

be born in me.
I welcome you as you welcome new members
into your church at Baptism.
May my life say welcome to all those
who cross my path.
May my life become new
as I open myself to your Spirit.
Amen.

The basis of the whole Christian life is the sacrament of **Baptism**. By Baptism a person's relationship with God is forever changed: Freed from sin and reborn as a son or a daughter of God, the baptized person is given grace and thus shares in the very life of God. Baptism incorporates a person into the Body of Christ, the church. It offers the fullness of the means to salvation—salvation *from* sin and death, and salvation *for* a share in the divine life of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is the first of the three **sacraments of initiation**, which celebrate a Christian's transformation, entrance, and lifelong growth in the community of Jesus' followers, the church. In the early centuries of Christianity, the other two

sacraments of initiation—Confirmation and the Eucharist—were united with Baptism and celebrated in one ritual as part of the process of becoming a Christian. Today adults who join the Catholic church go through a process similar to what the early converts experienced, celebrating all three sacraments together. But for small children and infants entering the church, Baptism is celebrated as a separate sacrament, with Confirmation and the Eucharist following at a later age. The significance of Baptism is best explained by the adult experience of this sacrament, the "original" version. So let's begin our study of Baptism by considering a different but related kind of adult initiation.

about what the transition from high school to college means to them. Already David is making friends.

By the end of the week, David feels much more at home, and his enthusiasm has soared. Now he knows lots of people, both newcomers like himself and upper-level students like Tony. He has heard talks from student leaders, teachers, and administrators, and he has registered for classes. The risk he has taken by plunging himself into this new world is beginning to pay off. Already he can sense the great transformation that college life holds in store for him.

Many factors are contributing to David's transformation: the independence of living away from home, the new and exciting relationships, the sense of purpose he feels about his classes and his

future, the feeling of belonging to a great college and sharing in the college's own special spirit. . . . David is amazed: He feels like a brand-new person!

Despite all his internal and external changes, David realizes vaguely that his transformation has just begun. But he is ready for more growth. He can't wait to get on with it.

The changes David went through during his college orientation week are just drops compared to the ocean of changes he will go through in the next four years. David cannot possibly anticipate all the highs and lows, the achievements and disappointments, the undreamed-of adventures that are to come. But he has already opened himself to these

experiences.

initiation into community

David can't believe it:

He really is in a new world, at a college halfway across the country from his home. He has dreamed of this day since ninth grade. Now he is at his first day of college orientation in a city he has never been to, in a college he has only read about, in a building he has seen only in pictures. David is trying to appear cool and calm, to pretend it doesn't bother him not to know anyone on campus. He wants to act like he knows exactly what he is doing and where he is going, but he knows his act won't be much of a success. He can't even find his assigned dorm.

Lining up in a gym with four hundred other new students, David waits to pick up his packet of information on the orientation and the college. When he is handed his packet, a guy comes forward, a good-natured grin on his face. "You're David," he says, shaking David's hand. "I'm Tony. I'll be showing you around this week. You got any questions, just ask me. This is my third year here. I know

how it feels to be in your shoes—just starting out. It's pretty overwhelming at first, but I think you'll get to like it here. I do. Say, where are you from, anyway?"

David and Tony swap stories about backgrounds and interests as they walk across campus to David's dorm, stopping first to see the student center and the cafeteria.

"The food's not terrific," Tony says. "For lunch I usually go to the snack bar and get a sandwich. That way I know it's fresh. Desserts are good—especially their homemade ice cream." Somehow David no longer feels the need to act cool and experienced. Here is someone who expects him to be curious about everything and will just be a friend while he gets used to things.

Before the first day of the weeklong orientation is over, David is more at ease. Not only does he have Tony to show him the ropes, but he has been teamed up with five other first-year people to talk

Welcome or Alienation?

In the near future, you may face challenges similar to the challenges faced by David in the previous story. Someday, certainly, you will find yourself at a crossroads, perhaps feeling isolated and in need of friends, support, and reassurance. You may already be familiar with that experience.

Which comes closer to your experience of the world—a world of alienation and cold stares, or a world of friendliness and welcome? You have probably encountered the world as a lonely, impersonal place at times; you have likely found it warm and welcoming at other times. Both portraits of the world are real.

Most of us were born into a welcoming family filled with smiles, support, and sharing. Every human baby needs at least some touching and affection just to survive, so our needs were met in a survival sense. At the same time, however, we were born into a world in which alienation and imperfections exist and are inevitable. A baby's complex physical and psychological needs cannot always be met (or understood!), even by the best-intentioned parents, so every child is bound to feel lonely or abandoned at times. We all eventually discover that the world can be an unfriendly or even hurtful place beyond the security of home or loved ones. And from an early age, most of us have cautionary messages drummed into us: "Stay away from that part of town." "Don't talk to strangers!"

Thus from birth on, we all have experiences that parallel David's experience of walking through a threshold into a new life, experiences where we face either alienation or welcome. [Ⓜ]

[Ⓜ] Write about a situation in which you felt uncomfortable and unwelcome. Then write about a situation in which you felt at ease and welcome. Focus on what made the difference for you.

What Does Baptism Celebrate?

David's initiation into the world of college has these characteristics:

- He is welcomed into the college community.
- He begins the long-term process of learning and growing in a new, transforming way of life—college life.
- He leaves behind an old identity (high school graduate) for a new one (college student).
- He takes on a new sense of purpose connected with being in college.
- He feels the spirit that energizes the college.

