

# RCIA: A JOURNEY OF CONVERSION

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The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (known as the RCIA) is a process by which an adult becomes a Catholic Christian. It also serves a model for all of us in growing as Catholic Christians.

This article examines the process of the RCIA and considers the ways this process challenges all of us as we continue our life-long journey of conversion.

The process of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (known as the RCIA) was decreed by the Second Vatican Council and was developed in 1972. It was mandated for use in the United States starting in 1988.

A process of preparation and initiation for adults was used in the early centuries of the church but as time went on it was no longer used. So the Second Vatican Council was not creating something new but rather a restoration of the process used in the early church adapted to meet the conditions of our life today.

The key to understanding the RCIA is:

First we must understand that it is a process and not a program. It is not another group or ministry in the parish to join as an organization. It is a process by which an adult becomes a Catholic Christian.

Second, it serves as model not only for becoming a Catholic Christian but also for remaining a Catholic Christian engaged in ongoing formation and growth.

In one of his sermons, St. Leo the Great tells us about those who are preparing for baptism into the church as well as those who are already members of the church:

*“The special note of the paschal feast is this: the whole Church rejoices in the forgiveness of sins. It rejoices in the forgiveness not only of those who are then reborn in holy baptism but also of those who are already numbered among God’s adopted children.”<sup>1</sup>*

## Understanding the RCIA Process

A process by which an adult becomes a Catholic Christian

A model for remaining a Catholic Christian engaged in ongoing formation and growth

A model of initiation from which we can understand the meaning of baptism, conversion, and what it means to be a member of the Church

## CONVERSION

The fundamental decision to commit the whole of life to God

To fall in love with God in an unrestricted fashion

The gradual and lifelong process of turning more and more to God and allowing God to radically transform our lives

### A Process of Conversion

The primary thrust of the RCIA is conversion. Conversion is the fundamental decision to commit the whole of life to God. The theologian Bernard Lonergan describes this as falling in love with God in an unrestricted fashion.<sup>2</sup>

This is not a one time decision we make but it is an ongoing decision - a decision we make every day and at every moment of the day. Conversion is the gradual and life long process of turning more and more to God and allowing God to radically transform our lives.

This conversion process, which begins for a person participating in the RCIA process, must continue for the rest of life. This is why we say that the RCIA process serves as a model for remaining a Catholic Christian.

Conversion is a life long challenge and task for every member of the Church. The RCIA process is a model of initiation from which we can understand the meaning of baptism, conversion, and what it means to be a member of the Church.

This process is intended for those who have never been baptized. However, it has been adapted for already validly baptized Christians from other denominations seeking entrance into the Catholic Church. In this case, the sacrament of baptism is not repeated.

*"...the rite of baptism is held in highest esteem by all Christians. Once it has been validly celebrated, even if by Christians with whom we are not in full communion, it may never lawfully be repeated."* (RCIA, #4)<sup>3</sup>

The celebration of baptism is considered a valid celebration if it is done with water and the Trinitarian formula (that is the person is immersed in water or water is poured over them and they are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit).

For those who enter into this process it is a journey – a spiritual journey – a journey of ongoing conversion. Conversion takes place over time and each person moves in his or her own way – or more properly in the way that God leads and directs each one.

### Precatechumenate

A person who is interested in joining the Catholic Church (whether unbaptized or baptized in another Christian denomination) begins with a time of inquiry. This period of time is known as the Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate.

For the unbaptized, it is truly a time of inquiry during which *"those who are not yet Christians, their hearts opened by the Holy Spirit, may believe and be freely converted to the Lord and commit themselves sincerely to him."* (RCIA #36)

For those from other Christian denominations, this is a time for inquiry into what the Catholic Church teaches and, with their hearts open to the Holy Spirit, a time to discern if God is calling them to the Catholic Church.

There is no set amount of time for this first step. This period can be as long or as short as a participant desires.

