

“No one working in any facet of the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults in today’s churches can afford to miss this book! Clearly and succinctly written, Paul Turner underscores that the RCIA is not about making ‘converts’ out of baptized Christians from other traditions but was intended to be and should be still about the way in which unbaptized people are fully initiated into Christ and the Church. Hence, this study explores in an ecumenically sensitive way what our common baptism means with regard to rites of reception into full communion.”

— Maxwell Johnson
University of Notre Dame

“Baptism makes it different! Beware when you read this book! It will change how you implement the Initiation process in your parish. Paul Turner has once again given the Church a masterful book to help all of us understand Baptism and in particular how we are to walk with those who approach the Catholic Church for ‘union and communion.’ Besides a comprehensive historical grasp of the development of the Rite of Reception into the Catholic Faith, he also provides practical insights and direction for those involved in today’s initiation ministry with candidates for reception into full communion of the Catholic Church.”

— Sr. Gael Gensler, O.S.F.
St. Julie Billiart Parish
Tinley Park, Illinois

“Tradition is not the past but the Church’s present understanding of the dynamic treasure its past has transmitted. Authored by one who is both scholar and pastor, this book on a hitherto neglected area of pastoral liturgy opens up for the reader the riches of that tradition in a way that makes them relevant for today. Paul Turner’s illuminating analysis of the multiple problems implicit in the formation of liturgical rites, past and present, demonstrates that change has always been the law of Catholic liturgy, and that Catholic rites modified in the aftermath of Vatican II were themselves also the product of growth and change to express new understandings and meet new needs. The new rites for receiving baptized Christians into full communion with the Catholic Church are delineated clearly and critically, with special emphasis on problems peculiar to their American adaptation and use. Read this book and you’ll wish Paul Turner were your pastor.”

— Robert F. Taft, S.J.
Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome

Paul Turner

**WHEN OTHER
CHRISTIANS
BECOME CATHOLIC**

A PUEBLO BOOK

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IN MEMORIAM
IACOBI DVNNING
DE CATECVMENATV FORI AMERICANI
SEPTENTRIONALIS CONDITORIS
QVI AB INITIIS
AVCTORI COMPREHENSIS HOC IN
VOLVMEN DE PROPOSITIS RESTITIT
ET VLTERIVS
PASSIONEM EIVS BAPTISMI PRO
SACRAMENTO INFLAMMAVIT
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Part I

Not the Beginning

Chapter 1

Baptized Christians

THE NEED

A baptized Christian who becomes a Catholic makes a personal decision with far-reaching implications. The motivation for changing from one Christian family to another may be as practical as fusing one household's diverse worship habits, or as spiritual as deepening one's experience of God. The result is one small step in the global dance of Christian unity. The decision may exact an emotional cost on family and friends in the previous church of baptism. Yet it brings peace of heart to the individual, the family, and friends in the subsequent church of destination.

Many people choose a religion different from the one they first knew. Some change several times. In parts of the world where the splinters of Christianity are manifest, the baptized who seek to become Catholic may outnumber the unbaptized who desire initiation.