The initiation into the Christian faith highlighted by the sacrament of Baptism has certain parallels with David's journey from alienation to belonging through his college orientation. Christian initiation, and Baptism in particular, celebrates these realities for the Christian:

- being welcomed into the community of Jesus, the church
- beginning a lifelong conversion, turning away from sin to embrace the Christian way of life
- being reborn to a new identity as a son or a daughter of God
- sharing in the mission of Jesus and adopting it as one's own life purpose
- receiving the gift of the Spirit of Jesus that enables the Christian to share in God's life of love

A Welcome into Jesus' Community

Most of us have experienced feeling both welcome and unwelcome in a group. When you have to linger around the


edges of a group, hoping to be noticed and subtly trying to be accepted, you probably do not feel welcome, even if the group members do not reject you outright. People do not have to be cruel to be unwelcoming toward others; they just have to fail to take initiative with others. David, on his first day at college, faced the unknown with fear and insecurity. He began to feel more comfortable when Tony noticed him and made an effort to help him feel like he belonged.

God Takes the Initiative

Baptism celebrates the good news that God takes the initiative with us human beings. We do not have to do anything to be “noticed” by God. We cannot earn God’s favor; it is a gift that God offers to all, inviting us to share in God’s own life of love. Whether the one baptized is a newborn baby or an adult who has freely chosen to be baptized, God is the one taking the initiative.

In Baptism the Christian community that gathers for the ritual is the human sign of God’s love welcoming the person being baptized into a life of loving relationships.

A Warm and Welcoming Church

Ideally, local Christian churches would be such warm, welcoming communities that outsiders would sense something remarkably alive about them. People would feel accepted, embraced by the inclusive love of God’s open heart. Most people are hungry for that kind of experience, and when they see a spirited community, they feel drawn to it. In fact the parish and school communities where teenagers and adults are coming into the church in great numbers are characteristically vital, caring communities; they are a sign of God’s outstretched arms. 

A Lifelong Conversion: From Sin to Life

In Christian belief human beings are created good, made in the image of God. They are meant to enjoy a loving life with God and one another forever. But human beings also have the freedom to choose—to love God or to turn their back on God, to care for others or to be concerned only for themselves, to cherish the Earth as a gift or to exploit it destructively. They can choose to sin.

Original Sin

As the Book of Genesis tells it, the first human beings chose to sin and thereby drove a wedge between themselves and God. According to Catholic teaching, every human being since the beginning of human history (except Mary, the mother of Jesus) has been born into this condition of being alienated from God and tending to choose sin rather than God. This sin at the outset of humankind, and the condition we inherit of tending to choose sin, is called **original sin**. It is a built-in weakness, a penchant for making shortsighted and self-serving choices over wise and generous choices.

Although subject to the effects of the sin of their first parents, human beings are not responsible for or guilty of that first sin. But they are responsible for their own wrongful choices, which are called **personal sins**. We can see the effects of original sin in humankind’s history of wars, persecutions, discrimination, and exploitation. These tragedies all come from personal sins for which human beings are responsible.

So original sin—which was human beings’ doing, not God’s—disrupted the harmonious relationship that was intended to exist between God and humankind.

Jesus Christ: Salvation from Sin


The Son of God, Jesus Christ, was sent to Earth to restore that relationship, to free human beings from the weight of sin that stood like a boulder between themselves and God. By his life, death, and Resurrection, Jesus overcame sin and gave every human being the chance to live intimately with God.

Thus Catholic teaching is that Baptism—being identified with Christ

forever through the waters of new life—takes away original sin, forgives all personal sins and the punishment due to them, and gives grace. Baptism does not take away the effects of original sin, the inclination to choose personal sin, but it offers the abundance of God’s grace to overcome that tendency.

Baptism, then, represents a turning away from the old life of sin to embrace the new life in Jesus Christ.

in the shadows
of sin

 If you were to create an entrance-way banner welcoming people to a local parish church, what would your banner look like? Draw a sketch of your banner and include your written message of welcome.



The Old Life of Sin

sin
 death
 fear
 slavery
 alienation
 isolation
 hoarding



The New Life in Christ

grace
 life
 courage
 freedom
 welcome
 community
 sharing

No to Sin, Yes to Grace

In the Rite of Baptism, an adult says no to sin and all his or her sins are forgiven. The adult says yes to God's life of grace, which is more powerful than any sin or any destruction wreaked by sin over centuries. For children too young to comprehend the choice, their parents and sponsors say yes to God's life by renewing their own baptismal promises, with the understanding that they will try to guide the children toward grace and away from sin. This yes implies that the person believes and will try to live out these truths in the world:

- Grace can overcome sin.
- Life can triumph over death.
- Courage can banish fear.
- Freedom to live joyfully in God can overcome slavery to destructive patterns.

- A spirit of welcome can banish alienation.
- Community can replace isolation.
- Sharing can dissolve hoarding. ☐

The conversion of Baptism marks a profound change in the way people perceive themselves, other people, and the world. But Baptism is not magic. Saying yes to God's life of love will not melt away the legacy of sin's tragic effects. The baptized person will no doubt commit sins during the rest of life. But with God's grace, the person will struggle to overcome her or his worst tendencies and find in God's mercy the strength to go on trying. The conversion to a new way of life, which is symbolized and celebrated in Baptism, will go on for a lifetime.

☐ Reflect on this list of truths that Christians try to live out in the world. Choose the statement that most appeals to you and explain in writing its appeal for you.

Born Again to a New Identity

To appreciate Baptism as an opportunity for rebirth, we need to know something about the life that is left behind and even more about the life that is embraced in this sacrament.

