

PREPARING TO RECEIVE THE LIFE OF GOD

RCIA Catechesis in the Period of Purification and Enlightenment

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us... For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote, "I believed, and so I spoke," we too believe, and so we speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence... So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison...

~ 2 Corinthians 4:7, 11-14, 16-17

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: "During the *period of purification and enlightenment*, the focus becomes a stronger emphasis on the spiritual and mystical life in preparation for the sacraments. The guidelines for this period (which normally coincides with Lent) as well as the rites associated with them, enable catechists to shift the focus of teaching from an exposition of the Deposit of Faith to reflection and meditation. Before they receive the sacraments of initiation, 'the elect must have the intention of achieving an intimate knowledge of Christ and His Church, and they are expected particularly to progress in genuine self-knowledge through serious examination of their lives and true repentance'" (RCIA 142).

The Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion (see RCIA, 118-137; 446-458; 547-561)

At this second step (the first being the Rites of Acceptance and Welcoming), on the basis of the testimony of godparents and catechists and of the

catechumens' reaffirmation of their intention, the Church judges their state of readiness and decides on their advancement towards the sacraments of initiation. Before the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion, participants should manifest:

- ✦ A conversion in mind and in action
- ✦ Developed a sufficient acquaintance with Christian teaching
- ✦ Developed a sufficient acquaintance with faith and charity
- ✦ An intention to receive the sacraments of the Church

Within the Rite of Election the bishop celebrant or his delegate declares in the presence of the community the Church's approval of those participating. Therefore to exclude any semblance of mere formality from the rite, there should be a deliberation in the parish setting some time prior to its celebration to decide on the catechumens' suitability. This deliberation is carried out by the priests, deacons, and catechists involved in the formation of the catechumens, and by the godparents and representatives of the local community. This may take the form of the pastor or his delegate receiving input from these sources and then privately meeting with each participant to discern readiness.

Proximal Preparation for the Sacraments

As has been stated, in this period the focus shifts toward spiritual preparation for the sacraments of initiation. The themes of repentance and holiness are constant throughout this period. Catechesis in the period of Purification and Enlightenment should be significantly informed by the rites that inaugurate and permeate these weeks of preparation. Interior reflection (on God's love for his people, his faithful provision, his call to turn to him fully), should seek to lead participants to repentance, acts of penance, a desire to offer thanksgiving, and more fervent practice of fraternal charity. The elect and candidates should turn to an ever-deepening study of Christ the Savior, focusing on the climactic events of the Paschal mystery.

This period should be permeated with a spirit of prayer and retreat. The method of teaching *to* and *from* the rites becomes indispensable here. Especially in this period, the liturgy is the prime way the catechist should think about teaching the faith. Inserting participants into the liturgy is equivalent to beginning to insert them into eternity. Liturgy is central in considering what to teach when; that is, catechesis should be taught *to* and *from* the major and minor rites of the RCIA process. **Teaching to the rites** means looking at the questions and answers for each rite, and ensuring that the teaching gives participants what they need in order to respond with understanding and conviction. **Teaching from the rites** means looking at the proclamations and intercessions that are part of each rite to identify what the Church prays for the participants to experience in the *next* period of the process. This hope expressed in the rites then helps shape the catechesis in the next stage of their journey. In teaching *TO* the rites, for the period of Purification and Enlightenment, look to RCIA 573, 580 and 591. In teaching *FROM* the rites for this period, look primarily to RCIA 558. As an important note: teaching *to* and *from* the rites does not mean that the *participants* are to study the rites and cited passages themselves; rather it means that the catechist must do so to help participants more fully enter into the rites when they take place.