This period of formation serves as a model for us to remain Catholic Christians. It reminds us that we have a role and responsibility in leading others to

## RCIA Process

Prechatechumenate – Period of Inquiry

*Rite of Acceptance*

Catechumenate

*Rite of Election*

Purification and Enlightenment

*Sacraments of Initiation*

Mystagogy

Christ and to membership in the Church. The primary way we do this is by the way we live our lives as Christians. Hopefully, this will lead others to want to join with us.

It is also a reminder to all of us to continue to be inquirers who seek to learn more about our faith so that we may commit ourselves to God more completely.

The Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate is the first of four periods of formation in the RCIA process.

### Rite of Acceptance

The movement to next period of formation is celebrated by a liturgical rite that expresses the process of conversion that God is bringing about in the lives of the participants. This is celebrated with the whole Christian community.

Those unbaptized who desire to enter the Catholic Church now take the step of acceptance into the order of catechumens. Here they “*express and the Church accepts their intention to respond to God’s call to follow the way of Christ.*” (RCIA, p. 14)) They have shown the beginnings of faith and “*an intention to change their lives and to enter into a relationship with God in Christ.*” (RCIA #42)

This rite is celebrated at a Sunday Mass so that the entire community can welcome these new catechumens. Each person to enter the order of catechumens comes with a sponsor who presents these candidates for the catechumenate. The celebrant asks the sponsor and all of us who are assembled: “*are you, and all who are gathered here with us, ready to help these candidates find and follow Christ?*” (RCIA, #53)

We answer, “*We are*” and in doing this take on a responsibility to these new catechumens - the responsibility to help them “*find and follow Christ.*” (RCIA, #53) All of us should pray for them. All of us serve as an example for them. Some members of the community serve as sponsors and catechists during this second period of the RCIA process – the Period of the Catechumenate.

The catechumens are now considered members of the Church even though they have not yet been baptized.

Those who are already baptized Christians and answer the call to join the Catholic Church do not enter into the order of catechumen. They are welcomed as candidates whose “*conversion is based on the baptism they have already received, the effects of which they must develop.*” (RCIA #400)

A sponsor presents these candidates and “*just as it helps catechumens, the Christian community should also help these adults by its love and prayer*” (RCIA #403)

These candidates join the catechumens during the Period of the Catechumenate.

**Catechumen: An unbaptized person who, after a period of inquiry, makes the decision to seek baptism in the Catholic Church.**

**Candidate: A validly baptized person from another Christian denomination who seeks to enter the Catholic Church**

## Catechumenate

The catechumens preparing for baptism and the candidates baptized in another Christian denomination preparing for full acceptance into the Catholic Church now enter the period of the catechumenate. This is a time for *“suitable pastoral formation and guidance, aimed at training them in the Christian life.”* (RCIA #75)

There are four dimensions to the formation that takes place during the catechumenate.

Doctrinal formation  
Moral formation  
Spiritual formation  
Apostolic formation

The formation in these four dimensions only begins during this period of the catechumenate. It is really the beginning of a life long process of continual formation in each of these dimensions.

As a model for all Catholic Christians, the RCIA process reminds us that these four dimensions should be part of our ongoing formation and growth in the Christian life.

Doctrinal formation provides instruction in the basic beliefs of the Catholic Church. For the catechumens and candidates, it is a time to ask questions, probe the meaning of life, and grow in the understanding of the Catholic faith.

This is the beginning of a life long process of learning and growing in the faith – something that all of us as Catholic Christians should continue to do.

Moral formation is living out the basic beliefs of our faith in the daily lives of the catechumens and candidates. Each catechumen or candidate has a sponsor to support and help them begin to live the Christian life.

Since none of us fully achieve perfection in living the Christian life, this moral formation is also a life-

## **FORMATION IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**

### **Doctrinal Formation**

Instruction in the basic beliefs of the Catholic Church

### **Moral Formation**

Living out the basic beliefs of the faith in our lives

### **Spiritual Formation**

Developing a life of prayer, participation in the Mass, reading and reflecting with the Bible

### **Apostolic Formation**

Service to our family, parish, and community

long task for all of us. We must continue moral formation in our lives as we struggle to live out the meaning of our faith in our everyday lives.

