

PASTOR'S NOTES: Sacramental Formation for Sacraments of Initiation: Part III

INFANT BAPTISM has been practiced in the Catholic Church from the First Century. No one asks to be born into this world, yet every one who is conceived is chosen by God to enter into our human condition. Similarly, we do not wait to accept a child into our family until the child asks for that privilege. It is a gift freely given. **Peter explained what happens at baptism when he said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). But he did not restrict this teaching to adults. He added, "For the promise is to you *and to your children* and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:39).**

When it comes to being born again, the miracle of God's election is the issue of paramount importance. Since God wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of Christ Jesus, we can be sure God wants us to be baptized. Unlike someone who has reached the age of discretion (often called reason), an infant cannot resist the grace of God so the Baptism is effective and the little one in fact becomes a Christian. **As John Chrysostom states: "For this reason we baptize even infants, though they are not defiled by [personal] sins, so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ, and that they may be his [Christ's] members" (*Baptismal Catecheses in Augustine, Against Julian* 1:6:21 [A.D. 388]).**

In the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, the ancient custom goes even further. **The custom in the Catholic Eastern Rites is to give all three Sacraments of Initiation to a child when the baby is about month old.** To be clear, they validly receive Baptism, Confirmation, and even Eucharist.

When a person reaches the age of discretion (reason) they must be allowed to make the choice. No one may be forced to be baptized against their will. This is why the Catholic Church wants babies to be baptized very soon since the actual onset of the faculty of reason is hard to pin point. **The customary age of discretion is around seven. The official documents do not say exactly at seven.** Anyone familiar with human development knows that no two people develop at exactly the same rate. To imply that at age 7 a child is magically endowed with reason is unreasonable.

In the Latin (Roman) Rite of the Catholic Church infants are only baptized. They are only confirmed when they are in grave danger of death.

There are two possible procedures for taking care of the Sacramental Formation of children:

Group A: "Non-Cradle Catholic Children"

When an unbaptized child has come to some degree of discretion they, according to Canon Law and the National Statutes for the RCIA, must be prepared for, the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Great care must then be taken to prepare them quickly for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. There are to be no

exceptions to this requirement. These children are to be treated as adults since they have the exercise of free will.

Group B: “Cradle Catholic Children”

When a child baptized as an infant as a Catholic comes to a reasonable degree of discretion, according to Canon Law, they may be prepared for Confirmation and Eucharist. Canon Law does not require an advanced age for Confirmation, only the age of discretion. Local custom of for about 100 years has added this stipulation. Most places administered Confirmation between the third and sixth grade. Only since the 1970s, has it been suggested that Confirmation belongs in junior high or high school. This has been further complicated by the desire to have children admitted to the Eucharist as soon as possible. **Since the Bishop is the ordinary minister of the Sacrament of Confirmation and he could not do all the First Communions every year in every parish, Confirmation was moved out of its original position as the middle Sacrament of Initiation to being the last to accommodate the scheduling issue.** Thus the role of Baptism and Confirmation (the non-repeatable sacraments) being the required preparations for participation in the Eucharist was overshadowed. The link is almost lost in our thinking. One could wonder, if a child is not ready for Confirmation, is that child ready for the Eucharist in Holy Communion? They could also ask, Why do cradle Catholics have to wait?