

Diocesan Pastoral Orientations for The Christian Initiation of Youth

Introduction

Evangelization is the mission of the Church. To be faithful to Christ whose body it is, this Church must bring to the world the Good News of salvation revealed and realized by Him. The preaching of the Gospel is always done in a well-defined context, taking into consideration the sociocultural situation of the persons to whom the message is addressed, the concrete possibilities and limits of families, the parishes and the school as well as the light from studies on the religion practiced by the people. One of the important places, where the Church responds to the mission confided to it, is that of initiation to Christian life. And one of the special places of this initiation, of this entry into Christian life, is that of the preparation, of access to and of immediate follow-up of the celebration of the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation and eucharist¹.

*Christian initiation is the process by which the church community brings a person into christian life, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, directs that person toward the Risen Christ giving meaning to life and guiding him/her to the Father².+

By presenting Christian initiation as a process or a whole journey, we signify that it does not consist simply in developing contents. Rather, it suggests uniting knowledge and apprenticeship, to implement a synthesis which is not limited to catechetical learning but integrates all the other dimensions of Christian life: ethical, liturgical, communal. Such an idea of Christian initiation prompts us to avoid all mass registration of young people for the reception of a sacrament either because of age or because of the level of schooling.

These orientations lie within the confines of the definition given above. They offer some landmarks to parents, pastors, pastoral ministers and volunteers who, in the name of the Church, bear more responsibility for the Christian initiation of young people through the sacraments.

Responsibility for Christian Initiation through the Sacraments

It is the whole community which has the responsibility for the children=s Christian initiation. At the heart of this community, those who first make it take shape are the parents. It is up to them not only to ask for baptism for their children, but also to guide their first steps toward Jesus the Christ. It

¹ While this is not a sacrament of Christian initiation, the sacrament of reconciliation is also affected by these orientations because of the age at which children can have access to confirmation and eucharist.

² D. Lamarche, *Le baptême, une initiation?* (Baptism, an Initiation?) Éditions Paulines, Montréal, Éditions du Cerf, Paris, p. 51.

is they too who, in the very first place, have to help the children of school age to ask for access to the sacraments of reconciliation, confirmation and eucharist. These parents, the members of their family, the children's godmothers and godfathers are members of the Church which acknowledges the important part of responsibility that they have in the Christian initiation of youth. The community of which they are members should offer them the support they need to accomplish this portion of the mission confided to them.

Though the family is the first unit in which children learn to live as Christians, it is not the only initiation place. The school and especially the Christian community should contribute to this initiation. We must not expect the school to prepare children for the celebration of the sacraments. However, we have a right to expect the school to give quality religious instruction according to programs duly approved by competent authorities; we should also be able to count on the school to offer students through school pastoral ministry some workshops on practicing the gospel.

As for the parish, it is up to it to offer the routes which permit children who are preparing to receive the sacraments to have, as much as they are able, a fraternal experience of church life in faith, commitment, and celebration. It is also up to the parish to support parents in a special way at the time when they are called to accompany their child more assiduously in this important step in his/her Christian life. The parish also should be willing to create ties with the school pastoral animator or even to suggest these ties³. Finally, it is up to the parish to make the Christian initiation of children through the sacraments an important time, where the whole community can be the initiator in reinitiating itself to its own mystery.

Conditions for Access to the Sacraments

For the sacraments of initiation to attain their goal of initiating to Christian life, the conditions of access to any sacrament must first be respected. There are four of these conditions: a) the request for the sacrament, b) faith in Jesus Christ, c) the presence of the community, d) the ritual celebration. Pastors and pastoral animators cannot doubt the intentions of the requesters; by avoiding all unsavory moralism, they can and should, however, make them deepen in truth the meaning and veracity of their request as well as the meaning and truth of the sacraments which will be celebrated. It would also be out of place for these pastors and pastoral animators to doubt the faith of the requesters; they must, however, make them aware that the sacraments are for believers who want to live in relationship to the God of Jesus Christ and that the means can be offered to them to make their growth in faith easy. As for the presence of the community and the ritual celebration, it is first up to those responsible for the community to ensure them in the manner and forms which are suitable for the progressive entry into the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Request

