Discovering
The
Mysteries
DISCOVERING THE MYSTERIES:
CHRISTIAN INITIATION

LEADER'S GUIDE
FOR AN ADULT INSTRUCTION PROGRAM.
ON THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION
The idea of pre-baptismal catechesis is certainly nothing new to our Church. Some of the great patristic homilies of St. John Chrysostom or the instructions of St. Cyril of Jerusalem attest to the fact that there was quite an involved preparation for baptism, sometimes extending over several years! This points also to the seriousness with which Holy Baptism was approached. In fact our Forty-Day Great Fast grew out of the final preparation and catechesis of those about to be baptized at the Vigil Service of the Resurrection.

To be sure, these catecheses were geared to adults and to their mature acceptance of the faith. Today we are usually in the situation of baptizing infants, but the parents and sponsors, those who are responsible for the child, stand more than ever in need of a preparation for baptism. Without any teaching we surely lose the importance of a baptismal service, and quite frankly, run the risk of going through a virtually meaningless ceremony to be finished as quickly as possible so that everyone can go home and begin the “real” celebration.

This preparation could take place in various ways: in a large parish where there are many baptisms, it is possible to have group discussions several times each year. It is also possible to set aside one Sunday each month as a baptismal Sunday, and the preparation of these parents could be done together. In most situations, the parishes are small enough that individual prep-
paration can take place. This is certainly more personal and allows individual contact with the families involved.

Another suggestion that is to meet at their homes if this is possible; if the baby has already been born, this is very important since most parents are reluctant to leave a new-born infant with a sitter. Also, they are more "at home" in their own surroundings and are usually pleased that someone has taken time and the interest to come into their homes. Also, you have the advantage of a more conducive situation -- the presence of a newly-born infant (or at least the nursery is being prepared in some way) gives a focal point to begin with.

A general announcement should be made informing the parish members of this instruction that will precede each baptism; then at the time you are informed of a birth or even when people call to arrange a baptism, this requirement can be mentioned to them again. In this way, the over-all teaching ministry of the parish is extended to yet another area, one which is very crucial since our baptism is the cornerstone for the rest of our life in Christ.

Who should participate in these preparation sessions? Certainly both parents should be involved and also the sponsors, at least in the second session.

At the first session, each participant should be given a copy of the photobook, CHRISTENED: NEWBORN IN CHRIST. This serves as a guide to your discussions and contains for easy reference the scriptural and patristic texts on which our catechesis is based. Should the participants be
disposed to further reading on the subject, give them copies of *WASHED AND ANOINTED*, a further treatment of the same themes, for reading at their leisure.

This program envisions two meetings as the norm. The aim of the first meeting is to acquaint the participants with the basic theology of the sacraments of initiation. The purpose of the second sessions is to familiarize them with the ritual of these mysteries.

One final note: throughout the pages which follow we assume that the best time for baptism is during the Divine Liturgy, in which setting it finds its full meaning. When this takes place, the members of the parish are present as the community of the faithful to welcome this new member into their midst. It goes without saying that all the members of the family and all those who will be at the home celebration later on in the day should all participate in the liturgical service. Baptism - our entrance into the paschal mystery and full life in Jesus Christ - is certainly not a private ceremony to be conducted in some dark corner of the church with only the priest and sponsors present! Even if the baptism is not to take place during a regularly scheduled Liturgy, we should make certain that as many people as possible be invited to share in this Mystery of our salvation.

If the entire parish community does participate in the christening, it should be made aware that it is not simply witnessing something cute, or even an important act which concerns only the family involved. All should be reminded that, as the parish is witnessing the christening, so too, it must assume a common responsibility for the Christian upbring-
ing of the child by assuring a vibrant Christian formation program in the parish and by taking a personal interest in each child's own development and faith life.

FOR YOUR FURTHER READING

Cabasilas, Nicholas, THE LIFE OF CHRIST (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974, 229 pp., paper). Commentary by the fourth century liturgist on the sacraments of initiation.


