Christian Initiation in the Melkite Church

Educational Services
Melkite Greek Catholic Eparchy of Newton
Christian Initiation in the Melkite Church

Educational Services
Melkite Greek Catholic Eparchy of Newton
Contents

I – General Policy for the Administration of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation

II – Pre-Chrismation Catechesis for Chrismation of Children Previously Baptized


GENERAL POLICY FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION

INTRODUCTION

The sacraments of the Church, like all the important dimensions of our faith, are inexhaustible in their meaning. At various times during the history of Christianity different aspects of the sacraments have been stressed in certain places; other traditions have emphasized complementary aspects. No one viewpoint is able to completely take in and express the full richness of the hidden realities in these rites, which we call "mysteries" precisely for that reason.

At this time, however, it seems good to emphasize two important principles from our Eastern tradition which are of special value today: the ecclesial aspect of the sacraments, especially the sacraments of Christian Initiation, and the principle of synergy: the cooperation between God and man which informs our whole outlook on salvation in the Christian East.

1. The Ecclesial Dimension

"A sacrament is always an event in the Church, by the Church and for the Church." (Georges Florovsky)

The Church is a sacramental community: realized and formed by the Lord and His Spirit working mystically through the sacraments. We cannot envision Church without sacraments, since it is chiefly through them that Christ builds up His Church. We may even say that the sacraments make up the Church since they are the point of encounter between God, offering salvation, and the human race, in turn responding by faith. The very communion of the baptized among themselves becomes possible because, incorporated in the mysteries into Christ through the Holy Spirit, they have communion with the Father.

At the same time we must recognize that the sacraments, particularly the sacraments of Christian Initiation, are ecclesial events. The very word "initiation" is communitarian, stressing that
one is being initiated into a community, the Church, that Divine Milieu in which the Holy Spirit is given to us through the sacraments. Through these mysteries a person is incorporated into the community of the “Chosen People.” No one is a Christian by himself or for himself alone. One is a Christian by becoming a member of the community of the faithful, born again of the Spirit.

For centuries the Western Church, both Catholic and Protestant, has stressed a more individualistic approach to the sacraments. The prime emphasis in baptism, for example, was the remission of the individual’s sins and his personal salvation. On the other hand the Eastern Church preferred to stress the mysterious and communitarian dimension of the sacraments as well as the essential role of the community and its faith. These ideas, incidentally, were adopted by the Second Vatican Council which stressed that individuals are not saved as individuals, but as members of the community (cf. Lumen Gentium, #9).

In addition sacraments must not be interpreted primarily in an individual sense, since they aim at the deification of all mankind. Through them the Holy Spirit vivifies the community of believers and makes the nature of the Trinity shine forth in it.

Therefore the incorporation of a person into the community of faith must be seen as primarily an ecclesial event, involving the participation of the community in both the preparation, celebration and follow-up of these mysteries. In addition the presentations and explanations of these mysteries should stress this communal dimension over the effect on the individual, a recognizably different emphasis from that previously common, and from the generally individualistic approach of Western culture.

2. The Principle of Synergy

“The grace of God is not able to visit those who flee salvation. Nor is human virtue of such power as to be adequate of itself to raise up to authentic life those souls who are untouched by grace. ... But when righteousness of works and the grace of the Spirit come together the same time in the same soul, they are able to fill it with blessed life.” (St. Gregory of Nyssa)
The relationship of grace and human freedom has been expressed in many theologies, with the principle of synergy being the one most in accordance with the tradition and teaching of the Eastern Churches. According to this principle, divine life comes about when grace and human freedom are expressed concurrently. The one may not be understood without the other, as both are seen as working in harmony. God's call demands our response. Our response in no way determines the action of God, but this action does not act upon us as if it were external or foreign to us.

Still the divine and human aspects cannot be placed on the same level. It is God who always takes the initiative and it is man who responds by confessing his faith, which in the end is only the babbling of an infant in the manner of the cry of Jairus, "I believe, Lord. Help my unbelief." The human response is totally dependent upon the divine action, although man is not constrained by it which he can oppose and even refuse.

Applying the question of grace and freedom to baptism, many Protestants began to see this sacrament as merely a symbol affirming the faith of the believer, in other words stressing the human response as the main element in this mystery. As a reaction against Protestantism, the Latin Church stressed the efficacy of the sacrament in itself as a divine action, emphasizing its power of conferring grace per se, ex opere operato and not by faith alone in the divine promises (Council of Trent #8). On the other hand the Eastern Church preferred to stress the necessity of complete cooperation of both God's initiative and man's response. Thus St. Maximos the Confessor had said that "God has made His desire and purpose clear in His love for mankind, making divine through grace those who consciously travel upwards with it."

