

STARTING FIRES IN THE RCIA

Precatechumenate Catechesis and Apologetics

And I said, "Who are you, Lord?" And the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles – to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

~ Acts 26:15-18

The Purpose of the Precatechumenate

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, concluded with the following comment: "The catechumenate invites a beautifully simple view of the matter – the only reason to be a Christian is to be configured to Christ – to be saint. The only reason to be Catholic is because the Church is the saint-making machine – through her graces, her teachings, her people, and her Head, enabling those who so will to be perfected in love."

The invitation to such a life – given gradually, convincingly, prayerfully, and with humility – is the mission of the pre-catechumenate period, the first part of the RCIA process. According to the guidelines in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, during this period inquirers "should receive help and attention" so that they may purify their intentions and clarify their desire to cooperate with God's grace (RCIA 38).

Initial conversion, the beginning of faith, is the goal of this period. Conversion, seen as a progressive process, involves various stages of change. Simply stated, conversion involves a turning *from* something coupled with a turning *towards* something else. "The Christian faith is, above all, conversion to Jesus Christ" (GDC 53).

This turning occurs in many areas, including:

- ✦ In prayer ~ discovering conversation with God.
- ✦ In *communio* ~ seeking relationships and the experience of Christian witness.
- ✦ In the moral life ~ living out their growing Christian convictions.
- ✦ In perspective ~ learning to see things through a Catholic worldview.
- ✦ In seeking and study ~ growing in hunger for the knowledge of God.

The pre-catechumenate period has as its mission to influence inquirers in each of these areas. Perhaps frequently in our parishes, the pre-catechumenate period is viewed as something less than a time to foster initial conversion. In practice, this time may become little more than a preliminary "social" introduction to the parish, without a clearly defined, much less critically foundational, catechetical and pastoral mission. What follows in this article is intended to provide some assistance with fleshing out the Church's intention for this crucial period of formation.

Starting Simple: Liturgical Elements in the Precatechumenate

Compared with later periods in the RCIA process, the pre-catechumenate has few liturgical components. A

principle of RCIA catechesis is never to ask the inquirers to do something unless it is explained. Elements of the liturgical year, Sundays and feast days, are to be explained as they occur. Even the common liturgical action of the Sign of the Cross should be explained before participants are invited to join in prayers that are begun and concluded with it. Applying this principle to liturgical practices means that part of the work of the precatechumenate period is laying the proper foundation for inquirers to desire the more distinctively Catholic liturgical forms of prayer and worship. In other words, an RCIA leader would be ill-advised to begin the very first session with a “Hail Mary” and a “Glory Be” and finish the evening with an exhortation to come and try formal exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament that weekend.

Liturgy is introduced gradually through developing prayer forms in an ever-more fully Catholic direction. Begin with simple, reflective, meditative prayers – preferably extemporaneous or spontaneous on the part of the RCIA leader. Sing songs which can be learned easily, which

express a seeking for God, and that help put words to the journey they are undertaking. Teach prayer and model it. An enthroned Bible, a standing crucifix, a cloth reflecting the liturgical color of the day, and other physical elements can be gradually introduced with explanation. Pray

individually with inquirers. Pray as a group using different prayer forms, especially communal praying of the Psalms. Invite inquirers to articulate intercessory needs. As participants approach the Rites of Acceptance and Welcoming, they should be introduced to the responses in the Liturgy of the Word, in preparation for their first invitation to the table of God’s Word. This also means “teaching to the rites” which indicate what liturgical responses must be given (see RCIA 52 and 511), so that

a participant’s response can be formed from a genuine understanding, rather than stated as an empty recitation.

“During the precatechumenate period, pastors should help those taking part in it with prayers suited to them, for example, by celebrating for their spiritual well being the prayers of exorcism and the blessings given in the ritual.” (RCIA 40)

Laying Out the Skeleton: Catechesis in the Precatechumenate

Catechesis in the precatechumenate is quite distinctive. The catechetical components of this period flow from the need to set out a skeletal structure upon which can be laid the flesh of the Deposit of Faith in the next period. For the next period to be truly organic and systematic, all the necessary “hooks” must be put into place during the precatechumenate:

- ✦ The Gospel expressed carefully and completely, by means of testimonies and explanation of Scripture (RCIA 38).
- ✦ Answers given to the most pressing and obvious questions of the inquirers. In justice, great care must be taken that the most troubling or difficult questions get answered for each inquirer, so that there will be no surprises after the commitment is made in the first rites (RCIA 38).
- ✦ Teachings which adequately prepare them for the first major rites and content of the process, and the living of a daily Catholic life of believing, hoping, and loving (faith, hope and love) (cf. RCIA 42, 43).

