

TO THE THRESHOLD AND TO THE FULLNESS

What is the RCIA supposed to be?

*For He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will,
according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time,
to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

~ Ephesians 1:9-10

The Purpose of this Article

The intention of the following paragraphs is to open a discussion on the nature of catechumenal ministry – that work of God and his people which seeks to invite and initiate new members into the Mystical Body of Christ. Other articles will follow, each addressing in specific matters treated more generally in this issue.

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 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 others words, to the degree that the RCIA process is complex it is 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 from 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.

The catechumenal process is not a program. Programs have a fixed length of time and a determined course of studies. No one can “program” the Holy Spirit as he moves individuals to conversion; each conversion journey is unique. While we do things systematically and make a calendar of events each year, we must also pay close attention to the fact that this is an individual process and a conversion journey for each inquirer. Our primary task is not to run a program but to be present to help facilitate conversion. For this reason, it

is not desirable to call what we do “the RCIA program” as this invariably creates a false impression for all involved.

In this article, the RCIA process will be examined from three distinct aspects: liturgical, catechetical, and pastoral. It is useful to discuss the nature and scope of each period of the process in light of these three aspects. *All three are equally important.* It is an injustice to those considering or seeking union with Holy Mother Church to be unambiguously catechetical to the detriment of the liturgical aspect, or be wonderfully pastoral despite poor catechesis. In order for the catechumenate to be what it has the potential to be, RCIA leaders can benefit greatly from understanding the implications of its liturgical, catechetical, and pastoral dimensions to make available the fullness of the process as intended by the Church.

Liturgical Formation

In our modern culture, ritual and the concept of a transcendent worship experience has become quite foreign to most people, even to many Catholics. Liturgy is often not recognized or understood for what it is – the fulfillment of God's intention to have us participate in His own divine life, even while on earth. This vital understanding is expressed eloquently in this series of statements by the Jesuit priest Johannes Hofinger:

The proper goal of our catechetical apostolate is not theoretical knowledge of Christ and His mystery, but as perfect a living union with Him as possible....The unique catechetical value of the liturgy essentially derives from the way in which it contains and makes us familiar with the heart of the Christian religion, the mystery of Christ....And here is the... most decisive reason why teaching through worship is superior to all other forms of Christian teaching. *The liturgy gives what it teaches.*

(Johannes Hofinger, S.J. and Francis Buckley, S.J., *The Good News and Its Proclamation*, 53, 56; Italics in original)

Because the entire catechumenate is ordered to leading catechumens and candidates to living a true liturgical life, permeated by prayer and worship within the Body of Christ and punctuated by regular participation in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Confession, it is vital that it be communicated that the liturgy is their means to achieve holiness. All knowledge of the Faith, practice of spiritual and corporal works of mercy, and obedience to the laws of the New Covenant flow from the liturgical life. In light of this fact, the presence of liturgical elements in the process of instructing those seeking to enter the Church not only becomes acceptable but, even more so, is crucial to the ends being sought. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council stated that “the liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the font from which all her power flows” (SC 10). As it is true for the Church, so it is true for the individual believer; the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, is the summit of the Christian life, and the font from which personal holiness flows.

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. Pope John Paul II expresses this understanding thus: “It is in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, that Christ Jesus works in fullness for the transformation of human beings” (CT 23). In other words, the presence of liturgical elements and rites not only enriches the catechesis given to participants, but is fundamentally inseparable and integral to the mission of the catechumenate. “The period of preparation is made

holy by means of liturgical celebrations” (RCIA 405). It is through these celebrations that the catechesis given to participants comes to fruition, reaching a climax in the rites of the Easter Vigil.

The RCIA process is dynamically moved along by liturgical rites that serve as gateways into the major periods of the process. Beginning with the Rite of Acceptance for catechumens and the Rite of Welcoming

“This comprehensive formation includes more than instruction: it is an apprenticeship of the entire Christian life...which promotes an authentic following of Christ, focused on his Person; it implies education in knowledge of the faith and in the life of faith, in such a manner that the entire person, at his deepest levels, feels enriched by the word of God; it helps the disciple of Christ to transform the old man in order to assume his baptismal responsibilities and to profess the faith from the heart...” (GDC 67)

for candidates, and going through all the subsequent minor rites and major gateways, liturgy propels the process and motivates conversion. Grace comes with every gateway and every liturgical moment. The sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist – are the powerhouses for the whole process. This grace – all that it means to take away original sin, to become a child of God, to be confirmed, and to come to the table of the Lord – is used to provide the ongoing impetus for the conversion process. For all of us involved in RCIA, it is crucial to understand the Catholic sacramental and liturgical sense of reality.