FIRST SESSION
INTRODUCTION

Parents love to show off their new baby! Everyone who comes into the house is invited to come and see the baby. This is their pride and joy, especially if it is their first child. Just spend a few minutes with them looking at the child; allow them to express themselves about their own joy, their hopes and their fears. Many thoughts run through their minds at this time, and usually they are not at a loss for words to try to express this. Because birth and new life is such an incomprehensible mystery, we usually are overflowing in our attempt to put it into words. Give them time to speak about the birth and their feelings as their child has now come to life.

Then allow some time just to stand in silence with them, as we too, marvel at the wonder of God’s creation. For, after all our attempts to give utterance to a mystery, the silence usually then speaks the clearest to us. And in the silence we sense that this is an awesome event that we witness, and that our time here together is a holy time; it is a time of realizing the presence of God among us and we have a sign of his presence in this new life that He has shared with us. Silence allows for a transition to a reflective mood and a better awareness of the spiritual understanding.

This might even be a time for a short prayer together (on the wonder of God’s creation and thanksgiving for new life).
With this introduction, the ice is usually broken and an atmosphere of interest and confidence is beginning to build. The parents have become involved in the thinking and have been allowed to share some of their thoughts of appreciation for their new child. After they have become part of the dialogue and feel free to speak, then we can move into the area of baptism.)

LIFE AS A GIFT

We are already in a beautiful atmosphere of wonder and awesomeness. "Lord God, how great you are!" And this should be our first attitude as we approach God. We are amazed and awe-struck because this is something so far beyond us. Even though birth is an everyday occurrence, it is also so deeply personal that it appears to us as a once-for-all and unrepeatable event. Their child never seems to them as "a" baby, but it is always "our child." The wonder that is stirred up at birth is made even more special since it is such a personal situation. The parents are so personally and intimately involved because this is their life. This is one of those very special "teachable moments" in which they are already prepared to listen, to reflect and to become personally engaged in the discussion.

The reflection can then be led to realize that this child is their own flesh and blood; it is a visible sign of their love - a love so strong, so intense, that it cannot contain itself. For true love is "creative," and it cannot remain locked up within itself; rather it overflows and takes the form of a new life. Their
own love for each other has now taken on flesh, it has become "incarnate" and is visibly present in the person of their child. The wonder of it all! That parents truly share in the creative work of God, that they are in fact "co-creators" with Him and cooperators in His love.

Even though the parents have truly been co-creators with God, their child is still completely "gift." Life is given to us by God, the Author of Life. Each of us has been created through His love, we have received life as a gift from Him. We have literally been "loved into life" through God's overpowering love for us as seen through the love of our parents and families.

The couple here present have each been loved into life, they are the visible sign of God's creative love; and they have shared this love with each other, thus completing the cycle and in this way returning their love to God. The gift of love that has been received has not been selfishly hoarded and thus killed (this is what happens if we try to hold onto love, to grasp it - if we seize it, we destroy it); love is freely given and freely received. And to continue to live, it must be shared. The sharing of life is the sharing of love.

It is this double aspect - that of receiving life as a gift, freely and completely given, as well as the total cooperation and participation of the parents - that must be seen here.

And it is well to allow time here for the parents to express their own gratitude for the great gift that has been shared with them. For they do experience their child as a gift (no matter how much anxiety and concern there might have been earlier!). To stand before the crib and behold this new life is
simply an awesome moment. And thanksgiving is a large part of our reaction at this time.

To be truly thankful is to recognize that all good gifts come from on high, that they do come from God. To be thankful means to realize and acknowledge the source of the gift as well as the meaning of it; it is to see the gift in its true light. For the new parents, it means to realize that this is their real gift from God, the gift of His love and concern for them, in the concrete form of this new life.

To be thankful is not simply a few words uttered; it is a way of life, a vision or way of seeing life. It is our acknowledgement of God’s lordship over us all, and that without Him our lives have no real meaning.