The third bullet was noted in the previous section and will be elaborated in the final section of this article. The second bullet will be addressed in the following section below. As to the first – the giving of the Gospel – this begs the question: *What is the Gospel?*

In a nutshell, the Gospel is the good news about God and His wonderful work, and the good news about His

Some Practical Suggestions for the Precatechumenate:

- ✦ Give participants a Bible early in the process, and give them tabs for it.
- ✦ Ensure that the team exemplifies handling Scripture with respect (no drink cups on the Bible, etc.).
- ✦ Use Scripture to teach prayer – begin with the Psalms.
- ✦ Offer a booklet of “Basic Catholic Prayers” and explain them.
- ✦ Offer a library of basic books/pamphlets, tapes and videos for people to use.
- ✦ Offer a tour of the church and sacristy.
- ✦ Never give the impression in teaching sessions that Scripture is an addendum to the lesson.
- ✦ Have team members give a testimony about a favorite verse, or the power of Scripture in their life.
- ✦ Use biblical narratives – a litany of Scriptures that form a story or a theme.
- ✦ Use celebrations of the Word as recommended in the guidelines (RCIA 81-89).

love and His plan for us. God is our Creator and in Him all things have their existence. God gives light to everyone who comes into this world, revealing Himself through His works, so that all may learn to give thanks. Breaking down the Gospel into catechetical essentials could be done in the following manner during this period:

- ✠ **Trinitarian:** He, who ‘was sent by the Father’ and ‘anointed by the Spirit’, is Lord, Messiah, and Savior, Son of God and Son of Mary. The Father has sent His faithful witness, Jesus Christ, to announce to us what He has seen and heard, the mysteries of heaven and earth. This is eternal life: to know the one true God and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent; the Trinity is our destiny and model of perfect love (GDC 99-100).
- ✠ **Christ-Centered:** Through the saving action of His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven (the Paschal Mystery), Jesus has made a way for us to take advantage of the Father’s plan for our salvation (John 14:6; GDC 98).
- ✠ **Ecclesial:** While on earth, He went about doing good and preaching the Kingdom of God, which He perpetuated in a visible Church (Ephesians 3:10; CCC 760).
- ✠ **Personal:** The Holy Spirit has made it possible for us to turn from the slavery of sin and to access the full power and merits won for us by Jesus in the Church, which dispenses them in the sanctifying action of the sacramental life, enabling us to make the mind of Christ our own, to love God and neighbor in holiness (cf. GDC 43, 117).
- ✠ **Forward-Looking:** Jesus ascended to the Father to prepare a place for His people who have been freed from sin and taken into the family of God (John 14:1-7). We are a people founded in hope.
- ✠ **Heaven-Focused:** His family will endure the judgment that is to come and will enjoy His ‘steadfast love that endures forever’ in the heavenly banquet; the Father’s plan for our salvation is for us to “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:3-4).

✠ **Experienced in this Community:** The Catholics of this parish family warmly invite you to come and see our life, and with us to enter into full communion with Christ and participate in the Father’s plan (GDC 102, 256).

The catechist in the precatechumenate (whether teaching about the image and likeness of God, evil, the nature of revelation, the covenants of the Old Testament, the person of Jesus, the concept of grace, the four last things, the communion of saints, etc.) is continually hooking everything to the great story of the wonderful works of God and His plan for us. Necessary to this precatechumenal teaching is helping inquirers understand how to navigate the Bible, and soaking each session in Scripture in order to guide and to apply revelation to real life. Through reason alone man can know *that* God exists; from revelation however, man can know *who* God is.

