like:

My family is Catholic. (Or my mom’s side of the family is Catholic.)

I was baptized and I made my First Communion in the Catholic Church.

I go to Mass on Sunday.

I believe in Jesus.

I hold the same strong views that the Church teaches (for example, that life begins at conception and that sex should be saved until after marriage).

I am preparing for Confirmation, aren't I?!

The list above and more things besides are certainly things that would define a person as Catholic. If you can agree to most of these things, you can certainly write down the word "Catholic" under any items about your religious preference. But are items on a checklist all that it really takes to make you or anyone else a Catholic? A further and deeper question might be: How do my *desire and attitude* in these areas affect the kind of Catholic that I am?

Francis Bernardone of Assisi was what might be called a "rote Catholic" until young adulthood. At age twenty, Francis, the son of a wealthy clothing merchant, Peter Bernardone, became a knight. His father had purchased for him the most expensive armor, shields, banners, and weapons. That didn't matter. When his troop suffered a defeat, Francis was captured and imprisoned for several months before being sent home. While convalescing, Francis sought out answers to the age-old questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? The answers Francis received came from the basic knowledge of his Catholic faith that he had always known but never clearly made a decision to embrace.

One night he had a dream that changed his life. In the dream, he could envision all the spoils of military victory: trophies, a palace to live in, and even a beautiful wife to be his companion. Francis woke up in a sweat. He could tell that he was destined for some kind of glory—the kind he really wanted.

After recovering, Francis headed off to Southern Italy to re-enlist. On the way there he camped along the road and heard the same voice that he had heard in his dream. The voice spoke: "Francis, who can do more for you, the servant or the master?" Francis answered: "Why the master, of course." The voice responded in a way that led to permanent implications both for Francis's life and the life of the Church: "Why, then, are you seeking the servant instead of the master, the vassal instead of the prince?"

Francis recognized the voice as the voice of Christ. "Lord," he asked, "what will you have me do?"

"Return home. Your vision will have its spiritual fulfillment through me."

Francis's life was never the same again. He was never again a "rote Catholic." Rather, he forsook his father and his father's inheritance,

stripped the clothing off his own back, and went to live in a cave. He soon attracted a group of men and women followers to his life of simplicity and sincere practice of Christ's Gospel. In 1209, Francis wrote a *Rule of Life* for his followers that has been followed ever since. Composed of Gospel texts and some very few precepts, this Rule aims at guiding committed Catholics to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

Is such a life of conversion possible among Catholics today? Can *rote* Catholics become *committed* Catholics? What about you? What scares you about going beyond the simple definition for being a Catholic? How can you be called and inspired to do God's will in such an unglamorous (remember, Francis lived in a cave) but lasting way? What can you do in your own life to incorporate the Gospel of Jesus Christ and your Catholic faith to the very core of your being? What can you do to at least *want* that to occur?

If you're reading this, you may be beginning your preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation. Or, you may be nearing the time when you will receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. In either case, you will know that Confirmation is a Sacrament of Initiation, and, if you have already been baptized and received the Sacrament of the Eucharist, that Confirmation "completes" your initiation into the Catholic Church.

But what does "completion" mean in this case? Does it only mean that you are "completed" with "Confirmation class" or "religious education?" Is the sacrament like a graduation from school where the graduate never sets foot in the school corridors again?

After all of the effort you may have expended in preparing for Confirmation, do you feel you might deserve a time to retreat from the Church, perhaps enjoy the high school years with your friends without thinking about God at all?

Or, do you think you will be drawn to a more grown-up practice of your faith?

Have you heard Jesus' personal call to you to put him—not the ways of the world—first? These are some of the questions you may ponder as the time of the Sacrament of Confirmation approaches.



Interestingly, the timing of Confirmation has quite a bit to do with whether you are willing and able to take on an adult-level commitment to the faith. As you may have already observed, the age where Catholics participate in the initiation process varies greatly in the Catholic Church. In fact, you may note that one of your buddies from another parish has only eight weeks of preparation or you may wonder why a grade-school friend of the family was confirmed at the same time she made her First Communion. In fact, these types of variations in Christian initiation have always existed.

Essential Elements of Christian Initiation

From the earliest times, becoming a Christian was viewed as a journey that could be long or short. The initiation of a new Christian took place in several stages. There were always essential elements in the journey:

Baptism

The first Sacrament of Initiation. It is “the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments” (CCC, 1213).

