

Some of the inquirers become firm in their desire for initiation and decide that they would like to begin more formal study of the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church. They are admitted into the next step through a special ceremony called the Rite of Acceptance/Welcome into the Order of Catechumens. In this ritual the Church symbolically claims these men and women for Christ by signing them with the cross.

This is the first time that the inquirers publicly declare their faith before the parish community. Because no one likes to do something like that on their own, each inquirer is accompanied by a sponsor. Sponsors may be chosen by the individual or provided by the parish. Sponsors provide support and companionship for the rest of the R.C.I.A. process.

After this rite, the inquirers are called catechumens, and the initial conversion is deepened. This name indicates that they are learning the teachings of the Church and beginning to accept Catholic tradition and practices. Even though they are not yet permitted to receive the sacraments, the catechumens do enjoy other important rights. They have a right to assistance as they grow in faith by learning about the teachings of the Church and participating in works of service in the parish. They also have a right to be married in the Church and to receive Christian burial.

Third Step Rite of Election and the Period of Purification and Enlightenment

The period of the catechumenate ends when the catechumens discern, with the help of their sponsors and the parish R.C.I.A. team, that God is calling them to receive the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and First Eucharist) at the next Easter Vigil. Before they can be initiated, they must be officially called to the sacraments by the bishop or someone designated by him. This Rite of Election is celebrated on weekend of the First Sunday of Lent presided by the Bishop. The Rite of Election marks the end of formal study of the teachings and practices of the Church. The catechumens are now called the elect.

On the Sundays of Lent, special prayers are offered at the Eucharist for the elect, called Scrutinies. These prayers are for strengthening in grace and virtue, and help them prepare more fully for the sacraments. The sponsors continue to accompany the elect in church and support them in their Lenten preparations.

Fourth Step Initiation and Mystagoga

On Holy Saturday, the parish assembles for the Easter Vigil. The Church has always recognized that in baptism we die to sin in Christ's death so that we may rise to new life with him. The Easter Vigil is the primary celebration of the Lord's resurrection and is, therefore, the most appropriate occasion for the elect to celebrate their baptism, confirmation, and first Eucharist.

For the newly initiated, now called neophytes, the time between Easter and Pentecost is a special opportunity to reflect on the commitment which they have made to the Lord, to the Church, and to the local parish community. This time of unfolding the meaning of the initiation sacraments is called mystagoga.

The journey of faith lasts a lifetime. The weeks after Easter are a time for new Catholics to seek out their place in the parish community. Other parishioners can reach out to welcome them, helping them to get involved and feel at home.

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Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

The letters "RCIA" stand for the "*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*", the document flowing from Vatican II 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 community, in which new Catholics embark on and join us 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.

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

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. Still others are drawn by seeing the example of a Catholic life well lived, or by exposure to a Catholic writer. 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.

Preparation: Awakening, Growth and Formation

The full RCIA process consists of four periods of awakening, growth and formation marked by celebration of three major rites involving the whole community.

Inquiry

During the first period of the journey, the inquiry period, 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 first major rite of the RCIA process is the Rite of Acceptance. Several times each year at Sunday Mass, 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 costs of Christian discipleship.

Into the Catacombs

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 during the Liturgy of the Word, after which they move to the parish house to continue reflecting on the Scriptures. The length of the catechumenate varies according to individual need. The norm is a year or more.

Sponsors are chosen from the parish community to act as spiritual companions, providing personal support, sharing experience of Christian life and

helping make the catechumens and candidates feel "*at home*" with Catholic religious practice.

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 the Cathedral to celebrate the second major rite of the RCIA process, the Rite of Election, while candidates receive the Call to Continuing Conversion.

Purification and Enlightenment

The period of purification and enlightenment is a time of final preparation for initiation. The period is one of prayer, fasting and reflection for both catechumens, now known as the Elect, and candidates. During this period, the Elect experience scrutinies and exorcisms, special rites which seal their break with evil in preparation for baptism.

Easter Fire!

The candidates and the Elect are initiated through the third and consummating 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 long journey to initiation in the waters of Baptism -- then, with the candidates, the newly baptized are sealed with the oil of Confirmation and share the bread and wine of the Eucharist as full members of the Roman Catholic community.

Mystagogia

Initiation begins the fourth period of the RCIA journey, the mystagogia, which means "*leading into the mysteries*". The newly initiated meet weekly between Easter and Pentecost to explore and confirm the Easter experience. From Pentecost until the following Easter, mystagogia continues with intermittent meetings. Mystagogia is the final stage of the RCIA process, but it is in turn the beginning of a pilgrimage of lifelong, continuous conversion in full communion with the Roman Catholic community of Christians.

How long does it take?

"The Rite of Christian Initiation is not a program.

It is the church's way of ministering sensitively to those who seek membership. For that reason some people will need more time than others to prepare for the lifetime commitment that comes with membership in the Catholic Church. The usual length of preparation is from one to two years. For those already baptized and who seek full communion in the Catholic Church, the time may also vary.

It seems reasonable that catechumens or candidates experience the yearly calendar of Catholic practice at least one time around in order to make an informed decision.

The process of spiritual renewal and catechesis should not be hasty, especially for those not accustomed to the fasts and feasts and Sundays and seasons 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. The celebration of the Easter Vigil dramatically points to the wellspring of the church's life:

"The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Four Steps to Becoming a Fully Initiated Catholic

First Step

Period of Inquiry

How someone comes to consider joining the Catholic Church is unique to each individual. At some point, the person may contact a Catholic parish and begin to meet with other adults who are also inquiring about the Catholic faith. These adults, with members of the R.C.I.A. team, will take time to tell their own stories and connect them with the faith stories found in scripture.

Second Step

Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens and the Period of the Catechumenate