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE?

The most direct way to get into the discussion is simply ask the question: “Why do you want your child to be baptized?” And the response to this will usually tell us something about the mentality of the parents and their relationship they have with the Church, the sacraments, etc. Following is a sample of a dialogue that often takes place in response to the question about baptism:

RESPONSE: Well, we’re Catholics! We’re supposed to bring him here to be baptized. Doesn’t everybody? Besides, everyone in our family is baptized. It’s our custom, isn’t it?

Yes, I suppose most everybody is baptized; but
why do you want your baby baptized? Does it make any difference to you whether or not he is baptized?

RESPONSE: Well, it has something to do with original sin - if anything should happen to a baby who is not baptized, he goes to Limbo or some place like that. He must first have the original sin washed away.

Oh yes, original sin! That does have something to do with it, doesn't it. What is this original sin anyway? Does your baby have some sort of sin already? I wonder what we mean by this?

RESPONSE: Well, it has something to do with Adam and Eve - (and somewhere about here we usually draw a big blank!)

Even though the responses to such inquiries may be quite varied, usually you will come to an impasse quite quickly. Not too many people have really thought about the meaning of baptism until this session.

So we begin with original sin, since this is "where most people are" concerning baptism. Everyone has heard the word, and for the most it is pretty much a "church" word, that is, one that they usually hear in church but that has little to do with their daily life and thinking. Usually they will speak about in terms of Adam and Eve, and something that is passed to us but with little real connection with our lives. The goal of this session will be to see the true and deep connection between baptism and our life in Christ.
(Even if it is not the question of original sin that comes up at this time, the reason for baptism will usually be expressed in terms of a need to join this person with God, that something is lacking, a separation has taken place that needs to be healed. In this session we want to see the break, the chasm that exists between God and man so that we may appreciate the new and deep unity that comes in Christ, the new creation that comes through his reconciliation).

Here we can go back to the creative power of love that was spoken about above. Our whole world exists because God loves us; God is love, and his love is so dynamic and overflowing that it cannot be contained. It has burst forth from the Trinity and from this love our world has been created; the whole world and all of us are a sign of God’s love... We remember the stories of creation from the Bible - the unity and harmony that existed in Eden - God and man living in peace and oneness.

But this tranquility was broken through sin, by a turning away from God and a seeking to be independent. In its core, sin is the breaking of relationship, an infidelity; it always presupposes that a relationship has in fact existed. For God has created in us relationship with Himself; this is His first covenant, that of creation. Sin is our refusal to respond in love, our breaking a relationship.

At this point, distribute copies of the photobook NEWBORN IN CHRIST. Refer to the quotation from St. Gregory of Nyssa on page 3. Elicit from the participants what they think this might mean.

When we are born, we are born into this world that has been created by God, that is the result of
His love for Us. But this world is also touched by the reality of evil, that power that tempts us to seek to be independent from God. The power of this Evil One is such that it broke the relationship of unity and harmony between God and man. The gateway to heaven was closed and man was rendered incapable of living up to this relationship with God.

But what is impossible to man is possible to God; He sent His Son to be our reconciliation; even while we were sinners, Christ reconciled us with the Father through His coming: His birth as a man healed the wound of separation, His death trampled down the power of sin, and His glorious resurrection overcame the power of death. He has reunited God and man and has re-created the whole universe through his coming.

Our baptism is our entrance into this life in Christ; it is our immersion into His death and resurrection so that what Christ has done might be made alive in us. When you bring your child forth for baptism, for example, it is your expression of faith in Christ and all that He has done, it is your confession of the need for this to be made alive in your child, it is your statement of faith that all life comes from the Father through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit, and that outside this there is no life! Baptism, then, brings more than forgiveness of sin: it brings life itself.

