

The RCIA: A Step-by-Step Look

by Rita Burns Senseman

New life in Christ is a gradual journey of many steps and stages. The four steps of the RCIA are: pre-catechumenate, catechumenate, Lenten purification and mystagogia. Along the way are key rites of acceptance, election and initiation.

1: The pre-catechumenate

The RCIA officially begins when a person calls the parish office and says something like, "I want to be baptized," or, "I'd like to know more about the Catholic Church." When such a person begins the process of initiation, she or he is in the first stage or period of initiation, called the period of evangelization and pre-catechumenate. It's also known as the inquiry period.

This inquiry period has usually begun long before anyone calls the parish office. It begins when the person is first evangelized. That's when they first hear the good news of Jesus Christ from a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor, a spouse, a parent, a stranger. Someone or something has drawn them to the parish and they want to find out more. During this first period of the process the parish helps the inquirer to discover just what it is he or she is seeking.

Rite of Acceptance. Once the inquirers have experienced an initial conversion to Jesus Christ, they celebrate the first major liturgical ritual of the initiation process. This first ritual is the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. During this rite of acceptance, which is usually celebrated during Sunday Mass, the candidates for initiation are publicly welcomed for the first time. They "declare their intention to the Church and the Church in turn...accepts them as persons who intend to become its members" (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, no. 41).

The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens completes the first stage or period of the initiation process and opens the door to the second period of the process, the period of the catechumenate.

2: Catechumenate

This second stage of the initiation process is the extended period of time when those to be initiated receive their more formal training in the Christian way of life. There are two groups. The catechumens are those who are unbaptized. Other candidates for

initiation are those who are already baptized, either in a Catholic or Protestant Church, but who are not fully initiated.

During the catechumenate stage, those to be initiated learn more about the sacred Scriptures and the doctrines of the Church. They meet weekly at Mass to hear the Word of God proclaimed. In many parishes, the catechumens and candidates (those in the period of the catechumenate who are already baptized) are dismissed after the homily. That is, they are invited to leave the main body of the Church and meet with a catechist to discuss the Scriptures they heard proclaimed at Mass. This study and reflection on the Scriptures is an important part of their formation and helps them prepare for the day when they will receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

In addition to the study of the Scriptures, the candidates participate in sessions that help them to understand the doctrinal teachings of the Church. The candidates also learn about the prayer and worship life of the Church. They learn how to live and serve others in apostolic witness. And they develop their relationship with the Catholic Christian community.

When they have experienced a true conversion to the Christian way of life (which the Church says is at least one year for the unbaptized), they celebrate the second major ritual in the process of initiation.

Rite of Election. The second major ritual of the RCIA usually occurs on the First Sunday of Lent. The catechumens have been elected (chosen) by God to receive the sacraments of initiation. The Church gives voice to God's election and calls each one of the catechumens by name to sign the Book of the Elect. This is a diocesan celebration and the presiding celebrant is the diocesan bishop. Often the celebration takes place at the diocesan cathedral, though in many dioceses there are multiple celebrations and sometimes at multiple locations. Generally, the local parish celebrates a Rite of Sending as a way of celebrating the candidates' upcoming election and sending them on to the bishop for their admission to the final period of preparation for the sacraments.

3: Period of purification

This final period of preparation is one of intense, spiritual recollection that usually coincides with

Lent. It is a period of purification and enlightenment. It is a time for reflection and prayer more than teaching. The candidates, now called the elect, purify their minds and hearts by celebrating several rituals. The three purifying rituals, known as the Scrutinies, strengthen the elect and help to complete their conversion. The Presentation of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer enlighten the minds of the elect in the final weeks of their preparation for the sacraments.

Lent ends when the sacred Triduum of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter begins, at sunset Thursday of Holy Week. Finally, some preparatory rites on Holy Saturday morning serve as the elect's immediate preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation, which will be celebrated that night at the Easter Vigil.

Sacraments of Initiation. At the Easter Vigil after sunset on Holy Saturday, the elect and possibly some previously baptized candidates celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism (for the unbaptized), Confirmation and Eucharist. The elect are plunged into the waters of new birth and come out of those waters reborn in Christ. They are then configured to be more like Christ through the sacred chrism of Confirmation. Finally, the culmination of their initiation happens when they taste the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. So, too, some of the baptized candidates may make a profession of faith, be confirmed and receive the Eucharist in this most holy of all the Church's liturgies.

4: Period of mystagogy

The process of initiation continues even after the Easter celebration, during the Eastertide period of mystagogia. The word comes from an ancient Greek word signifying a deepening understanding of the mysteries of our faith. During the Easter season, the neophytes (newly initiated) gather each week to deepen their grasp of the great paschal mystery into which they have just been incorporated. These new Christians have received the Body of Christ and have indeed become part of the Body of Christ through their Baptism. The Church uses the period of mystagogy to help the neophytes understand and live out their new lives as part of the Body of Christ.

Furthermore, mystagogy is about mission. The new Christians, now part of Christ's body, must now go forth with us to continue the mission of Jesus Christ.

That's where the whole parish, indeed the entire Church, comes in again. We celebrate the three sacraments of initiation to make us more like Christ and "to enable us to carry out the mission of the entire people of God in the Church and in the world" (Rite, General Intro, 2). Through the RCIA our parishes participate in the mission of the Church. We make new disciples and we renew the old, faithful ones. When we commit ourselves, our energy and our resources to the RCIA, we commit our parishes to continuing the mission of Jesus in the Church and in the world.

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