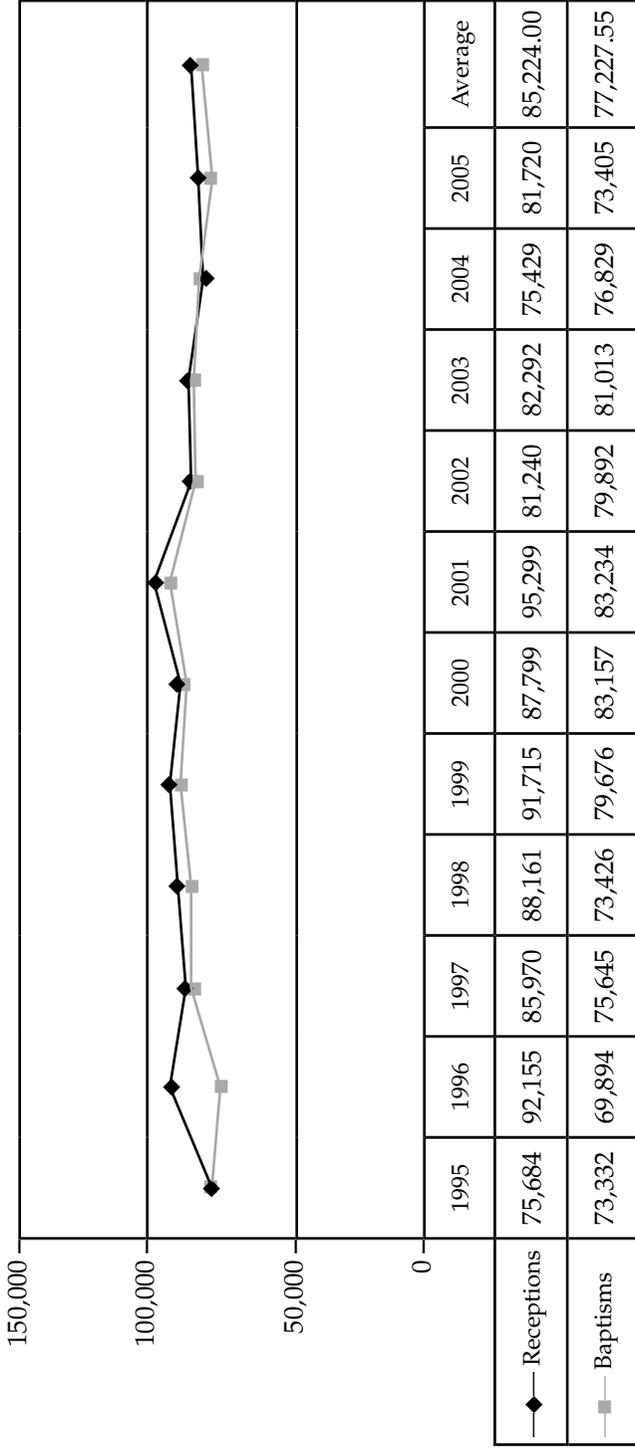
Global records are not available. The Vatican publishes the number of baptisms in each diocese worldwide, but it does not distinguish adult from infant baptisms, nor does it publish the worldwide number of receptions of those already baptized.¹

However, such statistics are available in the United States, where 52 percent of those becoming Catholic are previously baptized adults (see Table on page 4).²

¹ *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae and Annuario Pontificio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana).

² Chart compiled by author with statistics taken from *The Official Catholic Directory* (New York: PJ Kennedy) 1995–2005. The same reports show over a million infant baptisms in the Catholic Church each year.

Totals of Previously Baptized Adults (Receptions) and Unbaptized Adults (Baptisms)
 Becoming Catholic in the United States 1995-2005



On average, over 77,000 adults are baptized each year in the Catholic Church: and over 85,000 baptized in other Christians churches become Catholic. The preparation of all these candidates falls to Catholic parishes, where ministers rely on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)—a work that gives far more attention to the unbaptized than it does to the baptized—for direction.

The RCIA also addresses the needs of Catholics who were baptized in infancy but never received adequate catechesis, confirmation, and/or first communion. This book, however, is primarily about those baptized in other Christian churches who later become Catholic.

There are many reasons why people decide to become Catholic. In the United States, a pre-millennial survey of catechumens and baptized candidates summarized the motives this way:

Responses indicate that the individuals' main motivation for participating in the RCIA is to unify an ecumenical or interchurch marriage. Of married participants, 83 percent have Catholic spouses. Participants' second strongest motivation reportedly is a spiritual need and hunger, most often related to family life, health (of oneself or a loved one), a death of a loved one, a feeling of emptiness, or an inspiring experience. The third strongest motivation cited is a feeling of loneliness or a need for an authentic community. These motivations are often combined, and many persons mention more than one.³

In many Catholic parishes, the primary reason people become interested in joining the church is their marriage and family life. The number of Catholics who marry someone of another faith has grown; marriage has become a tool for evangelization. Even if someone becomes interested in the church primarily because of a Catholic spouse, other motives usually ripen. It is not uncommon to hear a candidate for reception say something like this: "I started this for my spouse, but I'm sticking with it for me."

Parish ministers discover that the religious experience of previously baptized candidates is not uniform. Some have virtually no religious upbringing. Others have been active in the church of their baptism for years. Some have never read from the Bible; others know it well. Still

³ *Journey to the Fullness of Life* (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000) 7.

others have been faithfully attending Sunday Mass with a Catholic spouse and participating in parish apostolates for decades. Occasionally, churchgoers are surprised to learn that someone with whom they worship every week is not a Catholic.

