

NATIONAL STATUTES FOR THE
RITE OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (*)

1. Introduction. — 2. The national canonical Statutes. — *a)* The catechumenate. — *b)* Subject. — *c)* Minister. — *d)* Celebration. — 3. Particular cases and circumstances. — *a)* Children of catechetical age. — *b)* Abbreviated catechumenate. — *c)* Mystagogy. — *d)* Uncatechized adult Catholics. — *e)* Reception into full communion. — 4. Conclusions. — 5. Concluding observation.

1. INTRODUCTION.

This paper sets forth a summary of and a commentary on the National Canonical Statutes for the regulation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States ⁽¹⁾. Pursuant to c. 788.3, these statutes were drafted and approved by the episcopal conference of the United States in its November 1986 meeting, and were confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship on 26 June 1988. A review of these statutes is opportune because they represent an instructive effort in the very important and complex task of applying, to local conditions, the general directive of the Second Vatican Council to restore the catechumenate.

(*) Cfr. il testo *infra*, p. 410.

(1) The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), is the English translation of the official Latin text, the *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum*, promulgated in 1972 in order to implement the Council's directive to restore the catechumenate. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 64). In 1974 the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) published the preliminary English translation of this rite, which was approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) for interim use in the United States. After a twelve year experience, in 1986 ICEL published its definitive translation. This text, along with local adaptations and a set of national canonical statutes proposed by the episcopal conference's Committee on the Liturgy, were approved by the NCCB at its November 1986 meeting and were confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship on 19 February 1987. This text will be referred to as « RCIA 86 ». A note of thanks is due to Rev. Ronald Christmon of the NCCB Liturgy Committee for kindly sharing with me his insights.

The importance of this task stems from the fact that it is carried out in obedience to a command of Christ Himself, who in his last recorded words before ascending to heaven, told the apostles: « Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you » (2). The role that the catechumenate is called to play in fulfilling this command is clarified by noting that the apostolic command entails a twofold task: baptizing and teaching. In the case of adults, teaching comes first, and later baptism and the other two sacraments which complete Christian initiation, confirmation and the eucharist.

This teaching task also has various stages. The first stage entails an initial proclamation of the Gospel to unbelievers. This is evangelization in the strict sense (3). At the second stage the evangelized person has come to believe and expresses his desire to join the Church. But his incipient faith must be nurtured. This involves the forming of that person into Christ through a deeper and more systematic knowledge of Christ's person and message, leading to sacramental initiation and then a life-long perfecting of that formation (4). This is catechesis (5). These two stages in the teaching task — the initial evangelization and the subsequent catechesis — are essential, distinct and complementary elements in fulfilling Christ's command.

The Church has committed herself to fulfilling a large part of one of these tasks — the catechizing of unbaptized adults — through the restored catechumenate. Thus one begins to discern the importance of this restoration by simply recalling the untold numbers of unbaptized and uncatechized persons in the world, the serious obligation of the Church to reach and teach them, and its basis in the intention of Christ: « the aim of bringing the Good News to the whole of humanity, so that all may live by it » (6).

(2) *MT.* 28:19-20.

(3) This is the Gospel *Kerygma*: « the initial ardent proclamation by which a person is one day overwhelmed and brought to the decision to entrust himself to Jesus Christ by faith » (*Catechesi Tradendae*, n. 25).

(4) *Id.*, n. 19.

(5) *Id.*, n. 25.

(6) *Id.*, n. 18.

