

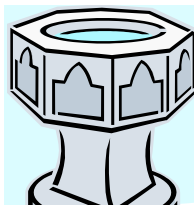


RCIA: Becoming Catholic

The letters RCIA stand for the “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the document from the Second Vatican Council which guides the process by which adults are initiated into our Roman Catholic Community. The RCIA describes a process in which men and women are guided and cared for as they awaken in faith and are gradually introduced to the Catholic way of life.

The RCIA process is a series of carefully planned stages, marked by liturgical rites in the presence of the whole Church community, in which new Catholics embark on a journey and join us in continuing and deepening conversion into faith and discipleship. The RCIA takes the distinctive history and spiritual needs of each person into account, differentiating between the baptized and the unbaptized, the catechized and the uncatechized. The needs of the mature, practicing Christians from other faith traditions are considered on an individual basis.

The RCIA draws its model from the “**catechumenate**” of the ancient church. Becoming Christian in the early days of the Church involved a sharp break with the surrounding culture. New Christians entered into the joy of new life and a life-sharing community of faith, but also entered into a way of living which demanded a deep commitment and entailed great risk. In the modern world, our faith also demands deep commitment – our beliefs and the beliefs of society are often in tension. The church revived the catechumenate – embodied in the RCIA – because new believers in the Church needed a process of commitment.



Conversion: Journey of Mind, Heart and Spirit

Awakening to Christ and seeking out the Church through the RCIA come about in a variety of ways. The first step for some is the sense that “something is missing”- a sense that, perhaps provoked some crisis, that there is more to live than how they now live. For many others, the journey begins because of a relationship with a Catholic. Still others are drawn by seeing the example of a Catholic life well lived, or by exposure to Catholic writer like St. Augustine, Thomas Merton or Dorothy Day. Whatever the reason for the awakening and the decision to seek, the RCIA Process is the first step on a lifelong journey of intellectual, emotional and spiritual conversion.

In her book, *Turning: Reflections on the Experience of Conversion*, Emile Griffin reflects that “conversion” is the process of “turning one’s life and energies to God.” While we know that the concept of “turning” is apt – the root image of conversion is the proverbial “one hundred and eighty degree change” – we also know from our lives and experience that conversion is an on-going, lifelong process of personal spiritual growth as well as a social process in which we strengthen and draw strength from others.

The RCIA recognizes both the ongoing quality and the communal nature of conversion, providing an intellectual and spiritual framework and a faith community in which an individual's conversion experience can be understood and supported. Caring for people in the midst of this life changing experience is the goal of the RCIA ministry.



Preparation: Awakening, Growth and Formation

The full RCIA process consists of four periods of awakening, growth and formation marked by three major rites involving the entire St. Benedict Community.

Inquiry

During this first period of the journey, the inquiry period, seekers ask the hard questions about Christianity and receive truthful, life-sharing answers from Catholic Christians. The informal discussions during this period help the seekers link their personal life stories to the Good News as witnessed and lived by the Roman Catholic Community.

As each inquirer desires to continue the conversion period within our faith community, he or she is invited to experience the first major rite of the RCIA process, THE RITE OF ACCEPTANCE. RCIA inquirers enter the second period of the journey, the catechumenate, by being marked with the sign of the cross on the ears, eyes, lips, heart, shoulders, hands and feet – a symbol of both the joys and the difficulties of being a Catholic Christian.

Into the Catacombs

The word catechumenate “time of serious study” and inquirers who become catechumens (those who have not been baptized) and candidates (those who have been baptized but not confirmed as Roman Catholics) join us a Sunday Mass during the Liturgy of the Word, after which they move to the parish rectory to continue reflecting on the scriptures. The length of the catechumenate varies according to individual need. The norm is about a year. Catechumens and candidates do not travel alone during this period. Sponsors are chosen from the parish community to act as spiritual companions, providing personal support, sharing experiences of Christian life and helping make a catechumen or candidate feel “at home” with Catholic religious practices.

The catechumenate period ends when a catechumen or candidate is ready to begin the third period of the journey, THE PERIOD OF PURIFICATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT which coincides with Lent each year. On the first Sunday of Lent, catechumens travel to Holy Name Cathedral to celebrate the second major rite of the RCIA process – THE RITE OF ELECTION, while the candidates receive a call to continuing conversion.

Purification and Enlightenment

The period of enlightenment and purification is a time of final preparation for initiation. This period is one of prayer, fasting and reflection for both catechumens and candidates. During this

period, the Elect experience the scrutinies and exorcisms, special rites which seal their break with evil in preparation for the reception of the sacraments.

Easter Fire!

The candidates and the Elect are initiated through the final rite of the RCIA process, the sacraments of initiation, at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. On that night, when light drives out darkness, joyful sounds fill the silence, and we proclaim and renew our resurrection hope, the elect culminate their journey in the waters of Baptism, Then the newly baptized and the candidates are sealed with the oil of chrism in Confirmation. They then share the bread and wine of the Eucharist as full members of the Catholic community.

Mystagogia

Initiation begins the fourth period of the RCIA Process. The word Mystagogia means “leading to the mysteries.” The newly initiated meet weekly to explore and confirm the Easter experience. From Pentecost to the following Easter, mystagogia continues with intermittent meetings. Mystagogia is the final stage of the RCIA process, but the beginning of a life long journey of faith.

How long does it take?

- The RCIA is not a program it is a process
- It is the church’s way of ministering to those who seek membership. It usually takes about a year to complete the process, but it can take longer depending on the seeker’s life situation.
- We try to have the candidates and catechumens experience at least one year of the church’s calendar of Catholic practices.
- The process of spiritual renewal and catechesis should not be hasty, especially for those not accustomed to fasts, feasts and Sundays and the seasons and the way Catholics observe them.
- One of the best times for the sacraments of initiation or the Rite of reception into full communion is the Easter Vigil. Lent prepares catechumens, candidates and the whole community for baptism, confirmation and Eucharist.

For more information, please call 773-588-6484 and ask for one of the following people:

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