

A New Look at the RCIA

by Rita Burns Senseman

Journey for the Entire Parish

It's been nearly 30 years since the Catholic Church first gave us a "new" way of initiating people into the Catholic Christian community. And it's been over 10 years since the bishops of the United States mandated that this new way of initiating adults and older children be implemented in the parishes of the United States. This new way of initiating Catholics is called the RCIA—Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

Not long ago our U.S. bishops took a closer look at how well the RCIA is working in our local parishes. The results of the bishops' study on the RCIA were published in October 2000 in a report entitled *Journey to the Fullness of Life*. The bishops found that in some parishes the RCIA is working very well, yet in other parishes it doesn't even exist. Nonetheless, the bishops say that the RCIA is "renewing the life of the Church in the United States" and that it must continue to be a priority in our parishes.

That's a pretty strong endorsement! Why do our bishops want the RCIA to be a priority in our parishes when there is so much else going on in parish life? How does it renew a parish? And what's it got to do with each of us? This Update will address these questions about RCIA as well as give a step-by-step explanation of the rite itself.

Journey of conversion for the parish

The bishops want the RCIA to be a priority in the parish precisely because it does (or at least it can) renew parish life. The RCIA is a journey of conversion for the person participating in the initiation process, and by extension it can be a journey of conversion for the whole parish! That is, conversion happens if the parish fully embraces the process of initiation and walks the journey of faith with the candidates for initiation.

Let's look closer at this notion of conversion. The Rite tells us that those requesting initiation "seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion." This indicates that those folks who come to our parish doors saying, "I want to be Catholic," are indeed "seeking" something. Although they may not articulate it as such, what they really seek is God. So, the parish invites them to into this wondrous process whereby they develop, deepen and

enrich their relationship with this loving God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Now, if RCIA really is this wondrous journey of conversion to God in Christ, then the sponsors who walk with the candidates—supporting them, praying for them, witnessing to their faith, guiding them along the path—cannot help but experience some kind of conversion themselves. Likewise, the Christian community that supports, prays for, guides and celebrates with the candidates also renews its own conversion to God in Christ.

Indeed, we Catholics believe that conversion to Jesus Christ is a lifelong and ongoing process. Thus, when we witness others changing their lives, giving up old ways of doing and being and committing themselves to Jesus Christ, it makes us want to recommit ourselves as well. And when the members of the parish recommit themselves to Christ, the parish is indeed renewed.

Discipleship and mission

RCIA is the Church's way of forming new disciples of Jesus Christ. It's the normative way the Catholic Church welcomes its newest members, but even more important than membership in the Catholic Church is discipleship in Christ Jesus. Through a gradual, complete and comprehensive training in the Christian way of life (Rite, no. 75), the unbaptized come to know Jesus Christ through the Catholic Christian community and they learn to live as Jesus' disciples. Then, as disciples, they continue the mission of Jesus Christ in the world today.

Some people who participate in the RCIA are already disciples of Jesus Christ by virtue of their Baptism in a Protestant denomination. Although the RCIA is designed primarily for the unbaptized, it can also be adapted for use with those who are already baptized, including adults and children over seven years of age.

Participating in the RCIA is much more than going to classes on Catholicism. It's undergoing a conversion to a new way of life in Christ. Although doctrinal instruction is a part of the formation process, the formation of disciples is more like an apprenticeship. The "apprentices" learn the Catholic Christian way of life from being in the midst of the parish community. The entire community helps form the apprentice in the Christian way of life. Herein lies the answer to one of the questions given

at the outset: What's the RICA got to do with me? Let's take a look.

The parishioner's role in RCIA

The entire Christian community is responsible for the initiation of its newest disciples. Here are some specific ways:

As mentoring community. Every baptized parishioner has a role in initiation of our new members. We are part of that mentoring community that apprentices the new disciples. By observing our prayer, words, deeds and actions in the parish and in the broader community our newest members learn what it means to live as a Catholic Christian today. We provide the examples. We are the models. RCIA depends on us because we make up the Christian community.

As sponsors. In addition to the prayers we offer for our candidates and the examples we provide, there are other specific ways parishioners are involved in RCIA. Baptized members of the community serve as sponsors for candidates in the RCIA. A sponsor is an active member of the parish who walks with the candidate on the journey to new, fuller life in Christ. The sponsor supports and guides the candidate along the way. The sponsor is the candidate's personal connection to the parish.

As catechists, coordinators and assistants.

Members of the community also serve as catechists (teachers) for the process of initiation. Other members of the community serve as coordinators and assistants in various aspects of the initiation process. Furthermore, in *Journey to the Fullness of Life*, the bishops urge that "even more parishioners" become actively involved in the RCIA. The more parishioners become personally invested in the process of initiating others into the life of Christ, the more the community itself will be renewed in its own life in Christ.

As members of the Sunday assembly. There is one final way that every worshipping parishioner is involved in the RCIA. That's through participation in the liturgical rites of initiation that usually happen at Sunday Mass, especially in the months before Easter but also throughout the year. There are major liturgical rituals that mark the progress of the candidates who are in the initiation process. These liturgical rites are major events not only for the candidates in the process, but also for the entire parish. During the rites the parish recognizes and celebrates the candidates. As a member of the parish you are asked to pray with and for those in the initiation process. As a member of the Body of Christ, you also make manifest Christ's presence in the community. You, and we, are a sign of Christ to the candidates in the RCIA.

Rita Burns Senseman, a freelance writer, is a catechist who specializes in Christian initiation of children. She has held various professional positions for parishes and dioceses, and is a team member for the North American Forum on the Catechumenate. She has an M.A. in theology from the University of Notre Dame.