

Prayer

1. Light a candle in a visible location. Read aloud John 8:12 slowly twice.
2. Ask the group when they have seen the symbol of light used in Catholic worship (Advent wreath, Easter candle, candles at Eucharist and so on).
3. Ask the participants to reflect upon a way Christ is light or illumination for them. Suggest that they silently thank God for that.
4. Allow time for participants to pray aloud to thank God for this light in their lives or to ask for a deeper understanding of any matters that are of concern. This prayer for light could be expanded to matters of national or even global concern.

Baptism

Catholic Updates: "Sacraments of Initiation" (C0301)
 "The Sacrament of Baptism—Celebrating the Embrace of God" (C0389)

Goals: To reach a deeper understanding of the Sacrament of Baptism

To encourage group members to be in touch with their feelings about their possible Baptism (or renewal of baptismal promises)

To motivate the elect to desire more earnestly the Easter sacraments

Catholic Update Video: (See introduction, p. 6) *Adult Baptism: Exploring Its Meaning* (V2020)

Session Outline: The session could include these elements:

• Responses to Questions

Invite participants to discuss the first three questions in the large group. Ask participants to share the fourth question briefly in small groups.

• Scripture Reflection/Discussion

Ask participants to remain in the small groups and to reflect on one or two of the following passages. Divide the passages among them:

John 3:1-8	1 Corinthians 12:12-13
Acts 2:38	Galatians 3:23-29
Acts 22:12-16	Colossians 2:9-12
Romans 6:1-11	1 Peter 3:18-22

Draw from them the observations and insights about Baptism that they gleaned from these readings. Ask them for further reflections from questions 1 and 8 and from the *Catholic Updates*. Bring together themes relevant to Baptism from other Jewish Scriptures as well (for example, stories of the Exodus, Noah, Naaman the Syrian, Jonah).

Emphasize Baptism and the other sacraments of initiation as the full entry into Christian community and, more specifically, into the Catholic Christian community.

• Consideration of sacramental rituals

By questions or a presentation in the large group, consider the meaning, power and significance of the sacramental ritual. Use questions such as the following: Why go through this experience of Baptism? What is a rite? Why do you think a sacramental experience makes a difference? Does the presence of the community make a difference? Why/Why not?

Option: Ask participants to share one-on-one their responses to questions 4 and 5.

Preparing for the Session (Participant Edition, p. 20)

1. Water, of course, is the primary symbol of Baptism. What are some meanings connected with being submerged in water?
2. A white garment and light (candle) are also part of baptismal symbolism. What do these suggest to you?
3. Read Romans 6:1-11. What is Paul saying about Jesus' death and our Baptism? About sin and Baptism?
4. Paul's emphasis on death in Baptism is strong. What does that mean to you personally?
5. What is your attitude toward your Baptism or renewal of baptismal promises? Do you have any misgivings about "dying with Christ"?
6. For Paul, Baptism is also resurrection with Christ. What is the meaning of this?
7. Read Deuteronomy 26:4-10. The Exodus from Egypt, summarized in this reading, has long been seen as a "type" of Baptism. What was the chosen people's experience in Egypt? Through what natural dangers were they led? What did they find in the promised land? What parallels to their deliverance do you see in your own life?
8. Read Galatians 3:23-29. What does it mean to you to clothe yourself with Christ? Try to be specific.
9. Baptism is a community sacrament. Through it you become a full-fledged member of the Body of Christ and

more specifically, the Roman Catholic community. What do you think Paul means (in the Galatians reading above) by being “one in Christ Jesus”?

10. What new perspectives and thoughts did you find in the *Catholic Update*? What difference do they make in your attitude toward the Easter Vigil experience?

Journaling (Participant Edition, p. 20)

1. What are your expectations of the Easter Vigil? Of entering into the death of Jesus? Into his resurrection?
2. What do you feel called on to change in your life as a result of a deeper understanding of Baptism?

