

An Overview of the RCIA **(Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults)**

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The Historical Development:

The decision to become a member of the early Christian community bore serious ramifications. Becoming Christian meant a break with one's background and often required fracturing relationships with the non-Christian members of one's family. In many cases, this decision meant a willingness to suffer persecution or even death, as seen in the example of the martyrs, St. Perpetua and St. Felicity. St. Perpetua, a noblewoman of Carthage and mother of an infant son, and St. Felicity, a pregnant slave woman, both refused to denounce Christianity and were subsequently martyred during the public games in the amphitheater around AD 200.

Just as the decision to become a Christian was not made lightly, the formation process wasn't quick or easy. **Catechumens** – those in the process of preparing for baptism – were invited into a step-by-step journey of three or more years with the community before achieving full membership. During this process, they were expected not only to begin to accept Christian beliefs but also to begin to live the Christian life. The community shared their faith with the catechumens and celebrated each step along with them.

One period of this preparation has remained throughout the centuries: the season of Lent. Originally this time was one of immediate preparation for baptism, which was celebrated at the Easter Vigil. During Lent, the entire Christian community, especially the catechumens, devoted themselves to prayer, fasting, and self-scrutiny. For those already baptized, it was a time to remember and renew their original commitment.

During the solemn Easter Vigil, the **catechumens** – now called the **elect** – received the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist) and were welcomed into the community. As a rule, this initiation was celebrated at the Easter Vigil only. Formation of the newly baptized did not end with the rites of Holy Saturday night, however, but continued with further instruction and daily living out of Christian values.

This process began to change in the fourth century, when periodic persecution of Christians was replaced by tolerance. Because of the favor many emperors showed toward it, Christianity became fashionable, and many people began entering the **catechumenate** for social and political reasons. As a result, the pattern and standards for formation gradually transitioned to the point where, by the fifth century, the rites of initiation were separated into the three sacraments we know and celebrate today. Infant baptism became the norm, and the **catechumenate** vanished.

The Church published the first *Roman Catechism* in 1566, following the Council of Trent. This book of teachings was presented in question-and-answer form and was used for instruction of the faithful. Such catechisms later became the foundation for what came to be called “convert classes.” Using a teacher-student model, the priest would meet with interested parties and assist them in memorizing certain prayers and learning the material to be covered, and the format were left to the priest or parish custom, with few outside directives given.

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Successful completion of these classes meant either baptism or formal reception into the Catholic Church. This event was usually celebrated in a private ceremony, with only close family in attendance. Those received into the Church would be confirmed by the bishop at the cathedral or would receive the sacrament in their local parish whenever the bishop came to confirm the schoolchildren. Follow-up for the new Catholics, if any, might consist of being sent to a formal course in liturgy, Scripture, dogma, or morality.

Following World War II, a call for a change in the formation of new Catholics came from the Church in Africa. They began to use the ancient form of the **catechumenate** to provide stability in formation and a period of time for faith to mature. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s called for a thorough revision of all the rites (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], 4), and a committee was formed that engaged in a formal study and revision of the methods leading to baptism or reception into the Catholic Church. This study resulted in the promulgation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)* in 1972.

Thus the **catechumenate** was restored: a process of formation, sanctified by various liturgical rites that mark progress in the journey of faith and culminate in full membership in the Catholic Christian community. An integral part of the revision is that the whole process and its rites are to be celebrated with and in the context of the local parish community and diocese.

Catechumenal Model:

The catechumenate is considered a process, rather than a program, because it is a spiritual journey that varies according to time, place, and individual needs. It primarily focusses on:

- Faith development (rather than mastery of doctrine) and maturing in one's relationship with God.
- Building and nourishing relationships, not only among the participants and leaders but within the parish community and the universal Church.

The Periods:

- **Evangelization and Precatechumenate (Inquiry)**
 - The first period is called *inquiry* or the *precatechumenate*. During this period, inquirers form relationships with one another and with their catechists. The sessions are informal and often center upon the life stories that have led each member there with questions such as:
 - What is faith?
 - Who is God, and why does God care about me?

