

Celebrating the Rites of the RCIA with Children and Youth

by Rita Burns Senseman



As Kent bent down to make the sign of the cross on Jacob's red Nike high top clad feet, the assembly sang, "Christ will be your strength, learn to know and follow him." Then Kent slowly stood up, looked his son straight in the eye, and there was no mistaking that something powerful had passed between them.

That something powerful that passed between father and son is a testament to the depth, richness, and mystery of the liturgical rites of the RCIA. The signing of Jacob's feet with the sign of the cross happened during the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. The Rite of Acceptance is the first major rite of the initiation process. The something that passed between them was undoubtedly the work of the Holy Spirit.

The rites are foundational to the RCIA. The symbols, gestures, and prayers of the rites speak of God's presence in the lives of the candidates (the unbaptized) and in the life of the community. Furthermore, they mark the children's journey of conversion as they move toward new life in Christ. Let's take a closer look at the importance and the purpose of the rites.

What the RCIA says about the Rites

The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) tells us just how important the rites are. Indeed, the second paragraph of the introduction to the ritual text speaks of the liturgical rites as constitutive to the process of initiation. In fact, the rites of the catechumenate are mentioned in the same sentence as our most sacred Sacraments of Initiation:

This rite (the RCIA) includes not simply the celebration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist, but also all the rites belonging to the catechumenate.

RCIA 2

The ritual text emphasizes how essential the rites are to the process of initiation. The candidates for initiation are on a journey of conversion that progresses gradually over an extended period of time. The rites mark the progress of the candidates as they journey toward Christ and the Sacraments of Initiation. The rites are identifiable *steps* that the candidates take along the way.

In particular, the ritual text clearly states that unbaptized children, "as with adults" (RCIA 253) take these ritual *steps*, too. Part II, Chapter 1 of the RCIA is the chapter that addresses the initiation of children of catechetical age. This chapter on children emphasizes the importance of celebrating the rites with children. The second paragraph of the chapter, paragraph 253, talks about vital role of the liturgical rites with children:

Also, as with adults, [the children's] initiation is marked by several steps, the liturgical rites of acceptance into the order of catechumens (nos. 260-276), the optional rite of election (nos. 277-290), penitential rites or scrutinies (nos. 291-303), and the celebration of the sacraments of initiation (nos. 304-329); corresponding to the periods of adult initiation are the periods of the children's catechetical formation that lead up to and follow the steps of their initiation.

Not only does this paragraph tell us how the rites ritually mark the children's journey, it also tells us about another important purpose of the rites. The rites culminate each period of formation and usher the children into the period that follows.

Young Apprentices

A RESOURCE FOR THE RCIA

RESOURCE ARTICLE

Look at the last line of paragraph 253 given above. The rites are peak moments; they are pinnacles. Each period of formation “*leads up to*” a liturgical rite. Then, another period of formation “*follow(s)*.” In other words, the rites sum up each period and then point ahead to the next period.

Let’s examine a specific example. Go back to the opening story about Kent and Jacob in the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. This rite for children is given in paragraphs 262-276 of the RCIA. As described in the story, after the celebrant signs the child’s forehead, opening with the sign of the cross, the parent signs the child’s other senses with the sign of the cross (see paragraph 268). The child is marked with the sign of the cross from head to toe. What does this tell us?

It tells us that in the period leading up to this rite, the period of the precatechumenate, the child must have learned something about the cross. In order for the signing to have meaning, the child must have some basic understanding of what the Cross of Christ means. Further, while the child’s feet are being signed, the church prays, “We mark your feet with the sign of the cross: walk in the way of Christ” (RCIA 268). We know that because of what has happened in the preceding period of precatechumenate, the child has some notion of what it means to walk with Christ.

In addition the rite gives a clue as to what is to come, in the period of the catechumenate. Again, look at the opening story. In this case, the assembly sang, “Christ will be your strength, learn to know and follow him.” The assembly gives voice to what will happen in the catechumenate period; the child will learn to know and follow Christ more deeply.



Doorways

Moreover, we can see why the RCIA calls the liturgical rites *doorways*. The rites are thresholds for the children to pass through as they move from one period to the next.

As stated in RCIA paragraph six:

This journey includes not only the periods for making inquiry and for maturing . . . but also the steps marking the catechumens’ progress, as they pass, so to speak through another doorway or ascend to the next level.

The Rite continues in paragraph six by saying that the doorways, or *steps*, or thresholds are “major, more intense moments of initiation.” They are indeed more intense because of the profound way in which they illuminate the mystery of Christ. Returning to our opening example once again, the signing of Jacob’s feet said to Jacob something like, “You walk with Christ. Jesus Christ will always be with you to guide your steps and give you strength.” Although those exact words were not spoken, the message came through by the power of the father’s touch and the assembly’s response. That one gesture, when done with passion and conviction, speaks to the child and stays with the child longer than any lesson or lecture on following Jesus.

It is through the signs and symbols of each rite that the children come to know the mystery of God in a more personal way. The liturgical symbols speak to children in a way that reaches their imaginations. The symbols communicate in a unique way that goes beyond classroom teaching.

In addition to the example given from the Rite of Acceptance, the first of the “major, more intense moments of initiation,” there are two other major rites and lots of other lesser rites. Here is list a of the rites of the RCIA and some of the liturgical symbols of each one.

