

Faith Formation and the Restored Order of the Sacraments of Initiation

Why did the Church move away from the in-depth formation of new members that it had in its early days?

In the earliest days of the Church and indeed for the first several centuries, the initiation of Christians and their formation in the faith involved the entire faith community working together to help new members learn the “way, the Truth and the life” of Jesus. Christianity was a dangerous and subversive sect to be a part of. You could be killed for believing in Jesus and persecutions were common.

When Christianity became accepted and persecutions stopped, more and more people began to join. Christianity became the religion of state and whole populations converted to the faith. Large numbers of people joining the Church made it difficult - sometimes impossible – to help new members (catechumens) really grow in their faith and learn well how to live this way of Christ.

In addition, because whole families often came to the Church wishing to all become Christian at the same time, more and more young children were being welcomed into the faith and eventually infants themselves were effectively “born into” Christianity by being baptized very soon after their birth. Where previously it had been mostly adults converting to the faith, now the baptism of infants became the norm. Obviously infants and even small children could not be formed in the faith the same way that adults were. We do not have the same expectations of infants and children as we do of adults in any learning situation. We expect that infants and children will learn at the level they are capable of at the time, and that, with the help of their parents and teachers, they will continue to grow in their abilities and understanding as they grow in age. With respect to infants being baptized into the faith, the expectation has always been that, as these children are being initiated into the faith of their parents, their parents and the faith community itself would ensure that, over the course of their children's lives, the faith would be taught, their relationship with Christ would be deepened, and their understanding of this Christian way of life would be strengthened.

The process of teaching the faith to adults seeking initiation (the Catechumenate) shifted its focus to the on-going faith formation of the initiated. The emphasis moved from walking with adults who had become Christian and helping them to live their faith more deeply every day, to teaching the 'catechism' to children. Over time, this idea of faith as being an on-going and life-long journey of growth in relationship and understanding within a shared community was forgotten to the point that, today, the teaching of religion has become just one of many subjects our children learn in school and graduate from when school is done.

The Restored Order of the Sacraments is about more than simply shifting around the order in which First Eucharist and Confirmation are received by our children. It is an invitation to the parish community as a whole, and families in particular, to re-claim their Christian calling to walk with others in the faith, to re-discover what a relationship with Christ means to each of us, and show our children that this faith is not just something we learn about to pass the test and then walk away from, but is the start of a relationship of learning and loving that they will carry with them, with our help and encouragement, for the rest of their lives.