An incident from John's Gospel describes some puzzling remarks that Jesus made about the "rebirth" of Baptism:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." (3:1-6)

Nicodemus at first did not understand what Jesus meant when he said we must be "born anew," or "born again." Nicodemus heard the phrase literally, not symbolically. So what did Jesus actually mean?

Born into Risen Life

In speaking of being born anew, Jesus was referring to the inner transformation that comes from people's experience of God's Spirit in their life. Instead of experiencing a new physical birth, people would experience a birth into the Spirit,

a rebirth into God's life after passing through a kind of death. Imagine what rebirth into God's life might mean:

- We notice our parents arguing with each other more and more. Their divorce seems almost certain. Can we survive a family breakup? Rebirth into God's life reminds us that Christ journeys with us through all the suffering and dying in our life.
- We struggle with decisions about our priorities in life, about how to balance looking out for ourselves with giving ourselves to others. Remembering that we are born anew into God's life colors the way we look at our life decisions. We try to see things as Jesus would.
- We think back on our childhood experiences and recognize that we carry within us many old wounds from disappointments or mistreatment. The rebirth of Baptism affirms that Christ the healer shares our life. In the end we are never alone.

Baptism, then, plunges a person into the paschal mystery. Through Baptism, Christians are united with Jesus in his life, death, and Resurrection. ☐

Dying and Rising: An Ongoing Process

Recall again the story of David's entering college. After his first week there, David has a sense of a new identity, but his identity will develop and grow throughout his years in college. Just as David's experience of growth is gradual, the process of rebirth into Christian identity does not happen all at once. Baptism celebrates the mystery of our being continuously reborn, every day of our life. We do not "die and rise with Christ" once but over a lifetime of many "deaths and resurrections," of losses followed by new growth, of failures followed by deeper understandings and victories of the spirit. Our rebirth is ongoing; we are never finished being born again until we

reach our eternal destiny of union with God.

Perhaps you have heard the phrase "born-again Christian" and wondered what it really means. Some people may ask you pointedly, "Have you been born again?" and they may even want to know exactly when in your life you were born again. When these Christians use the phrase "born again," they are referring to a one-time-only, supposedly life-changing event in which a person accepts Jesus as lord and savior. It is obvious that this notion differs significantly from the Catholic understanding of rebirth. Baptism itself celebrates a process of dying and rising to new life within a community, a process that happens over and over again in a person's lifetime.

Sharing in the Mission of Jesus

In the opening story, college-newcomer David finds a new sense of purpose in his life during his orientation. He may also at times wonder about his purpose beyond college.

A Life Purpose

Many of us ask ourselves big questions like these:

- What am I going to do with my life?
- What am I here for?
- What's my life all about, anyway?

When we ask ourselves these questions, we are considering our basic purpose in life. ☐

Jesus' Priority: The Reign of God

With initiation into God's life, the Christian shares in the larger life purpose that Jesus calls his followers to. For instance, Christian initiation challenges Christians to look at war with a different attitude, to show concern for people who are different or distant from themselves,

☐ Imagine how rebirth into God's life might affect a troubling situation in your own life. Describe in a paragraph one possible outcome of that situation.

☐ Choose one of these questions, reflect on it, and write down your reflections.

what's my
life about?

and to think critically about the values that are popular in a culture.

In Jesus' set of priorities, life is not simply about taking care of our own needs and wants and those of our family. Jesus' life purpose, and therefore his followers' life purpose, is to usher in the reign of God's justice and peace in the world. The Christian's personal life goals are still important—like getting an education, finding meaningful work, and raising a family. But these goals become just part of the larger life purpose—carrying on Jesus' mission, a task Jesus entrusted to his church. In identifying

with Jesus' life purpose, Christians will no doubt encounter suffering, but they will also experience a deeper, more lasting happiness than the kind that can be attained through success or money.

Conversion and rebirth, as described earlier, do not happen suddenly and completely. Likewise, a person's commitment to Jesus' life purpose does not happen instantaneously with Baptism, even for adult converts. That commitment takes a lifetime of growing into it. Baptism—and indeed, the whole process of initiation—celebrates that the commitment has begun.

☒ In writing describe what you like best about your school's or team's spirit. Illustrate your description by recounting at least three concrete incidents in which that spirit was displayed.

Receiving the Gift of the Spirit of Jesus

Recall that one outcome of David's college orientation was that he shared in a certain spirit of the college. That spirit was apparent in the enthusiasm and the interest of individuals he met that week, but it was bigger than just personal attitudes. It seemed to characterize the college as a whole. Your high school probably has its own school spirit. Sports teams, too, are said to have team spirit.

Becoming part of those groups entails catching the spirit, energy, and vitality that seem to breathe life into the groups.

For the Christian, initiation also involves catching the spirit of the Christian community. But the spirit that enlivens, moves, and guides the community at the deepest level is Jesus' own Spirit, poured out on the disciples at Pentecost, after Jesus' Resurrection, and continuously poured out in history even to the present moment. To become a Christian is to become a "Spirit-ed" person, living in Christ's risen life, because the person shares in the Spirit-life of the Christian community and is thus enlivened, moved, and guided by that Spirit. ☒

The Permanent Nature of Baptism

At the beginning of this chapter, it was said that Baptism changes our relationship with God forever. It makes us a son or a daughter of God, and that change is permanent. We cannot get "unbaptized"! Even if we fall away from God for years, we are still God's own beloved. Catholic teaching speaks of the special permanent **character**, or seal, of Baptism. Like the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders, Baptism can be received only once because its effect is permanent.