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- How does the Church understand the Bible and the sacraments?
 - What are the roles of Mary and the pope?
 - Why are there statues in Catholic churches?
- Each inquirer will examine the Church and the ways in which its members worship together and live the Christian faith. First impressions of the parish and of all involved are very important. The period culminates in the inquirer's decision to enter the **catechumenate**, the period of formal preparation for entrance into full membership in the Catholic Church.
- **Catechumenate**
 - The **rite of acceptance** marks the beginning of the **catechumenate**, a period of study and reflection on the faith. At this point, the inquirers become **catechumens**. **Candidates** (those already baptized but preparing for full membership in the Catholic Church) formally enter the RCIA process through the **rite of welcoming**. Both publicly state their intention to continue their formation, and the community supports them in their journey. **Sponsors** will act as companions and models of faith and lend their personal support.
 - The length of this period is determined by the needs of each participant and of the community. It can last anywhere from several months to a couple of years. During this time, the **catechumens** and **candidates**:
 - Learn Catholic beliefs.
 - Are exposed to various forms of prayer.
 - Join the community in worship, social events, and charitable activities.
 - Participate in the apostolic life of the Church.
 - During the **catechumenate**, catechesis usually takes place during the Sunday liturgy. The participants are prayerfully dismissed after the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful); the catechists, and sometimes the sponsors, join them in reflecting upon the day's readings and connecting them to their faith and the life of the Church.

“There should be celebrations of the word of God that accord with the liturgical season and that contribute to the instruction of the catechumens and the needs of the community...Celebrations of the word may also be held in connection with catechetical or instructional meetings of the catechumens, so that these will occur

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in a context of prayer.” (RCIA chapter of *The Rites*, Volume One [RCIA], 81, 84)

• **Purification and Enlightenment**

- When the **catechumens** and **candidates** are ready to make a formal request for the sacraments of initiation, and when the catechists and **godparents** are ready to recommend them to the bishop and to the parish community for full membership, the ***rite of election*** is celebrated. This celebration is generally held on the **first** Sunday of Lent. The ***rite of election*** marks the beginning of the **period of purification** and **enlightenment**, the time of immediate preparation for initiation or full reception at the Easter Vigil.
- The beginning of Lent signals a 40-day “retreat” in which the parish joins the **elect** in preparing for the mysteries celebrated at the Easter Vigil. The RCIA sessions are marked by increased emphasis on prayer and the interior life rather than on accumulation of knowledge. Many parishes allow time for a day of prayer especially designed for the **elect** and their supporters. On the **third, fourth, and fifth** Sundays of Lent, the **scrutinies** are celebrated during the liturgy. These rites are prayers of healing in which the **elect**, as well as the faithful, are reminded that everyone needs continued healing, conversion, and reconciliation.

• **Postbaptismal Catechesis (Mystagogy)**

- The Easter Vigil does not mark the end of the RCIA process but the beginning of a commitment to a lifelong discovery and living out of the Catholic Christian tradition. The 50 days from Easter to Pentecost are called the period of **mystagogy**, a Greek word meaning “**entering into the mysteries**.” In the early Church, this time was used to explain the mysteries of the sacraments. Today this period serves as a time for today’s **neophytes** (newly converted) to:
 - Continue to gather, pray, and nourish their faith.
 - Deepen their experiential understanding of God’s word and the sacraments.
 - Center more on the apostolic or social justice aspects of Catholic Christianity.
 - Claim a new role of service in the community. (All Catholics are invited to activate participation in parish life, which includes worship, stewardship, and fellowship.)

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Sponsors and Godparents in the RCIA:

“A person to be baptized is to be given a sponsor who assists an adult in Christian initiation...A sponsor also helps the baptized person to lead a Christian life...” (*Code of Canon Law #872*)

Prior to the **rite of acceptance**, (RCIA) **sponsors** should be chosen for all **catechumens**. **Sponsors** represent the parish community and assist the larger Church in preparing the **catechumen** for baptism (*here, initiation*), testifying to his or her faith, and promising to assist him or her in living the Catholic faith.

Canon 874 lists the basic criteria for **sponsors**. These guidelines are the same for **baptismal godparents** and **confirmation sponsors**, though the roles are somewhat different:

1. The **sponsor** should be designated or invited by the **catechumen** or **candidate**. If he or she doesn't have someone in mind, the RCIA leader or pastor will select an appropriate person from a voluntary pool of parishioners. This is similar to parents choosing **godparents** at the time of their child's baptism.
2. The **sponsor** must be at least **16-years-old** – in other words, mature enough to understand and fulfill this important role.
3. The **sponsor** must be a **confirmed Catholic** “who leads a life of faith” – someone who has already committed to and experienced the Catholic faith journey.
4. No **sponsor** can be subject to a Church penalty such as excommunication.
5. The **sponsor** cannot be the participant's parent.

In the case of infant baptism, the parents already have a unique and important role to play. Some adult **catechumen** desire to have their spouse or a close friend or relative as a **sponsor**. This is generally discouraged, but RCIA leaders and pastors can help the **catechumen** decide whether the potential **sponsor** is sufficiently experienced and objective to fulfill this role.