The Church never imposes a sacrament. It celebrates it when requested. It is then important that the requesters of the sacrament - parents, in the case of the baptism of a baby, and school-age children, when it concerns their own baptism or another sacrament - make their request in a meaningful way. Nobody owns the sacraments. They are given to the Church who, with the greatest respect for the sacraments themselves and for the people who ask for them, has the power to celebrate them. It is then up to the mandated persons to receive the request in the name of the whole Church, to help the requesters to clarify the meanings and intentions of their request with great freedom of conscience. The respect due to the requesters is expressed, to a large extent, in

³ For example, the activities connected with the giving out of the gospels could be integrated in the initiation step as learning from bible reading and from listening to the Word of God.

the trust we have in them to want and to be able to progress in the direction they wish to give to their request and in the deepening of the gospel message and of the meanings of the sacraments to be celebrated.

Faith

In order that it will not be reduced to an empty rite, any sacrament must be celebrated in faith. That is so for the sacraments of Christian initiation as well as for the other sacraments. Of course, we do not wait to celebrate a sacrament until the candidate - especially if he/she is a child - has reached the height of faith, or even until the candidate is able to cite and explain all the articles of the Nicene Creed. What matters, however, is that the candidate be able to affirm with a certain consistency his/her faith, trust in Jesus Christ, and above all, that he/she shares the faith of the Church by adhering to the Risen Lord present and acting in the world through his Spirit.

The Community

If the sacraments are given to the Church, it is first so that the Church be Church and that it speak and act today in the Lord's manner. When it initiates its members, the Church community reinitiates itself. So, the parents are the members of the community nearest the initiating in their daily life. They share in their initiation by living in everyday life values, attitudes and behaviors promoted by the Gospel: sharing, mutual aid, service, pardon... The family can be a very important unit of the Christian community even though it cannot bear alone all the responsibility for Christian initiation.

The parish must help parents to see and to live in their way the part of initiation which falls to them. It must also offer the children places and means to be born in faith, to grow in this faith, to act according to this faith, and to live within their capabilities, in the name of their faith, certain commitments within the community or connected to it, to pray and to celebrate the Lord who welcomes them into his Church baptizing, reconciling, confirming and communing. The parish should train some catechists⁴ who accompany the children in their journeying. But it is the whole community of Christians who welcome the children to the celebrating meeting and grants them the place to which they have a right in the whole of church life. The community makes known how important it is to be regenerated, to allow itself to be questioned and disturbed by its new members, to adapt to new needs which are manifested within its bosom as they are in the world.

⁴ If some parents can be catechists, it is never in the capacity of parental rights that they are so, not any more than they are doctors because they are parents. However, all Christian parents are, in this capacity, awakers and educators of their children's faith, just as all parents must be able to watch over their children's health. Catechetics is literally the elementary teaching about life, faith and Christian behaviors. It is, in the restricted sense and according to Vatican II, very closely connected to all the essential functions of the Church. In its broad sense, it is a form of evangelization of Christians, an activity of the church community having to do with the concrete situation of human beings to make them able to understand the gospel, to celebrate it, to live it and to actively participate in the building of community and in the diffusion of the Good News. (Cf. Günter Beimer, *Dictionnaire de théologie* (Dictionary of Theology) under the direction of Peter Eicher, Éditions du Cerf, Paris, p. 50-56)

The Ritual Celebration

The initiatory rites are important. They mark passage. Their symbolic, sacramental function says and realizes the meeting of the Resurrected with his Church and with the subject of the sacrament. These rites are not magic. They are in the realm of mystery, of the project of salvation revealed and brought about by Jesus Christ. Birth to the life of a son or daughter of God, openness to the Holy Spirit who makes the Church and sends it into the world, the meal at the table of God, symbolized really in baptism, confirmation and eucharist make us aware of the action of God, that of the Church and that of the Christian especially concerned by the sacrament. It is therefore with the greatest dignity and the greatest respect possible for God, for the Church and for the initiated themselves that the sacraments of Christian initiation should be celebrated. It is in the course of sober and meaningful, liturgical celebrations that the rites should be highlighted and carried out in such a way that they have the best opportunity to be understood and to touch the children as well as the whole community.

These four conditions which ensure the validity and the lawfulness of any sacrament will be better ensured if the following orientations are respected in the Christian initiation of the children.