The complexity of the restoration of the catechumenate may be gleaned simply by considering the multiple relationships involved. Each episcopal conference has the responsibility of determining the duties and prerogatives of the catechumens — defining their basic legal status, specifically tailored to the peculiarities of that country or region. But each catechumen already enjoys an existing relationship with Christ. This is a relationship characterized by a gift of faith there is also contained the intention of the catechumen to join the Catholic Church. This intention of the catechumen has the character of a commitment to the process of becoming a Catholic, which is precisely what distinguishes him from other non-Catholics, whether baptized or not. From beginning to end, the whole process necessarily depends on the existence of the catechumen's continuing intention or desire, which, « posited within the act of faith itself, is a commitment on the divine authority itself, as affirmed by the (catechumen) » (7). Thus, when the candidate for the catechumenate makes his unconditional act of Catholic faith, « he has brought into existence a new juridical situation, a situation of social obligation » (8), a bilateral relationship whereby the Church, in faithfulness to Christ's command, is obliged to care for this relationship between this person and Christ. The Church must nurture this relationship into a substantial identification, by grace, of the person with Jesus Christ.

In summary, the Church enters into an important and delicate relationship with each catechumen, which is based on the Church's and the catechumen's pre-existing relationships with Christ. The complexity of the task facing each episcopal conference lies in drafting a regulation which, on the one hand, will aid in effectively communicating the unchanging content of the faith, and, on the other hand, will be sufficiently simple, clear and flexible in its practical application so as to be pastorally sound.

2. THE NATIONAL CANONICAL STATUTES.

The statutes, in keeping with the directive of c. 788.3, purport to regulate the catechumenate in the United States, determining

(7) M. HUGHES, *The Juridical Nature of the Act of Joining the Catholic Church*, in *Studia Canonica*, 8 (1974), p. 393.

(8) *Id.*

« what things are to be expected of the catechumens and define what prerogatives are recognized as theirs »⁽⁹⁾. The regulatory scheme consists of 37 paragraphs, with 10 subheadings, and appears to proceed in three logical steps: first, distinguish and define the catechumenate; second, regulate the subject, ministers, and celebration of the catechumenate; third, consider particular cases or circumstances meriting special considerations. The final subheading consists of a very useful compendium of the relevant conciliar texts and canonical norms from which these regulations draw their inspiration and authority.

a) *The catechumenate.*

The regulations first draw a distinction between the catechumenate and the pre-catechumenate, wherein the catechumen is rightly distinguished from mere inquirers about the faith. In the Church is undertaking its obligation to formally prepare and formally admit into the Church unbaptized adults who desire to join the Catholic Church. It is precisely this intention of the person, the work of grace in cooperation with his free will and indicative of an already existing faith — that constitutes the focal point of the whole catechumenate. The catechumenate seeks to inform and form these persons more fully so that their intention to join the People of God may mature. The Council characterizes catechumens as desiring « with an explicit intention to be incorporated into the Church »⁽¹⁰⁾.

This explicit intention is what makes them already, *de facto*, « joined to her »⁽¹¹⁾. This explicit intention is the distinctive and determinative feature of the legal status of the catechumen, making it a pre-requisite *sine qua non* for entering the catechumenate, whose mission is to then form and formalize that intention, joining each person to the Church *de iure*. Thus « any reception or service of welcome or prayer for inquirers at the beginning or during a pre-catechumenate (or in any earlier period of evangelization) must be entirely informal »⁽¹²⁾. While the various circumstances of evangelization are often served by such activities, the strict avoidance of any formalities is a safeguard against confusion. The precatechumen is

⁽⁹⁾ C. 788.3.

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 14.

⁽¹¹⁾ *Id.*

⁽¹²⁾ National Statutes, n. 1.

not yet seeking to formalize anything, be it these preliminary inquires or an embryonic intention. Even the appearance of making some kind of formal commitment could easily lead one to feel coerced at this stage.

The catechumen is also distinguishable by the fact of being unbaptized. The statutes insist on terminological precision to distinguish the catechumen from baptized persons, be they Catholic or not. All may well have some overlapping needs for catechetical instruction, such as in the preparation of a baptized Catholic for the reception of confirmation and the eucharist, the preparation of a non-Catholic Christian for entrance into full communion with the Church, or the preparation for full initiation received by a catechumen. Indeed, the practical limitations of time and resources will often dictate a combining of these persons for some of these overlapping aspects of their formation. But out of respect for the permanent effects of the sacrament of baptism once validly administered, the term « convert » « should be reserved strictly for those converted from unbelief to Christian belief », and the term « catechumen » « should be strictly reserved for the unbaptized who have been admitted into the order of the catechumens » ⁽¹³⁾.

