

RCIA for Adults Explained

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:19-20).

Introduction

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is the process, established for the universal Church, for individuals to become Catholic and receive the sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. This initiation process also involves a parish community experiencing a renewal in faith as it prepares and welcomes new members into the Church.

The Rite speaks of conversion as a "spiritual journey." Centered on fostering a deep relationship with Jesus and the Church he founded, this journey takes place through distinct stages over a period of time suitable to bring about a thorough catechesis, significant experience of the parish community, and commitment to the liturgical and moral life of the Catholic faithful.

The RCIA process is a restoration of the ancient catechumenate, arising within the first three centuries following the era of the apostles. It was the early Church's way of Christianizing the pagan Roman Empire. The Second Vatican Council called for the restoration and use of this venerable and powerful method of initiation for the worldwide Church (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 64).

The RCIA process may last for only a few months or could last for years, depending on the needs and the readiness of the catechumens and candidates. When a child is baptized, the Church expects that the child will be gradually initiated over the years into the life of faith by his or her parents and godparents, and the parish community. When an adult or older child enters the Church, they immediately need to be initiated more completely before they receive the sacraments. The RCIA is designed to allow people to move forward when they are ready for the next step of their formation.

Periods and Steps of the Process

When people first consider becoming Catholic, they enter into a period of evangelization and catechesis known as the precatechumenate. This is a time for inquiry and introduction into the life of the Catholic Church, its teachings, and into the richness of Sacred Scripture. The period has no fixed duration or structure and has no formal ritual or celebrations, although prayer is an element of learning about and experiencing the Catholic way of life.

Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate:

This is a time for inquiry and evangelization, an opportunity for the beginnings of faith. Here the seed is planted through the proclamation of the Gospel and the story of salvation history.

First Step: Rite of Acceptance Into the Order of Catechumens, and/or Rite of Welcoming:

When they make the decision to join the Church, they are accepted into the Order of Catechumens in a liturgical rite that marks the beginning of the formal period of initiation into the Church. During the catechumenate, the catechumen's faith is nurtured through celebrations of prayers and blessings, and through a course of study and formation. If a person dies while a catechumen, he or she receives a full Christian burial and is considered to have been a member of Christ's body, the Church.

The **Rite of Acceptance** into the Order of Catechumens is for inquirers in the RCIA process who are preparing for their Baptism. They are now ready to publicly declare their intention to continue their journey toward becoming Catholics. At this Rite, they are asked to more fully embrace the Gospel message with the help of God, and are also signed with the Cross to show that they now belong to Christ, the Shepherd of souls. In this Rite, the parish community has the opportunity to more fully participate in and pray for those in the RCIA process. This Rite places these catechumens in a formal relationship with the universal Church. By Church law, the Pope and all bishops are to pray for those who have gone through this Rite.

The **Rite of Welcoming** is for inquirers who have been previously baptized and are ready to publicly declare their intention to continue

their journey toward full communion with the Catholic Church. At this Rite, they are asked if they are ready to listen to the apostles' instruction, gather with the worshipping community in prayer, and join that community in the love and service of others. They are signed with the Cross to show that they belong to Christ.

Period of the Catechumenate:

This is an extended period for pastoral formation and guidance aimed at training participants in the Christian life; it includes a thoroughly comprehensive catechesis on the truths of Catholic doctrine and moral life.

The Catechumenate contains the following Minor Rites:

- Celebrations of the Word of God
- Minor Exorcisms (for catechumens)
- Anointings (for catechumens)
- Blessings

Second Step: Rite of Sending, and Rite of Election and/or Call to Continuing Conversion:

When people are ready to enter the Church, they begin a period of purification and enlightenment that normally takes place during Lent. On the First Sunday of Lent, those seeking to become Catholics usually participate in the Rite of Election with their bishop. During this period, the people, now called the elect, are prayed for publicly during Mass each Sunday as they go through an intense period of conversion where they spend much time in fasting and prayer, and living out the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy.