Spiritual formation challenges the catechumen to begin a life of prayer. For the candidates this formation continues and builds on that formation they have received as a member of another Christian denomination.

They participate in the Liturgy of the Word and are dismissed after the homily to reflect on the message of the Word of God. The reason for this is that the catechumens *“must await their baptism, which will join them to God’s priestly people and empower them to participate in Christ’s new worship.”* (RCIA #75) The candidates usually join the catechumens in this dismissal and reflection on the Word of God since they are not yet Catholic and cannot receive the Eucharist.

They are introduced to the scriptures and are encouraged to read and reflect on them. Again this is only the beginning of a life long process. The challenge is also made to all us. Prayer, participation in the Mass, and the reading and reflection on scripture is essential to our continued spiritual growth.

Apostolic formation introduces the catechumens and candidates to the various ministries in which the parish is engaged.

All of us are called to engage in apostolic formation. It is part of our responsibility as members of the Church to be of service to the community - our parish community, our families, and the communities in which we live and work.

So we see that the formation, which begins in the period of the catechumenate, is only the beginning of what should be a life long process. We also see that this formation process serves as a model of what our ongoing formation should be as Christians.

There is no set length for the period of the catechumenate. *"The time spent in the catechumenate should be long enough...for the conversion and faith of the catechumens to become strong."* (RCIA #76)

#### Rite of Election and the Call to Continuing Conversion

The period of the catechumenate comes to an end with the celebration of the Rite of Election at the beginning of the season of Lent. Based on the testimony of their sponsors and catechists during the period of the catechumenate, *"the church makes its 'election,' that is, the choice and admission of those catechumens who have the dispositions that make them fit to take part...in the sacraments of initiation."* (RCIA #119)

In this rite the catechumens express the desire and intent to receive the sacraments of initiation into the Catholic Church – baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. This rite is celebrated by the bishop of the diocese with the catechumens from all the parishes of the diocese on the first Sunday of Lent.

On the first Sunday of Lent the local parish celebrates a rite in which the catechumens are sent forth to the Rite of Election because *"this community gladly recommends you to the bishop,*

*who, in the name of Christ, will call you to the Easter sacraments."* (RCIA #112)

During the period of the catechumenate, the candidates who are already baptized as Christians and are seeking full acceptance into the Catholic Church are prepared *"for their fuller life in the Church."* (RCIA #435)

*"Through the experience of worship, daily life, and service in the parish community the candidates deepen their appreciation of the Church's tradition and universal character."* (RCIA #435)

Their process of conversion began at the time of their baptism in another Christian denomination and now they are called to continuing conversion. The parish sends these candidates to the bishop along with the catechumens to *"be recognized for the progress they have made in their spiritual formation."* (RCIA #439)

The bishop affirms that *"the Church recognizes your desire to be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and to have a place at Christ's Eucharistic table."* (RCIA #557)

Then the bishop challenges them to *"Hear the Lord's call to conversion and be faithful to your baptismal covenant."* (RCIA #557) This is a challenge not only for the candidates but also for all of us.

#### Period of Purification and Enlightenment

Now the catechumens are referred to as The Elect and enter into the third period of the RCIA process that coincides with the season of Lent. This is the Period of Purification and Enlightenment.

**Elect: those catechumens who after a period of formation, based on the testimony of their sponsor, are elected (called) by the Church to take part in the sacraments of initiation.**

*“This is a period of more intense spiritual preparation, consisting more in interior reflection than in catechetical instruction, and is intended to purify the minds and hearts of the elect as they search their own consciences and do penance....This period is intended as well to enlighten the minds and hearts of the elect with a deeper knowledge of Christ the Savior.”* (RCIA #139)

This also becomes a period of spiritual preparation for the candidates who will be received into full communion in the Catholic Church as well as for all of us who are Catholic Christians especially during the season of Lent.