Parish ministers sort through the motives, offer catechetical formation, discern the readiness of those who express a desire for membership, and celebrate with them the rite of reception. In doing so, parish ministers are, at a local level, fulfilling a great need of the universal church.

THE RITUAL TEXT

The title of the appropriate rite is the Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. A fruit of the Second Vatican Council, it has no precise predecessor. Previously, baptized Christians were received into the Catholic Church by professing faith in the church, renouncing heresy, and undergoing a conditional baptism, while the priest supplied the rites omitted from their original baptism.

Introduction

The introduction to the rite of reception explains its purpose:

This is the liturgical rite by which a person born and baptized in a separated ecclesial Community is received, according to the Latin rite, into the full communion of the Catholic Church. The rite is so arranged that no greater burden than necessary (see Acts 15:28) is required for the establishment of communion and unity.⁴

This introduction says the rite pertains to those “born and baptized” in an ecclesial community separated from the Catholic Church. This presumes the candidate was baptized as an infant. But the rite applies to one who was baptized later in life as well. The circumstances of one’s birth do not matter as much as the church of one’s baptism.

The rite uses the phrase “a separated ecclesial Community” to designate one with a valid baptism but not sharing the full communion of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church recognizes the baptisms

⁴ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, Study Edition, Prepared by International Committee on English in the Liturgy (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988) 473.

of mainline Christian bodies, but it does not share communion with them. Ministers in many Christian churches offer communion to visiting Catholics, but the Catholic Church does not return such an invitation to visiting Christians. Nor does the Catholic Church permit its members to receive communion when they attend services at another Christian church.⁵

The rite is about being “received”—not forgiven or reconciled. The reception admits the person into “the full communion” of the Catholic Church, with the privilege of sharing the Eucharist.

Due to the influence of the ecumenical movement, the rite was simplified so that “communion and unity”—the goals of the rite—could be accomplished with “no greater burden than necessary.” This paragraph cites several documents of the Second Vatican Council⁶ and a passage from Acts of the Apostles.⁷ The allusion to Acts is from the so-called Council of Jerusalem, where the apostles debated the requirements for Gentiles to become Christian. Those who thought Gentiles should first become Jews lost under the rubric that the Gentiles should be baptized with no greater burden than necessary.⁸

That was the spirit behind the creation of the rite of reception. It was intended to downplay the ceremony in order to affirm the baptism already received. “Any appearance of triumphalism should be carefully avoided.”⁹ And, “Anything that would equate candidates for reception with those who are catechumens is to be absolutely avoided.”¹⁰

The rite envisions that the candidate has already been appropriately prepared in mind and heart. “The baptized Christian is to receive both doctrinal and spiritual preparation, adapted to individual pastoral

⁵ Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (Vatican City, 1993) 130–132.

⁶ Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, art. 69b; Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, nos. 3 and 18. It also cites the postconciliar text from the Secretariat for Christian Unity, *Ecumenical Directory I*, no. 19: *Acta Apostolicæ Sedæ* 59 (1967) 581.

⁷ Acts 15:28.

⁸ Otherwise, Gentiles would have to have been circumcised before becoming Christian. A matter of more concern for Gentile men, the argument was lost amid Christianity’s newfound freedom from the old law.

⁹ RCIA 475.

¹⁰ RCIA 477.

requirements.”¹¹ These “individual pastoral requirements” suggest that the framers of the rite did not envision a circumstance when several or very many candidates would be prepared together. The rite itself is composed with the intention of receiving one single candidate.¹²

Thus the introduction to the rite envisions a simple ceremony with a profound meaning: A previously baptized person, having prepared for this day in mind and heart, is received into the Catholic Church at a celebration with a local Catholic community.

Sponsors

To assist with the preparation, the candidate receives a sponsor. The sponsor also plays a role in the rite:

At the reception, the candidate should be accompanied by a sponsor and may even have two sponsors. If someone has had the principal part in guiding or preparing the candidate, he or she should be the sponsor.¹³

The Catholic Church acknowledges three different occasions for sponsors: the catechumenate, deferred confirmation, and the rite of reception.

