

Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA)
A Joint Ministry of St. Joseph and St. Stephen Parishes

The Catholic Church firmly believes that faith in Jesus Christ is a gift from God, and comes through the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit. St. Francis of Assisi once said, “Preach the Gospel effectively, when necessary, use words.” Catholics believe that a true disciple of Jesus demonstrates service and an authentic love for humanity and creation. Therefore, the Catholic Church does not believe in proselytizing individuals or forcing conversion. Rather, individuals are drawn to the Church because they see or experience something attractive, loving, and familiar, and are led to discover the Truths of the Christian faith on their own initiative.

In a simple sentence, history clearly shows that the Catholic Church was the one church founded by Jesus Himself... therefore she is our mother and our home. All other Christian denominations find their origin in the Catholic Church. For those drawn to the Church, it is always a homecoming! Welcome home!

Introduction and History of the RCIA

The Rite of Christian Initiation finds its origin in the first century, as the Christian Church continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire and more doctrines were formulated by the leaders of the church, as a defense against false teachings about Jesus and the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). In the beginning of the Christian era, immediately following Jesus’ resurrection, the apostles were sent out to “make disciples of all nations” and to baptize believers (cf. Matthew 28:19-20). In the Acts of the Apostles, we have an accurate account of several thousand people who were baptized in a single day without formal preparation or instruction.

There is a difference between the first few years of Christianity and the years that followed, however. Gnosticism and Arianism developed. These two groups denied Jesus’ humanity or His divinity. The Church was constantly trying to preserve an authentic understanding of who Jesus was: a divine person (God Himself) who took on a human nature.

Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders of the day, as well as the Roman leaders, saw great problems with this new religion, called “The Way”. The Christians were persecuted and killed. Therefore, immediate and public baptisms were not commonplace anymore. Christians were very cautious about welcoming those who inquired about joining the Church. The Church was placed under heavy scrutiny and many people left the Church for fear of their lives, or followed the latest fad or “apostle”, even though they were false teachers. Many of St. Paul’s letters in the New Testament are letters that dispel heresy (false teachings) or offer encouragement to the Christians in major cities of the Roman Empire, all who were being persecuted. The Book of Revelation, written by a presbyter named John, is really a letter of encouragement to fellow Christians, written during one of the bloodiest persecutions yet to be experienced by those who followed Jesus.

As a result of these two factors (heresy and persecution), among other factors, those who desired to enter the Christian Church were given instructions, and went through a period of preparation, purification, and enlightenment before receiving Baptism, the gift of the Spirit (Confirmation) and Eucharist. Since the RCIA is described in several early Christian writings, we know that this preparation could last upwards of THREE YEARS! The early Christians certainly knew how to separate the wheat from the chaff!

The RCIA as Experienced in Our Parishes Today

Step I: The Period of Inquiry

In early September, individuals interested in joining the Catholic Church come together for informational meetings, where they ask the burning questions that they may have about the Catholic Church, based on what they may have heard or believed to be true. This three-week period is called inquiry. Inquiry is a no-pressure, no-obligation way to get initial questions answered, and hear how the RCIA works. Inquiry is led by the pastor, director of the RCIA process, and a recently initiated member of the Church who went through RCIA. Many people find inquiry to be enlightening, because many false rumors exist in the world concerning the Roman Catholic Church! For instance: Catholics DO NOT worship statues, we worship the Holy Trinity ONLY. So, that also rules out worship of the Blessed Virgin Mary... but yes, Catholics certainly hold her in high regard—after all, God the Father did, too. If He didn't, then we should erase Luke, Chapters 1-2 from Scripture.

These are just two of the most popular questions asked during the period of inquiry.

Step 2: The Catechumenate

Catechumenate is a Greek term that means “to instruct”. In early October, after a few weeks of inquiry, those who wish to continue formal preparation to enter the Church through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist (or Confirmation and Eucharist for those who are already baptized) fill out information sheets stating the reason(s) that they wish to continue the process. They also choose a sponsor, or Catholic mentor, who will journey with them over the course of the year. Then the Church celebrates the Rite of Welcome and/or Acceptance. Those seeking initiation into the Church literally knock on the front door of the church, and are welcomed by the parish community. These individuals are now called candidates (those who are baptized) or catechumens (those who are non-baptized).

Each Wednesday, the group comes together to study an aspect of the Church's 2,000-year history and teachings. Over the course of twenty weeks, the candidates will be exposed to Holy Scripture, Church history through the ages, an understanding of the seven sacraments, Mass as the central act of Christian worship, the Communion of Saints, and lessons concerning prayer and how to be a good disciple of Jesus.

Step 3: The Scrutinies and Sacraments of Initiation

The Season of Lent is an intense time for those in RCIA. Each week, they are presented to the church community and are prayed over by the pastor. They sign a book of readiness, and they pilgrimage to St. Joseph Cathedral in Baton Rouge to meet the bishop and receive his blessing. The candidates are now called “the Elect”.

The group prepares for the Easter vigil celebration by participating in a one-day retreat during Holy Week, where the learning from the past year is synthesized and any missing pieces of the puzzle are named by the group and discussed. By this time, the group has truly grown into a small extended family. There is great anticipation as Holy Saturday approaches, and the Elect are invited to participate in the Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, and Good Friday liturgies.

The Easter Vigil—the greatest celebration for the universal Church, is the time when new Christians are baptized and those from other denominations are brought into full communion. Catholics who attend the Easter Vigil are inspired as they witness the Elect become fully initiated members of the Church via the sacraments.

Step 4: The Period of Mystagogia

This Greek term means “unpacking the mystery”. After the celebration of the Easter Vigil, the new Catholics, or “neophytes” are encouraged to get together for a few weeks to truly talk about what happened at the Easter Vigil,

and how they experienced God's grace. These new Catholics are then encouraged to sign up for a ministry, based on their God-given talents, so that they can continue their process of growth and truly settle into the life of the parish. As a general teaching, mystagogia never ends, for Catholics believe that conversion is an ongoing process—and not just a one-time event. God always tries to draw us into a closer relationship, and as recipients of God's grace, we are always trying to “unpack the mystery”... to seek to understand God more and more.

Members of the RCIA Core Team

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