Baptism and Confirmation

Teacher Background

Sacraments of Initiation

Baptism and Confirmation are two of the three sacraments of Initiation of the Catholic Church. The third sacrament of Initiation is Eucharist. In the first two hundred years of the life and practice of the Church, these sacraments of Initiation were received by adults as three symbolic actions making up the one ritual of initiation. Most Catholics today have been baptised as infants and received the sacrament of Eucharist for the first time around the age of seven years. The age of reception of the sacrament of Confirmation varies depending on the sacramental policy and practice of a particular diocese at the time when people were confirmed. The present sacramental policy of the archdiocese of Brisbane completes the sacraments of Initiation for young Catholics with the reception of both Confirmation and First Eucharist. This completion of Initiation usually takes place at a parish Mass where the community of the parish is gathered. The young Catholics whose initiation is thus completed are seven years of age or older.

The Sacraments of Initiation are so named because all three of them are necessary for one to be a full member of the Christian community. Baptism is a re-birth of the individual into sharing the life of Christ. According to Church tradition, set free from sin, the baptised now becomes part of God’s family. To carry on Christ’s mission in the world, the Christian needs the gifts of the Holy Spirit that filled Jesus in his lifetime. These are bestowed through Confirmation. The daily living of the gospel is not possible alone. It must be done in union with the whole Body of Christ and relying on the nourishment that God gives. First Communion introduces one to the Eucharist, which especially among its liturgical celebrations, is the ‘summit and source of the Church’s life’.

Initiation in the Contemporary Church: The RCIA

Reforms to the Church’s liturgy after the Second Vatican Council re-introduced the ancient catechumenate that had lapsed when infant Baptism became the norm. Today the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) provides the model for admission to church membership. It involves the three elements common to initiation rites discussed above: instruction, testing and admission. The catechumen or candidate in the contemporary RCIA concludes a period of enquiry and instruction with reception of sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil. Unbaptised candidates receive all three sacraments of Initiation in the Easter Vigil ritual. Candidates whose previous Baptism and Confirmation are recognised by the Catholic Church receive Eucharist only. However, the central aspect of the sacraments of initiation is conversion. The introduction to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults states:

The rite of Christian initiation is intended for adults. They hear the preaching of the mystery of Christ, the Holy Spirit opens their hearts and they freely and knowingly seek the living God and enter the path of faith and conversion. By God’s help, they will be strengthened spiritually in their preparation and at the proper time they will receive the sacraments fully.

Baptism

Each sacrament is an action of Jesus Christ working through the Church that is the Body of Christ. Baptism introduces the new Christian to a relationship with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through baptism, the Church acts sacramentally. It begins at the church door where the community gathers to welcome the candidate. After being named and marked with the sign of the cross, the candidate is led in a joyful procession of welcome into the church. There the community prays for its new member through intercessions, anoints against the power of evil and shares in a profession of
their common faith. Sponsors are appointed from the community to assist the newly baptised person in taking up the responsibilities of membership.

The ritual of baptism includes the sign of the cross on the threshold of the celebration, the proclamation of the Word of God, one or more exorcisms and the anointing with oil, the consecration of the baptismal water, the pouring or triple immersion in the baptismal water, the anointing with sacred chrism, the putting on of the white baptismal garment and the lighting of the baptismal candle from the Easter (Paschal) candle.

The essential rite of baptism, namely, the pouring or immersion in water, signifies death to sin and entry into the life of the Trinity, a life of love through a life conformed to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (the Paschal Mystery). The anointing with sacred chrism, perfumed oil consecrated by the bishop, signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptised and incorporation into Christ, priest, prophet and king. The white garment signifies that the newly baptised has “put on Christ”. (Galatians 3:27). The candle, lit from the Easter candle, indicates that the neophyte, the newly baptised, has been enlightened by Christ and in Christ is to be “the light of the world.” (Matthew 5: 14)

**Confirmation as Sealing**

Confirmation (or Chrismation in the Eastern Church) is the sacrament through which the baptised are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The symbol of anointing with oil (chrism) is used. This points to one's consecration as a Christian: sharing more completely in the mission of Jesus and in the fullness of the Holy Spirit with which Jesus is filled. A seal is a sign of authority, of personal ownership. Confirmation imparts a spiritual seal or character, which marks the Christian as belonging wholly to Christ. It calls one to share in Christ's priestly, prophetic and kingly mission.

The sacrament of Confirmation strengthens the Christian with the gifts of the Spirit to help him/her live out the Christian life. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace; it unites us more firmly to Christ; it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us; it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly and never be ashamed of the cross.” (#1303)

Elements of the ritual for the sacrament of Confirmation include the public announcement of the new Confirmation name chosen by each candidate, the call to each candidate to strengthen their Christian life and commitment through Confirmation, the renewal of baptismal promises, the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil. Throughout history, oil has been used to strengthen, heal and preserve. In the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, those chosen and called by God for some special task were anointed with oil.