It is necessary, then, to emphasize both the divine action and the need of our response in presenting the sacraments. Stressing the first without the second borders on magic and makes of baptism an isolated ritual with no relationship to a subsequent way of life. Insisting on the second without emphasizing the first leads to Pelagianism: seeing the person's actions as primary in the life of grace. The sacraments must be shown as a divine action demanding the response of faith, calling forth the cooperation of the believer to the initiative of God.
In infant baptism this cooperation is expressed by the parents and the whole community of the faithful, from whom the infants cannot be separated. The infant is introduced into the community by virtue of the faith professed by the sponsors and the community. As St. Basil says, “For if faith receives its perfection from baptism, baptism is built upon faith.” Thus it is essential to stimulate and awaken the faith of the adult community for the baptism of infants to communicate fully the divine life.
SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

It is to heighten our community’s realization of these dimensions of the mysteries of Christian initiation as well as to insure awareness of the Church’s other directives concerning the administration of these sacraments that this statement of policy has been prepared. This policy, expressed in the following guidelines, covers many aspects of the Christian initiation of infants, including preparation and follow-up as well as the actual celebration. Each of these areas is important in assisting the members of our community to discover the depths of meaning contained in these mysteries.

1. PREPARATION

1. Couples preparing for marriage should be instructed on the dimensions of the Christian family, including child-rearing. They are to be reminded that the foundation of their future children’s Christian formation is their own practice and maturity as believers. They are to be shown that their maturity will be seen in the light of their participation in the life of the Church. Engaged couples should be also prepared to expect an intensive formation experience at the time of the child’s birth and baptism so that they not hear of it for the first time when the child arrives.

2. a. Upon learning that a parishioner is pregnant the priest should make a pastoral call on the expectant parents to pray for the safe delivery of the child, to congratulate the parents and to share with them the Church’s teachings on parenthood. The parenting book published by the eparchy, Blessed is the Fruit of Your Womb, should be given them at this time and form the basis for their formation at this point. The prospective parents should be advised of the existence of the rites and blessings surrounding the birth and naming of a child in our tradition and be encouraged to call the priest to offer them at the appropriate time.

   b. Prospective parents should also be reminded of the immediate pre-baptismal preparation and be advised to include it in their plans for their child’s christening. In larger communities,
groups of laypersons may be formed to undertake this ministry. In any case, the priest should not neglect to perform the blessings at birth as it is part of his sacramental ministry to his people.

c. This is also the appropriate time to discuss the choice of godparent(s) with the couple. Few families see this role as anything but honorific, so parents should be encouraged to select as godparents those whom they know will support their own faith and assist in their efforts to raise the children as believers in our tradition. Stressing this faith-supporting function will make more obvious the fact that those who are not living our tradition can hardly be sponsors in any true sense. It goes without saying that a non-Christian is not in a position to present anyone for membership in the Body of Christ when he does not belong to it and thus cannot act as a sponsor in Christian baptism.

3. a. The actual pre-baptismal catechesis of parents and godparents is to be a normative part of the Christian initiation of infants in our Church. It may only be deferred in the case of an emergency baptism, but then it is to be conducted once the child is recovered.

b. The *Adult Instruction Program on the Sacraments of Initiation* published by the eparchy for this purpose is to be used in all our churches whether in individual instructions or in groups, at the discretion of the local pastor.

2. CELEBRATION

1. a. The mysteries of Christian Initiation are the foundation of all Christian life and the basis for our entire spirituality. Their celebration should be as prayerful and solemn as the services of Easter or Pentecost since they are the neophytes’ personal entry into these great paschal mysteries. Therefore every care should be taken to make their observance meaningful to all.

b. Priests should insist upon the presence of both parents for the celebration. The absence of the mother, whether for domestic or superstitious reasons, is to be discouraged in the strongest possible way. In addition, both parents should be encouraged to stand with their child and to receive him at the end of the rite as a sign of their responsibility for his upbringing.
c. Christenings should be scheduled in such a way that their community dimension be manifested. A christening is not the private affair of one family but affects and concerns the entire parish community. Christenings may be scheduled before or after the parish Liturgy to highlight this dimension. In any case, times of christenings may be made known to the parish whenever they are scheduled and the entire parish family encouraged to attend.

d. The symbolism and meaning of these rites is to be explained to all attending, preferably at the beginning of the celebration. The service book published by the eparchy is to be made available to all attending to increase the sense of participation in these sacred mysteries.