Pastoral Orientations

1. The children=s process of initiation will aim at more than only access to the punctual celebration of a sacrament.

This means that the process of initiation is a process which aims at making the children enter into the Christian faith, evangelical fraternity, church commitment and liturgical celebration; it also means that it will be the opportunity for the members of the community to be reinitiated to this faith, this fraternity, this commitment and to celebration.

That implies that the initiated as well as the initiators grasp progressively the place of the celebration of the sacraments in Christian life. While this celebration of the sacraments, some of which can be repeated, is very important, it is not everything in this life which, of itself, is sacramental.

That requires that those in charge of the Christian community make the person being initiated aware of his/her role in the transmission of faith and support him/her in various ways in the accomplishment of this role and in his/her growth in church life.

2 In all stages of the process of initiation, the role of the parents will be respected.

This means first that it is up to the parents to ask for baptism for their child, to make the first spiritual and religious awakening of the little one, to accompany the child in the request that the latter makes to the community to celebrate sacramentally reconciliation, to be confirmed, to participate in the eucharist, without ever imposing their choice on the child who would not be ready to ask for access to any one of these sacraments.

That implies also that once the request is made to receive any of the sacraments of Christian initiation, the parents accompany, within their family and in ordinary life, their child=s journeying by teaching him/her - through their manner of being or speaking - how we live when we agree to walk behind Jesus.

That requires on the part of those in charge of the Christian community that they be attentive in helping parents to see their role as initiators and to choose well their child=s godfather and godmother; that those in charge care about the support that the parents need and that they see to getting them the suitable instruments for exercising this important parental ministry; that they offer the parents suitable accompaniment so that the latter ensure a normal follow-up to the celebration of each of the sacraments.

3. A process which facilitates the journeying of the one to be initiated will be set up from the time of the request for baptism until the end of the Christian initiation.

That means in the very first place that a special emphasis will be placed on the preparation of parents who request baptism for their child so that they will be better able to understand the meaning of the commitment that they are making and that they will be ensured of help which will be offered them in their role as parent initiators.

That implies that, without asking parents to shoulder impossible burdens, we show them all the trust to which they have a right in the accomplishment of their parental role, and that we help them to see how family life can be the very first place of Christian initiation.

That requires Christian communities to be welcoming to families, especially those with small children; that people in charge of these communities see that these families be offered the means to awaken the faith of their little ones; that the liturgical celebrations, especially certain Sunday celebrations, have a family atmosphere; that the pastoral activities allow and facilitate family participation throughout the period of Christian initiation; that community membership be made easy for families, especially for children who are being initiated to Christian life through the sacraments of confirmation, reconciliation and eucharist.

4. The children=s process of initiation will include the following elements:

- a) preparation of the parents for their child=s baptism;
- b) religious awakening of the little ones;
- c) registration in classes of religious and moral instruction in the Catholic religion at the primary grade level;
- d) preparation for the sacraments of reconciliation and eucharist;
- e) celebration of the sacraments of reconciliation and eucharist;
- f) learning bible reading and listening to the Word of God;
- g) experience in fraternal service (e.g. collecting for the poor - meeting the elderly, etc.);
- h) experience in community life (e.g. participation in youth movements - participation in the various community activities, etc.);
- i) preparation for the sacrament of confirmation;
- j) confirmation.

That means that a collaboration must be ensured throughout the process of initiation, between the family, the parish, the school and certain alternative places like the youth movements⁵. We must also take into account the special emphasis to be placed on certain elements in the process of Initiation. Thus, the present context leads us to devote very special attention to religious awakening of the little ones and to youth ministry.

⁵ The working document produced by the Episcopal Committee on Education of the A.É.Q., *Proposer aujourd'hui la foi aux jeunes: une force pour vivre* (Proposing Faith to Youth Today: Strength to Live) is enlightening in the exercise of this collaboration.

That implies diversity in pedagogical methods of the initiation and the collaboration of many volunteers throughout the initiation process. These volunteers should have suitable training. To facilitate this diversity and in the framework of parish renewal, it could be worthwhile to establish collaboration between different communities of the diocese. At any rate, we must be watchful that the various methods used be approved by the bishop. Besides, we must be careful to promote church membership, even if the community is not in the territory where we live.