*“In the liturgy and the liturgical catechesis of Lent the reminder of baptism already received or the preparation for its reception, as well as the theme of repentance, renew the entire community along with those being prepared to celebrate the sacraments of initiation. For the elect and the local community, therefore, the Lenten season is a time for spiritual recollection in preparation for the celebration of the paschal mystery.”* (RCIA #138)

On the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Sundays of Lent, the community celebrates the scrutinies with the Elect. These rites are *“intended to purify the minds and hearts of the elect as they search their own consciences and do penance.”* (RCIA #139) This search reveals what is weak and sinful in their lives so they can receive forgiveness and healing. It also reveals what is good in their lives so it can be strengthened. *“From the first to the final scrutiny the elect should progress in their perception of sin and their desire for salvation.”* (RCIA # 143)

The scrutinies are celebrated with the entire assembly at one of the Sunday Masses each week. The readings are always taken from the Year A readings of the lectionary even in Years B and C because the gospel readings are especially pertinent to this celebration.

The first scrutiny (third Sunday of Lent) is the gospel reading about the Samaritan woman who thirsts for

## The Scrutinies

Reveals what is weak and sinful in the lives of the Elect so they can receive forgiveness and healing

Reveals what is good in the lives of the Elect so it can be strengthened

Challenges all of us during the season of Lent to reflect on our own sinfulness and need for forgiveness as well as to recognize our goodness and the need to strengthen it

living water – the living water that can only come from a relationship with Christ. Jesus calls the woman to review her life just as the elect are now called to review their lives. We pray that the elect *“who, like the woman of Samaria, thirst for living water, may turn to the Lord as they hear his word and acknowledge the sins and weaknesses that weigh down upon them.”* (RCIA #154)

The second scrutiny (fourth Sunday of Lent) is the gospel reading of the cure of the blind man who receives sight from Jesus – the light of the world. Just as Jesus removes the blindness from the eyes of the man in gospel, the elect are called to allow Jesus to remove the blindness from their own lives. We ask: *“Let them rejoice in your light, that they may see, and, like the man born blind whose sight you restored, let them prove to be staunch and fearless witnesses to the faith.”* (RCIA #168)

The third scrutiny (fifth Sunday of Lent) is the gospel reading of Lazarus coming forth from the tomb at the command of Jesus who is the resurrection and the life. Just as Jesus restores life to Lazarus, the elect are called to allow Jesus to bring life to them in the baptism they will receive at the Easter vigil. We ask: *“By raising Lazarus from the dead, you showed that you came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Free from the grasp of death those who await your life-giving sacraments.”* (RCIA #175)

These scrutinies also challenge us – the assembly – to review our own lives so that we may allow Christ to heal all that is weak and sinful in us, remove the blindness from us, and restore us to life – the life we received at our baptism. We recognize all that is good within us and ask Christ to strengthen us. This is really the purpose of the season of Lent.

During this time the elect receive the Creed and the Lord's Prayer – *"the ancient texts that have always been regarded as expressing the heart of the Christian faith and prayer."* (RCIA #147)

First the Creed is presented to the elect and they are asked to memorize this Creed and proclaim it publicly before their baptism so it may fill the elect with the *"sure light of faith."* (RCIA #147) This usually takes place during the third week of Lent after the celebration of the first scrutiny.

The Lord's Prayer is presented to the elect so they may be filled *"with a deeper realization of the new spirit of adoption by which they will call God their Father, especially in the midst of the Eucharistic assembly."* (RCIA #147) This usually takes place during the fifth week of Lent after the celebration of the third and final scrutiny.

