



Introduction

How do we provide formation that is both complete in its coverage and as conversion-centered as the RCIA intends? The intention of this resource is to provide a skeletal vision of how to implement the Rite of Christian Initiation in the parish. The theological principles set forth in the ritual text (RCIA) are the guiding star of this project.

Those who crafted the RCIA resurrected the ancient model of mystagogy (reflection on the mysteries), reflection on the sacraments, and liturgies of the Church within the context of the liturgical year. The terms liturgical catechesis and sacramental catechesis embody that mystagogical reflection.

The ancient model of mystagogical/liturgical/sacramental catechesis included 1. Catechesis before baptism, 2. Participation in the rites associated with baptism, 3. Reflection on the rite of baptism after celebration, leading to 4. A conversion-centered transformed life. Such *was* the sacramental catechesis of the early Church; such *is* the sacramental catechesis envisioned in the RCIA today.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS, a division of Bayard, Inc.
One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200, New London, CT 06320;
(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411; www.twentythirdpublications.com

Copyright © 2021 Mary Birmingham. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher. Write to the Permissions Editor.

Cover art: ©Shutterstock.com | ISBN: 978-1-62785-591-4 | Printed in the U.S.A.

1. Catechesis *on* the liturgical rites, liturgical year, Sunday celebration of the word, and immersion in the life of the community.
2. Celebration *of* the liturgical rites, liturgical season, and Sunday celebration of the word within the celebrating community.
3. Reflection and teaching *on* those rites, the Scriptures, dogma and doctrine, and transformation of life that flow from the rites within the home, community, and the wider world.
4. Decision to live a transformed way of life that flows from all of the above.

Mystagogical, liturgical catechesis is the model of catechesis intended by the RCIA. Pastors and other pastoral staff members often have some of the same questions that might be swirling in your head right now, such as: “Is forming catechumens according to the rites and the liturgy and liturgical year enough?” Perhaps you are worried that you won’t cover all the doctrines of the Church by using liturgical catechesis. The answer? It is more than enough and, as you will see, fulfills even more than your expectations.

Stages

RCIA is an acronym for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. When the church uses the word *adult* in reference to Christian initiation it includes children of catechetical age (seven and older). There is no specific rite for children or teens (thus there is no RCIC or RCIT). The principles of the RCIA are simply age-appropriately adapted for children and teens.¹

1 I have written a catechetical resource for elementary age school children that will be published this year by GIA and World Library Publications.

The RCIA is an ongoing process designed especially for people who wish to be baptized in the Catholic Church. It is also for those who have been baptized in another faith tradition and wish to be fully initiated in the Catholic Church, as well as baptized Catholics who would like to complete the sacraments of initiation by celebrating the sacraments of Eucharist and confirmation.

There are four stages, and the doorway into each stage is a community ritual that celebrates what God has done in their lives in the previous stage and serves as the threshold into the next. It involves a process; it is a journey toward a lifetime commitment.

First Stage

The *Precatechumenate/Inquiry* (also known as the Period of Evangelization (RCIA p. 36ff.)), is the first stage of the process and is for baptized or unbaptized persons who have had little or no formal Christian training and would like to inquire more into the Catholic way of life. This first period of the process is a time to grow more deeply in intimate love and friendship with Jesus.

During this first phase of their journey, inquirers grow in faith and personal intimacy with the living God, they witness to God's action in their lives, they ask questions, and they discern their call to Catholic Christianity. The overarching dynamic of this period is welcome and hospitality.

The inquirer begins to have a sense of what it means to be part of a community. When the community gathers for social events, inquirers gather with them. One or two catechists meet with inquirers for about an hour, either on Sunday or another day of the week.

The precatechumenate meets every week throughout the year whenever there are inquirers. Catechists rotate and share this ministry; one way this works is for one (or perhaps two) catechists to minister for two months at a time. When it is time for the other catechist(s) to take their turn, they make contact with the catechists of the previous two months and discuss what is going on in the lives of the inquirers so that the incoming catechist(s) are up to speed on the needs of the individuals in the group.

Inquirers move to the next stage when initial conversion has taken place in their lives. The RCIA (p. 42) helps us discern readiness to move to the next stage: initial faith and conversion, calling on God in prayer, acquaintance with the fundamentals of Christian faith, primary stories of the Old Testament and of Jesus in the gospels, understanding our need for repentance, and a sense of Church and the Christian community. Herein lies the content for this period: evangelization.² It is not a time to pass on Catholic doctrine. That comes in the next stage, once a person has been evangelized. Conversion is a gradual process; time is given for faith to take root in those wanting to become Catholic.