The Catholic church recognizes the Baptisms that take place in other Christian churches as valid sacraments, if they baptize with water and use the trinitarian formula (see page 137). So if someone baptized in one Christian denomination decided to join the Catholic church, he or she would not be baptized again. Instead, the person would be brought into full membership in the Catholic

church through Confirmation and a formal act of reception.

Necessary for Salvation

The Catholic church teaches that Baptism is necessary for salvation. What is meant by this?

As we have seen in the story of Nicodemus from the Gospel of John, Jesus himself taught, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (3:5). And he commanded his disciples to go out to all nations and baptize everyone (Matthew 28:19). The church teaches that Baptism, through which one becomes a member of Christ's Body, is the fullest means of salvation. For those who have received the Gospel and have the opportunity to be baptized, Baptism is the necessary way to their salvation.

What about all the non-Christians, who make up most of the Earth's population? Does this mean they are not saved? The church teaches that because Christ died for all humankind, all are offered salvation through the paschal mystery, in ways that are known to God. They may not explicitly know or believe in Christ. But those who seek the truth and try to do God's will in accordance with the truth as they understand it can be saved. The assumption is that if they knew of the necessity of Baptism for their salvation, they would desire it, and the desire for Baptism is itself a kind of Baptism.

What about children who die without being baptized? The church entrusts them to God's mercy, in the hope that the God who desires that every human being be saved will not leave innocent children without a means to salvation.

celebrating
a new life

For Review

1. Describe what happens to a person through Baptism.
2. Name the three sacraments of initiation. In general what do these sacraments celebrate?
3. What five realities for the Christian are celebrated in Baptism?
4. What is meant by original sin? How does Baptism affect original sin?
5. How does the Catholic church's understanding of the phrase "born again" differ from some other Christians' interpretation of that phrase?
6. What does it mean to say that Baptism is necessary for salvation? How can non-Christians be saved?

The Ritual of Baptism: Symbolic Actions and Words

All the rituals of the sacraments consist of symbols and symbolic actions, along with certain significant words. Together, these express the meaning of the sacrament.

In Baptism, as in all the sacraments, the Christian community—the church—is the primary symbol. In welcoming new members, the Christian community represents God, who takes the initiative in inviting us into divine life. In addition,

four symbols in the Rite of Baptism express different realities of the sacrament. These special symbols are water, oil, a white (or new) garment, and a lighted candle.

Each of these symbols is rich in meaning, and any discussion of their symbolic power is bound to be incomplete. So before reading on, take a few moments to make a list of the meanings that you associate with each of these symbols.

welcoming
new members

Water: Cleansing and Life-Giving

At the core of the sacrament of Baptism are the action and words of the water rite. This essential rite consists of the minister's pouring water over the person's head or immersing the person in water, while pronouncing the trinitarian formula, "**I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.**" Thus the person baptized is freed from all sin and welcomed into the intimate life of the Trinity. Without this action and these words, there is no valid sacrament.

Why is water so central a symbol in Baptism?

A Natural Symbol

For refreshment or recreation, we often use water. We can drink it, swim in it, ski on it, walk near it, listen to it. Water can restore our energy by cooling us on a hot day and by cleansing us when we are dirty or sweaty. We also get some of our food from fresh and salt waters. And without rainwater, most of what we eat could not grow.

Water is vital for human life: We cannot live without it for more than five days. And although we ourselves did not actually come from water, we do have evolutionary relatives who lived in the sea. It seems, too, that we may not have left the sea far behind; the human body is over 70 percent water.

Of course, water can be destructive as well as creative. Persons who live in places liable to floods know this only too well, as do swimmers and sailors. Being plunged into water can be a deadly experience.

Scriptural Meanings

Water has special meaning for the Christian community. In the Old Testa-

ment, in the very beginning of the Book of Genesis, God breathes on the waters to bring order to Creation. Later, in the story of Noah, the world of sin is destroyed and washed clean through the waters of a flood.

In the Book of Exodus, Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt by guiding them miraculously, with God's power, through the great Red Sea and toward freedom and new life in the Promised Land. That sea-crossing was the first step in a long journey for the Israelites. On the way God provided them with life-giving water just when they were feeling hopeless, afraid they would die of thirst wandering in the desert.

In the New Testament, too, water has great significance. Jesus himself is baptized in the water of the Jordan River. Later Jesus would refer to the life he offers people as the "living water." It is no wonder that water is the essential symbol of Christian Baptism.

Taking the Plunge

In the early years of the Christian church, Baptisms were performed in rivers and streams. The converts would be plunged into the water to symbolize their being cleansed of sin and their dying to an old way of life. Their coming up again would show that they were rising to a new life, a new identity, in Christ. Even when Baptisms moved indoors, new Christians were immersed in a pool of water as a sign of their embracing the mystery of Christ's death and Resurrection. Their plunge into the water also reminded them and the gathered Christian community of how God had rescued the Israelites from slavery, taking the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea and bringing them out safely to freedom on the other side.

☑ If you were invited to teach a class of first graders about the symbolism of water, how would you do it? Outline a brief lesson you would give.

A Powerful Communicator

For many centuries Catholics have not seen any dramatic use of water in their baptismal rites. Typically water is poured over the candidate's forehead. In the last few decades, however, many Catholic churches have begun to use the symbol of water in a more powerful fashion in the Rite of Baptism, as it was originally intended. In these churches Baptisms are done either by immersing the whole person in water or by submerging just the person's head. Some Protestant denominations today baptize only by immersion. Consider how much more the symbol of water can communicate about Baptism when it is used this fully. ☑

Oil: Healing, Strengthening, and Being Chosen

Oil has been used on persons for thousands of years in a variety of ways, many of which find echoes of meaning in the Catholic sacraments.