That requires of those in charge of the community a special vigilance in the choice of people assigned directly to the setting up and administration of the process of initiation. The pastor who chairs the community is concerned about the whole journey. Certainly, he cannot carry alone all the responsibility for it, but it is up to him to see that the members of the community and the people more directly involved in the specific tasks related to the process of initiation accomplish them in the best way and with as much satisfaction as possible.

These orientations come from deep pastoral convictions widely accepted by the whole pastoral staff of the diocesan Church of Saint-Jean-Longueuil.

Pastoral Convictions

1. Christian initiation should lead the initiated and the initiators to progress in learning about Christian life:

- * To live in relationship with the God of Jesus Christ;
- * To participate more in church communion;
- * To act as Jesus would act;
- * To celebrate the Lord Jesus in prayer and in the sacraments;
- * To make connections between the Gospel received and their way of responding to it.

2. The Christian initiation of children is the fruit of a collaboration between:

- * The family, especially the parents;
- * The Christian community (pastors, pastoral animators, volunteer collaborators, believers)
- * The movements, parish and school pastoral animation which facilitate for the children the various dimensions of the church's mission: sharing the faith, evangelical fraternity, commitment, celebration;
- * The school which offers Catholic moral and religious instruction and pastoral animation.

3. Christian initiation is not limited to the preparation for and the celebration of the sacraments:

- * It is a matter of initiating a person into the whole sacramental Christian life;
- * Pastoral investments cannot all be granted only to the initiation of children. In order that the adults of the community, especially the parents, be true initiators, they must be helped to continue their growth in faith and in their church membership;
- * The process proposed for children aims at initiating them into the Christian life (cf. 1st conviction) through the sacraments.

4. Access to the sacraments supposes practice of the Christian life:

- * While nobody can judge this practice and its quality, it matters that the requesters of the sacraments be able to have the opportunity to take a responsible stand on their decision to live this practice;
- * The practice of Christian life about which we are talking is presented in the statement of the first conviction.

5. The mechanisms of accompaniment of those to be initiated should be varied to respect the different ways of learning about Christian life.

- * The procedures suggested must clearly define the responsibilities of the various contributors and promote complementarity of roles;
- * These procedures should be flexible enough to be used in different situations and interesting enough to acquire a taste for continuing the initiation to Christian life or growth in this life.

6. Access to the celebration of the sacraments must be linked to the dispositions of the candidates:

- * We must avoid connecting this access to a specific age or a school level;
- * In the case of children baptized at school age, we must consider the possibility of restoring the order of access to the sacraments: baptism, confirmation, eucharist.

7. It is of primary importance to offer adequate training to the contributors collaborating in Christian initiation:

- * This training cannot consist only in the acquisition of knowledge even if this aspect of training is important;
- * Spiritual resourcing of the contributors can qualify them as witnesses of Christ who calls them to live according to the Gospel.

8. The pastoral orientations presented by the Christian Education Committee of A.É.Q. in the document *Proposer la foi aux jeunes, une force pour vivre* (Proposing Faith to Youth: Strength to Live) should inspire us in the exercise of Christian initiation of children:

- * This document suggests renewing our viewpoints on education of the faith by striving *to energize and set free what is closest to life, in the depths of our hearts, this spiritual experience which helps us to live, which leads to what is essential, to the heart of faith+;
- * It invites us, within the confines of the journeys dictated by life itself, to *suggest making the possible step rather than the impossible leap.+

Conclusion

These orientations given to the Church of Saint-Jean-Longueuil aim at an ever better quality of Christian initiation through the sacraments. They do not expect total uniformity in the exercise of this pastoral work which is so important to the Church. For if the Church celebrates sacraments, it is the sacraments which make the Church. These orientations aim at unity, at the communion of the whole local Church in the work of evangelization which is accomplished when new Christians enter the Church to live as disciples of Christ.

The beacons presented in this document have no other objective than to call families, parishes, schools and certain other alternate places, like the youth movements, to walk on new paths traced by the present new situations of those being initiated as well as the initiators, paths which lead to the proposal of Christian faith, evangelical fraternity, Church commitment and the celebration of the God of Jesus Christ ever attentive and present in the life of His people.

Given at Longueuil, on the seventeenth day of February in the year one thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight.



↖ Jacques Berthelet, C.S.V.
Bishop of Saint-Jean-Longueuil



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