

## DEEPENING IN THE GRACES RECEIVED

### *RCIA Catechesis in the Period of Post-Baptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy*

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul. Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. . . . For he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls*

*~ 1 Peter 2:9-12, 24-25*

The introductory article to this series (*To the Threshold and to the Fullness: What is the RCIA supposed to be?*) published in the October-December 2003 issue, included the following comment: "The catechumenate seeks to impart an understanding of the Faith in such a way as to transform the life of the catechumen or candidate. The RCIA process not only results in a change of status with respect to the Church, but also a change of status with respect to God. The process is intended to be life-changing. This intention is most efficaciously carried through in the liturgical celebrations of the catechumenate and continues as the neophyte becomes a full participant in the sacramental life of the Church. In the *period of mystagogy*, the focus is on a deepening of the neophytes' understanding and practice of the sacramental life, with the rest of the neophyte year devoted to substantiating, strengthening, and deepening their understanding of the Faith that will lead to a more committed and mature practice of Christian living."

The grace received from the Easter mysteries propels the new Catholics into the final period of post-baptismal catechesis, called mystagogy. The term comes from

the Greek *mystagogia*, which refers to instruction in the mysteries or sacraments. Ordinarily, this period following reception of the sacraments of initiation lasts for seven weeks from Easter to Pentecost.

Mystagogy is properly situated after the reception of the sacraments because only then do our fledgling Catholics, the neophytes, have the grace to understand and appreciate the sacred mysteries of the Church in a more profound manner. The process of penetrating deeper into the mysteries of God continues past the period of mystagogy into the remainder of the neophyte year as they frequent the sacraments and strive for holiness. While the neophyte year terminates the following Easter, this process of continually penetrating the mysteries characterizes Christian existence. We are pilgrims here on earth, sustained and nourished by the Eucharist, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that awaits all of us.

The intimate relationship that RCIA participants have longed to share with Christ and his Body in the parish community is realized in the Eucharist, the true source of communion and the authentic sign of unity. Now all have

access to the full means for sanctification. Even so, care must be taken during their first few years as Catholics, especially in the neophyte year, to help them to grow and mature in the Christian life and to develop a genuine Catholic worldview.

What is meant by a Catholic worldview? It is the way that a Catholic thinks about and perceives the authentic realities and transcendent truths — the absolute truths — that guide and direct life in Christ. Becoming Catholic is not simply joining a club; it is a total change of attitude, perception, and intent in life. They have always had a worldview, whether or not they consciously thought about it. It was and continues to be formed by the culture in which they live and the events of their lives. Now, as Catholics, their worldview is radically changing, thanks to the catechumenal process, prayer, their own acts of charity, and especially the abundant graces which they are now receiving in the sacraments. As their minds and hearts continue to be fed on Scripture and the truths of the faith, and are transformed by the graces received in the sacraments, the fullness of Catholic truth gradually permeates all areas of their thinking. They may find themselves more sensitive to issues concerning life, human dignity, social justice, the value of suffering, the importance of family and vocation, the dignity of labor, and stewardship of the natural world. The list can go on to touch every aspect of human life and society.

This process takes time. It usually takes three to five years for neophytes to consistently think and feel like Catholics. Issues may come up, not necessarily entirely new but presenting themselves in a new light, or issues may arise that they had never dealt with before, and suddenly they surprise themselves by looking at them in a new way because of their Catholic formation. Catechesis seeks to support this process of change during the period of mystagogy and the rest of the neophyte year, aiding the transition from the firm personal conviction that

brought them into the Church to a more fully mature Catholic worldview, seeing the world and its concerns as Christ and his Church see them. That will keep them enduringly Catholic in thought and actions.