2. a. All the rites as prescribed in the Euchologion are to be fulfilled in every celebration. Thus the blessing of the water is to be done during each ceremony at the proper time and place as specified in the Euchologion, previous customs notwithstanding. “Blessing the water” by mixing so-called “holy water” with it is to lose the symbolism of the New Creation and must be forbidden.

b. Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist must be administered together, according to the ancient discipline and as it exists today in the Euchologion. Under no circumstances, for no persons and for no reason is it permitted to confer baptism without chrismation in our churches, as has been the custom of some. If a child has received emergency baptism without the full rite, as in a hospital, the priest should complete the initiation as soon as possible by conferring the mysteries of chrismation and the Eucharist.

c. The Holy Chrism used for Chrismation must be that which has been consecrated by the Melkite Patriarch and distributed by the eparch. To do otherwise, except in case of emergency and with the permission of the eparch, would be to break a substantial link with the patriarchal Mother Church of Antioch and to act contrary to the traditional custom in honor in all the Eastern Churches, both Catholic and Orthodox.

d. Concerning the administration of the Eucharist to infants, the Patriarchal Synod—in response to the Vatican II Decree on the Eastern Churches—recognized the legitimacy of returning to this ancient discipline almost fifteen years ago. It is to be considered an obligatory part of the Christian Initiation of infants in this eparchy
and is not to be omitted.

e. If a child is presented to the church who has been baptized in another church but not chrismated, steps should be taken to complete the Christian Initiation quickly. Chrismation of a baptized person may be conferred either in conjunction with a full christening or separately. If the chrismation is served apart from a baptism, the order followed on pages 463–467 of the Isabel Hapgood translation of the Service Book (Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America, 1956) may be used. If the candidate is of the age of discretion, instructions appropriate to the age level must be given before conferring the sacrament as discussed in the appendix to these guidelines.

f. Parents should be encouraged to continue bringing their infants and young children to the sacred banquet as often as possible and are not to be discouraged from doing so in any way. They are, however, to be reminded of their obligation to stress appropriate reverence for the sacrament to even the youngest child and to communicate an understanding of this mystery as truly the body and blood of Christ to their child as soon as he is able to appreciate it.

g. It goes without saying that “First Communion” ceremonies or their imitation (“Solemn Communion,” “Eucharistic Awareness”) are completely out of place in churches of our tradition and are to be abandoned wherever they are still practiced. It is the responsibility of the pastor to communicate these realities to the entire parish, especially where the Latin form of First Communion has been established, and to assist the parents in giving their child the necessary instruction as he reaches the age of discernment.

3. FOLLOW-UP

1. a. Parents should be encouraged to bring their child to church on a regular basis from the time of his baptism so that the divine life he has received may be continually strengthened. Priests should remind parents that by a constant and directed exposure to the sacred rites their children will acquire a sense of reverence for God and by continued reception of the sacred mysteries their union with
Him will be strengthened. The idea of many parents that they can get closer to God by leaving their infant at home is to be discouraged strongly.

b. A child becomes a learner from the first days of its life. Parents should be reminded to include basic religious learning among the things they communicate to their children, for they are the first and primary teachers. Leaflets published by the diocese for this purpose should be distributed to the parents at the indicated times, thus spanning the years until the young believer enters the Church School program.

4. DELAY OR REFUSAL OF THESE MYSTERIES

1. a. Often people who bring their children for baptism are not observant believers themselves and present their children primarily for reasons which are social or bordering on the superstitious. They may know that children should be baptized but have no understanding that its purpose is to give the true life to their children.

   Non-practicing members of the parish community [see note] who present their children for baptism are to be received with love in the spirit of Christ. They are to be apprised of the practice of our Church concerning preparatory catechesis and follow-up. They should be helped especially to understand that their child is baptized in virtue of the faith of his parents and of the community. They should be reminded of their resolve made at marriage to give their children a Christian upbringing and every means taken to draw them to a renewal of their own faith as well.

   b. Parishes are encouraged to prepare a number of believers strong in the faith who can be designated as sponsors where it seems the parents are unwilling or unable to provide for the child’s religious upbringing. Such appointed sponsors would keep contact with the child and assist the parents in providing Christian instruction at an appropriate age.

   c. Some parents may refuse to participate in the preparatory catechesis or evidence no desire to take seriously their own baptism or marital responsibility to raise their children in a Christian atmosphere. Such an attitude is clearly irreconcilable
with the necessity of a faith-response inherent in the doctrine of synergy. For this reason the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has stated, “A well-founded hope for Christian education should be provided by the child’s parents, godparents and some of the members of the community of the faithful. Otherwise the child should not be baptized, though it could be blessed and inscribed in a special register so that contact with parents could be maintained.”

