

COME AND SEE

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because we are created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw us to Himself. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 27)

WHAT IS THE RCIA?

*The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God'. The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi where are you staying?' He said to them, "**Come and you will see.**" John 1:35-39*

Religion is rooted in our cultural heritage. Look into your own life. How did you first find out about God? How did you come to know God, and to practice religion? What helped you shape your image of God? How have you come to express your faith?

You answer these questions at a specific historical time in a specific culture, with its own unique outlook and value system. Besides physical life, you have also inherited certain attitudes from your parents and your surroundings. As you matured, you developed your own response to life.

The RCIA is directed to those who are searching and inquiring about the Catholic response to God's invitation to follow Him. RCIA stands for "Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults". It is primarily a *process* of catechesis and spiritual formation, one that is filled with rites, ceremonies, and celebrations. Each stage of the process is recognized with special prayers and liturgical ceremony in the presence of the worshipping community.

BASIC CONCEPTS OF THE RCIA:

1. Conversion is a process.
2. Becoming Catholic is coming into a community of believers.
3. The RCIA takes place in an experience of community.
4. The RCIA stages are celebrated in community with appropriate liturgical rites.
5. The RCIA experience follows the flow of the liturgical seasons.
6. The RCIA process encourages authentic Catholicity.

THE RCIA IS ROOTED IN HISTORY

The RCIA is an attempt to reinstate the original way people came into the faith. In the first century, all that was required to be a Christian was to believe that Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). That belief called people to repent, be baptized, and live the gospel message within a community of believers.

From the second to the fifth centuries, the Church articulated Christian beliefs and a way of life more specifically, especially in response to errors and controversies that arose. Early councils of bishops formulated the Creed, as well as dogmas about Christ's true nature.

In A.D. 313, the Emperor Constantine proclaimed religious toleration through the Edict of Milan, ending official Roman persecution of Christianity. Christianity then became socially acceptable. To ensure that people did not enter the Church for purely social motives, she began to require a period of formation called the *Catechumenate*, followed by a dramatic single celebration during the Easter Vigil, in which the catechumens were initiated through the baptism of water and were sealed with the Spirit, then first partook of the Lord's Supper – the Holy Eucharist.

As the Church continued to grow and expand throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, infant baptism became more common and the formation period for adults was abbreviated and accommodated. Gradually, the catechumenate as a formation process disappeared completely. A person who desired to enter the Church received individual instruction and formation, and was brought into the Church in a private ceremony. This practice continued until the changes and reforms that followed the Second Vatican Council.

The RCIA process was thus modeled upon the ancient way of accepting new members into the Church, and offering a deeper formation and a more authentic understanding of the conversion process. In 1988, the American bishops mandated that all parishes in the United States use the RCIA as the process for new members to come into the Church, whether those new members were unbaptized or were coming from another Christian denomination. Although the format may vary slightly from parish to parish, the RCIA follows a fixed pattern that is outlined and explained in the following section.

STRUCTURE AND FORMAT OF THE RCIA

The RCIA is a gradual process. In form, it reflects the elements of a growing relationship. Just as two people grow gradually toward establishing lasting bonds, the RCIA advances in stages from casual acquaintance to full commitment. Of course, the stages of a journey cannot be neatly compartmentalized, but there are distinguishing characteristics that mark each step. The RCIA assists those coming into the Church in four distinct phases, with liturgical rites marking the transition to each phase.

PHASE ONE: THE PERIOD OF INQUIRY

(PRE-EVANGELIZATION OR PRE-CATECHUMENATE PERIOD)

The period of inquiry has no fixed structure of duration and is the most flexible in its format. Inquirers have time to share their faith journey. They receive answers to questions they may have and clarification of any stereotypical ideas they may have about being Catholic. Inquirers are invited to discern the Catholic faith and where God is leading them. When inquirers decide to pursue the journey of faith into the

Catechumenate, they make a commitment through the *Rite of Acceptance*.

FIRST LITURGICAL RITE:

ACCEPTANCE INTO THE CATECHUMENATE

The *Rite of Acceptance into the Catechumenate* is the celebration of the unbaptized inquirers' intention to seriously continue the journey of faith toward baptism. This is the first liturgical rite that takes place in the presence of the community of faith, preferably at a Sunday liturgy. Previously baptized inquirers who are seeking reception into full communion with the Church are invited to participate in this rite as part of the community of faith.