“In the presentation of the Christian religion, catechesis must deal with the many questions, difficulties and doubts which arise in the human heart. Indeed, these questions should be brought to light when they have been obscured or confused by ignorance or indifference. The faith response to these questions will appear meaningful if it is rooted in the Bible and in concrete historical life, and if it is respectful of reason and attentive to the signs of the times.” (ACCC 48)

Building Trust: Apologetics in the Precatechumenate

In some quarters that I know of, especially some places on the Internet, apologetics has become a word synonymous with sparring matches, biblical swordplay, or even doctrinal brawls. In the combat over who is “right”, charity is a common casualty. It cannot be so if one is acting in the mind of the Church when doing apologetics in the RCIA process. Apologetics

is about removing barriers to a full embrace. RCIA apologetics is a form of welcome, not challenge, in the precatechumenate. It is an invitation to hope – the theological virtue that stems from faith and enables love to be directed towards Heaven, no matter the cost. This is why the classic verse used in apologetics, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15), appears in a passage about perseverance in suffering and the perfecting of virtue. In other words, apologetics is not an end in itself, to prove one is “right”, nor is it primarily to defend whatever doctrine is in question; the doctrine is not an end in itself either. Instead, the

purpose of apologetics in an RCIA setting is to foster deeper desire for God as Truth, and to settle intellectual doubts that impede whole-hearted pursuit of *virtue*. It is one element in delivering the Gospel call to holiness.

Necessary to this is teaching doctrine as an organic reality, always placing apologetic answers in the paradigm of love given and love returned (cf. John 15:9-12; 1 John 4:7-12). The organic, systematic nature of doctrine in RCIA apologetics seeks to answer the details while *always* pointing back to the whole. This helps participants begin to see the Faith as a totality, not a collection of doctrines – a pattern, not a pile. A catechist can deal with tough questions if the inquirers are led to see that the Church is about expressing God’s overwhelmingly generous love. This gives them a paradigm, a lens, a background for seeing and processing the world, as well as individual questions that might otherwise threaten to atomize the Faith into an uncounted number of accepted or rejected separate propositions.

Catechists and team members in RCIA should encourage inquirers to ask questions in order to remove “stumbling blocks” to seeing this vision of the Faith. Initially, convincing inquirers that you truly desire to know their questions may not be easy. Some RCIA groups, and most people in general, are shy to state questions verbally in the company of relative strangers. Encouraging those in the group who are willing to do so may help others venture to speak. Provide other means as well, such as giving a list of questions and letting people pick their favorites, providing blank paper for submitting questions in written form, or answering

important questions not asked that you know should have been asked. Regarding techniques for answering questions, the following suggestions may be helpful:

- ✘ Always restate the question so all hear exactly what you are answering and the questioner knows you heard the question correctly.
- ✘ Explain Catholic beliefs simply and clearly, without feeling the need to give a whole “teaching”.
- ✘ Answer accurately – if you’re not sure, admit it, then look it up.
- ✘ Help inquirers recognize that some “hotly debated” issues are not to be answered simply or in “sound-bite” form.
- ✘ Rely on Scripture, Tradition, Magisterium, liturgy, and reason.
- ✘ Answer immediately, or give good reason for necessary delay (inquirers may not be there ‘later’).
- ✘ Answer cheerfully, tirelessly, patiently, and if necessary, repeatedly.
- ✘ Answer respectfully and non-defensively.
- ✘ Answer practically with real life application in mind.
- ✘ Ask for further questions—ask if you answered the question adequately for them.

As a final point, it is important to overcome an overly apologetic approach to doctrine. The *aesthetic* aspect of doctrine in catechesis should become part of your apologetics perspective. This means considering whether your answers adequately express not simply the “rightness” of a doctrine, but also its *beauty*. If apologetics in the precatechumenate is one element in delivering the Gospel call to holy virtue, then the apologist aims to communicate a vision that is profoundly desirable – the glory of the Lord. Reflecting on this is one of the keys to helping inquirers see doctrines as expressive of a way of *life*, not just a way of *thinking*.