On Holy Saturday, the elect are asked to spend time in preparation for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation. There is an option to defer the presentation of the Creed and the Lords' Prayer to this day. If the Creed has been presented during the third week of Lent, the elect recite the Creed on this day as a preparation *"for the profession of faith they will make immediately before they are baptized."* (RCIA #193)

The candidates (those baptized in other Christian denominations who seek entrance into the Catholic Church) do not celebrate the scrutinies. However, there is a penitential rite that can be celebrated with them as a preparation for the celebration of the sacrament of Penance, which should be celebrated prior to their reception into the Catholic Church at the Easter vigil.

## **The Creed: The statement and profession of what we believe as Catholic Christians**

**Sacraments of Initiation: The three sacraments that form the foundation of the Christian life and lead to full membership in the Catholic Church – Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.**

### Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation

At the Easter vigil on Holy Saturday, the elect receive the sacraments of initiation in the presence of the community. They are baptized, confirmed, and participate in and receive the Eucharist for the first time.

The candidates are not baptized since the Catholic Church recognizes their baptism in another Christian denomination. They are called to *"profess all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God."* (RCIA #491) Then with the newly baptized they receive the sacrament of Confirmation and are *"one with us for the first time at the Eucharistic table of the Lord Jesus, the sign of the Church's unity."* (RCIA #490)

During the Easter vigil, the entire community reflects on our own baptism and what it means to live the risen life of Christ. After the catechumens are baptized, the entire community renews their own baptismal promises. We are also called to reflect on the meaning of the sacrament of Confirmation we have received and the sacrament of the Eucharist.

I remember one very powerful experience at the Easter vigil when one of the newly baptized returned from receiving the Eucharist for the first time with tears of joy. It reminded me how great the gift of the Eucharist is. Over time it can become almost routine and we can forget the real meaning of why we receive the very body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist and what a privilege it is. To this day I have tried to make the reception of the body and blood of Christ a special moment each time I receive communion.

### Period of Postbaptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy

These newly baptized members of the Church are now called neophytes. They begin the final period of the process of formation in the RCIA.

*“This is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing the works of charity.”* (RCIA #244)

This period is called Mystagogy, which means the study of the mysteries, and is a time for the neophytes to be *“introduced into a fuller and more effective understanding of mysteries through the Gospel message they have learned and above all through their experience of the sacraments they have received”* so that *“out of this experience, which belongs to Christians and increases as it is lived, they derive a new perception of the faith, of the Church, and of the world.”* (RCIA #245)

**Neophyte: The newly baptized members of the Church; from the Greek word *neophytos* meaning newly planted.**

**Paschal Mystery: from the Hebrew word *pesah* which means the passage from death to life. This refers to the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ through which we have been redeemed and saved.**

This is a time for the neophytes to be integrated into the life and activities of the parish community. They focus on the sacraments they have received and how they can live these out in their daily lives. They take a more active role in the parish community.

### Conclusion

We have examined the process of the RCIA. But we have done more than just study it. We have seen that the RCIA process challenges us to ongoing formation and growth in our own lives.

In an article in Liturgical Ministry Winter 2009, Berard Marthaler suggests that the RCIA process serves as a model for all of us.

*“It is an introduction to a way of life. It fosters a conversion, a change in one’s vision of reality, behavior patterns, and relationships....It is a reappropriation of the church’s mission and what it means to be Christian in today’s world.”<sup>4</sup>*

For the neophytes and for all us the process and journey of conversion continues – the fundamental decision to commit the whole of life to God – to fall in love with God in an unrestricted fashion - a decision we make every day and at every moment of the day. Conversion is the gradual and life long process of turning more and more to God and allowing God to radically transform our lives.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Leo the Great, From Sermo 6 de Quadragesima. Internet: <http://www.yenra.com/catholic/prayers/leoonlent.html> (accessed January 8, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Lonergan's understanding of religious conversion is described by Ian Bell in "An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern of Experience in the Work of Bernard Lonergan." *Worship*, 81 (November 2007): 521-540.

<sup>3</sup> All references to RCIA are taken from *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Study Edition*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Berard L. Marthaler, "Catechesis: 'A Semantic Evolution'?" *Liturgical Ministry*, 18 (Winter 2009): 10.

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