PHASE TWO: THE CATECHUMENATE

The catechumenate phase marks the beginning of formal instruction in the beliefs and practices of the faith. This instruction is based on the fact that God loves us and has revealed that love to us in Jesus Christ. Catholic tradition is our means of knowing and understanding the life of Christ. We are called to mirror that life in our way of living, so the catechumenate focuses on Jesus, His teachings, the Church, and the sacraments.

Unbaptized inquirers in the catechumenate are called *catechumens*, and inquirers already baptized in another Christian community are called *candidates*. When catechumens and candidates enter the catechumenate, each chooses or is assigned a *sponsor*, a member of the faith community who is willing to share personal faith and to assist another toward the sacraments of initiation and committed Catholicism. Being a sponsor is both a privilege and a serious responsibility.

SECOND LITURGICAL RITE:

THE RITE OF SENDING, THE RITE OF ELECTION, AND THE RITE OF CALLING TO CONTINUING CONVERSION

The catechumens and candidates conclude the catechumenate phase and enter the next phase of their journey, the *Period of Purification and Enlightenment*. This transition is marked by the optional *Rite of Sending* and either the *Rite of Election for Catechumens* or the *Rite of Calling to Continuing Conversion for Candidates*. Having discerned that they are called to the Catholic faith, catechumens and candidates are officially called to the sacraments by the bishop or his representative in these Rites, which usually take place the First Sunday of Lent in the Cathedral Church.

The Rite of Election and the *Rite of Calling to Continuing Conversion* are elaborate and memorable events for those entering the Church. For the first time, they experience the Church on the diocesan level, coming together with people from all over the diocese who will be entering the Church during the Easter Season. In the *Rite of Election* catechumens enter their names in the *Book of the Elect*, and are thereafter called *the elect*. These Rites mark the completion of the period of formal instruction and the beginning of a more intense preparation through prayer and reflection for the celebration of the paschal mystery and the

reception of the sacraments of initiation.

PHASE THREE: THE PERIOD OF PURIFICATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

The third phase of the catechumenate coincides with the Lenten season, a time of reconciliation, prayer, and spiritual renewal for the whole Church. Those coming into the Church now turn their attention toward interior reflection and conversion.

THE SCRUTINIES

Held on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, at the Sunday liturgy, the scrutinies include prayers by the parish for deliverance from evil and for the strength to be faithful to the gospel. The elect stand in prayer before the altar in the midst of the community and the community prays for them. The intercessions focus on the spiritual needs of all, but especially those of the elect.

Since those coming into the Church are preparing for full participation in the liturgy, they are presented with the two basic traditional prayers of the Church: the *Lord's Prayer* and the *Creed*. The elect are encouraged to pray these prayers regularly and to memorize them, so that when they attend the liturgy they can participate fully in their recitation.

EASTER VIGIL

The celebration of the Lord's Resurrection and the initiation of Catechumens at the Easter Vigil is the most important celebration of the liturgical year. Amidst the symbolism and ritual of the Easter Vigil, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery: Christ's redemptive death and resurrection.

The Easter Vigil encompasses all phases of the spiritual journey. It has four distinct parts:

First, the Service of Light, with the blessing of the Easter fire and lighting and blessing of the paschal candle, which takes place outside the church.

Second, the Liturgy of the Word, from the Old and New Testaments, recounting the story of our salvation.

Third, the Liturgy of Baptism, including the baptismal ceremony, the profession of faith and renewal of baptismal promises by those already baptized, and the sacrament of Confirmation.

Fourth, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, during which those coming into the Church receive their First Holy Communion.

PHASE FOUR: MYSTAGOGY

The period when new Catholics begin practicing their faith and getting more involved in their parish is referred to as *mystagogy*. Derived from a Greek word, *mystagogy* literally means "entering more deeply into the mystery." In some places, additional classes are held during this period. At St. Francis Xavier, new Catholics are invited to reflect on their experience of the RCIA process and begin participating actively in parish ministry, especially by getting involved in parish groups and activities.