



What's Right with the Rites for Catechesis

“I claim you for Christ.” With these words, in a small hotel in Rousseau, Bulgaria, I blessed the three children my sister and her husband had adopted. I traced the Sign of the Cross on their foreheads, as I have done so many times on the foreheads of family and friends. It was a touching moment that made the ups and downs of the adoption process all worthwhile. This poignant time with three little strangers in a hotel room in a foreign land consoled all of us who were present, as well as those loved ones elsewhere in the world who would receive the news via modern technology.

This story is one of many that I use when preparing parents, guardians, godparents, and sponsors for a child’s reception of the Sacraments of Initiation. In this article I concentrate particularly on catechetical moments such as this one, using salient examples of liturgical texts rich with meaning for catechesis, as well as Scripture readings associated with particular sacramental rites.

Baptismal Catechesis for Parents and Guardians

“[Name,] the Christian community welcomes you with great joy. In its name I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross. I now trace the cross on your forehead, and invite your parents and godparents to do the same”

—Rite of Baptism for Children, no. 41, in The Rites of the Catholic Church, Study Edition (RCC), vol. 1 (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1990)

For many years I have heard these words again and again at the celebration of Baptism. No wonder the words “I claim you for Christ” came so easily to me when a prayer was requested for my

new nieces and nephew. When I prepare adults for the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism, I call attention to how this text and the action of signing the cross on the child’s forehead remind parents, guardians, and godparents of the Paschal Mystery. I also invite reflection and conversation on such questions as the following:

- When was the first time you gave thanks to God and claimed this child for Christ?
- Who is the Church that welcomes your child? How do you celebrate with this community?
- How can you and the Church consciously claim this child for Christ again and again beyond the Rite of Baptism?
- How and when will you use this Sign of the Cross on your child’s forehead as he or she grows?

For parents, guardians and godparents who are “cradle Catholics,” the Sign of the Cross can become a ritual gesture that Catholics automatically make whenever they begin to pray. Helping them understand the abundance of meaning beyond the familiar words and gesture sheds a new light on this routine movement.

Catechetically, another rich text within the *Rite of Baptism* is the prayer that accompanies the presentation of the lighted candle: “Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. He (she) is to walk always as a child of the light. May he (she) keep the flame of faith alive in his (her) heart. When the Lord comes, may he (she) go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom” (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 64).

This text, and the action of lighting and presenting the candle, call attention to the reality that this child belongs to the Lord and will walk in his light. The prayer is a clarion call to all those who care for the child being baptized to assist him or her in keeping the flame of faith alive through family example and support. The prayer is a powerful reminder to parents, guardians, and godparents that as the child meets Christ in Baptism, so too the Lord will come in love at the end of time.

Questions to pose for discussion about this prayer may include the following:

- What social and cultural challenges do the parents face in keeping the flame of faith alive?
- How will the parents help the child claim Christ as the light of life?

These are just two examples of how I invite parish catechetical leaders to open the text of a sacramental rite for catechesis. While these examples are based on the Rite of Baptism, I have used similar questions for parents when they begin the catechesis for Eucharist.

Eucharistic Catechesis for Parents and Guardians

In recent years, it often happens that when the Christian community buries a loved one, a photographic story of the beloved may be on display during the viewing. The community captures in photos the life story of the person and his or her connection to family and friends. Likewise, God's story comes to us in the Bible, but God paints his memory through words. The members of the community listen to God's story and share it with one another and the world, because this story is for all.

I often begin my catechesis on the Eucharist by calling attention to the Liturgy of the Word. In the Eucharist, and particularly in the Liturgy of the Word, the Church uses the language of ritual to introduce and complete the readings from

the Bible. Ritual words, such as "A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew," prepare the hearer for what is coming. When the Church uses the salutation for the Gospel, the assembly prepares itself to hear God's Word about Jesus, the Son of God. Adults can be invited into conversation about ritual language with the following questions:

- What family stories have you communicated to your children? Why are they important to your family?
- What sacred story do you desire to share with your child?

In continuing the catechesis on the Liturgy of the Eucharist, I briefly outline the components of the Eucharistic Prayer and then choose several quotations from that prayer for the group to reflect on theologically. For example, I will read the text "Do this in memory of me." I then suggest that the group reflect successively on each of the text's words to emphasize a particular point of the text. This one sentence engenders more conversation among adults than any other I have used in catechesis for first Eucharist.

For the closing prayer of the lesson I use the Gospel text the parish will proclaim on First Holy Communion Day. I prepare written copies of the Gospel reading so that the family may read it at home before the celebration of the Eucharist.

Confirmation Catechesis for an Age-Specific or Intergenerational Group

I have often used liturgical catechesis as an integral component of one session for Confirmation catechesis, presenting the sacrament in the doctrinal and spiritual framework of the renewal of baptismal promises, which forms part of the Rite of Confirmation. The *Catechism* notes the connection this liturgical action makes between Confirmation and Baptism: "When Confirmation is celebrated separately from Baptism, its connection with Baptism is expressed, among other

ways, by the renewal of baptismal promises. The celebration of Confirmation during the Eucharist helps underline the unity of the sacraments of Christian initiation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2000], no. 1321). The promises made at Baptism, and renewed during the Easter Vigil, are replete with concepts for presentation and conversation either with a homogenous group of learners or an intergenerational group.

Included here is a brief lesson plan for the catechesis, based on activities and discussions that take place after the reading of each component of the text for the renewal of baptismal promises. (The text of the rite quoted here can be found in *Rite of Confirmation* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006], no. 23.)

“Do you reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises?”

This question is a great one to encourage conversation among members of any age group. In an intergenerational group, pair participants who are at different age levels and ask them to list the “works and empty promises” that are a temptation in today’s world. When the pairs are finished making their lists, discuss the lists as a group, focusing on how these empty promises might be rejected. After the discussion, ask the group to concentrate on the verb “reject.” Encourage the members of the group to turn away from sin in clear language, such as that used in the “Just Say No” campaign against drug abuse.

“Do you believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?”

If time allows, provide materials and invite the group to portray God the Father artistically. Teach the participants about the Catholic understanding of God the almighty Father in Scripture and Tradition.

“Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?”

Play a liturgical song that is frequently used in your parish that gives witness to Jesus Christ, true God and true man. Help the assembled to understand the image of Jesus presented by that song. Next, play a song that reflects upon Mary’s role in salvation history. Invite the participants to write a paragraph to explain their understanding of Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

“Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who came upon the apostles at Pentecost and today is given to you sacramentally in Confirmation?”

Make this question the central teaching component of the gathering. (For a review of the Church’s teaching about the Sacrament of Confirmation, see CCC, nos. 1285–1321.)

“Do you believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?”

Divide the gathering into five smaller groups. Ask each group to take one portion of the question and describe in writing either “the holy catholic Church,” “the communion of saints,” “the forgiveness of sins,” “the resurrection of the body,” or “life everlasting.” The presenter then reads aloud each group’s answer, elaborating on any doctrinal points that may be underdeveloped or missing for the age group assembled.

“This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

End the session with this statement from the renewal of baptismal promises. Provide cards on which the baptismal promises have been printed, so the participants may take them home and use them for prayer prior to the celebration of the Rite of Confirmation.



There is no limit to how one might develop prayer experiences and catechetical lessons based

on the liturgical rites of the Sacraments. The parish catechetical leader only needs to use the resources of text, gesture, and symbol over and over again like the twelve musical notes of the chromatic scale to create meaningful and inspiring compositions that provide new variations on the theme of catechesis.

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