The liturgical aspect in each particular period is the driving force behind the whole process and the primary means of inserting those along this journey into the mystery of Christ. In the first period, the pre-catechumenate, the liturgical aspect is at a minimum. There are no liturgical rites during this stage, because the inquirer has

not yet entered a formal relationship with the Church. While no formal liturgy goes on at this stage, prayer is an important part of evangelization. Singing hymns, which is a form of prayer, can help draw the heart up to God and facilitate conversion.

The first liturgical rites, the Rite of Acceptance for catechumens and the Rite of Welcoming for candidates, establish (catechumen) or deepen (candidate) a relationship between the Church and the participant and are the gateways into the period of the catechumenate. There are countless liturgical moments in this period that impart grace to participants and help them continue along the path of

conversion. Blessings, minor exorcisms, anointings, and celebrations of the Word are all designed to introduce those in the catechumenate into the liturgical life of the Church.

The next gateway, the Rite of Election for catechumens and the Rite of Continuing Call to Conversion for candidates, begins the intense period of preparation for the sacraments of initiation. Participants are greatly helped by the scrutinies (for catechumens) and the penitential rite (for candidates) as they make their final preparation for complete Christian initiation. Lent becomes a rising crescendo of liturgical graces, the war against sin at the height of its strength (cf. Rom 5:20).

The third gateway, receipt of the sacraments of initiation, fully inserts participants into the mystery of Christ. This is the climax of the catechumenal process, and it is not by accident that it occurs during the Easter Vigil, the Church's greatest and most solemn feast of the year. This third gateway gives birth to the new "fledgling Catholics" or neophytes who, while enjoying the fruits of all the sacraments like the rest of the faithful, are still watched over and cared for in a special way during the course of their first year. The neophyte year begins with seven weeks of mystagogy. During this period, neophytes are invited to participate in the main Sunday Mass of the parish, and the readings during these seven weeks were selected by the Church to meet their needs.

It is important to communicate to both current and future Catholics that liturgy is much more than ritual, and that it is through liturgical events (the summit of which is the Mass) that our relationship with Jesus Christ becomes as intimate as possible outside of heaven itself. As RCIA participants move towards full communion with the Church, nothing is more fundamental to their catechesis, and more crucial to impart to the worshiping community, than the fact that it is through the liturgical rites of the catechumenate, and the sacramental participation to which they point, that a foundational relationship with Jesus is most firmly established.

Catechetical Formation

The catechetical endeavor native to the catechumenal process serves a deeply personal end – discovering at an intellectual level not simply how an individual learns the Faith, but how a participant falls in love. The goal of catechumenal catechesis is far more than imparting that which must be believed – it seeks to prepare participants for a new union, an embrace. This embrace is human and divine, unifying the two as water into wine, inviting participants to thereby quench the deepest call of relationship that Jesus gives – "I thirst" (John 19:28). The following are suggestions for certain catechetical distinctives that are demanded by the RCIA process.

RCIA catechesis should be practical.

The catechetical aspect is inseparable from the

practical reality it seeks to inform; it is the work of teaching the Faith so as to inform people how to truly live it in their daily experience. Catechetical sessions cannot be nebulous nor theoretical, but must be real and applicable to participants. To give a suitable and complete presentation of the Deposit of Faith to those who are coming into the Church means that participants get a solid hold on it, and they need to know they have a hold on it. This is only possible if the truths are taught so as to move participants – to foster change – in their interior life of adoration and acceptance of divine will, their actions, their participation in the life of the Church, their married and family lives, their professional lives, and their economic and social responsibilities (GDC 55). In the truths that the Catholic Church gradually unveils, they discover their deepest aspirations fulfilled; they find what they are seeking and they find it superabundantly.

To foster this change – turning from sin and turning towards Christ – catechists must organize their teaching around the needs displayed by each group of participants, and the ways they need to be shepherded. For this reason, it is a significant mistake to assume that an inflexible catechetical curriculum can be used, nor can the catechist plan to teach each lesson identically from year to year. The catechist's work is not just the delivery of doctrinal information; the catechist, rather, teaches a *Person* – the person of Jesus. The all-important work of fostering conversion to Christ – which is the point of the catechumenal process – demands a catechetical flexibility that recognizes and communicates not only Jesus' unchanging universality, but also his intimacy to each participant. RCIA catechesis, therefore, must be wholly ordered to the conversion of the hearts and minds of participants, allowing for the flexibility demanded by differing pastoral circumstances in parishes from year to year, and a learning model suited to adults of various faith backgrounds.

RCIA catechesis must have an organic and systematic character.

Each participant will vary in his or her walk with God. Some will never before have sought or experienced God, while others will already be strong Christians. Catechists must organize their teaching to ensure that the catechesis is both organic and complete, based on the composition of each specific group of participants in any given year.