- When a catechumen begins formation, a sponsor assists. This sponsor may serve as the godparent for baptism and confirmation, but need not; someone else may fill that role.¹⁴
- When a child is baptized, he or she receives one or two godparents, and when the child is later confirmed, someone serves as the sponsor. Ideally, a baptismal godparent serves again as the confirmation sponsor,¹⁵ though this is rarely observed.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The English translation is not consistent on this point. See, for example, the description of the homily, in which “the celebrant should express gratitude to God for those being received and allude to their own baptism as the basis for their reception . . . and to the eucharist, which for the first time they will celebrate with the Catholic community” (RCIA 489). All those plurals are in the singular in the *editio typica*.

¹³ RCIA 483.

¹⁴ RCIA 10.

¹⁵ Code of Canon Law, hereafter CCL (Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983) 893/2.

- When a baptized Christian is received into the Catholic Church, a sponsor assists. If confirmation is administered, the same person logically becomes the confirmation sponsor.

The Code of Canon Law, however, gives no information about a sponsor for reception. The canonical requirements for confirmation sponsors are the same as those for godparents at baptism.¹⁶ The same requirements would likely apply for the sponsor for reception. In the relevant text, the code uses the English word “sponsor” for the baptismal godparent, which is confusing. But the requirements for godparents and sponsors are the same:

To be permitted to take on the function of sponsor a person must . . . have completed the sixteenth year of age, unless the diocesan bishop has established another age, or the pastor or minister has granted an exception for a just cause; be a Catholic who has been confirmed and has already received the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist and who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on; [and] not be bound by any canonical penalty legitimately imposed or declared.¹⁷

Presumably, at the time of baptism, the individual received one or two godparents from his or her own local church community. Those godparent relationships remain intact. Thus the baptized Christian who becomes Catholic receives a sponsor—and not a godparent—from the Catholic community.

The specific duties of a sponsor for reception are nowhere explained. In practice, a sponsor is often a person who represents the local community, who has made an impression on the candidate, who sets an example of Catholic life, who will assist in the rite of reception, and who will help integrate the newly received Catholic into the community.

It often seems that the logical person is the Catholic spouse. After all, many Christians become Catholic because of the spouse’s inspiration. The law does not forbid the Catholic spouse from being the sponsor, but many parishes discourage it. The spouse already has a role. The

¹⁶ “To perform the function of [confirmation] sponsor, a person must fulfill the conditions mentioned in can. 874.” CCL 893/1.

¹⁷ CCL 874/1.

sponsor represents the care of the broader faith community beyond the family.

Structure

The rite of reception unfolds simply, ideally during a Mass at any time of year. If the reception takes place apart from a solemnity (for example a holy day of obligation) or a Sunday, the readings and prayers may be taken from the Mass “For the Unity of Christians” from the Masses for Various Needs and Occasions.¹⁸ After the homily, the celebrant invites the candidate to come forward with his or her sponsor. All the faithful, together with the candidate and sponsor, recite the Nicene Creed. This shows the unity of baptismal faith already shared between the candidate and the Catholic community.

The one being received adds this profession of faith: “I believe and profess all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God.”¹⁹ The statement is simple and direct.

The celebrant calls the candidate by name and makes the statement known as the Act of Reception:

N., the Lord receives you into the Catholic Church. His loving kindness has led you here, so that in the unity of the Holy Spirit you may have full communion with us in the faith that you have professed in the presence of his family.²⁰

The celebrant administers the sacrament of confirmation, unless the person is coming from a church with a confirmation recognized by the Catholic Church.²¹ Then the celebrant “takes the hands of the newly received person into his own as a sign of friendship and acceptance.”²² The local bishop may permit the substitution of another gesture. The meaning of the gesture appears right in the rubrics—*signum amicalis*

¹⁸ RCIA 487.

¹⁹ RCIA 491.

²⁰ RCIA 492.

²¹ For example, the Catholic Church recognizes the confirmations of the Orthodox Church, the Old Catholic Church, and the Society of St. Pius X. It does not recognize the confirmations of the Protestant-Anglican traditions because the Catholic Church believes they do not have valid ordinations, which are required for the valid administration of this sacrament.

²² RCIA 495.

receptionis—a sign of a friendly welcome. The rubrics rarely explain the meaning of the rites, but this gesture is new and unique.