The catechumenate is then further characterized by directives regarding its place, length and content, as well as options in the rites. If the catechumenate does not take place in a parish setting, the catechumens « should be introduced into the Christian life of a parish or similar community from the very beginning of the catechumenate » to avoid their finding themselves in some way « isolated from the ordinary life of the Christian people » ⁽¹⁴⁾.

The rite for entrance into the catechumenate offers various options. The prudential judgment of whether to include or exclude in the same rite, as legitimate options, other rites, which, according to local custom, symbolize reception into the community, is left to the diocesan bishop ⁽¹⁵⁾. The minimum length indicated for the catechumenate is one year, ordinarily running from Easter to Easter, and preferably it should begin before Lent of the first year and extend

⁽¹³⁾ National Statutes, nn. 2-3.

⁽¹⁴⁾ National Statutes, n. 4.

⁽¹⁵⁾ RCIA 74. One exception to this general delegation to the diocesan bishop is the approval by the Episcopal Conference itself of the presentation of a cross to the catechumen as a legitimate option of the minister.

until Easter of the next ⁽¹⁶⁾. The content of the catechumenate consists of « a thoroughly comprehensive catechesis on the truths of Catholic doctrine and moral life, aided by approved catechetical texts » ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Each of these precisions is a local refinement of the basic directives of the Council. The Council, concerned with the full insertion of the catechumen into the People of God, describes the catechumenate as: « not simply a presentation of teachings and precepts, but a formation in the whole of Christian life and a sufficiently prolonged period of training » ⁽¹⁸⁾.

This end, the forming of the catechumen, requires not only time, so that he may digest the contents of the faith and growth may occur under the action of grace, but it also requires pastoral sensitivity for the most effective use of the means available (such as the place used, the rites used, etc.) for introducing the catechumens, in a natural and effective way, into the life of this community whose center is Christ in the Eucharist. In this vein, the Council notes:

« This transition, which involves a progressive change of outlook and morals, should be manifested in its *social implications* and effected gradually during the period of catechumenate » ⁽¹⁹⁾.

b) *Subject.*

The catechumens are not yet members of the Church, and do not yet enjoy the rights corresponding to this membership. The title to these rights is rooted in the dignity bestowed by baptism and the full exercise of these rights is contingent on one's full communion with, as well as one's particular status within, the Church. But, in accord with their special status (already, by intention, joined to the Church), the catechumens are encouraged to seek the non-sacramental means of grace available to them in the Church. Specifically mentioned are blessings and suffrages. In the case of death, a full funeral liturgy may be used, including the funeral Mass, but excluding any direct references to the sacraments of initiation which the catechumen had not yet received. Marriages of catechumens with

⁽¹⁶⁾ National Statutes, n. 6.

⁽¹⁷⁾ *Id.*, n. 7.

⁽¹⁸⁾ *Ad Gentes*, n. 14.

⁽¹⁹⁾ *Id.*, n. 13 (emphasis added).

non-Catholics should be celebrated with a liturgy of the word, and never at the eucharistic liturgy ⁽²⁰⁾.

c) *Minister.*

The proper minister for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation for all adults and children of catechetical age in the diocese is the diocesan bishop ⁽²¹⁾. If he is unable to perform all of these celebrations, the statutes direct him to at least celebrate the rite of election with all the catechumens ⁽²²⁾. If the diocesan bishop wants to confirm neophytes, he is reminded that he should specifically reserve to himself their baptism ⁽²³⁾. Otherwise, priests who have this faculty to confirm cannot be prohibited from exercising it, since they are indeed bound by law to exercise it ⁽²⁴⁾.

d) *Celebration.*

The primary directive regarding the celebration is that the sacraments of initiation are to be received in a single eucharistic celebration « in order to signify clearly the interrelation... of the three sacraments... for full Christian initiation » ⁽²⁵⁾. This interrelation is most clearly signified in the case of the catechumens, who are apt subjects for the reception of all three sacraments. The sequence of these sacraments signifies a progressive initiation into Christ, beginning with baptism and confirmation, as irrepeatable and preparatory to the then continuing reception of the eucharist. In the Latin rite, the common postponement of confirmations ⁽²⁶⁾

⁽²⁰⁾ National Statutes, nn. 8, 9 and 10. By implication, a nuptial Mass would be legally permitted in the marriage between a catechumen and a Catholic.