Foundational Charity: Pastoral Care in the Precatechumenate

In the precatechumenate, pastoring (used here in the rather broad sense of the term) is necessary because inquirers do not yet know how to live the life to which you are calling them. The community of the faithful is to provide information, formation, and a sincere and open witness to the life of charity. Sponsors should be

***“From evangelization,
completed with the help
of God, come the faith and
initial conversion that cause
a person to feel called away
from sin and drawn into
the mystery of God’s love.
The whole period of the
precatechumenate is set aside
for this evangelization,
so that the genuine will
to follow Christ and seek
Baptism may mature.” (RCIA 57)***

***Introduce inquirers to Jesus using
Scriptural images which reveal different
aspects about Him:***

Jesus the Good Shepherd	Jesus the Teacher
Jesus the Son of God	Jesus the Son of Mary
Jesus the Savior	Jesus the Truth for us
Jesus the King	Jesus the High Priest
Jesus the God-Man	Jesus the Redeemer
Jesus the Way for us	Jesus the Life for us

chosen with care taken to train them to be companions on the journey. Intercession for individual inquirers should begin. The role of clergy, catechists, team, and sponsors in this period is to model, explain, and invite. In this period people (catechists, clergy, team, sponsors, neophytes, other parishioners) should be giving personal testimonies to God's love, His faithfulness and His family, the Church. Following teachings or certain prayer forms, make sure that there is time for silent reflection, and for sharing between inquirers and team/sponsors/clergy. Provide the opportunity for friendships to begin.

The results of this period of formation are, of course, not set into a given timeframe. The prerequisite for making this first step is that the beginnings of the spiritual life and the fundamentals of Christian teaching have taken root in the candidates. Participants approach the Rites of Acceptance and Welcoming as they are ready: "The celebration of the Rite of Acceptance into the order of catechumens should be delayed until the candidates have had sufficient time to conceive an initial faith and to show the first signs of conversion" (RCIA 18.1). In the guidelines to the Rites these signs for fostering and identifying this initial faith in the candidates are to be looked for (RCIA, 37, 38, 42):

- ✘ To feel called away from sin and drawn into the mystery of God's love.
- ✘ The genuine will to follow Christ and seek Baptism may mature.
- ✘ With a purified and clearer intention they may cooperate with God's grace.
- ✘ The beginnings of the spiritual life.
- ✘ The fundamentals of Christian teaching have taken root.
- ✘ The first faith was conceived.

- ✘ Intention to change their lives.
- ✘ Entrance into a relationship with Christ.
- ✘ The first stirrings of repentance.
- ✘ A start of the practice of calling upon God in prayer.
- ✘ A sense of the Church.
- ✘ Some experience of the company and spirit of Christians.

Whatever an inquirer's original reason for coming to RCIA, it is a good one – it is the reason God has used. However, by the end of the RCIA process it must be cultivated, encouraged, and purified so that an inquirer can come to the conviction that he or she cannot imagine living the rest of his or her life outside of the Church. Changes in lifestyle should accompany this period as participants turn away from sinful patterns and turn toward God in Christ. The mission of the precatechumenate, as expressed in the above bullets, is crucial to the rest of the process, inviting RCIA leaders, team, and sponsors to the diligence and prayerfulness native to serving those people hoping to find the joy that is Christ's alone to give.

Abbreviations for Magisterial Documents used in the article:

- ACCC* *Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community: Some Principles and Guidelines*, International Council for Catechesis, 1990.
- CCC* *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, second edition, 1997.
- GDC* *General Directory for Catechesis*, Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, 1997.
- RCIA* *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum*, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), Editio Typica, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1972.

Bio for William J. Keimig: Mr. Keimig is currently the Director of Religious Education at St. Mary's Parish in Clinton, Maryland. His duties include directing adult education, RCIA, oversight of the youth group, sacramental preparation, catechist training, and catechesis of the parish's children in the day school and Sunday school. Mr. Keimig also serves as a Master Catechist and a teacher in the marriage preparation program for the Archdiocese of Washington, DC. In addition to his in-diocese work, Mr. Keimig serves as the Director of the Association for Catechumenal Ministry (ACM). This apostolate serves dioceses in the United States and Canada, as well as seminaries, in training clergy and laity how to implement RCIA successfully in parishes. This work takes him to numerous dioceses to do catechist training, alongside with the Association's many seminar presenters. Mr. Keimig holds a Master's Degree in Theology and Christian Ministry from Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio and a Certification in Catechetics. He also holds a BA in Government and Politics and a Master's Degree in Public Management from the University of Maryland. He and his wife, Heather, have a daughter, Rose Marie, a son, William, and a third child due soon.

THE ASSOCIATION FOR CATECHUMENAL MINISTRY

P.O. Box 127, Clinton, MD 20735 | 301.203.1334 (o) | 301.203.4249 (f) | website: acmrcia.org | e-mail: office@acmrcia.org