2. a. Priests, therefore, may use their discretion to delay the celebration of the mysteries of Christian initiation, provided that they are committed to working with the parents to effect a change of attitude during that period. However, they may not directly refuse these mysteries to any parishioner, for this right belongs solely to the eparch. In these cases the priest should nonetheless perform the rite of churching or presentation of the child in the church with its especially appropriate prayer that “in due time he may be illumined in spirit and numbered among your chosen flock.”

b. When taking such action, however, priests should know that as spiritual father of those they initiate into the holy mysteries, they have the special responsibility to encourage and stimulate the faith of their spiritual children in a special way. Demanding a commitment from parents, they should be conscious of their own, always recognizing that God does “work in all things for the good of those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

5. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. In no case is the delay or refusal of these mysteries to be based on financial considerations either directly, as a required donation, or indirectly, as a set figure for activating membership in the parish. Parents should be advised that they are responsible to give according to their means.

2. All offerings given for baptism are to be deposited in parish accounts and are not for the personal use of the priest.
CONCLUSION

The mysteries of Christian initiation represent for the neophyte the great events of our salvation, bringing him the divine life itself. For this reason the directives herein listed bear a special significance and all the clergy of this eparchy are called to familiarize themselves with them and with the spirit in which they were formulated, to implement them consciously and to strive in every circumstance to increase awareness of the significance of these sacraments and reverence for the life they convey.

• NOTE — Canonically, every person whose father or mother (if the father is not Catholic) was a Melkite Greek Catholic is himself considered to be a Melkite Greek Catholic, as are those who have been officially received into the community as adults. In addition, according to canon law, no member of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church may lawfully approach another church for the sacraments of initiation where there is a Melkite church in the community. In viewing the community, however, we know that on the observable level many canonical members have no interest in the community life. For this reason the eparchy has set standards for active membership in a parish (refer to the Pastoral Handbook). Nevertheless, priests should be sensitive to the fact that many—especially recent immigrants—may look to them as the head of their community, even though they do not view the community in an organizational or close-knit sense as most American-style parishes strive to be, but as the "taifet" or quasi-ethnic community. These people must be received as they are, not as we would like them to be, while attempting to raise their community awareness in love.
APPENDIX A

PRE-CHRISMATION CATECHESIS

FOR CHRISMATION OF THOSE PREVIOUSLY BAPTIZED

The separation of baptism and confirmation in the Western Church did serious damage to the understanding of this sacrament. Since confirmation was postponed until teen age, at least in our immediate experience, it seemed to take on the character of a rite of passage. One who received this sacrament was “becoming an adult believer,” “professing the faith of his own recognizance,” etc. Thus, the sacrament became a “rite of Christian maturity,” a second baptism.

This, of course, has nothing to do with its original place in the liturgy or in the consistent practice of the Eastern Churches. So Western catechetical programs on the sacrament, which abound, cannot convey the traditional understanding of chrismation as the gift of the Spirit, period. However, in our existing programs, sufficient material abounds which can be used to prepare baptized children to receive this mystery or to prepare un-baptized children for full initiation into Christ. The following references are to the official diocesan grade school program, the God With Us Series, which includes material on the primary (grades 1–3) and middle (grades 4–6) levels.

For primary students, Unit Six of Discover (first grade) includes the following lessons:

Lesson 23 “Jesus Tells Us About the Holy Spirit”
Lesson 24 “The Father Sends Us the Holy Spirit”
Lesson 25 “The Spirit is Present Among Us”
Lesson 26 “Praying Together in the Spirit”

The second grade program, Life, includes the following lessons in its Unit Four:

Lesson 13 “We Are Baptized Into Christ”
Lesson 14 “In Baptism We Receive New Life”
Lesson 15 “In Chrismation We Are Sealed With the Holy Spirit”
Lesson 16 “Now We Can Pray Our Father”
Lesson 17 “Because We Are Christened We Are Called God’s People”

For Middle School students, we turn to *Share*, the fifth grade text in the series, for the following lessons:

Lesson 5 “With a Little Help” (The promise and presence of the Holy Spirit)
Lesson 6 “Pass It On” (The Spirit in the Early Church)
Lesson 8 “Baptism: the Lord Enters Our Life”
Lesson 9 “Chrismation: the Lord Seals this New Relationship”
Lesson 10 “A Christian Is...” (Fruit of the Holy Spirit)
Lesson 11 “Alive in Christ” (Follow the Spirit’s lead)
Lesson 12 and 25 can be combined into a lesson on the gifts of the Spirit as they relate to the students, by omitting the sections of those lessons that speak of the saints.