One Suggested Arrangement of Teachings During the Weeks of Lent

Adoration of God the Son (Transfiguration)
Mercy and Humility of the Son (Samaritan Woman)
Spiritual Blindness and Pride (Blind Man)
Liturgical Prayer and the Hope of New Life (Lazarus)
The Lord's Prayer and Forgiveness
Eucharistic Meditation and Chaplet of Divine Mercy
Meditation on the Sacraments in the Church Fathers

Although the Lectionary is not specifically designed to provide a systematic, gradual unfolding of the faith for *every part* of the RCIA process (certainly not during the Precatechumenate and Catechumenate periods), Lectionary-based catechesis, using the Year A readings, is specifically called for as a foundation for *systematic* catechesis during the majority of the period of Purification and Enlightenment. In this case, the Lectionary readings have specifically been chosen to provide prefiguration and types of revelation and grace which Jesus has now made fully available through the sacraments of the New Covenant (see RCIA 146, 462). The ritual book's call for Lectionary-based catechesis at this time helps clarify that the Church's official RCIA guidelines are not operating by *implicitly* calling for general application of Lectionary-based catechesis, but instead *explicitly* calling for this method only when appropriate.

Since the Easter sacraments are the high point of the liturgical journey, the Church sets aside the whole season of Lent for preparation. As well, there are three Scrutinies for the elect and one Penitential Rite for the candidates; the Presentation Rites; and the Preparation Rites for Holy Saturday. All of these liturgical rites, found in the RCIA ritual book, should be studied closely for the sake of those coming into the Church. Based on a study of the guidelines and rites of this period, the following themes emerge which can serve as aids when preparing the sessions for this period:

- ✠ **The Mystery of Sin** — The power of sin (RCIA 141, 143); acknowledgement of sin and failing (RCIA 153); forgiveness of sin and freedom from the effects of sin (RCIA 144, 154, 469).
- ✠ **The Power of Darkness** — Satan and his minions (RCIA 141); freedom from the effects of the devil (RCIA 144); protection against temptation (RCIA 141).
- ✠ **Purification of Heart and Mind** — A search of the conscience (RCIA 139); renunciation of self and penance (RCIA 139, 469); conversion and change of heart (RCIA 153, 469).
- ✠ **The Healing Effect of Mercy** — Revelation and the healing of weakness (RCIA 469); freedom from

A Second Suggested Arrangement of Teachings During the Weeks of Lent

The Eucharist as Christ Revealed (Transfiguration)
Sin and the Challenge of Purity (Samaritan Woman)
Sin and the Challenge of Humility (Blind Man)
The Dignity of Life in Christ (Lazarus)
Teaching on Holy Week
Workshop on the Sacrament of Reconciliation
Lord's Prayer as a Prayer of Unity

falsehoods concerning God (RCIA 470); Christ, the Lord of Mercy, in Baptism and Penance (RCIA 167, 299).

- ✠ **The Tremendous Sacrament of Baptism** – Reflection on their Baptism (or their coming Baptism) (RCIA 452, 556); ransomed by Christ, being baptized into his Death and Resurrection (RCIA 168, 174); members of his body, brothers and sisters in God’s family (RCIA 134, 452, 465).
- ✠ **A Deeper Knowledge of Christ, the Savior** – Recognition of Christ’s presence in daily life (RCIA 470); obedience to him (RCIA 131, 556); being conformed to Christ’s suffering (RCIA 456).
- ✠ **Prayer** – Spiritual recollection (RCIA 138); interior reflection (RCIA 139); the help of the Holy Spirit (RCIA 153).