Daily Prayer (Participant Edition, p. 20)

Day 1: Read Genesis 11:1-9. Look at this text as a commentary on the nature of human aspirations. Ask the Lord to strengthen any worthwhile dreams that you have and to give you insight about any that are selfish or unrealistic. Spend a few minutes quietly in the presence of the Lord.

Day 2: Read Matthew 4:1-4 aloud slowly. Where do you find your sustenance in life? Do you allow time for the Lord to feed you with Scripture? Take a few moments to ask the Holy Spirit for a real hunger for God’s word in Scripture.

Day 3: Read Matthew 4:5-7 aloud slowly. Do you ever test God by acting imprudently? Is there a good balance in your life between trusting in God and respecting God’s ways? Thank God for that balance or pray to have it. Spend time simply in the presence of God.

Day 4: Read a newspaper article about some moral transgression. Can you imagine yourself committing the same or an equivalent deed? Reflect prayerfully on God’s grace in your life.

Day 5: Remind yourself that God keeps us in existence from moment to moment. Allow yourself to feel your frailty and poverty. Converse with God about this.

Day 6: Do you find it hard to forgive yourself for something you have done? If so, take this moment to be open to the cleansing power of God’s Spirit. Commit the matter to God’s forgiveness, trusting in God’s promise.

Prayer

Preparation: Place an icon, a crucifix or a statue of Jesus in a visible place in the gathering room. Below it, place a simple small dish. Give small pieces of writing

paper and a pen to each participant.

1. Read aloud John 7:37-38 and, following a brief pause, John 8:12. Ask members of the group to be in touch with any feelings that these readings might elicit from them. Reread the two passages aloud.
2. Ask them to write any personal longings or hopes concerning their initiation into the Church. Ask them also to remember the infinite possibilities of new vision and rebirth as they write any intentions for other individuals, for the nation or the world.
3. Invite them to bring their papers forward and place them in the dish.
4. Drop a lighted grain of incense on the papers. Let the rising of the incense symbolize the rising of the prayers.

Confirmation

Catholic Updates: “Confirmation: A Deepening of Christian Identity” (C1095)
“Who Is the Holy Spirit?” (C0695)

Catholic Update Video: (See introduction, p. 6) *Sealed With God’s Spirit: Sacrament of Confirmation* (V2023)

Goals: To understand Confirmation as a sacrament of initiation
To reflect upon commitment in Confirmation
To appreciate the Holy Spirit as the enabler of life in Christ

Session Outline: The session could include these elements:

• Small-group sharing on commitments

Discuss question 2 in small groups of three or four. Allow at least 20 or 30 minutes for this.

• Personal witness on commitment

Invite a recent convert to share commitment issues with which he or she struggled during the Christian initiation process. Allow time for questions.

• Discussion on Confirmation

Discuss question 3 in the small groups.

Ask everyone to return to the large group and continue the session by discussing question 4 and any other issues that may have come up about the Holy Spirit as enabler.

Initiation

We Catholics celebrate three sacraments
in order to become fully initiated
into the People of God, the church.

The first of these is baptism where we are born anew.
The second is confirmation
which strengthens us.

The third is Eucharist
which gives us the food of eternal life
and continues throughout our lives.

We are, in a sense, never fully initiated
but always entering more deeply
into the mystery of the church
and into life in Christ.

We are speaking here of the first of these,
baptism.

The term comes to us from a Greek word
which means, literally, to plunge or immerse!

Going into the water is a symbol of entry into Christ's death
and coming out of it a "new person"
is a symbol of the resurrection.

In the early church, it was also called
"the water of rebirth" or
"the washing of rebirth."
in the Letter to Titus,
chapter 3, verse 5.

It has also been called "enlightenment"
because by it, we enter the community
in which grace and light are received and shared.
Indeed, through baptism, we ourselves become
light for the world.

The baptismal water is blessed
on Holy Saturday night during the Easter Vigil.
Our prayer that night reveals our understanding of baptism.
We believe that grace comes to us
through the sacramental signs
and this grace reveals God's
unseen powers.
We believe that water in baptism
is this rich symbol.

exploration

Read through the story of Paul
and Silas in prison in Acts of the
Apostles, chapter 16, verses 16-40.
Tell the story in your own words,
identifying the moral of the story.

