

Easter Vigil and Sacraments of Initiation

The candidates and the elect become full members of the Roman Catholic community through the consummating rite of the RCIA process, the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion), at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. On this night, the light of the Resurrected Christ, signified by the Paschal Candle, drives out darkness. Joyful sounds fill the silence, and the whole community renews its own baptismal promises. The elect culminate their long journey to initiation in the waters of Baptism. The candidates are admitted into the Church. Then all are sealed with the oil of chrism at Confirmation and share the Body and Blood of Christ for the first time.

Period of Mystagogia

Easter begins the fourth period of the RCIA journey, the mystagogia, which means “leading into the mysteries.” The newly initiated meet weekly for some weeks after Easter to explore and confirm the Easter experience. Mystagogia is the final stage of the RCIA process, but it is in turn only a beginning—the beginning of a lifelong pilgrimage of continuous conversion and growth in holiness in full communion with the Roman Catholic community of Christians.

Text partly adapted from Roman Catholic WebRing, by Jan Francis.

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RCIA – A Year’s Journey

The letters “RCIA” stand for the “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults,” the document stemming 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.

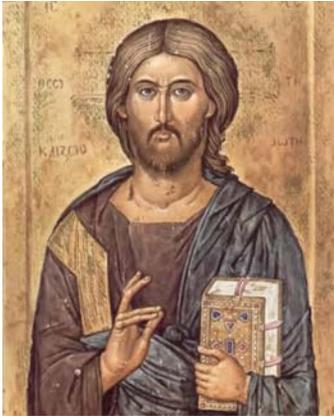
The RCIA year comprises a series of carefully planned stages, marked by liturgical rites in the presence of the whole community, in which potential Catholics embark on and join the community in a continuing and deepening conversion into faith and discipleship. The RCIA takes the distinctive history and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



Easter Vigil, Nativity Parish, 2010.

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 deep commitment and entailed great risks. In the modern world, our faith also demands deep commitment—our beliefs and the beliefs of our society are often in tension. The Church revived the catechumenate—embodied in the RCIA—because new believers in the modern world need careful preparation and caring support as they enter into the mysteries of Christ and the commitment of Christian living.

Conversion: a Journey of Mind, Heart and Spirit



Pantocrator, Christ Savior and Life Giver - painted by Metropolitan Jovan Zograf (1384)

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

becoming more and more like God—and therefore becoming our truest and best selves.

The full RCIA process follows several stages of awakening, growth and formation, with major rites that involve the whole Nativity community.

Inquiry Period

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

The Rite of Acceptance—Period of the Catechumenate

As the inquirers desire to continue the conversion journey within our faith community, they are invited to experience the first major rite of the RCIA process, the Rite of Acceptance. This simple rite at Sunday Mass begins a more formal period in their journey, the catechumenate.

The word catechumenate means “time of serious study” and inquirers who become *catechumens*—those who have not been baptized—or *candidates*—baptized Christians who have not been confirmed as Roman Catholics—join us at Sunday Mass. We used to leave Mass after the Liturgy of the Word to continue reflecting on the Scriptures, but we have dropped this practice for the time being.

Our catechumens and candidates do not travel alone during this period. Our staff is here to help, and class members also choose Catholic sponsors to act as spiritual companions, providing personal support, sharing experience of Christian life and helping make everyone feel “at home” with Catholic religious practice.

The Rite of Election—Period of Purification and Enlightenment

The catechumenate period ends on the First Sunday of Lent when the catechumens, of their own free will, take a serious step towards baptism through the Rite of Election. It is an hour-long ceremony at the cathedral in which the catechumens sign their names in the Book of Elect, and are recognized by the archbishop as members of the elect, persons who are seriously preparing for baptism. (The baptized candidates also attend, and are invited to continuing conversion.) The period of purification and enlightenment that follows during Lent is a time of final preparation for the Easter sacraments. This period is one of prayer, fasting and reflection for the elect, and candidates. During this period, the elect participate in the scrutinies in three Sunday Masses, special rites which seal their break with evil in preparation for baptism.