

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 OCIA?

*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*

Look into your own life. How did you first find out about God? How did you come to know God, and to practice religion? How have you come to express your faith?

The OCIA is designed for those who are searching and inquiring about the Catholic response to God’s invitation to follow Him. OCIA stands for “Order 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 OCIA:

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

THE OCIA IS ROOTED IN HISTORY

The OCIA is an attempt to return to 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. At that same time, the Church Fathers began to offer a period of formation for inquirers called the *Catechumenate*,

with a 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, infant baptism became more common. For older children and adults, 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. It is from this Council that the OCIA was eventually developed.

The OCIA is modeled on the ancient way of accepting new members into the Church, by offering a deeper formation and a more authentic understanding of the conversion process. In 1988, the American bishops in the United States offered the OCIA as the process for new members to come into the Church, whether unbaptized or those who were coming from another Christian denomination.

STRUCTURE AND FORMAT OF THE OCIA

The OCIA is a progressive process of discernment and development. Just as two people grow gradually toward establishing lasting bonds, the OCIA advances in stages toward full commitment. The OCIA 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 is the most flexible in its format. Inquirers have time to share their faith journey with others seeking to learn more about the Catholic Church. Inquirers are invited to discern 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. We are called to mirror the life of Christ in our way of living, as 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

Catechumens and candidates conclude the catechumenate phase and enter the *Period of Purification and Enlightenment*. This transition is marked by the *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* occur at the Cathedral 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 in preparation 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.

Those coming into the Church are preparing for full participation in the liturgy and are presented with two 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.

The Easter Vigil 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, recounting the story of our salvation in Sacred Scripture.

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

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

PHASE FOUR: MYSTAGOGY

The period when new Catholics begin practicing their faith and become more involved in their parish is referred to as *mystagogy*, a Greek word meaning "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 OCIA process and begin participating actively in parish ministry, especially by becoming involved in parish groups and activities.