We are
initiated
in three
sacraments:
baptism,
confirmation,
& Eucharist.



Baptism

is birth into the
new Life
of love.

We believe that the Spirit of Love
breathes upon these waters
making them a wellspring of Love.
The crossing of the Red Sea by Israel
in the story of the Exodus from Egypt,
was itself a great symbol:
enter into the water on one side,
leave it a new people on the other.
Jesus himself began his ministry
by being baptized in the River Jordan
and later sent his followers to baptize as well.
"Go," he told them after the resurrection,
in Matthew, chapter 16, verse 19,
"Go... and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit..."
God is Love, we read in the Gospels,
Divine Love.
And Christ reveals that Love to us
in its fullness.
In baptism, the Spirit of that Divine Love
enters into us
because of the life, death, and resurrection
of Christ, the Son of Love.
In baptism, we receive the grace to love deeply,
profoundly,
and generously
and to move away from selfishness
and from being unilateral.
From the earliest hours and days
of the church of Pentecost,
baptism has been part of our practice.
And it has been connected to faith:
"If you believe in Jesus,"
Paul told his jailer in Philippi,
"you will be saved."

reflection

What does it mean for you to be baptized?
How do you "put on Christ like a garment?"

The jailer was baptized at once, with his whole family.
(This story is in Acts, chapter 16.)
St. Paul summarizes our understanding of this
in his Letter to Romans,
in the first verses of chapter 6
in these famous words:
"Do you not know that all of us
who have been baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into his death?
Therefore, we have been buried with him
by baptism into death,
so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead
by the glory of the Father,
so we too might walk in newness of life."
Perhaps one of the richest ways of saying this
also comes from St. Paul
in his Letter to the Galatians
where he says that in baptism,
we "put on Christ like a garment."

How we celebrate

From the earliest years of the church,
the journey to become a Christians
has occurred in certain clear stages.

A person hears the Word proclaimed,
accepts the Gospel,
turns his or her heart to Christ,
professes his or her faith,
is baptized,
receives the Holy Spirit,
and begins receiving the Eucharist.

Some of these moments are observed with rites,
within the catechumenate.

Where infant baptism is the norm,
this process is greatly abridged
but it is assumed there will be catechesis
and conversion at a later time.

Where adult baptism is being done,
the church provides for a process known as
the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
called in short, the RCIA.

In the Eastern traditions, infants receive baptism,
but also immediately Confirmation and Eucharist
while in the Latin tradition,
the baptism of infants
is followed by years of catechesis before
the sacraments of Confirmation
and Eucharist are received.

What it all means

By looking at the rite of baptism,
the meaning of the sacrament emerges clearly.
We begin with the sign of the cross,
which traces on the body the imprint of Christ
in the Paschal Mystery.

Next we proclaim the Word of God
because the light of faith flows from that
and baptism is inseparable from faith.

We then signify our liberation from selfishness and sin
by publicly rejecting evil and sin at its source
and then by anointing the person with oil.

These are the baptismal promises
and it is excellent to renew them often!



reflection

When you review the Rite of Baptism, what touches you most? What part gives you a deep sense of the beauty and power of this rite?

Afterward we confess our faith with the Creed,
preparing for the rite of immersion.

The baptismal water is then blessed
by calling down the Spirit of Love
so that those baptized may live in that Spirit.

Next comes the essential element of the sacrament.
This is the actual moment of baptism.

The person being baptized is three times immersed in water,
or water is symbolically poured three times on the head,
signifying entry into the death of Christ
and thereby, entry into the new life of Christ
which is the same as entry into the church.

Having holy water in our homes,
and using it to remind ourselves of our baptism
is an excellent way to live our faith every day!

In the Latin tradition the minister prays
as the person is immersed:

"[Name], I baptize you
in the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit."

In the Eastern traditions, the person being baptized turns East
and the minister says:

"The servant of God, [Name], is baptized
in the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit."

In the Latin tradition, we next anoint with sacred chrism
which is a lovely perfumed oil
consecrated by the bishop
which signifies the gift of the Spirit.