At the time of the Roman Empire, gladiators and soldiers prepared for battle by covering their bodies with oil for protection against abrasions and infections. Oil was known for its healing qualities. Greek athletes, too, were rubbed with oil as a means of strengthening them. On beaches during the

summer months, present-day people guard against the sun's rays using oils from squeeze bottles. Swimmers and other athletes also use protective and healing ointments.

Mixed with perfume, oil was used in ancient times for anointing a person as royalty; anointing was a sign of making the leader sacred for a sacred responsibility. The title Christ actually means "the Anointed One," the Messiah long awaited by the Jews.

In the baptismal rite, anointing with oil on the breast or on both hands occurs before the water ritual of Baptism. This anointing is associated with asking God for strength for the person. The anointing of the new Christian on the crown of the head with chrism (special consecrated oil), which takes place after the water ritual, signifies being chosen and anointed as Christ was chosen, to share in his risen life and to receive the Spirit through him.

A White Garment: Becoming a New Creation

Treating ourselves to new clothes can help us feel renewed inside. Dressing up on Easter Sunday or for a school prom goes naturally with the freshness of the season and with the excitement of the occasion.

To symbolize the radical newness of a life in Christ, of being "clothed in Christ," the baptized individual receives a white (or new) garment or a white cloth to wear after the water ritual. In appearance as well as in spirit, the person is a "new creation." In the early church, newly baptized people wore this garment the whole week after their Baptism as a constant reminder, to themselves and the community, of their new life and Christian dignity.

(In some cultures today, colors other than white are used because in those cultures white signifies death, not life.)

Baptism in Words and Symbols

Litany of the Saints

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us. . . .
Saint Peter and Saint Paul,
pray for us. . . .
All holy men and women,
pray for us.

Blessing of the Water

Through the waters of the Red Sea
you led Israel out of slavery
to be an image of God's holy people,
set free from sin by baptism.

Renunciation of Sin

Do you reject sin so as to live in the
freedom of God's children?
I do.

Do you reject the glamour of evil, and
refuse to be mastered by sin?
I do.

Anointing with the Oil of Catechumens

We anoint you with the oil of salvation
in the name of Christ our Savior;
may he strengthen you with his power,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Profession of Faith

Do you believe in God, the Father
almighty, creator of heaven and earth?
I do.

Rite of Baptism

[Name], I baptize you in the name of
the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.

Anointing After Baptism

[If there is no sacrament of Confirma-
tion after the Rite of Baptism, an
anointing is done.]
[God] now anoints you with the chrism
of salvation,
so that, united with his people,
you may remain for ever a member of
Christ
who is Priest, Prophet, and King.

Clothing with the White Garment

[Name], you have become a new
creation,
and have clothed yourself in Christ.

Presentation of the Lighted Candle

Walk always as a child of the light
and keep the flame of faith alive in your
heart.

A Lighted Candle: Sharing in the Light of Christ

Imagine yourself in a vast, totally dark room that you have never been in before. You have no idea what awaits you in the room, what you might stumble on, or how you might find your way around the room. You are anxious, even fearful.

Then imagine being handed a candle that is suddenly lit. The light from even this small flame fills the corners of the room. You are relieved and glad to carry the light, and you do not want it to be snuffed out.

The burning of a single candle, especially in darkness, fascinates and captivates us. Light dispels darkness. It guides the lost. It wards off danger and exposes evil. Light is warm, inviting, comforting.

Where there is light, there is life. Jesus called himself “the light of the world.”

At Baptism the newly baptized person is given a lighted candle to hold. (In the case of an infant or small child, someone from the child’s family, such as the father or godfather, lights and holds the candle.) The flame of this candle is received from the large Easter candle, which signifies Christ, the light of the world. In this way the newly baptized person shares in the light of Christ, the hope and warmth of the world, and is encouraged to always walk as a child of the light. H

Who may be baptized? Anyone who has not been baptized before. And who may perform a Baptism? Usually an ordained person—a priest, bishop, or deacon—is the minister of the sacrament. But you may be surprised to hear that in case of necessity (such as when an unbaptized person is in war or in danger of death), any person, even someone who has not been baptized, can baptize another if she or he has the right intention: to do what the church does in baptizing.

H Focus on one of the primary symbols of Baptism—water, oil, a white (or new) garment, or a lighted candle—and complete one of the following two exercises:

1. Write a poem or an essay about an experience you had involving that symbol.
2. Make a collage or draw a picture illustrating the practical importance of that symbol.

essentials
of Baptism

For Review

7. What are the essential actions and words in the sacrament of Baptism?
8. List three symbolic mentions of water in the Old Testament.
9. What do the two anointings with oil during Baptism signify?
10. What is the significance of the white garment worn in Baptism?
11. Why is a lighted candle given to the newly baptized person?
12. Who may be baptized? Who is the usual minister of the sacrament?

Baptism's History

The First Baptisms

At the start of his ministry, Jesus came forward to be baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Christians have seen in Jesus' own baptism a model of repentance and self-emptying. After his Resurrection Jesus commanded his Apostles to go forth to all nations and baptize all people:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:18–20)

On the day of Pentecost, the Apostles, who had been huddling in fear since

Jesus' Ascension, were filled with the Holy Spirit. They had been "baptized" by the whole experience of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection, and now they were filled with the new life of God, ready to share this Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit with others.