The general intercessions follow, and then the entire assembly may be invited to “greet the newly received person in a friendly manner.”²³ This may replace the sign of peace during the communion rite of the Mass, but its function is slightly different. This is meant to be a friendly greeting—*omnes amicaliter salutant*—not precisely the exchange of peace and unity that leads to the sacramental communion of the faithful.

The Mass continues, and the newly received person shares in communion for the first time, preferably under both kinds.²⁴

That is how the rite progresses, but it is rarely celebrated that way in the United States, where it is more common to see this liturgy folded into the Easter Vigil. In that setting it takes on a grander dimension, as a group of baptized candidates joins the group of the unbaptized in an expansive celebration. The preparation for the rite of reception has also become more complex. Due to large numbers, candidates in many parishes are often prepared together with those who are unbaptized, with the assumption that everyone needs the same catechesis. The pastoral practice has drifted, then, from the council’s original intent.

THE ECCLESIAL CONTEXT

The ritual text has an ecclesial context. In preparing candidates for reception, parishes involve them in a multilayered formation including catechesis, service, community life, preliminary rites, and spiritual guidance. The spiritual formation of candidates is paced by rituals preceding their reception.

Rites Preceding Reception

In the United States baptized candidates are invited to participate in a number of rituals that precede their reception. The American edition of the rite of reception (Part II, section 5 of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) explains:

During the period of their doctrinal and spiritual preparation individual candidates for reception into the full communion of the

²³ RCIA 497.

²⁴ RCIA 498.

Catholic Church may benefit from the celebration of liturgical rites marking their progress in formation. Thus, for pastoral reasons and in light of the catechesis in the faith which these baptized Christians have received previously, one or several of the rites included in Part II, 4—“Preparation of Uncatechized Adults for Confirmation and Eucharist”—may be celebrated as they are presented or in similar words. In all cases, however, discernment should be made regarding the length of catechetical formation required for each individual candidate for reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church.²⁵

Part II, section 4 includes a series of rites created in the United States, patterned on the rites preparatory for adult baptism but adapted for those who are already baptized. The forgoing paragraph appears in the American edition of section 5, the introduction to the rite of reception, and it permits the celebration of the section 4 rites “for pastoral reasons and in light of the catechesis” the candidates have already received. But section 4 pertains to the preparation of *uncatechized* adults.

Still, section 5 says, “the length of catechetical formation required for each individual candidate for reception” needs to be determined. This allows parishes to judge whether or not to use these adapted rites for candidates case by case. This was important to state because the original universal text for the rite of reception merely says in its introduction, “During the period of preparation the candidate may share in worship in conformity with the provisions of the *Ecumenical Directory*.”²⁶ At its simplest, this meant that candidates could attend Sunday Mass but not receive communion; the directory also permits other forms of common Christian worship.²⁷

Prior to the rite of reception, then, the universal text envisions that the candidate will participate in Catholic worship—except for receiving communion. But the American edition introduced a series of rites to mark previously undefined stages along the way to one’s reception. These stages were conceived for those who were uncatechized, but they have been widely used for any baptized candidate.

²⁵ RCIA 478.

²⁶ RCIA 477.

²⁷ *Directorium ad ea quae a Concilio Vaticano Secundo de re oecumenica promulgata sunt exsequenda: Ad totam ecclesiam*, Acta Apostolicae Sedis [AAS] 59 (1967) 583–592.

In 1986 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops distinguished between those baptized persons who “have received relatively little Christian upbringing” and those “who have lived as Christians.” It was envisioned that the program of catechetical formation—both doctrinal and spiritual—would be different for each group.²⁸ In practice, though, many Catholic parishes assume that baptized candidates in formation for reception are thereby uncatechized, so they celebrate with them the adapted rites.

Spiritual Formation as Conversion

The rite does not place greater importance on either doctrinal or spiritual formation. But some theologians have offered reflections on this point. Rita Ferrone, for example, indicates that doctrinal apprehension and spiritual growth are just two of three movements happening to those joining Catholicism from another ecclesial community. She adds to them the gifts the candidate brings to the Catholic Church. Of these three, she states that spiritual growth holds priority:

The call to holiness, to conversion, must be considered the first priority of all the activity surrounding reception. It reigns over and, if necessary, supersedes the other two movements we have just considered, because a just appreciation of the gifts of Catholicism and a true willingness to share from the storehouse of one’s spiritual history demand a chastened self-awareness, humility, patience and all the spiritual gifts that come from God.²⁹

Going a step further, Ron Oakham argues that the candidate is undergoing a conversion, and hence the experience is paschal. He cites the introduction to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, which states, “The whole initiation must bear a markedly paschal character.”³⁰

This “paschal character” is most often spoken of throughout the ritual text with the term *conversion*. . . . [T]he initiation process must first and foremost seek to foster the conversion going on

²⁸ National Statutes for the Catechumenate 31 (see Appendix III of RCIA).