In the Eastern traditions, we next confirm the baptized
in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Then we cover the person in a white garment
symbolizing the putting on of Christ
and light for them a candle,
taking the flame from the Easter candle.

The newly baptized is now celebrated as a child of God,
and is entitled to pray aloud the "Our Father."

In the Eastern traditions, the newly baptized
immediately receives Eucharist,
completing initiation.

In the Latin tradition,
newly baptized infants wait several years
to receive Eucharist
but adults may receive Eucharist at the same Liturgy.
We then conclude the rite with a solemn blessing.

Immersion

in water is

the actual

baptism.

Who can be baptized?

Before they are baptized,
it goes without saying,
people should be prepared.
The normal way to do that is in the catechumenate,
an ancient practice of the church
recently restored at Vatican II.
The first step for those preparing for baptism,
of course,
is the turning of their hearts to Christ.
Encountering Christ in the church,
one's family and friends,
the Gospel being lived well,
liturgy, prayer, and charity,
or formation and education materials
launches this desire for Christ.
But we also baptize infants
who are clearly too young
to experience any of this first.
Children are born into a world where darkness
sometimes seems to surround us.
Baptism initiates them into a community
where grace is shared.
And only grace enlightens us to be light
in that darkness.
Baptism is the first step on the journey of faith
that will last a lifetime.
Infants have been baptized since the early years
of church life
and we continue that practice today.

"Baptism is the sacrament of faith,"
the Catechism tells us in article 1253.
"But faith needs the community of believers.
It is only within the faith of the Church
that each of the faithful can believe.
The faith required for Baptism
is not a perfect and mature faith,
but a beginning that is called to develop."
Once baptized, the whole community
is called to support and nurture faith,
but especially parents and family members,
or baptismal sponsors.
Normally, bishops and priests preside at baptism,
in addition to deacons in the Latin tradition.
But anyone can baptize, even someone not baptized,
if it is necessary and if the intention is correct.

From the
earliest
years,
children were
baptized.



reflection

In your own words, what are your baptismal promises?

The necessity of baptism

For those to whom the Gospel is proclaimed,
and who are able to ask for the sacrament
baptism is necessary for salvation.

But while we believe God has made baptism necessary,
we also believe that God is not bound
by the sacraments
and we trust the mercy of God.

We believe that those who die for their faith
without being baptized
live and die in God's mercy.

We believe that catechumens who die before baptism,
are also in God's mercy and love.

Furthermore, we believe that all those
who are not aware of the Gospel
but who seek truth and follow God's will
based on how they understand that,
also live in God's mercy and love.

And finally, children who die without baptism
are fully entrusted to the mercy of God
and we do not believe God is absent from them.

Grace

In baptism, we believe,
all occasions of missing the mark,
of being selfish and sinful,
of making unilateral choices,
are forgiven.

And yet...

that inclination to such sin remains
as does suffering,
death,
and weakness of character.

It is up to us as the Letter of Timothy suggests,
to till the soil of our souls well.

In baptism, we become adopted sons and daughters
of God who is Divine Love.

We receive sanctifying grace which empowers us
to live our faith.

Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ,
which makes us "members of one another"
and incorporates us into the church.

Baptism gives us a share
in the common priesthood of all believers.

We are called thereby to serve each other,
to listen to church leaders and obey them,
to assemble for the Eucharist,
and to be nourished with the Word of God.

For those
who die
without baptism,
we trust
God's mercy.

And while this is true for us Catholics,
we Catholics also recognize the baptisms
of all other Christians
and we call them sisters and brothers.

Indeed, baptism is the sacramental bond of all Christians.

Baptism connects us to Christ
and seals us with an indelible mark
which identifies us as "Christian."

For this reason, baptism cannot be repeated.
This seal commits us to the life of grace
we just described above.

And those who live by this seal,
remembering it always,
and dying "marked with the sign of faith,"
will know God who is Divine Love,
and Christ who is Love Revealed,
and the Holy Spirit of Love.

God, who is One,
will love them eternally.