→ the hearing and acceptance of the Good News of Christ

→ the making of a profession of faith

→ **Baptism**

→ **Confirmation**, which more perfectly binds the Christian to the Church and enriches him or her with a special strength of the Holy Spirit (CCC, 1285)

Confirmation

A Sacrament of Initiation, it is sometimes known as the Sacrament of the Holy Spirit. It completes Baptism and seals the recipient with the Holy Spirit and confers the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

→ full welcome into the Church through receiving Holy Communion

At first, a long period of **catechumenate** (“period of instruction”) pretty much preceded in the order described above, with culmination being the reception of all three sacraments on the vigil of Easter. Confirmation was a rite of laying on of hands directly connected with Baptism. A key point in this process was that it was reserved for adults.

catechumenate

The process of study, prayer, and participation in community for the purpose of preparing for the Sacraments of Initiation.

The process changed with the advent of more infant Baptisms. At that point, the elements were still part of the process, though done in a very abridged way, with the preparation directed not to the infant, of course, but to the parents and godparents.

At the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Church restored the original catechumenate process for adults. It also continued baptizing infants, with the understanding that a catechesis for the infant would take place in the years following and would later include preparation for and reception of Eucharist and Confirmation.

That's where we are now. If you were baptized as a baby, you probably celebrated your First Communion (and the Sacrament of Penance) in the second grade. Confirmation preparation could have come at the same time, but more likely, because you are reading this book, was reserved for right now.

With all the different variations in practice, there is no doubt that questions and dilemmas within the processes will arise. The question is, how to settle them? To do so requires more understanding of the essential elements of the catechumenate process and of the Sacraments of Initiation themselves.

Only then can you attempt to answer the bigger questions: "How can I become a more committed disciple of Jesus Christ?" "How do I belong to the Church?" "How can I be more than a rote Catholic?"



Look up and write five interesting facts about the life of St. Francis of Assisi.



What have been the consistent elements of Christian initiation?

Where do you find yourself on the spectrum between a "rote Catholic" and a "committed Catholic"? Explain.

Christian Initiation: Back to the Beginning

If it is any solace to those who question the timing of Christian initiation, history and circumstances have always contributed to how great or how little difficulty there is to become a Christian.

For example, after the **Apostles** first received the Holy Spirit at **Pentecost**, Peter stepped out on the balcony of the Upper Room in Jerusalem (the place where Jesus had shared his Last Supper) and spoke convincingly to the Jewish crowds gathered in the street below.

Apostles

The **Apostles** are those who are "sent" to be Christ's ambassadors, to continue his work. In its widest sense, the term refers to all of Christ's disciples whose mission is to preach his Gospel in word and deed. It also refers to the Twelve whom Jesus chose to help him in his earthly ministry. The successors of the Twelve **Apostles** are the bishops.

Pentecost

The day when the Holy Spirit descended on the **Apostles** and gave them the power to preach with conviction the message that Jesus is risen and is Lord of the universe.

Jews from many different neighboring regions in Jerusalem were there to celebrate the Feast of the First Fruits. By the end of the day, the Scriptures report, about three thousand of those who listened to Peter accepted the message about Jesus Christ and were baptized.

This relatively easy road to the Church is contrasted with a more difficult challenge faced by other potential new Christians described in the very same book of the New Testament. At first, the “New Way,” as the Church was described, was thought only to be an extension of Judaism. All of the Christians had been raised Jewish. Jesus himself was a Jew.

☛ **Gentiles**

The name for anyone not of the Jewish faith; a Christian.

When **Gentiles** began to hear and accept the Good News, they too were baptized. St. Paul—known as the Apostle to the Gentiles—was the leader of this movement. But disagreements arose about this. Some of the converted Jews wanted any of the baptized Gentiles to observe all the laws of Judaism completely. This included, in their belief, the circumcision of the Gentile males as well as observance of all of the Jewish dietary laws. This debate became the subject of a gathering of Church leaders at the Council of Jerusalem. Both sides presented their cases. Finally, the Apostle James offered the final decision:

It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, but tell them by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. (Acts 15:19–20)

Gentile Christians were spared some of the more difficult requirements of Judaism (most significantly, circumcision), and Christianity left behind some of its Jewish roots. But the process of Christian initiation did not become significantly easier in the next two centuries.

Development of the Catechumenate

Until AD 313, it was illegal to be a Christian in the Roman Empire. So the undertaking of new converts seeking Baptism was both a courageous and difficult one. It was always an answer to God’s call that spurred a person on his or her way.

☛ **martyrdom**

The state of choosing to suffer and give up one’s life for faith rather than renouncing it.

Besides the built-in dangers associated with illegal Christianity—including persecution and **martyrdom**—the catechumenate itself was difficult. First of all, it was a three-year process. The candidate—sponsored by a baptized Christian—studied Christianity, prayed, fasted, and proved to be up to the challenge of choosing a lifestyle that could bring death.