The **Penitential Rite** (see RCIA, 459-472), the **Scrutinies** and the **Exorcisms** illustrate the pastoral focus of this period: The guidelines (RCIA, 141) states that the scrutinies are celebrated in order to:

- ✠ Deliver the elect from the power of sin and Satan
- ✠ Protect them against temptation
- ✠ Give them strength in Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life (see John 14:6)

These rites, therefore, should:

- ✠ Help complete the conversion of the elect
- ✠ Deepen their resolve to hold fast to Christ
- ✠ Lead them to carry out their decision to love God above all

In this period of extended retreat, clergy, catechists, and other team members should help participants recognize Satan’s deeds of deception and discouragement, which tempt them to abandon what they had started. Reminding them of their new-found convictions, and to what they committed before the bishop at the Rites of Election and Calling to Continuing Conversion, catechesis on prayer and spirituality aims to stir up more fervent faith and dispel darkness. Most

A Third Suggested Arrangement of Teachings During the Weeks of Lent

The Transfiguration and the Light of Faith
The Woman at the Well and Baptism’s Living Water
The Man Born Blind and Seeing All That Jesus Offers
Lazarus and Our Resurrection in the Second Coming
Reconciliation as a Sacrament of Healing
Praying with Scripture and the Our Father
Eucharist: Source and Summit of Catholic Worship

importantly, participants may need intense prayer for painful situations, or work harder to end sinful habits and lingering doubts. Knowing the difficulties of this period, the Church provides powerful rites to sustain and strengthen participants’ resolve to hold fast to Christ and his Church. As Holy Week carries the liturgical crescendo to its height, participants should feel that the catechesis of the Lenten period has, above all, been for them the Word of God spoken to those who have ears to hear, to lead them to the Word of God made flesh for those who have hearts to worship. “Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height and look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east, at the Word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them” (Baruch 5:5).

Ideas for this Period:

- ✠ Give a prayer book for the Lenten Season and Stations of the Cross
- ✠ Explain fasting and redemptive suffering
- ✠ Schedule a retreat weekend (this might be the first opportunity offered for the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the candidates for full communion)
- ✠ Pray with the prayers of the scrutinies
- ✠ Offer special prayer times: They could include intercession for the needs of the Church, meditation on the life of Christ in the rosary, time before the Blessed Sacrament, or recitation of Evening Prayer or Night Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours
- ✠ Spiritual reading of Scripture and the lives of the saints
- ✠ Examination of conscience in preparation for Baptism
- ✠ Examination of conscience and formal preparation (for those already baptized) for the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to the Sacraments of Initiation. (See RCIA, 482 and National Statutes, 36)
- ✠ Participation in the Lenten activities of the parish should certainly be part of this time. With all of the above and explanations of such devotions as the Stations of the Cross there would certainly be continuing education, but not in the same manner as in the previous stages

Catechesis in the Period of Purification and Enlightenment should be significantly informed by the rites that inaugurate and permeate these weeks of preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation:

Penitential Rite (*baptized*)

- ✠ 2nd Sunday of Lent – Year A, B, C (Transfiguration of Christ from one of the synoptic Gospels) “help to prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance” (RCIA 461)
- ~ Seek forgiveness of sins and healing of weaknesses (RCIA 469, 470)
- ~ Seek readiness for sealing by the Holy Spirit (RCIA 469)
- ~ Seek readiness for being fed at the Lord’s Table (RCIA 469)

Scrutinies (*unbaptized*)

- ✠ 3rd Sunday of Lent – living water (John 4:5-42 ~ the Samaritan woman at the well)
- ✠ 4th Sunday of Lent – light of the world (John 9:1-41 ~ the man born blind)
- ✠ 5th Sunday of Lent – resurrection and life (John 11:1-45 ~ the raising of Lazarus)

Presentations (*unbaptized*)

- ✠ Creed – “the wonderful deeds of God” and “the great mysteries” (RCIA 147)
- ✠ Lord’s Prayer – “a new spirit of adoption” (RCIA 147)

Sacrament of Penance (RCIA 482) (*baptized*)

- ✠ Healing the wounds of sin and strength for the way of holiness (RCIA 470)
- ✠ Trust in God’s mercy (RCIA 469)
- ✠ Deepening an inner adherence to the Church (RCIA 477)
- ✠ Reflection on the mystery of their Baptism (RCIA 556)
- ✠ Reflection on their heritage: the tradition of the Church (RCIA 556)

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