²⁹ Rita Ferrone, “Reception in Context: Historical, Theological and Pastoral Reflections,” in *One at the Table: The Reception of Baptized Christians*, ed. Ronald A. Oakham (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995) 38.

³⁰ RCIA 8.

within the person's life. . . . The task of the initiation minister is not just to educate the candidate about Catholicism but to discern, along with the candidate, what it is that God is prompting in his or her life.³¹

Oakham believes this same sense of conversion guides the spiritual formation of candidates for reception, even though they are already baptized.

This view fits with the second presentation of the rite of reception in the American edition of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.³² There, the rite appears not on its own but combined with adult baptism at the Easter Vigil. This form has become so common in Catholic parishes that many Catholics who prepare adults for membership are unaware that baptized candidates may be received another way. The combined rite at the Easter Vigil has fostered the common preparation of baptized candidates and unbaptized catechumens, subsumed into the same doctrinal and spiritual formation. By adopting Easter as the paradigmatic occasion for celebrating the rite of reception, the Catholic Church in the United States has reframed the meaning of the rite and its attendant preparation into something more resembling a conversion, a dying and a rising—rather than an evolution, a coming to full communion. Everyone has multiple experiences in life that convert them from one way of thinking to another, but foundational in the context of initiation is the conversion to Christ represented by baptism. All other conversions are secondary by comparison.

Contextualization in the Easter Vigil has caused the simple rite of reception envisioned by the council to morph into a grand celebration on the most important night of the liturgical calendar. This happened as part of an enthusiastic response to the restored catechumenate in a nation where baptized candidates for reception outnumbered catechumens. However, the decision was costly in terms of understanding the distinct meaning of these rites.

Oakham recounts a conversation that has been replayed with different characters in many other parishes. He had adapted the

³¹ Ron Oakham, "Normative Dimensions of Initiation," in *One at the Table*, 72–73.

³² Celebration at the Easter Vigil of the Sacraments of Initiation and of the Rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church, RCIA 562–94.

prebaptismal scrutinies to include baptized candidates for reception. A candidate named Mark reflected on the rituals of initiation. Oakham writes,

He concluded his comments with what I found to be an unnerving statement: "It all leaves me wishing I hadn't already been baptized; then I could be baptized at the Easter Vigil."

Like neon blazing in the night, our failure flashed before me. In working to help Mark develop his faith life as a Catholic Christian, we unconsciously had diminished his respect for his baptism.³³

Such a conversation is a symptom that something has gone wrong with the rite of reception. The council envisioned an ecumenically sensitive rite that would promote the concept of one baptism among Christians. But the rite of reception is being celebrated as a near equivalent with the initiation of the unbaptized.

Joseph A. Favazza thinks of candidates for reception as "embodied seasons of Advent." He explains:

Something wonderful has already happened, yet we await it afresh. They are the "already but not yet," incarnated reminders of a world full of grace and yearning for fulfillment.³⁴

If baptism is a beginning, the rite of reception is not. It meets people midstream in the Christian crossing. Celebrating the rite of reception with integrity requires a unique spiritual formation distinct from the prebaptismal catechumenate. Preparation for it begins in the middle of life in Christ, not at the beginning. A deeper understanding of the rite of reception will lead to a more meaningful preparation and a more expressive celebration. This rite grasps each candidate by the hand, wherever he or she is in the stream of Christianity, and brings them safely ashore.

The next part of this book will summarize the liturgical, theological, and ecumenical climate that led to the creation of the rite of reception. The final part will investigate issues pertaining to its fruitful implementation.

³³ Oakham, "Formation of Uncatechized Christians," in *One at the Table*, 85.

³⁴ Joseph A. Favazza, "Reconciliation as Second Baptism," in *One at the Table*,