Just as at the time of the birth of your child, he was born of a child of the flesh, a child of this world, now at the time of his baptism he is re-born a child of the spirit, a son/daughter of the Kingdom of God. We see this even in the name: in the hospital your child is simply referred to as “Baby
_________ (family name).” This identifies him as
a member of your family as an inherant of
all that that implies. At the time of baptism we take
on a new name, our baptismal name; it is this name
that will be used throughout our lives each time we
approach for the Holy Mysteries. We shall always
be called the “Servant of God __________
(baptismal name),” for this identifies us as an
inherent of God’s family.

Refer to the quotation from John 3 on page 3 of
the photobook which speaks in terms of rebirth and
its necessity. You may wish to ask the participants
what reason they think prompted Christ’s sense of
urgency and absoluteness when speaking of
baptism.

Once again, why are we baptized?

We are baptized for the gift of life!!! We become
a sharer in life eternal, the life that comes from God.
We become a sharer in the death and resurrection
of Jesus Christ, we put on Christ, we are
“Christ-ened.” We are re-born a child of God and
an heir of the heavenly kingdom.

Of course, you begin to see that here so much
does depend on the faith of the parents, of the
family involved. For a child does begin life as an
extension of the parents’ life; only gradually does
he become independent. Why then do we baptize
an infant? Why not wait until he can make up his
own mind?

(Much of this will depend on the people involved
and their relationship with their church. Following
are several points that could be mentioned briefly
or even developed in detail if necessary).

-- While, as St. Augustine says, “We believe that
the Holy Spirit can work in the souls of babies,” still
we must remember that a child will grow up with only what he is given; if he is not introduced into the life of faith, it will have no meaning for him.

-- As he grows up, he will only know what you show to him, what he experiences from those around him (primarily his parents), for he is now completely dependent on you for everything (food, clothing, warmth, shelter, love and affection); he needs all of these very much to live, and it is your role to support his life now; the way in which you act towards him will determine so much of his life.

-- Your "giving life" to this child means not only to "give birth" physically, but to give life throughout his formative period, until he is independent enough to go off on his own as an adult, mature and responsible.

-- Thus you as responsible Christian parents now take the responsibility of saying "yes" we will bring this child up in an atmosphere of faith and hope and love. We will share with him the joy of all being the children of God; we will allow him to join in sharing the joy of Christian life.

-- In fact, all of those parents present for the baptism (and ideally the parish family is also present) say "yes" we will all share the responsibility of being a good influence on this child. The role of the sponsors, that is, those who stand behind the promises made at this time, what stand "good" for them, is also taken up by all those who will touch the life of this child.

Before completing the session, ask the participants to read and reflect on the first seven pages of the photobook. If you feel that they have a deeper interest, distribute copies of WASHED AND ANOINTED and assign the first chapter.
SECOND SESSION
In the first session we spoke of the meaning of Christian Initiation; the themes of rebirth, initiation, death and resurrection, new life in the Trinity. Now we want to look at the actions or movements of the baptismal service to see that this is a language which gives expression to all we said earlier.

Begin by reviewing the highlights of the first session in which we discussed the meaning of baptism:
-- life is a gift from God that we receive graciously
-- baptism is our re-birth into new life in Christ
-- through baptism we become a partaker of this new eternal life

THE "LANGUAGE"
OF RITUAL

In this session we want to look more closely at the rite of baptism - just what is done and why? What is the meaning of this service? For the service is itself a "language," a way of speaking to us. It is one of the many different ways our Church speaks to us; in our worship we use the language of words, symbols, music, art and also the language of ritual.

The ritual is composed of words and symbols, movements and music - all of which are designed
to give expression to something very deep and basically inexpressible. For example, how do we give expression to the great mystery of being incorporated into Christ, of being re-born through a mystical death and resurrection, of being joined to the life-giving Trinity? In fact, how do we give expression to any of the deeply meaningful events of our lives: feelings of love and hope, joy and thanksgiving, repentance and helplessness?