⁽²¹⁾ C. 852.1: National Statutes, n. 11.

⁽²²⁾ National Statutes, n. 11. A certain flexibility in this directive would seem to be required in order to not unduly prejudice the rights of the catechumen who, because of illness, age, distance, etc, may be unable to attend this type of a celebration at the cathedral. Would a dispensation be required to then have this rite in the local parish?

⁽²³⁾ C. 863; National Statutes, n. 13.

⁽²⁴⁾ C. 885.2. Priests without a pastoral office require a mandate of the diocesan bishop to baptize adults, but not an additional mandate to confirm. They have this faculty *de iure*, as do those with a pastoral office. Cf. National Statutes, n. 12.

⁽²⁵⁾ National Statutes, n. 14; c. 842.

⁽²⁶⁾ C. 891 allows for this practice.

often disrupts this sequence in the case of baptized infants, who receive the eucharist before being confirmed.

The other directives in this section concern more incidental points connected with the liturgy: encouraging additional fasting on Holy Saturday; no anointing with oil in the Easter Vigil ⁽²⁷⁾; baptism by immersion is the « fuller and more expressive sign of the sacrament » and therefore, « though not yet the common practice », is to be preferred ⁽²⁸⁾.

3. PARTICULAR CASES AND CIRCUMSTANCES.

a) *Children of catechetical age.*

These children, having reached the age of reason, are presumed by law to be adults for purposes of Christian initiation ⁽²⁹⁾. Therefore their formation should, as far as possible, follow the normal pattern. The statutes, however, foresee the appropriateness of their often being joined with baptized children for some aspects of formation (in preparation for confirmation and the eucharist), and cautions that their condition or status as catechumens should not be confused or compromised ⁽³⁰⁾.

b) *Abbreviated catechumenate.*

The underlying issue involved here is how far to insist on these liturgical rites, which, while very salubrious for the catechumen and at the heart of the restoration, may be impossible to attend, or unnecessary in some cases. Equitable considerations require certain flexibility for these cases. This flexibility is embodied in the so-called « abbreviated catechumenate ».

The rite itself, as described in the Roman Ritual ⁽³¹⁾, allows certain candidates for admission into the Church to forego the full liturgical rites of the catechumenate which are celebrated at various stages in the formational process, and to instead simply receive the

⁽²⁷⁾ Apparently the rationale is to encourage the use of the other possible anointings during the catechumenate by precluding the option to do one at the end, in the Easter Vigil.

⁽²⁸⁾ National Statutes, nn. 15-17.

⁽²⁹⁾ C. 852.1.

⁽³⁰⁾ National Statutes, nn. 18-19.

⁽³¹⁾ Cf. RCIA, nn. 240-244.

three sacraments of initiation in one liturgical celebration. The circumstances which will warrant this exception are « either events which prevent the candidate from completing all the steps of the catechumenate, or a depth of Christian conversion and a degree of religious maturity that lead the local bishop to decide that the candidate may receive baptism without delay »⁽³²⁾. The rites also allow for and encourage a so-called « expanded form », an expansion of the abbreviated form by incorporation of elements from the complete rite. The logic is to maintain as much of the complete form, with its spiritual benefits, as possible. The use of these forms would require the permission of the diocesan bishop, given in the form of a dispensation from the full rite. Note that the abbreviated and expanded forms concern simply the omission or inclusion of various liturgical rites. What they do not entail is any attenuation of a full catechetical instruction, mandated for each of these forms⁽³³⁾.