For Junior High students and older, no corresponding material exists. The following questions and references provide a basis for discussion between priest and/or catechist and the students. Adapting them to the age level and maturity of the learner is necessarily the task of the catechist.
PREPARING FOR CHRISMATION
(SEVENTH GRADE AND OLDER)

A — Learning

Your preparing has two parts, learning and formation. In the learning part you will read the following page thoroughly and understand it to the best of your ability. Have your parents, older brother or sister or anyone else help you, so that you absorb all the information it contains. When you are sure you can repeat it all, ask the priest for an appointment and be ready to answer the questions that follow, based on what you have read:

 Chrismation in the Church

1. **Chrismation, or Confirmation, is** the sacrament in which we receive the Holy Spirit. Just as we become related to Christ in baptism, now in chrismation we become related to the Holy Spirit. Our baptism is not complete until we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is what the apostles believed and why they made sure new Christians received the gift of the Holy Spirit: “Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–15).

   Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to the Church, to be with us forever. He said, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it” (John 14:16–17).

   We see in the Scripture that the Holy Spirit is with us:
   a) *to be our teacher* — Jesus said, “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name: He will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.” (John 14:26);
   b) *to help us share the good news of Christ with others* — Jesus also said, “When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, He will testify to
me.” (John 15:26);
c) to give us the power to live a Christian life — Jesus told His disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8); and
d) to help us pray — St. Paul writes, “In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings.” (Romans 8:26).

Sometimes the Holy Spirit gives people special gifts to help them build up the whole Church:

“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as He wishes. (1 Corinthians 12:4–11).

Whenever we see these special gifts in people or seek the Holy Spirit’s help in what we do, we are recognizing that He is with us as Jesus promised.

2. In the early Church people were baptized and received the Holy Spirit at the same time. The Acts of the Apostles tells us what happened when St Paul converted some people at Ephesus. “When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul laid (his) hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.” (Acts 19:5 – 6). This is the way we do it in the Eastern Churches today. They were confirmed in a ritual known as the laying-on-of-hands, which means that the bishop placed his hands on them as he prayed that the Holy Spirit would come upon
them. This is what we do today.

Later on in the history of the Church, a problem arose. People used to be baptized in groups by the bishop who would confirm them at once. Then there got to be too many people needing baptism, especially children. The bishop couldn't baptize and confirm them all: he would be doing nothing else! So solutions were found. In the Eastern Churches they solved the problem one way: in the Western Church they chose another.

In the West, they said, "Let the priest baptize the children, but let them wait for the bishop to come around and confirm them." In the East, they said, "Let the priest give both sacraments so the people would remember that a Christian should always be related to both Christ and the Spirit. But let the bishop be symbolically present by the chrism which he sends."

3. **Chrism is a special perfumed oil**, blessed by the bishop, which the priest uses in confirmation. He anoints the person with it on different parts of the body. It represents the sweetness of the Holy Spirit which should penetrate the Christian and fill him with joy. Because the chrism is used in this sacrament, in the Eastern Churches confirmation is more usually called chrismation.

The chrism has another meaning, too. It reminds us of the word "Christ." Jesus was called "Christ" to mean that He was anointed or filled with the Holy Spirit. And so the Church Fathers said we become in this sacrament "other Christs" (other anointed ones). When we are anointed in this sacrament it is to remind us that, like Christ, we are touched with the Holy Spirit.

**Questions**

1. What is chrismation (confirmation)?

2. Explain the difference between the way these two mysteries are given in the Eastern and Western Churches. What is the difference and how did it start?

3. What is the chrism and what is its meaning in chrismation?

4. Why do we say that a confirmed person is "another Christ"?
The formation part includes meeting with the priest and talking about the way you live the Christian life. Do you just go to church on Sunday, or do you pray regularly, help others, etc.? With the priest you will set up a program to live the Christian life a little more maturely.

It will also include reading the Bible’s teachings on the gift of the Holy Spirit and its effects. Each day at your prayer time, read one of these passages and think about its meaning.

1. Jesus was touched with the Holy Spirit at His conception (Luke 1:35) and His baptism (Luke 3:21–22).


6. The Spirit brings the gifts of God (1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 27–31; Romans 12:6–8; Ephesians 4:11).

7. Letting these gifts work in you will make you have a certain kind of Personality (Galatians 5:22–23).