During this period, the deepest meaning of discipleship must be examined, including the responsibilities to witness and to bring the light of the Gospel to every corner of the world. The Church has designed the Year A Lectionary readings for the Sundays and the Solemnity of the Ascension to form the basis for the teaching during this period (see RCIA 247). Below

***“The distinctive spirit  
and power of the period  
of postbaptismal catechesis  
or mystagogy derive  
from the new, personal  
experience of the sacraments  
and of the community.” (RCIA 247)***

is a summary of some of the mystagogical themes present in the readings for Year A:

- ✠ ***Second Sunday of Easter — Sacrament of Penance — Apostolicity***  
Acts 2:42-47; Ps 118; 1 Pt 1:3-9; Jn 20:19-31
- ✠ ***Third Sunday of Easter — Emmaus Event — Paradigm for the Mass***  
Acts 2:14, 22-33; Ps 16; 1 Pt 1:17-21; Lk 24:13-35
- ✠ ***Fourth Sunday of Easter — The Church as the Sheepfold — Relationship with Jesus***  
Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Ps 23; 1 Pt 2:20b-25; Jn 10:1-10
- ✠ ***Fifth Sunday of Easter — Heaven — Relationship with the Father through Jesus***  
Acts 6:1-7; Ps 33; 1 Pt 2:4-9; Jn 14:1-12
- ✠ ***Sixth Sunday of Easter — Relationship with the Spirit through Jesus — “do whatever he tells you”***  
Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; Ps 66; 1 Pt 3:15-18; Jn 14:15-20
- ✠ ***Ascension — The Great Commission — Evangelism/Witness — Necessity of Baptism***  
Acts 1:1-11; Ps 47; Eph 1:17-23; Mt 28:16-20
- ✠ ***Seventh Sunday of Easter — Prayer for Unity and Glorification of the Church — Apostolicity***  
Acts 1:12-14; Ps 27; 1 Pt 4:13-16; Jn 17:1-11a

It is assumed that many of the truths discussed in this period will have been presented earlier in the RCIA

***One Suggested Arrangement of Teachings  
During the Weeks of the Easter Season***

Sacramental Living in the Apostolic Church  
The Mass as the Way of Life  
Evangelization and the Call of the Good Shepherd  
Personal Devotion to Jesus  
Ecumenism and Other Religions  
Becoming a Saint  
The Catholic Worldview

***A Second Suggested Arrangement of Teachings  
During the Weeks of the Easter Season***

Pursuing Holiness in Holy Mother Church  
The Eucharist as a Call to Virtue  
Who Is Jesus to You Now?  
Who is the Father to You Now?  
Who is the Holy Spirit to You Now?  
Being Catholic in a Non-Catholic Society  
God’s Plan for the Glory of His Life in You

process. The catechesis here thus seeks to deepen what has been offered in prior months. As always, liturgy is central in considering what to teach when; that is, catechesis should, as in other periods, be taught to and from the major and minor rites of the RCIA process. In teaching TO the rites, for the period of mystagogy, look to RCIA 229, 230, 244 and following. In teaching FROM the rites for this period teach to the newly available sacramental life.

The work of these seven weeks of the Easter season is to more profoundly challenge and encourage the neophytes to become true disciples of Jesus. Discipleship means to know, to think, and to act like Christ. Jesus gathered his first disciples around him in order to reveal the mysteries of his Kingdom: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven...Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Mt 13:11, 16). This revelation of the secrets by Christ to his disciples has been preserved in the Sacred Scriptures and Sacred Tradition of the Catholic Church. In order to think like Christ, the neophytes must seek to become “impregnated” with the teachings of Christ as transmitted by his Church (CT 20). St. Paul commends all Christians not to “be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal of your mind” by the study of God’s Word (Rom 12:2).

And yet Christ’s teachings must be not only intellectual knowledge, but also apply personally. The neophyte should be encouraged to absorb this body of truth and to live more deeply the Christian life. It is in seeking to know God in faith and assenting to him that the faithful come to understand his teaching more fully, since the greatest way to show love for God is through obedience to his will (Mt 7:21; 1 Jn 5:2-3). He rewards this embrace of his will with a greater understanding of his mysteries. The neophytes are thus also called to live the moral life with a serious pursuit of sanctity. It is the grace that comes from the sacramental liturgical life that allows the neophytes (and all the faithful) to live a life of charity and to pursue holiness. It is a time to learn what it means to be glorified and what it means to be holy. Discipleship also means to recognize that alone we can do nothing at all, but that God

can do everything through us, for “in him, we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

