

Christian Initiation of Adults

By MSGR. WILLIAM H. SHANNON
Second of Two Parts

The Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults presents us with a new vision of how the Church continues to come into being. Christian Initiation is not just a one-time event that takes place at the baptismal font after a few months of private instruction. It is a process of conversion that passes through several stages and, indeed, if properly understood, is intended to continue through a life-time. It is a process of coming to faith and growing in faith — a faith that involves the commitment of one's life to Jesus Christ, and not simply intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions. It is a process whereby one joins the Church by becoming a new person in Christ, and not simply by taking out envelopes in the parish. It is a process by which one plunges deeply into the death and resurrection of Jesus as a life-time involvement, not simply as a momentary event.

The new Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults represents a return to the practice of the early Church, when baptism with water, the laying on of hands, and anointing (that came to be called Confirmation) and the Eucharistic Meal were all parts of one ceremony — a ceremony whereby, after adequate preparation, a person entered into new life in Christ. By about the fifth century the original meaning of the initiation rite was lost. Under the influence of St. Augustine's teaching on original sin, baptism came to mean the remission of an inherited sin rather than interior conversion to a new life in Christ. In the light of this theology, babies were to be baptized as soon as possible to prevent them from going to hell or limbo. Baptism came to be more and more privatized; it ceased to be something in which the whole community was involved and came to be administered privately, in the rear of the Church without the presence of the community.

The new rite which we are discussing involves a radically different understanding of initiation. Indeed as time goes on, we may come to see that it offers a meaningful alternative to infant baptism. A newly born infant might, through an appropriate ceremony, be received into the Church as a catechumen. As he grows up he would go through the various stages of the catechumenate. During this period his Christian growth would be the concern of the whole community, not just of his family. Then when the family and the faith-community decided it was appropriate, the young catechumen could receive the three sacraments of Christian initiation celebrated together.

Inaugurating such a practice would make initiation a process that would have deep meaning for the initiate. It would make the members of the local Church much more aware of their responsibility to the young catechumens undergoing the conversion experience. Moreover, the continuous presence in the Church of catechumens would awaken in the whole Church a much deeper consciousness that conversion is not just the task of catechumens but a life-long process for all Christians.

The implementation of the new Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults could well mark the beginning of a new era in the life of the Church.

RTL SPEAKER

Auburn — Phyllis Hycza, of the Syracuse Right to Life Bureau, will be the featured speaker at the Nov. 18 meeting of the Cayuga County Right to Life Group at 7:30 p.m. at Sacred Heart Parish, Melrose St., Auburn.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mk. 13:24-32. (R1) Dan. 12:1-3. (R2) Hebr. 10:11-14, 18.

Sunday's Readings are a bit difficult because they are apocalyptic writings. Such writing is in code. Those who do not know the code find the writing mumbo-jumbo. The purpose of apocalypse was not to satisfy idle curiosity about the future (what a gold mine apocalypse has been for a lunatic fringe!). It was propaganda literature aimed at comforting and encouraging a people during times of oppression by holding up rewards and punishments. Of course the punishments referred to the oppressors, and so such writing was dangerous. Hence it had to be coded and peddled underground. The Book of Daniel and the 13th Chapter of St. Mark's gospel belong to this genre of writing.

The Book of Daniel was composed in a time of terrible persecution (165 BC) when the Jews were aghast at the widespread apostasy of their own people. The author sought to encourage fidelity by promising a divine intervention through Michael, the guardian angel of Israel. "Hang on," he urged, "for the persecutor will be slain and the just victorious." As for those already slain, they would be resurrected to live forever.

The gospel parallels the Daniel account. Jesus spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Obviously, He could not speak openly on this matter to the Jews. So He used the accepted apocalyptic jargon to describe a divine intervention. As always this

would have a twofold effect: punishment of God's enemies — the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, as God's judgment on a nation for rejecting Christ; and blessings for His friends — the launching of His Kingdom in power and glory.

The striking cosmic imagery suggests the power and majesty of God before whom even the heavens tremble. "The coming of the Son of Man in the clouds" is better understood as the resurrection of Jesus and His coming reign on earth in power, not the Parousia.

The destruction of Jerusalem signaled this "coming." For until Jerusalem was destroyed, Jewish Christians were loathe to see little more in Christianity than a brand of Judaism. Some — the Judizers whom Paul so excoriated — even sought to impose Judaic rites on pagans becoming Christian. With the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the umbilical cord with Judaism was severed — the old order ended and the new order began. The exclusivism of God's chosen people was terminated and the good news of salvation was proclaimed to all peoples — "chosen from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of earth and sky."

The blossoming of the fig tree is in Scripture a sign of blessing and prosperity. It harbingered the end of winter (the Old Testament) and a second spring, a promise of renewal.

"We live in the in-between time: between the first coming and the last coming of the Lord. Our posture, therefore, should be one of vigilance. Since no one knows the hour of the second coming, the only sensible thing to do is to be ready."

A teacher once told his pupils that the way to secure eternal life is to live the last day of one's life for God.

The students answered, "But we do not know what day is our last."

The teacher replied, "Then live each today as if it were your last and you will obtain what you seek."

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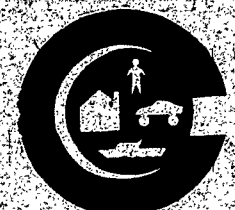

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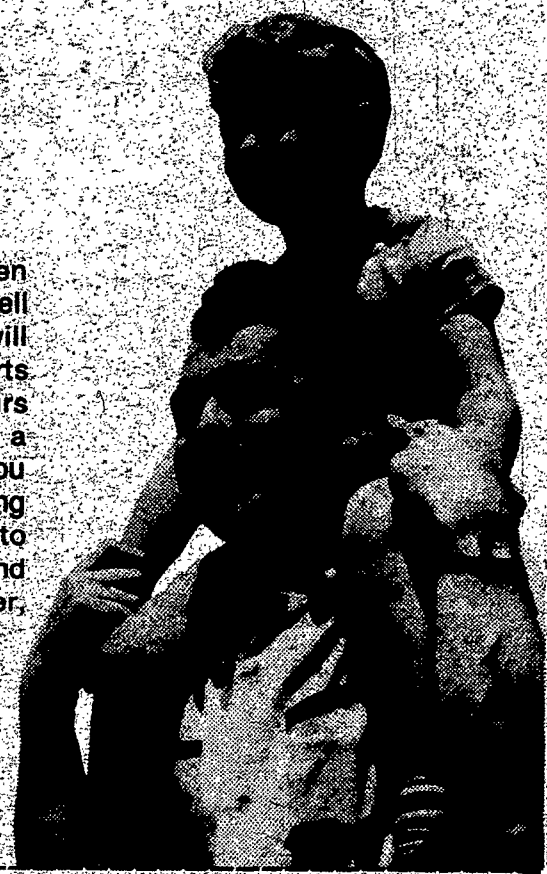
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