Against this background the statutes themselves emphasize that recourse to the abbreviated catechumenate « should always be as limited as possible (and) should extend over a substantial and appropriate period of time »⁽³⁴⁾. For instance, the mere movement of a catechumen from one parish or diocese to another is not, *per se*, a sufficient reason to abbreviate the person's catechumenate. This is a very sound point, ecclesialogically, juridically and pastorally. The catechumen is being inserted not into a parish, or diocese, but into the People of God, the one universal Church, which subsists in each particular Church. Once enrolled in the catechumenate, that person is a catechumen regardless of the parish or diocese to which he may move. Respect for this personally acquired condition requires a certain uniformity and continuity among the catechumenates in each parish in this very mobile society. On the one hand, a pastor should not abbreviate one's catechumenate merely to finish it before the person moves. And on the other hand, the pastor in the place of destination should not make a catechumen begin the catechumenate all over again. The keeping of a book of catechumens in each parish and the forwarding of these records to one's new parish will be key in providing this desired continuity in formation, and thus respect the condition of each catechumen.

⁽³²⁾ Cfr. RCIA, n. 240; RCIA 86, n. 331.

⁽³³⁾ RCIA, nn. 241, 277; RCIA 86, nn. 335, 336.

⁽³⁴⁾ National Statutes, n. 20.

c) *Mystagogy.*

The catechumens become neophytes with the reception of the sacraments at the Easter Vigil, and then pass through a post-initiation period of continuing formation — the mystagogy — lasting until Pentecost. The statutes direct the neophytes to live this period by participating (as a group, along with their god-parents and others who assisted in their formation), « in the principal Sunday eucharist of the community throughout the Easter season »⁽³⁵⁾. The diocesan bishop should moderate this period to ensure that it be the occasion for a deepened understanding of the three sacraments of initiation, and of the centrality of the Eucharist « as the continuing celebration of faith and conversion »⁽³⁶⁾. This keenly felt need for continuity in the formation of the neophytes has in fact led the Episcopal Conference to extend their post-baptismal catechesis for a full year after their initiation by means of monthly meetings⁽³⁷⁾.

d) *Uncatechized adult Catholics.*

Under this subheading two highly prevalent concerns are again dealt with. The first is to maintain a clear distinction between the unbaptized catechumen and any baptized Christians who may participate in parts of the catechumenate. While uncatechized adult Catholics preparing for confirmation and the eucharist may appropriately receive some of their formation in conjunction with catechumens, the actual reception of these sacraments in the same celebration with the catechumens is generally discouraged, and if it should occur, « the condition and status of those already baptized should be carefully respected and distinguished »⁽³⁸⁾.

The second concern is to maintain the interrelation and sequence of the sacraments of initiation⁽³⁹⁾. Basically the statutes seek to ensure that priests involved in administering the three sacraments of initiation will have the faculty to confirm also these uncatechized adults. While c. 883.2, by a *de iure* grant of the faculty to confirm, ensures that, in the case of apostates or non-Catholic Christians, a

⁽³⁵⁾ *Id.*, n. 22.

⁽³⁶⁾ *Id.*, n. 23.

⁽³⁷⁾ *Id.*, n. 24.

⁽³⁸⁾ *Id.*, n. 26.

⁽³⁹⁾ Cf. c. 842.2.

priest with the office or mandate to baptize adults or admit them into full communion will also be able to confirm them in the same celebration, this faculty does not extend to the confirmation of a baptized Catholic who inculpably has never put the faith into practice, namely the uncatechized adult Catholic. To avoid the situation of not being able to confirm these particular persons at the same celebration where others are being confirmed, the priests lacking the faculty are instructed to seek it from the diocesan bishop, who may, in accord with c. 884.1, grant it as he judges necessary ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