So Peter and the other Apostles boldly went out to convert and baptize all who would hear the Good News and believe in Jesus. Following the example of Jesus' own baptism, they baptized with water, which symbolized receiving the Spirit of Jesus as they had received it at Pentecost.

This simple act of Baptism with water later developed into a complex ceremony of initiation, full of the rich symbolism discussed earlier. Let's see how the process evolved.

In the Early Church

As the fledgling community of Jesus' followers grew and broadened to welcome Gentile (non-Jewish) converts, the church discovered that it needed a more thorough way to prepare persons to become Christians.

The Catechumenate

From the second century (the 100s) into the fourth and fifth centuries, a process of baptismal preparation called the **catechumenate** developed and flourished, along with the beautiful, powerful rituals of initiation.

As illustrated in the story of Paulina's conversion in chapter 6, becoming a Christian was quite a risky step to take in the earliest centuries of the faith. With Christianity officially illegal, the religion existed "underground"—in secret. Bloody persecutions by the Romans were a constant reminder that becoming a Christian could bring martyrdom. One did not decide lightly to become a Christian.

A person desiring to become a Christian needed to find a Christian who would be a sponsor, who would vouch for her or his character and help the person during the two- to three-year preparation for Baptism. About forty days before the person was to be baptized, the final preparation took place during the period that later evolved into Lent. This preparation consisted of intensive instruction, prayer, fasting, and liturgies involving the group of candidates, or catechumens, with the whole community, led by the bishop. The final step was the Easter Vigil—the only time Baptisms were performed.

At the Easter Vigil

The Easter Vigil ceremony was preceded by a ritual bathing on Holy Thursday and by two days of fasting. On the Saturday night of the vigil, all the candidates were brought together, men in one room and women in another. Their sponsors—the persons who had guided them toward their new birth—were there. The sponsors were called fathers and mothers by the candidates because sponsors performed a parental role. (Later sponsors would become known as godparents.)

At the start of the ceremony, the candidates faced the West, the place of sunset and darkness. They stretched out their arms and denounced Satan. Suddenly they turned to the East and shouted their attachment to Christ. This physical turnabout by the candidates marked their spiritual turnabout, or conversion. The East was considered the place of light, of the rising sun, and of new life.

Next the candidates went to a room with a pool, often modeled after the Roman public baths. They stripped off their old clothing. Oil was poured over the candidates, who then stepped down into the waist-deep waters. One by one, the bishop submerged the candidates

into the water, usually three times—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. After the candidates emerged from the other side of the pool, the bishop anointed them with oil, and they donned new white linen robes, signifying their new life in the risen Jesus. They were embraced in a sign of peace and welcome, and each was handed a lighted candle.

Finally, the candidates were led into the room where the Eucharist was celebrated. By now dawn had come. For the first time, on Easter Sunday, they participated in the total eucharistic celebration.

Before their Baptism the catechumens attended Mass only up to the completion of the sermon. As a matter of fact, the first part of the Mass was called the Mass of the Catechumens because the prayers, readings, and sermon were intended to give instruction to the catechumens. What a joy it must have been for the newly baptized, after three years' preparation, to share the Eucharist with their friends for the first time! It must have been a similar joy for the rest of the community to welcome these long-awaited newcomers to their special Easter meal. □

Mystagogia

After the Easter Vigil Baptisms and the Easter Eucharist, the new Christians would go through another period of study and intense involvement with the community as they learned more about the mysteries of the faith. This period was known as the **mystagogia**.

Becoming a Christian required abandoning pagan ways and renouncing many comforts, conveniences, and privileges of the time. And before Christianity was made legal in 313 in the Roman Empire, being Christian presented a great risk of martyrdom. Initiation meant sharing one's fate and faith with the Christian community. Considering all that initiation involved, a lengthy process for acceptance into the community certainly made sense.

At the same time, the early Christian leaders realized that Baptism was meant to be a sustained joy, not just a moment of excitement. Developing a joyful, loving community demanded a profound initiation of its newcomers. Today the church has revised the Rite of Baptism, along with the other sacraments of initiation, to recapture the spirit, joy, and meaning of the rites in the early church.

Evolution into Three Sacraments

The process of initiation just described was appropriate for the adult converts who were joining the faith in the early centuries of Christianity. But later on so many candidates sought initiation into the church that the bishops had difficulty officiating at all the ceremonies. Yet it was considered essential that the bishops conduct the rites.

A Delayed Anointing

To handle the increased numbers of converts, in the Western church, priests of a given community performed the Baptism with water but delayed the rest of the baptismal ceremony (the anointing with oil by the bishop) until the bishop could get around to the church to “confirm” the initiation at a later time, sometimes even years later. This ritual of anointing and laying on of hands by the bishop became known as Confirmation, and was gradually accepted as a separate sacrament.

□ Imagine that you live in third-century Rome and that you were recently baptized at the Easter Vigil along with two other candidates. Write a letter to a friend describing your experience of the ceremony. Include details: Was the ceremony held in a remote location out of fear of persecution? Did the aura of secrecy make it more sacred? Was the water cold? And so on.

□ If relatives of yours asked you to help make their newborn baby's Baptism a true community celebration, what would you suggest to them? Describe in writing at least three recommendations.