The **Rite of Sending**, ordinarily held earlier on the same day, offers the parish community an opportunity to acknowledge the spiritual progress the catechumens and candidates have

made, express approval of their election or recognition, and send them forth to our bishop with assurance of the parish's care and support. To send a catechumen or candidate to the bishop means that a parish has discerned that the person is ready to enter the Catholic Church.

In Sacred Scripture, the Book of Revelation makes reference to a "Book

of Life," in which are written the names of those who have chosen to follow the Lord Jesus and be baptized. Those who are already baptized, as Catholics or in other denominations, had our names written in the Book of Life at our Baptism. In this Rite, those preparing for Baptism are invited to come forward and sign a book, which we call the "Book of the Elect," as a sign of their desire to be numbered among the chosen of God.

The **Rite of Election** marks a key moment. For the catechumens this Rite signifies that they have been called by Christ and attests to the reality that only those mystically claimed by Christ will enter Heaven.

St. John writes, "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:15). Throughout the RCIA process, catechumens should have become increasingly involved with the parish community. The community, with godparents representing the parish, will wholeheartedly acclaim the participants' readiness. It is appropriate for the bishop to recognize them because he is the sign of unity of the particular Church, and it is the parish community's responsibility to bring those in RCIA into the fullness of the life of the Church.

The godparents give public testimony about the catechumens. The godparents' role is very significant; they represent the community and are asked during this Rite to make serious statements about the catechumens. The decision of an RCIA participant to go through this Rite means that the judgment and decision-making (of both the catechumen and the parish) about whether to enter the Catholic Church has ended. From this point forward, they are no longer catechumens but are called the "elect." They have been chosen to enter into the final period of preparation for initiation, and called by the bishop, their shepherd, to the holy mysteries to be celebrated that Easter.

The **Call to Continuing Conversation** is for all who have been baptized, the reality of being chosen and claimed by Christ took place at their Baptism. This is true for the baptized candidates as well. Therefore the Rite of Election is inappropriate for them; they are already among the elect in Christ. Instead, the candidates are "called to continuing conversion," and thus their intention to be fully initiated and share in the Eucharist is recognized. This Rite also takes place before the bishop, normally as part of the same liturgical event as the Rite of

Election for those who are unbaptized.

With their sponsors standing in support of them, the candidates are addressed by the bishop: "Hear the Lord's call to conversion and be faithful to your baptismal covenant." (RCIA 454) Together with the elect, the candidates are thereby moved by this Rite into a period of intense spiritual preparation.

Period of Purification and Enlightenment:

Coinciding with Lent, this period consists more in interior reflection than in instruction. It is intended to enlighten the minds and hearts of participants with a deep knowledge of Christ the Savior.

The period of Purification and Enlightenment contains the following Minor Rites:

- Penitential Rite (for candidates)
- Scrutinies (for catechumens)
- Presentation of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer
- Preparation Rites

Third Step: Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation:

This is the liturgical rite, usually integrated into the Easter Vigil, by which the elect are initiated through Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist, and the candidates receive whatever sacraments of initiation that they have yet to receive. Candidates might in some parishes, receive the Sacraments on a particular Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy during the Easter Season.

Period of Post-Baptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy:

Following the Easter Vigil when the candidates or the elect receive the Sacraments of Initiation, these new Catholics—now called neophytes—enter into their final period of formation, called the mystagogy, a period of post-baptismal catechesis that lasts for the six weeks of the Easter season. During this time they reflect on their experience of receiving the sacraments and gather together each Sunday with all the faithful at Mass. They are now fully initiated members of the Church with all the rights and responsibilities that go with it.

Mystagogy is a time for deepening the Christian experience, especially

in appreciation for the sacramental life, for spiritual growth, and for entering more fully into the life and unity of the Catholic community. The neophytes now share with Christ, and his Body in the parish community, the intimate communion of the Eucharist, and they have access to all the means of sanctification. We as a parish community pledge to help them grow and mature in the Christian life and to develop a genuine Catholic world view.

Like all the faithful, neophytes are called to continue to grow in faith once their formal formation process is completed. One of the best ways for adults to continue their formation in Christ is to help them to become more aware of the connection between the Sunday Scriptures and everyday life.

Portions of this document are from – On the Journey Series: RCIA