

# Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

## **What is the RCIA?**

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is a process universally restored in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1970's to prepare unbaptised adults for membership in the Church.

Also called 'the catechumenate', this process of Christian initiation has several stages and ritual steps, leading up to the reception of all three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation and eucharist, usually at the Easter Vigil, and finishing with Pentecost. People undertaking this journey of initiation are called 'catechumens.'

*(Because the RCIA is such a rich process it is often adapted to include people already baptised into another Christian denomination who wish to become Catholics. We call this other group "candidates for full communion".)*

## **What is the history of the RCIA?**

The catechumenate was flourishing in many parts of the Christian world by the fourth century. It lasted anywhere from several months to several years during which time the catechumens (unbaptised) were expected to pray regularly, to learn the way of Christian discipleship through familiarity with the Word of God and immersion into the community, and to adopt a way of living that conformed to the gospel. Often this meant a radical conversion of life-style and employment.

During this time of prayer, fasting, and good works, catechumens and the community discerned together their readiness for membership into the Church at Easter, the feast of our own dying and rising with Christ by our baptism.

## **What happens in the RCIA?**

The RCIA consists of four time periods and three transitional rites celebrated in the midst of the worshipping assembly.

**First Stage:** Called the Pre-catechumenate or Period of Evangelization, this is the time in which the inquirer's own questions form the basis of formation along with celebrations of the Word that introduce the inquirers to the story of Jesus and the community of his followers. This period is of no fixed duration. It depends on the needs of those participating.

**First Ritual Step:** Once initial conversion is experienced, the unbaptised inquirers are accepted into the Church as catechumens with a public rite called Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens.

**Second Stage:** The longest period of formation or catechesis now takes place. The catechumen participates in the life of the believing community particularly by celebrations of the Liturgy of the Word on Sundays and other occasions, by learning as much core doctrine as is deemed necessary, and by gradual involvement in the community's outreach.

When the catechumen has experienced a conversion of heart and action and both she/he and their representatives of the community have discerned that they are ready to proceed to the next stage, the second transitional rite takes place.

**Second Ritual Step:** This is called the Rite of Election or Enrolment of Names. Through this Rite the Church acknowledges that God has selected the catechumen for full initiation at the Easter Vigil.

**The Third Stage:** This is called the Period of Purification and Enlightenment and takes place during Lent marked by three community celebrations called Scrutinies which ask God for healing and forgiveness for the elect (*now the new title for the catechumens*). These scrutinies coincide with the 3rd 4th and 5th Sundays of Lent.

**Third Ritual Step:** Now comes the most important of all the transitional rites, when the elect are fully incorporated into Christ and the Church by baptism, confirmation and eucharist at the Easter Vigil.

**Fourth Stage:** This is an important period of reflection by the newly initiated with their faith community during the season of Easter. They reflect on the significance of the Easter sacraments, especially by their weekly participation in the Eucharist, meditating on God's word and participating in the life and mission of the parish.

***Besides the catechumens (and the optional inclusion of baptised candidates wishing to become Catholics) who is to participate in the RCIA?***

The whole parish community has a part to play in the process of welcoming and forming catechumens and candidates for full communion. The RCIA is not a private process of initiation. ***It is the community that initiates its new members*** and so the

community has an important part to play at every stage. The **priest** has a special role in ministering to the pastoral and spiritual care of those on the journey and those accompanying them.

**Sponsors or godparents** are to take an active and supportive role as companions, witnesses and guides not only during the RCIA but beyond.

**Faith companions and catechists** are responsible for guiding the formation process of the inquirer towards a deeper reflection on the Word of God and a greater understanding of the faith of the Church

**Others in the parish community** who are not part of the RCIA team are called on to help, pray for, and support the catechumens and candidates throughout the process of initiation and ensure they are welcomed as members of the Parish community.

***Where does it take Place?***

- 1 Within the worshipping community.
- 2 Wherever people are prepared to welcome and support a newcomer.

***How long does it all take?***

It will depend where participants are starting from. In most parish groups, people will commence mid-year and journey to the following Easter and conclude group sessions with Pentecost. It should not be presumed that all catechumens (or candidates) will automatically proceed to the Easter sacraments. (In the early Church some remained as catechumens for three years and even longer!)

If anyone does not feel quite ready to take on the commitment asked of them by baptism (or the priest and the rest of the RCIA team in consultation with the person does not feel he or she should proceed to baptism) this must be honoured. Each person is unique and should only take each step as she or he is personally ready for it.

***For further information about the RCIA email:***

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