e) *Reception into full communion.*

This case deals with baptized non-Catholic Christians, and in giving them formation, again out of respect for the sacrament of baptism and ecumenical considerations, their treatment and designation is to be distinguished from that of the catechumen. Their precise formational needs for admission into full communion should be determined on a case by case basis. If some participate in parts of the catechumenate (i.e., catechesis, liturgy of the word) to attain needed formation they should not participate in any rites intended for the unbaptized ⁽⁴¹⁾. Their reception into communion should be done in a way that leaves clear their already existent condition as Christian believers. To avoid confusion, the recommended time for these receptions is at a regular Sunday Eucharist in the parish, rather than at the Easter Vigil. However, pastoral reasons and the primacy of the Easter Vigil in the liturgical year may dictate that the receptions take place in the Easter Vigil. In such case the statutes call for maintaining a clear distinction during the celebration between the candidates for baptism and those for reception into full communion, noting also that «ecumenical sensitivities should be carefully respected» ⁽⁴²⁾. Also, conditional baptism should be administered only if there exists «reasonable and prudent doubt concerning the baptism... which cannot be resolved after serious investigation into the fact and/or validity of baptism» ⁽⁴³⁾. If conditional baptism is necessary, it is to be done privately.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ National Statutes, n. 29.

⁽⁴¹⁾ *Id.*, nn. 30, 31.

⁽⁴²⁾ *Id.*, n. 34.

⁽⁴³⁾ *Id.*, n. 37.

Finally, both in this case and in the case of uncatechized adult Catholics, the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation is to take place at a time prior to and distinct from that of confirmation and the eucharist. In their formation they should be encouraged in the frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation ⁽⁴⁴⁾.

4. CONCLUSIONS.

1. The statutes are largely a reiteration of already existing norms culled from various places in the ritual and the Code and then more conveniently arranged in a single, logically systematized regulation.

2. The tenor of the statutes is mixed. Some are formulated as mandatory (implying the need for dispensations if they are not followed), while others are merely directive ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

3. The statutes also propose several elements of new law:
 — a one year minimum for the catechumenate ⁽⁴⁶⁾;
 — a one year extension of the mystagogy ⁽⁴⁷⁾;
 — determination of eligibility for the abbreviated catechumenate is left to the diocesan bishop ⁽⁴⁸⁾;
 — no anointing of oil in the Easter Vigil ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

4. These four new requirements appear to be mandatory.

5. Each of these four new requirements fosters one common concern: that the time and the elements of the catechumenate not be unnecessarily abbreviated.

5. CONCLUDING OBSERVATION.

These statutes regulate the catechumenate in the United States. The catechumenate is a complex enterprise which calls upon many varied resources in the Church, drawing from, among other areas, theology, catechetics, liturgy, law and pastoral experience. It is, in a pronounced way, an interdisciplinary effort. In order to cooperate

⁽⁴⁴⁾ *Id.*, nn. 27, 36.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Beyond the nuances conveyed by English words such as « should », and « must », reference to the criteria of c. 17 may be needed to clarify ambiguities.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ National Statutes, n. 6.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ *Id.*, n. 24.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ *Id.*, n. 20.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ *Id.*, n. 16.

effectively in this effort, each discipline must contribute according to its own principles and respecting its own limits. To allow the criteria of one or another area to dominate would lead to extremes and to ineffectiveness. For instance, the failure to respect the intrinsic link between catechesis and the sacramental liturgy (with the former as the indispensable intellectual formation for being able to live the latter) rapidly turns catechesis into mere intellectual theory and sacramental life into a « hollow ritualism »⁽⁵⁰⁾. Or an undue rigidity in the law would breed the reaction of ignoring it, with all the harm that that brings. In the restored catechumenate, the law is called upon to strike a balance between maintaining what is essential and not being unduly rigid about what may not be essential. The crux of the matter lies in determining, through the contribution of these distinct and complementary disciplines, where and how to draw the line — what to require, and with what force. If extremes are to be avoided, constant reference must be made, in the drafting and then in the application of these laws, to their immediate end, namely the good of the most important person in this process, the catechumen.

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⁽⁵⁰⁾ *Catechesi Tradendae*, n. 23.