During the first year as a Catholic, care must be taken to be sure that each neophyte is securely established in the life of the parish. The difficulties of this year can be very great. These fledgling Catholics cannot be neglected or forgotten once weekly organized instruction and spiritual direction is completed, but instead must be helped to increase in faith, hope, and charity as they grow in the moral life and the liturgical life. They must have support and strengthening. Some means for facilitating that are: a library or collection of materials to continue a study of the faith; a retreat

### *Ideas for this Period:*

- ✦ Ask neophytes to share their experiences of the sacraments.
- ✦ Tell the Story of the “wonderful works” of God again, this time highlighting the sacramental life, foretold in the Old Testament and now available to them in the New Testament.
- ✦ Proclaim and reflect on Scripture for the post-baptismal catechesis, especially the Sunday readings of Year A.
- ✦ Sing songs to celebrate. Repeat songs from throughout the initiation process and the Easter Vigil.
- ✦ Pray together: Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic adoration, spontaneous prayer, meditation, silent reflection
- ✦ Tell stories of saints, such as those who were baptized or received into the Church as adults. Discuss the Universal Call to Holiness.
- ✦ Discuss current moral/social issues in the light of the Church’s teaching to help neophytes gain a “Catholic worldview.”
- ✦ Encourage neophytes to continue asking questions as they come up. Answer them.
- ✦ Make a pilgrimage to a local shrine, the Cathedral; attend a Mass for new Catholics with the bishop.
- ✦ Have a potluck with the pastor.
- ✦ Help neophytes begin a Bible study or join a small faith-sharing group in the parish.
- ✦ Discuss what it means to share in the Church’s mission of evangelization – spread the Good News!
- ✦ Share involvement in social outreach activities in the parish.
- ✦ Have a retreat for neophytes near the anniversary of their initiation.
- ✦ Keep in touch! – Maintain a mailing list of neophytes; send a newsletter; create a website; insist that sponsors maintain regular contact with neophytes.

### *A Third Suggested Arrangement of Teachings During the Weeks of the Easter Season*

How Baptism Enables the Call to Holiness  
 How Confirmation Enables the Call to Holiness  
 How the Eucharist Enables the Call to Holiness  
 How Reconciliation Enables the Call to Holiness  
 How Anointing of the Sick Enables the Call to Holiness  
 How Marriage Enables the Call to Holiness  
 How Holy Orders Enables the Call to Holiness

focusing on faith, hope and love; a Bible study with new friends in the parish; specific invitations to parish missions, presentations by visiting speakers and other adult education events; a monthly neophyte newsletter; monthly gatherings with the pastor or members of the pastoral team just to chat or share a meal. Every benefit must be provided for answering questions, identifying misconceptions, and imparting encouragement and hope.

With the grace of the sacraments, the neophytes are now able to deepen their grasp of the Paschal Mystery via meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the Eucharist, and serving others in acts of charity (see RCIA 244). The very existence of this final stage following the sacraments implies that the sacraments are not an end but a beginning. From this point on, the new Catholics will continue in a life of ongoing conversion. Called to a life of holiness, the Christian can always deepen in the daily joy and struggle of more fully cooperating with God's grace. Then the disciple of Jesus hopefully can say, like the apostle Paul, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (see Gal 2:19-20).

This series of six articles on the RCIA process concludes as it began, with an emphasis on the value of the catechumenal process to the mission of the Church. RCIA is a privileged and, in many ways, challengingly complex form of adult formation. Its complexity flows from the need for the process to be authentically truthful (implying catechesis that is far removed from the easy sound-bite answers and errors of the culture), authentically personal (implying pastoral flexibility and sacrificial effort to call forth from people deep conversion), and authentically unitive (implying insertion into a profoundly countercultural liturgical way of life to realize union with a divine Spouse). In other words, to the degree that the RCIA process is complex, it is so because it must be *fully human*, so that it may be fully open to the divine. The restoration of the ancient catechumenal process, as called for in no less than five documents of the Second Vatican Council, is a reflection of the Church's wisdom in going back to a tried and true practice in order to lovingly bring people into her fold.

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