Infant Baptism

By about the year 200, some children of Christian parents were being baptized into the church without going through their own conversion process. By the year 500, when almost everyone in the empire was Christian, infant Baptism was, almost without exception, the way that one became a Christian. Baptizing infants as soon as possible after birth became the norm because it was thought that an unbaptized baby who died would not go to heaven. A Christian family would, naturally, want their child to have access to salvation. So infant Baptism caused a delay between Baptism and the bishop's conferral of Confirmation.

In addition, with the practice of infant Baptism, children did not receive the Eucharist until they were old enough to

understand the sacrament. Eventually, in the Western (Roman or Latin Rite) church, the baptized members began to participate in the Eucharist before they were confirmed, and they became confirmed at an even later age. Until recently in Roman Catholicism, these sacraments of initiation remained separate and were celebrated in this sequence: Baptism, the Eucharist, and then Confirmation. Even today debate is going on in the church about how and when in a person's development these sacraments should be celebrated.

The Eastern Church Practice

In the Eastern churches, the original sequence of initiation was kept. Priests were allowed to baptize, confirm, and offer the Eucharist to the initiates. Today in the Eastern Orthodox churches, and in some of the Eastern Catholic churches, babies and little children receive all three sacraments at one time.

Since Vatican Council II

After the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, the church developed two main procedures for Baptism:

1. a ceremony specifically for babies and young children
2. an initiation process for adults (and a parallel process for older children) modeled on the process used in the early church

For Young Children

Before the special rite for baptizing children was developed, the words of the baptismal ceremony were addressed to the child as if she or he were an adult. Therefore, when infants were baptized—which accounted for the majority of Baptisms during most of Christian history—the adult godparents responded for the children.

Baptism not consciously chosen. Today's distinct baptismal rite for young children acknowledges that the awareness and experience of the sacrament differ between adults and small children. For both adults and children, Baptism is a gift from God, not something earned or dependent on the person's own merit. But with adults Baptism is received as a conscious choice. For infants Baptism is not "conscious" (personally felt) or chosen by the children. So during the Baptism of an infant or small child, the parents are addressed rather than the child. No one speaks "for" the child, as the godparents used to do. The parents are recognized as the primary community of the child and as the ones who seek Baptism for their child and want to raise the child in the Christian faith.

As with adult initiation, the new baptismal rite for an infant involves the entire community, not just the child being baptized and the child's close family and godparents. The whole community is reminded of its role in helping the parents raise the child in the faith. All who are present also recall the significance of their own Baptism and their own ongoing initiation into the mystery of Christ. □

Godparents have a special role to play in the life of the child whose parents have chosen them. They are to help the parents and support them as they encourage the unfolding of the child's faith-life. For this reason they need to be baptized and firm believers in Christ.

"Initiated," one way or another. In a concrete way, the practice of infant Baptism acknowledges that from our earliest experiences, we are being "initiated" into some way of viewing ourselves and our world. From infancy on we are influenced by the people around us, by our physical environment, and by all our internal and external experiences. Parents can choose to let "initiation" for

their child just happen through exposure to the images, stories, and values communicated by the popular culture and media, like television. Alternatively, parents can put their hopes in the images, stories, and values of the Christian vision as the context for raising their child.

Through Baptism an infant is welcomed into a community that claims as its own the simple beauty of the Christmas story and the dramatic realities of Holy Week. Through Baptism the community celebrates a baby as a child of a loving God, someone whose family ties extend to heaven. Thus infant Baptism signifies the crucial roles that the family, the church community, and the Christian story play in developing within children the Christian view of life. □

□ Do you agree or disagree with each of the following? Explain your answers in writing.

- When I have children, I won't have them baptized as infants. They can decide for themselves when they grow up.
- If I ran a parish, I would not be willing to baptize children of parents who did not practice their faith.

Baptized Among a Million Friends

At the 1997 World Youth Day in Paris, France, ten young people were baptized by the pope. The ritual was a living reminder that when we are baptized, we become united with the whole Body of Christ.

Fifteen-year-old Megan Costello held her breath as Pope John Paul II, holding a seashell-like ladle of water, approached her.

She'd been preparing for this moment for two years—ever since joining Saint James Catholic Church in Ogden, Utah. For years before that, she'd been visiting churches of various denominations around her home, looking for one that felt right. The Catholic church had felt like the place she belonged, and now, with nearly a million young people from around the world looking on, she was about to be baptized into it.

She hadn't fainted when the pope greeted her at the beginning of the ceremony, as her friends predicted she might. Instead of being nervous, she had spent much of the ceremony deep in thought.

"I was trying to decide exactly what the whole thing meant to me," she said later. "I still wasn't really sure, so I was going over it in my head."

But there wasn't much time for personal reflection on the mystery of Baptism; before she knew it, the pope was pouring a large measure of cool water over her head, thoroughly drenching her as he said, "*Je te baptise au nom du Pere, et du Fils et du Saint- sprit.*" And then she breathed again, taking a huge gulp of air as the crowd cheered.

"God acknowledges you as his children and transforms your existence into a story of love with him," the pope said. "Live from now on as children of the light who know they are reconciled by the cross of the Savior."

Then Megan and the nine others who had been baptized with her took their baptismal candles and lit the candles of the assembled cardinals, who in turn passed the flame on to others. Spotlights fixed their beams in a criss-cross pattern overhead, making a sort of cathedral of light.

"The light spread out into the audience, so everybody had candles, and it was so pretty," Megan said. "It was a sea of candles. It was beautiful, so moving."

After the catechumens received the sacrament of Confirmation, the ceremony ended in a jubilant riot of waving flags, banners and white sashes as the crowd sang, in one voice, "*Magnificat, magnificat, magnificat anima mea Dominum!*" over and over: "My soul magnifies, magnifies, magnifies the Lord."