Important events in our lives, which have their roots at the core of our being, seek to be expressed to take on flesh, as it were, so as to come alive in a new way. Music and art have always been a part of man's world because they can lift us beyond the limits of a purely physical existence. Symbols also raise our consciousness to a new level so that we may see beyond. Ritual finds its roots in this same situation; ritual is a part of our life because it enables us to express something very deep inside us, it allows us to express our spiritual dimension. It is the language of poetry in our life.

We experience the rituals of our own family and traditions, for example, when we prepare and eat a special meal at Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter. More than the simple fact of eating is the special preparation of the food, the table and its decorations, the gathering of family and loved ones, our own anticipation and excitement; all of these together tell us that something special is happening, something much deeper than simply eating a meal (which we do every day!). And the "ritual" of preparing and sharing such a meal gives expression to this event.

Our ritual in Church is very similar. It is the language of the soul. The more we are aware of the
transcendent, the otherness of God, the better we can understand ritual. For the language of ritual is our way of speaking in church, it is our way of expressing the great mystery - that God who is totally other, in His great love for us, now comes to us and fills our lives with His presence.

At this point begin to go through the rite of baptism with the parents and sponsors, showing them how the ritual speaks to us. Refer to pages 8-16 of the photobook as a guide for your description of the service. Note that each of the different actions or movements express the deep reality of “putting on Christ,” being joined in an intimate relationship with Him; a relationship so intimate that the Fathers of the Church often refer to it as a “spiritual wedding.” By preparing the family now, you will help them to better share in the baptism as it actually takes place.

As a guide for this discussion, a skeletal outline of the baptismal service is given below. The companion booklet, WASHED AND ANOINTED, will offer a fuller explanation of the service on which to base your presentation.

**RECEPTION INTO THE CATECHUMENATE:**

Prayer to make a catechumen
  - breathing upon the candidate
  - sign of the Cross
  - laying on of hands

Exorcisms

Questioning of the candidate and Profession of Faith
turning away from Satan
turning towards Christ
bowing in worship before Him

RITE OF HOLY BAPTISM

Blessing of the Baptismal Water
Blessing of the Oil for the anointing
Anointing with the Oil of the Catechumens
Baptismal immersion
Clothing with the Robe of Light
CHRISMATION
Procession around the Baptismal Waters/Hymn: “All of you who have been baptized…”
Epistle and Gospel readings
Holy Eucharist

POST-BAPTISMAL RITES
(according to local custom)

Prayer on the Eighth Day/Washing off of the oil
Prayer for the Mother
Presentation/Churching of the Child

(The following questions in particular should also be treated, especially since that may not be well understood; in this catechesis, we have spoken about the complete Rite of Christian Initiation in the Eastern Churches and have proposed an ideal to be sought. This ideal seeks to re-integrate the
complete initiation through Baptism, Chrismation and Holy Eucharist; at times these have been separated into individual movements, but we see today that they find their full meaning when they are kept intact).

WHY IMMERSION?

Throughout this catechesis we have spoken of a baptism by immersion as the ideal. But why immersion? Isn’t it sufficient to pour on a few drops of water? Isn’t it easier and certainly more convenient? Does immersion really make a difference?

The heart of the Baptism is the Paschal Mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ; it is this event that we enter through Baptism. Without question the symbol of immersion in water was accepted by the Church as the symbol of baptism because it does give clear expression to the very heart and meaning of baptism.

“You were then led to the holy pool of the Divine Baptism, as Christ was carried from the Cross to the Sepulchre which is before our eyes. And each of you was asked, whether he believed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; and after making that saving confession, you descended three times into the water, and ascended again, here also symbolizing the three days burial of Christ...

“At that time you were both dying and being born; and that Water of salvation was at the same time both your grave and your Mother” (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, CATECHETICAL LECTURE, XX,4).
Often we have given up this symbol for the sake of convenience (or perhaps even more to the point, because of a lack of understanding. But in so doing, we have lost the primary symbol of baptism.