Initial interview. Sometimes people come to us already evangelized but not thoroughly catechized in Scripture, Catholic teaching, and apprenticeship in the Catholic way of life. Those people do not need the full precatechumenate. They may only need several weeks of faith sharing before they celebrate the rite of acceptance and are placed in the period of the catechumenate. The initial interview asks: “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Are you familiar with the Scriptures?”

2 *Formed in Faith* by Mary Birmingham (GIA/World Library Publications) is a resource for the precatechumenate. There are twelve sessions that seek to accomplish what the RCIA intends for the period of evangelization.

Do you read the Bible? Do you pray? What do you know about Christianity? Are you aware that you are a sinner and are in need of repentance? Have you ever been part of a Christian community, and do you know the importance of being part of the Church?” If they are able to articulate evidence that they are evangelized they do not belong in the first period.

When they are evangelized they are ready to celebrate the rite of acceptance or optional rite of welcome and move to the next period of the process. The RCIA insists that several rites of acceptance and rites of welcome may be celebrated throughout the year—whenever the parish discerns an inquirer is ready to move to the next stage (RCIA 18). It is best to wait until several inquirers are ready, if possible.

It is also important to discover the marriage status of couples early in their journey to discern if annulments are needed and if so, allow the proper authority to begin that process.

Second Stage

The *Catechumenate* is the second stage/period of the process. Liturgy, Scripture, and Catholic tradition are the heart of this stage. People preparing for baptism are now called *catechumens*; those who are already baptized are called *candidates*.

Paragraph 75 of the *Rite* is the prism through which we discern how formed a person is—paschal mystery, liturgy and sacraments, Scripture and tradition, community life, and service.

Catechumens are invited to pattern their lives after Jesus in the gospel. The primary focus of this period is formation in God’s word, Catholic doctrine, liturgy and sacraments, service/outreach, and most important, incorporation into the life of the parish community—apprenticeship.

During this stage of the process catechumens meet weekly at the principal Mass with the rest of the community. They are dismissed after the homily to break open the word of God just proclaimed. They learn what we believe about the Scriptures and are invited to become “hearers and doers” of God’s word.

After Mass, they break for refreshments with the community and then gather for another hour (this can also be held on another day of the week) to explore what Catholics believe—the doctrines of our Church. All this is done in a relaxed, adult faith-sharing atmosphere that invites a deeper relationship with God. Conversion is the primary objective.

Catechumens and candidates are apprenticed and participate in the life of the parish. If there is a parish retreat or renewal program, they participate with the rest of the faithful. If there is a parish fair or an outreach event, they participate with other parishioners. Catechumens and candidates are apprenticed in the Catholic way of life when they go with sponsors and parishioners to do the “work” of Christianity, such as visiting the sick and feeding the hungry.

The National Statutes of the RCIA (no. 6) insist that this period should extend for one complete liturgical cycle, from the time the rite of acceptance is celebrated until their initiation. An uncatechized person would be in this period for one full liturgical year. Thus, if a person celebrated a rite of acceptance in January, they would bypass Easter and be initiated the following Easter. There are so many exceptions to this rule that it ultimately depends on the formation of the individual. Ongoing discernment is a necessary tool in determining when a person is ready to move through the process. The following elements also serve as a tool of discernment.

Five Elements of Catechesis. There are five elements of formation envisioned by the RCIA: Catechesis in the paschal mys-

tery, on the liturgy, in word and tradition, formation in the life of the community, and catechesis in the life of service.

What does a suitable catechesis in the paschal mystery, in liturgy, in Scripture and tradition, in community life, and the apostolic life look like (RCIA 8 and 75–84)?

1. Paschal Catechesis. A suitable, paschal catechesis is one that fosters and invites a deep and lasting conversion to Jesus Christ, incorporating a person into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. If we do not invite candidates to grow in intimate union with Christ and participate in his paschal mystery, we are not doing the most important job we have been given to do. Thus, every time we gather with catechumens and candidates to break open the Scriptures and explore Church teaching (doctrine and dogma), we pose questions that invite them to encounter Christ at the deepest level. For example: "How does what we shared today invite you to grow in deeper friendship with Jesus? How does what we shared today invite you to take up your cross and follow him?" We share our own stories of dying and rising, thus inviting them to share theirs.

The primary place where the paschal mystery is made manifest is in the liturgy. Thus, our attention turns to the liturgy, the second element of formation mentioned in the RCIA.

2. Catechesis in Liturgy. The Fathers of the Church always understood liturgy as primary theology. Suitable liturgical formation is rooted in the liturgical year and Sunday liturgy. Suitable catechesis—liturgical catechesis—celebrates, remembers, and reflects upon the Scriptures, the symbols, the gestures, and the ritual prayers of the Sunday liturgy, sacraments, feasts, and liturgical season that hold within them the major doctrines of our faith.