Days after returning to her home in Utah, Megan was still full of questions about what the Baptism would mean to her life. But she was certain of one thing: "I felt different after [the Baptism]," she said. "I can't explain what I mean by that, but I felt different. Happy." (Adapted from Daoust, "World Youth Day '97")

For Adults and Older Children

Since 1972 an official process of initiating adults into the Catholic faith has been in use, and it is modeled after the process the early church used in initiating its new members. The official process today is titled the **Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults**. Popularly called the **RCIA**, it takes into account these realities:

- Becoming a Catholic Christian is a process that takes time.
- Becoming a Catholic Christian means joining a community.

A similar rite is specifically designed for older children—that is, children old enough to learn about and choose the faith.

The RCIA is also a model for receiving into full communion with the Catholic church those persons who have previously been baptized. They could be Catholics who have lost touch with the Catholic church, or they might be Christians who were baptized in another denomination. As mentioned earlier, their Baptisms are considered valid in the Catholic church and thus are not repeated. For those who have not been confirmed in the Catholic church previously, they will receive Confirmation as the sign of full membership.

As a process, the RCIA has a number of stages to help interested persons move along to becoming informed and active members of the Catholic Christian community:

1. Inquiry. Before someone enters a formal initiation program, during the phase when she or he and the church are getting to know each other, the person is called an inquirer. When both parties are satisfied that they want to continue with the initiation process, the individual enters the catechumenate stage.

2. Catechumenate. A catechumen studies the Catholic faith, accompanied

joining a
community

by a sponsor or sponsors, ideally within a community of other catechumens. The catechumens also participate with their sponsors in certain rites that bring them more deeply into the faith and the community. A sponsor should be a committed person who can serve as a mentor in the faith to their catechumen because he or she will be very involved in supporting that person's spiritual journey before and after Baptism.

Ideally the catechumenate period lasts from one to three years. All during this time, the catechumens attend Sunday Mass, but leave the church for their own session after the homily in a formal Rite of Dismissal. This reminds them and the assembly how important full participation in the Eucharist is for Christian life. Toward the end of the catechumenate stage, on the day of election, each candidate is chosen to be among the elect, provided he or she has shown sincerity as a catechumen. Although the community affirms the choosing of the catechumens, it is clear from the Rite of Election that God is doing the choosing. The elect have not "merited" their way into God's favor, like working up through the ranks in scouting. Rather, God has chosen them and they have responded.

Lifelong Initiation, Lifelong Baptism

If you were baptized as an infant, the community of your family and your parents' friends would obviously be significant in your growth as a Christian. But as we have seen, adult Baptism also relies on the community to help new members grow into a Christian life, and it builds up the bonds and commitments in the community.

Baptism is not unique among the sacraments in its emphasis on the crucial role of the community. Each of the seven sacraments is celebrated on behalf of and

for the good of the whole community, not just the individuals who are obviously involved.

Each time members of the community witness a Baptism, at the Easter Vigil or at Sunday Mass, they are reminded that their own initiation into the paschal mystery is not yet complete. Initiation will be a lifelong process, a lifelong Baptism in Christ, open to ever-deeper consciousness of the mystery of Jesus and to commitment to his mission.

3. Period of enlightenment or illumination. The season of Lent preceding the Easter Vigil, when the elect will be baptized, is a period of intensive preparation with its own particular rites, consisting of questioning those to be baptized and hearing their profession of faith. As in ancient times, this season gives everyone, the already-baptized members and the elect, the chance to reflect on the mystery of the Resurrection, which they are soon to celebrate at Easter.

Of course, the major event for the candidates and the community is the Easter Vigil. The Easter Vigil service is filled with baptismal imagery so that the new and longer-standing members of the Christian community can reflect on the relationship between the Resurrection of Jesus and the sacraments of initiation. During the service the new members, accompanied by their sponsors, may be baptized and are confirmed. Later in the liturgy, the new members receive the Eucharist for the first time.

4. Mystagogia. The process of initiation does not end with Baptism, Confirmation, and the celebration of the Eucharist at Easter. Naturally, new members of a group have special needs. During the time from Easter to Pentecost Sunday, new members and their sponsors reflect together on their experiences of

being Christian. The term applied to this period is *mystagogia*, a word related to the word *mystery*. Mystagogia is a time to understand and appreciate more deeply the Christian mysteries.

Throughout the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the church community plays a significant role. Persons are usually drawn to Catholicism because they see some evidence of the life of Christ present within a local Catholic community, or within individuals who have cared about them. During the RCIA process, the catechumens and sponsors gather regularly as a community to share their own life stories and faith stories, and the candidates are affirmed in their journey of faith. The various rites throughout the catechumenate stage are celebrated with the whole gathered community. In fact where the RCIA is experienced as a dynamic process with the involvement of the community, the growing faith of the catechumens presents church community members with a challenge to their own faith. They are often inspired to not be complacent about their faith and to foster the bonds and commitments that build a genuine faith community. Thus the RCIA has the potential to renew local churches in their spirit. □

□ Interview someone who became Catholic as an adult. Ask why he or she made this decision, what the initiation process was like, and how the person's life has changed since joining the church. Write a brief summary of your interview.

Baptism's history

For Review

13. Briefly describe the process called the catechumenate in the early church.
14. Why did the ritual of anointing and laying on of hands, or Confirmation, become separate from the ritual of Baptism?
15. What is the role of godparents?
16. Name and briefly explain the four stages of today's RCIA process.