RCIA leaders should develop a list of parishioners who are willing to become **sponsors** and maintain those connections as new inquirers arrive each year. It is important for **sponsors** with no prior relationship to the **catechumen** to realize that they are committing to an ongoing spiritual relationship. While their ecclesial role technically ends at the **rite of election**, **sponsors** often serve as, or stand in for, **godparents**, whose support lasts a lifetime.

Godparents are chosen before the **rite of election** (*RCIA* 123). Like **sponsors**, they will encourage, inspire, and even hold the **elect** accountable to remain faithful to Christ. It is encouraged that **catechumens** use their RCIA **sponsor** as a **baptismal godparent**.

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The Rites:

- **Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens**
 - This rite marks the first transition in one's journey – the move from being an interested inquirer to an active **catechumen**. (For **candidates** seeking full communion in the Church, the **rite of welcoming** is used. *RCIA* 507 and the following details the combined rite.) The importance of this step is rightly recognized by the Church.
 1. Symbolizing movement into the community, those asking to be received, along with their **sponsors**, begin by standing at the doors of the church (*RCIA* 48). The celebrant introduces them to the worshiping community, and asks, **“What do you ask of the Church?”** They state their desire for initiation, implying their intent to live, learn, and love with the community.
 2. The sign of the cross is marked on each forehead, symbolizing the love and strength of Christ that accompanies each person (*RCIA* 54-55). This sign of faith may also be marked on their:
 - a. Ears (to hear the Lord's voice).
 - b. Eyes (to see God's glory).
 - c. Lips (to respond to God's word).
 - d. Heart (that Christ may dwell there).
 - e. Shoulders (to bear the gentle yoke of Christ).
 - f. Hands (that their work witnesses to Christ).
 - g. Feet (to walk in Christ's way). (*RCIA* 56)
 3. After the signing, **catechumens** and **sponsors** are formally invited to enter the church and to join in the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word (*RCIA* 60). Following the homily, the **catechumens** should be called forward and dismissed with a book of the Gospels or a cross (*RCIA* 64). They are specially included in the Mass' intercessory prayers before being formally dismissed from the assembly in order to pray and reflect upon the Scriptures (*RCIA* 65-67).

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- **Other Rites in the Catechumenate**

- Other liturgical rites during this period, although optional, are significant to the continuing faith development of both participants and parishes:
 - Celebrations of the word of God (*RCIA* 81-89).
 - Minor exorcisms (*RCIA* 90-93).
 - Blessings (*RCIA* 95-96).
 - Anointing (*RCIA* 98-101).
 - Sending (*RCIA* 106-117).

- **Rite of Election**

- The importance of this rite is accented by the fact that it is often celebrated by the bishop (or bishop's representative) at the diocesan cathedral. The transition is marked further by a change of title and in the selection of the **godparent(s)** beforehand.
- After the **catechumens** have been presented to the bishop and approved by the assembly (*RCIA* 130-131), their names are inscribed in the *Book of the Elect* (*RCIA* 132). Intercessory prayers and a special blessing for the **elect** follow this sacred moment.

- **The Scrutinies**

1. The **first scrutiny** takes place on the 3rd Sunday of Lent. Its focus is the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5-42). After special intercessory prayers, the celebrant prays that the **elect** may be exorcised from the powers of sin (*RCIA* 150-156). During the week that follows, the presentation of the Creed should be formally made, preferably after a homily within Mass (*RCIA* 157-163).
2. The **second scrutiny** takes place on the 4th Sunday of Lent. It focuses on the story of the man born blind (John 9:1-4). Again, after the intercessions, the celebrant prays that the **elect** may be exorcised from the powers of sin (*RCIA* 164-170).
3. The **third scrutiny** takes place on the 5th Sunday of Lent. This Sunday focuses on the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45). Intercessory prayers from the worshipping community and prayers of exorcism from the celebrant again follow (*RCIA* 171-177). During the following week, the Presentation of the Lord's Prayer should be made, preferably after the reading of the Lord's Prayer from Matthew's Gospel. Following the homily, the celebrant calls on the community to pray silently for the **elect**. Before their dismissal, the celebrant bestows a special blessing upon the **elect** (*RCIA* 178-184)

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• **Rites of Preparation**

- When it's possible to bring the elect together on Holy Saturday for reflection and prayer, these rites may be used in immediate preparation for the reception of the sacraments (*RCIA* 185 and following). If the presentation of the *Creed* or the presentation of the *Lord's Prayer* has not been celebrated already, they could be celebrated now. An ***ephphetha rite*** (a rite of opening the ears and mouth, symbolizing the hearing and proclaiming of the word) is a fitting preparation rite, as is the ***rite of choosing a baptismal name***. Any or all of these rites serve to set the stage for the highlight of the RCIA experience: the sacraments of initiation.

