

Why Are Three Sacraments Received at the Easter Vigil?

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As the priest lays hands on the newly baptized and anoints them with chrism at the Easter Vigil, some in the assembly are surprised. Indeed, until their participation in the Christian initiation process, some of the sponsors of these new Christians were not aware that at the liturgy in which candidates are baptized, they also are confirmed and receive the Eucharist.

Many of us who were baptized as infants cling to the notion that sacraments are initially received at different liturgies. After all, our experience was Baptism as an infant, First Communion around second or third grade, and then Confirmation with the bishop years later, perhaps in eighth grade or high school. Why, then, do people who are baptized at catechetical age (around seven years old and above) or as adults, receive Confirmation and Eucharist at the same liturgy?

Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are called the sacraments of initiation. For much of the first thousand years of the Church, people were confirmed immediately after Baptism and then received Communion at the same liturgy. For various reasons, the reception of these sacraments were split up and celebrated at different liturgies.

A little more than fifty years ago, at the Second Vatican Council, the decision was made to restore the catechumenate, the initiation process of the early Church. That process is the foundation to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults through which individuals are initiated into the Church. With the restoration of the catechumenate, Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist were again received in that order at one liturgy.

When these three sacraments are received at the same liturgy, their connection is highlighted. People are completely initiated into the Church and adopted as God's own as they receive the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, and are drawn closer to the Father through Christ in the Eucharist.

You may have noticed that the architecture in many churches reflects the connection of the sacraments. Often when we enter a church, the baptismal font from which we bless ourselves, remembering our Baptism, is directly across from the altar. We can easily see that Baptism leads to the table of the Lord, from which we receive the Eucharist. Having received the Eucharist, we are sent forth in mission to do God's work in the world.



The reception of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist at one liturgy highlights their connection to each other.

Eucharist not only completes initiation but renews our Baptism every Sunday when we gather as the Body of Christ. The laying on of hands and anointing of chrism at Confirmation “confirms” the Holy Spirit given at Baptism. Through the Holy Spirit, we are made the “anointed ones” of Christ.

Since the three sacraments of initiation are received at one liturgy, the newly baptized are incorporated into the Church completely at the Easter Vigil. These new Christians do not need to wait for the initiation to be “confirmed” or to be welcomed at the table of the Lord.

As members of the Church, they will participate fully in the both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist each Sunday. Having received the Eucharist, they will join the rest of the Body of Christ in being sent forth to spread the Good News in the world in word and deed.