Perhaps our symbolic language (that is, the “language” of immersion) was lost also because we lost the meaning of Baptism in our own vision. If, for example, we see baptism only as the washing away of sin, then the simple pouring on of a few drops of water probably would be an adequate symbol of this. But when we realize that baptism has its roots in the events of Holy Week and the Resurrection, that it is our personal passover from death to life, our entrance into the Paschal Mystery, then we seek the fuller symbol of a baptismal immersion. Refer to the scriptural and patristic texts on page 7 of the photobook for fuller illustrations of this imagery.

As we saw above, our liturgical actions, our ritual is a language. And as a language, it speaks to us and expresses what is truly happening. Our liturgical actions then should be a symbol of what is really taking place in this great Mystery.

WHY CHRISMATION AND EUCHARIST NOW?

The initiation of Christians involves the three sacraments; Baptism, Chrismation and the Holy Eucharist. Some time should be spent with the parents on the connection among these, how they are an inner relationship and lead to a full participation in our life in Christ. (Refer to pages
of the booklet, WASHED AND ANOINTED, for a fuller discussion on this).

This anointing with the Sacred Chrism is the gift of the Holy Spirit. In it we are given the “seal” of our baptism, that we might remain firm and sure in our commitment to this new life. We are not dependent solely on our own strength, but the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon us, the same Holy Spirit Who decended upon Jesus as He came forth from the Jordan after His baptism.

Chrismation is the complement of Baptism; the Holy Spirit completes all that is done for us. The balance of both sacraments received together was the norm for the entire Church from the beginning; only later were they separated in the West.

By keeping these two sacraments together, the Eastern Churches have maintained the link between the Resurrection and Pentecost. The risen Christ gives us life, and He also sends His Spirit to strengthen us in this life.

In the same way we now see that the Eucharist is the fullness of our entrance into the Church, into life in Christ. For once we are baptized and chrismated, there is nothing to keep us from Communion. In this regard, we see that the question of infant communion is really a question of infant baptism: once we can admit the baptism of infants (even though they do not “know” or “understand” the meaning of it at the time) then the way is clear for the reception of the Bread of Life, the fullness of our baptismal union with Christ.

Here we see that the Eucharist is intimately connected with Baptism: only a baptized and chrismated person may receive the Eucharist, and all baptized and chrismated persons are expected
to share in the Eucharist (unless we are "excommunicated"). For we have heard the command of the Lord: "Take and eat... Do this in remembrance of me." Through the Eucharist, the whole Paschal Mystery, the basis of our baptism, is renewed and made present in us.

A WORD CONCERNING THE SPONSORS

Finally some time should be spent on the role of the sponsors. The sponsors are not simply ornamental, nor is the choice of sponsors to be sentimental; they will act as the ones who will be our surety, they will "guarantee" the good will of the one who is baptized.

Originally the sponsors were spoken of in terms of "bondsmen," the one who puts up surety for someone else. They received the newly baptized person from the baptismal waters and promised to act as the one who had been given charge of a precious gift. Later the term "spiritual parent" or "godparent" also came into use, as well as the term "sponsor."

But all these terms lead us in the same direction: the sponsors are an important choice; they are the ones who (if necessary) will see to our Christian formation and education, our attendance at Church, in a word, the living out of our baptismal commitment.

Even though members of the family are usually our first consideration for sponsors, a good suggestion would be for at least one of them to be a
communicant of the local parish; in this way there would be someone who would be available in the future years to insure that the baptism is lived out, that the person indeed does lead a sacramental life, that he does participate in the religious education programs of the parish. It is even more imperative to make a wholesome choice of the sponsors today with the high incidence of mixed marriages and at times rather tenuous commitments on the part of parents; perhaps the role of the sponsors is more important than we often realize.

This is especially important if the sponsoring relatives come from a distance. In such cases many parishes appoint another sponsor - perhaps a catechist - who will be an on-the-scene model for Christian life for the growing child.

Finally, before the conclusion of the session, be sure to mention anything that might need to be prepared, such as the baptismal robe and cross which the sponsors usually are responsible for.
FOR YOUR FURTHER READING