• **Sacraments of Initiation**

- After months or years of sharing the faith, the RCIA journey culminates in this very special parish celebration. Holy Saturday is the night to celebrate, and the Church celebrates in style. In the early Church the Easter Vigil lasted until dawn; today's vigil lasts only a few hours (depending on the parish, generally between two and four). It is the most glorious celebration of the entire liturgical year.
 1. This night begins in total darkness. The parish community may assemble outside for the blessing of the fire. Then, as the celebrant processes into the church, proclaiming the ***Light of Christ***, each person lights a taper from the new Easter candle that has been blessed and ignited with the new fire. Soon the church is aglow with flame.
 2. The Liturgy of the Word begins in candlelight. There are seven readings from the Old Testament provided, but it is not necessary to proclaim all seven. Psalms are interspersed between each reading.
 3. Before the New Testament epistle is read, the "***Gloria***" rings out, the altar candles and electric lights are lit, and the Church bells are joyously rung. With this, the glorious "***Alleluia***," the Gospel, and the homily, the stage is set for the sacraments of initiation.
 4. The rite of baptism begins with the calling forth of those to be baptized. A litany of the saints follows, and the celebrant blesses the water by plunging the Easter candle into the baptismal pool. Baptism follows, and the newly baptized are clothed in white garments.
 5. Once the baptisms are concluded, the candidates are called forward to profess their belief in the holy Catholic Church. They join the newly baptized, and the rite of confirmation is celebrated with the laying on of hands and anointing with chrism. Then the whole assembly renews their

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baptismal vows and the celebrant ritually sprinkles everyone with the newly blessed waters of baptism.

6. The Mass continues with the Universal Prayer and Liturgy of the Eucharist. When it's time to receive Communion, the new Catholics – along with their godparents, sponsors, catechists, and family members – lead the congregation in the Eucharistic feast. This is the culmination of initiation: sharing at the table and being sent forth.

Traits of an Effective RCIA Sponsor:

There is no one way to be a good sponsor, but certain qualities do increase a sponsor's potential. These qualities will help you recruit, maintain, and even be a better sponsor:

- **A sponsor is willing to share the faith.**
 - A **sponsor** should talk with his or her **catechumen** about his or her faith, love, commitment, and relationship with Jesus Christ. This person shares simple ways to put our faith into words and actions to help the **catechumen** deepen his or her relationship with Jesus.
- **A sponsor is prayerful.**
 - A **sponsor** has and knows the importance of an active prayer life and prays for his or her **catechumen**. This person is aware of and sensitive to the many different ways of praying. He or she may even teach the **catechumen** how to pray.
- **A sponsor is welcoming and hospitable.**
 - A good **sponsor** makes his or her **catechumen** feel comfortable in and around the parish. Whether at an RCIA session, Mass, or another parish function, this person goes out of the way to greet the **catechumen**, sit and visit with him or her, and introduce him or her to others.
- **A sponsor is a good listener.**
 - All **catechumens** are seeking God in one way or another. Some are very forthcoming with their story and questions; others are more reluctant. Sometimes what is *not* said is just as revealing. A good **sponsor** remains available, respects privacy, and listens as much (if not more) than he or she talks.
- **A sponsor is understanding and supportive.**
 - A **sponsor** tries to understand the **catechumen's** feelings, concerns, joys, and uncertainties. This person shows empathy and compassion no matter what is going on and how the person feels. If something serious arises, he or she can refer the **catechumen** to the RCIA coordinator or pastor.

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- **A sponsor is informed and involved.**
 - Good **sponsors** help their **catechumen** by staying informed of news and events not only in the parish and the RCIA but also in the larger and universal Church. This person reads the bulletin, follows the Church in the media, and keeps track of the RCIA schedule. Better yet, he or she attends every session possible and obtains copies of the material to share in the experience and renew his or her own understanding.

- **A sponsor is willing to challenge.**
 - If a **catechumen** shows a lack of commitment, serious hesitation, or resistance to the process, the **sponsor** should ask kindly about the situation. Being honest and willing to talk about potential conflicts will ensure the spiritual well-being and best interests of the **catechumen** and the Church. The RCIA coordinator or pastor may know the best way to address difficult situations.

Integrating the Parish Community:

The RCIA process can renew the entire parish. It is a constant reminder of our roots, our heritage, and our traditions. Each beginning offers an opportunity for all to revisit their own journey of faith, to share how God is with us, and to mature in our relationships with God and each other. When expressed through the life of the parish, the RCIA can facilitate a continuous conversion process throughout the community and an ever clearer image of the reign of God.