Young Apprentices

A RESOURCE FOR THE RCIA

RESOURCE ARTICLE

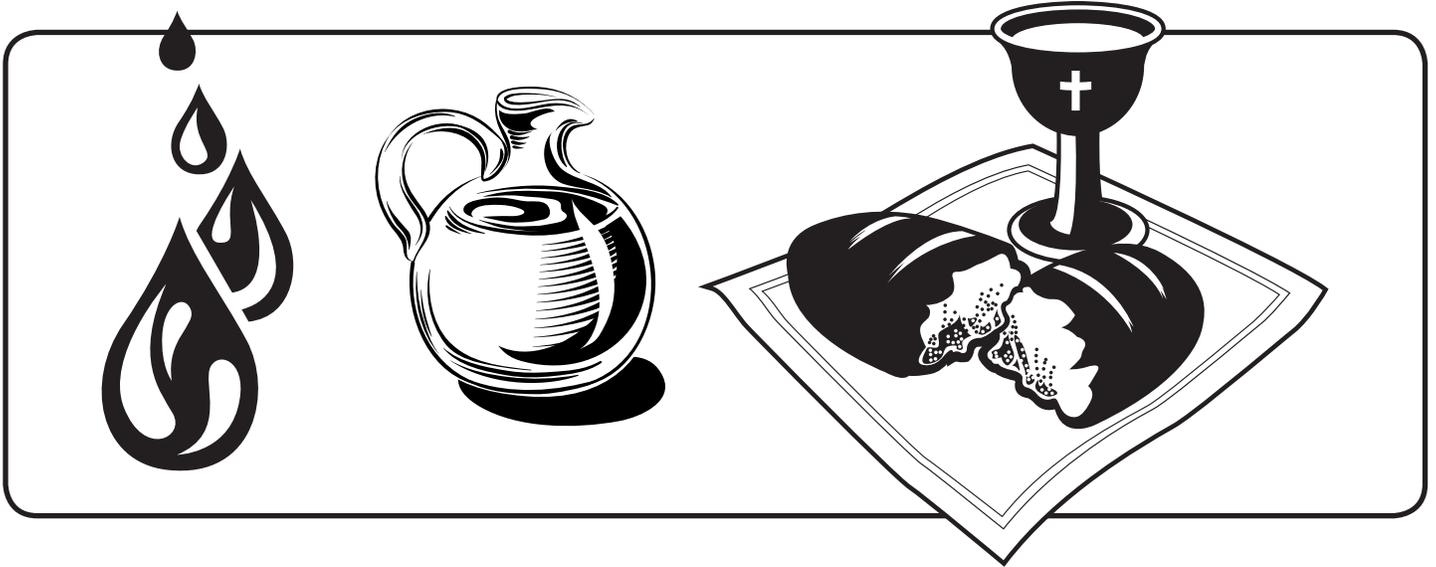
The Major Rites	Liturgical Sign or Symbol
Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens	Cross, community, Word
Rite of Election	Community's testimony Signing of the book Act of election
Sacraments of Initiation	Water, oil, bread, and wine

Other Rites Throughout the Journey	Liturgical Sign or Symbol
Minor Rites of the Catechumenate Celebrations of the Word of God Minor Exorcisms Blessing of the Catechumens Anointing of the Catechumens	Word Prayer of exorcism Hands laid in prayer Oil
Rite of Sending for Election	Community's testimony Signing of the book
Penitential Rite (Scrutiny) from Part II, Chapter 1	Prayer of exorcism Laying on of hands Anointing
Three Scrutinies from Part I	Prayer of exorcism Laying on of hands
Presentation of the Creed	Handing over the Church's faith
Presentation of the Lord's Prayer	Handing over the Church's prayer
Preparation Rites on Holy Saturday Recitation of the Creed Ephphetha Rite	Preparation for profession of faith Touching the ears and mouth

Young Apprentices

A RESOURCE FOR THE RCIA

RESOURCE ARTICLE



All of the rites of the RCIA point the children toward Christ. The symbols of the rituals are the signposts along the pathway to Christ. As the children embark on their journey with their parents and sponsors, they encounter the rites along the way. The rites mark their journey and help to move them along the path. As a way of summarizing, let's look at how all the rites fit together.

The Pathway and its Doorways

The first rite, the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, is the child's first official welcome to the "household of Christ" (RCIA 47). The community accepts the children and asks them to accept the Gospel and the cross as they continue their journey toward Christ.

Having entered into the Period of the Catechumenate, the children listen to the Word of God, learn the Christian way of life, and receive the Church's prayers and blessings.

When their conversion has sufficiently developed, the Church celebrates their election. The Rite of Election is the beginning of the Period of Purification and Enlightenment. To complete their conversion, the children celebrate the three Scrutinies. (Or they may celebrate the Penitential Rite [Scrutiny] as given in Part II, Chapter 1.) They are also

presented with the Creed and the Lord's Prayer in order to enlighten them during this final preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation.

Then, "in order to bring out the paschal character of baptism," the children celebrate Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil (see RCIA 304, 305).

Finally, in the period of mystagogy, the young neophytes "deepen their grasp of the paschal" by sharing weekly in the greatest of rituals, the Eucharist (see RCIA 244, 247).

Young Disciples for the Life of the World

Having completed the process of initiation, the children have become disciples of Jesus Christ who participate in his life and mission. As they go forth in mission for the life of the world, they will return again and again to that great ritual to be nourished for the rest of their lives by Word and Eucharist.