Catechesis cannot be considered systematic and organic solely because it covers a great deal of material or is lengthy. A defining characteristic of a systematic and organic catechesis is its presentation according to the hierarchy of truths (see CCC 90 and 234; GDC 114-115). Participants need to understand certain truths first in order to be able to understand others, and as catechesis proceeds, each truth needs to be linked to those taught previously. The

Blessed Trinity must be presented as the central truth of the faith. A catechist who cannot understand in practical terms how all the doctrines connect to this central truth, within a Christocentric perspective, cannot successfully present a systematic and organic catechesis.

RCIA catechesis should be liturgical.

The liturgy is the prime way the catechist should think about teaching the faith. Inserting participants into the liturgy is equivalent to inserting them into eternity. The RCIA process should, therefore, teach participants to be “liturgical people,” moving them towards full and active participation in the worshipping community around the one Table. Liturgical catechesis is not only an appropriate form of instruction of participants in the RCIA process, but also, as the *General Directory for Catechesis* states, liturgical catechesis is “an eminent kind of catechesis” (GDC 71). Understood in the mind of the Church, the Christian initiation process is intended to be fundamentally liturgical. Liturgical catechesis is an indispensable aid to conversion and fosters an intimate union with Christ and his Church.

Liturgy is central in considering what to teach when; that is, catechesis must be directed to and derived from the rites of the RCIA process: the Rites of Acceptance and Welcoming, the Rites of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion, and the Rites of Christian Initiation, as well as the minor rites that build to a crescendo as the participants move closer to the Easter Vigil: blessings and minor exorcisms, the penitential rite and scrutinies, the presentations of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, and the preparation rites of Easter Saturday. Teaching to the rites means looking at the questions to which participants will be required to respond at each rite, and ensuring that the teaching gives participants what they need 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 desires for participants and allowing that to shape the catechesis in the next stage of their journey. Catechesis should be accommodated to the liturgical year, not only in the above manner, but also by teaching a given lesson with clear reference to the liturgical season. This is done particularly through imparting a liturgically-

appropriate tone (for example, a sense of penance, celebration, expectation, or thanksgiving) through discussing the practical application of the teaching to participants’ lives.

RCIA catechesis should be distinct in each period of the process.

The three major liturgical gateways help to define the methodology and scope of our catechesis during each of the four periods. In the precatechumenate period, the focus is mainly apologetic and evangelistic, with a delivery of the basic Gospel message and unreserved answering of questions. “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 37).

In the *catechumenate period*, the focus moves to

a substantial, organic catechesis involving the full delivery of the essential elements of the Deposit of the Faith, laying the flesh on the bones of the Gospel laid out during the precatechumenate. This is typically the longest period of the Christian initiation process. It is also the most densely catechetical. Catechesis is to be “gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the Word” (RCIA 75). Instruction received during this period, “while presenting Catholic teaching in its entirety also enlightens faith, directs the heart toward

Indeed, “it can happen that in the present situation of catechesis reasons of method or pedagogy may suggest the communication of the riches of the content of catechesis should be organized in one way rather than in another.” It is possible to begin with God so as to arrive at Christ, and vice versa. Equally, it is possible to start with man and come to God, and conversely. The selection of a particular order for presenting the message is conditioned by circumstances, and by the faith level of those to be catechized.

(GDC 118; material in quotations is from CT 31)

God, fosters participation in the liturgy, inspires apostolic activity, and nurtures a life completely in accord with the spirit of Christ” (RCIA 78).

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).

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 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).

RCIA catechesis should be personal.

Some time ago Pope Paul VI wrote, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (EN 41). The catechist is not just a voice that communicates knowledge, but a bearer of faith, hope, and love, so much so that he or she should strive to be able to say as St. Paul did: “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). This is possible only so far as the catechist recognizes that “an adherence to the truths which the Lord in his mercy has revealed...cannot remain abstract and unincarnated” (EN 23). The catechist is one critical and proximal place of that incarnation of truth – a human struggling to overcome sin, but sure of victory in the Christ who redeems that which he enters. Far from being limited to catechists, the call to be a transparent

Adult Christian Initiation is a Process...

- ✦ A turning process (GDC 82)
- ✦ A gradual process (GDC 88-89)
- ✦ A personal process (GDC 118; CT 31)
- ✦ A pervasive process (GDC 116; CT 22)
- ✦ A community process (GDC 72, 158; CT 24)
- ✦ A supernatural process – “Then He opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” (Luke 24:45)

witness is extended to all those involved with the RCIA process. Hence we turn next to the pastoral aspect of the catechumenate.

Pastoral Formation

The RCIA process is a growth in intimacy as much as in knowledge. Aidan Kavanagh, in *The Shape of Baptism*, refers to the catechumenate as “a structure of Christian nurture” (Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, Pueblo, New York, 1978, p. 182). Alongside the powerful liturgical moments of the process and the faithful catechetical endeavor, there is also an intense pastoral activity, which must be initiated from the first time an inquirer expresses interest in the Church. This activity operates with the knowledge that each participant will vary in his or her background, lifestyle, motivation, and state in life. Those doing RCIA ministry steep themselves in the lives of participants, with gentleness, prudence and a genuine desire to open their hearts wide (cf. 1 Cor 6:11).

The pastoral components are the people who participate, some intimately and others from a distance, in Jesus’ work of conversion and discipleship. The pastoral work of the catechumenal process is accomplished through the love and labor of many people, including the following: clergy, catechists, hospitality folks, sponsors, small group leaders, prayer intercessors, and parish members. This pastoral work is a people-to-person endeavor – all the people impacting this one person for the Lord. Pastoring involves both information and formation.

Christian Initiation during the catechumenate is not the concern of catechists or priest alone, but of the whole community of believers and especially the godparents, so that from the outset the catechumens will have a sense of being a part of the people of God. (AG 14)

By instruction and by example, the catechumens and candidates learn who God is, what he wants, and how to follow him as a member of the Christian community. Through the pastoral attention of others, participants are informed about him, and formed in him.

The people of God, as represented by the local Church, should understand and show by their concern that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized. Therefore the community must always be fully prepared in the pursuit of its apostolic vocation to give help to those who are searching for Christ. (RCIA, Introduction 9)

As with liturgy and catechesis, the pastoral aspect also changes as participants move through the periods of the process. The precatechumenate serves as a time of inviting people to come and see, of determining motivation and moving them from the initial stages of faith – an encounter with Jesus, turning away from sin, and finding a home in the Church. During the next period, the catechumenate, the pastoral aim is to move the

participants from initial motivation to firm conviction, with strong elements of fellowship and spiritual direction. The periods of purification and enlightenment and mystagogy serve as a time of strong support and encouragement for participants to deepen their spiritual life and increase in works of charity. For the remainder of the neophyte year, the pastoral focus is to provide continued support and encouragement in living out a strong Catholic life in a parochial setting wherein they feel comfortably at home. The process aims not just at making non-ignorant Christians – it seeks to transform them into outwardly focused Christians, sure in the conviction that the fullness of the truth has been revealed and is to be shared with joy.

To conclude...

In summary, the RCIA process seeks to prepare people not merely for assent to eternal truths, but more so to fall in love with an eternal Lover. If participants are falling in love with the Person of Jesus, then it is only reasonable that, like anyone that we love in the human order, they would want to know him more. Without the teaching and converting aspects of the liturgy and the loving witness of the community, formal instruction runs the risk of becoming just information, instead of light for the path of faith in Christ (see CCC 89). The catechumenal process, a balance of liturgical, catechetical and pastoral aspects, thus becomes an engine of conversion today, as it was centuries ago, fulfilling the intention of its restoration by the Second Vatican Council (see SC 64-66). The Church can be understood as the earthly configuration of Jesus Christ – to be a member of the Church is to be configured to Christ. Our inner being in Christ has its demands. They are not obligations imposed from outside, although one of Church's missions is to articulate those demands for our guidance and growth. The Christian initiation process invites a beautifully simple view of the matter: the reason to be a Christian is to be perfectly configured to Christ – to be a saint. The reason to be a Catholic is because within the Church subsists the fullness of the means to become a saint – through her graces, her teachings, her people, and her Head, enabling those who so will to be perfected in love.

Abbreviations for Magisterial Documents used in the article:

- AG *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, Decree on Missionary Activity in the Church, Second Vatican Council, December 7, 1965.
- CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, second edition, 1997.
- CT *Catechesi Tradendae*, On Catechesis in Our Time, John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, October 16, 1979.
- EN *Evangelii Nuntianđi*, Evangelization in the Modern World, Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, December 8, 1975.
- GDC *General Directory for Catechesis*, Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, 1997.
- LG *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Second Vatican Council, November 21, 1964.
- RCIA *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum*, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), Editio Typica, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1972.
- SC *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Second Vatican Council, December 4, 1963.

Some Elements of Initiation Catechesis...

- ✦ To know (GDC 174) – “...sincere and patient dialogue...” (AG 11)
- ✦ To be known (EN 41, 46; GDC 158-159) – “... establish relationships of respect and love...” (AG 11)
- ✦ Centered on the One to be known (GDC 89)
- ✦ Delivery of an invitation – keeping in mind the reciprocal nature of inculturation (GDC 90)
- ✦ Discernment – teaching them to read what God has written in themselves (GDC 152c)
- ✦ Definitive goal – peace, joy, the satisfaction of our deepest desires, and the beginning of heaven (GDC 117; CT 21)
 - ⊕ Systematic and organic catechesis
 - ⊕ Focused on essentials of the Deposit of Faith
 - ⊕ Open to the fullness of the Christian life

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