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Catholic Conversion Process Unwrapped

By Jeannine Marino, J.C.L.

For most parishes, Sunday Mass during Lent has been different as people called “the elect” and “candidates” have been called forth to the altar. As the Easter Triduum approaches, the Church prepares to welcome these participants in Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) through the Sacraments of Initiation. RCIA is not only for those seeking full initiation into the Church, RCIA involves the whole Christian community.

RCIA is mainly for two groups of people: the unbaptized and baptized Christians seeking full communion with the Church. Some dioceses also include baptized but uncatechized Catholics. For the unbaptized, RCIA prepares them to receive all three Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Baptized Christians and Catholics will receive Confirmation and/or the Eucharist.

Here are ten important steps in the RCIA process and their significance for the participants and the entire Church:

1. Period of Evangelization: Through baptism every Catholic is called to preach the Good News and share the gift of faith they received with the world; all are urged to invite friends and family members to Mass. Sometimes this invitation inspires people to consider the Catholic Church and RCIA.

2. Rite of Acceptance and Welcome: This marks the first time those in RCIA officially assemble before the parish. After their initial conversion, they declare publicly their intention to enter into a relationship with Christ and his Church. The parish commits to praying for them. From this point on those seeking baptism are called *catechumens*, and those seeking full communion with the Church are called *candidates*.

3. Celebration of the Word: After the Rite of Acceptance, the catechumens are usually dismissed from Mass after the Liturgy of the Word to reflect more deeply on Scripture and prepare themselves for their eventual participation in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This dismissal is not meant to exclude those in RCIA from the Liturgy of the Eucharist, but to help them and the parish joyfully build up anticipation of the Easter Sacraments.

4. Sending of the Catechumens and Candidates: Before the First Sunday of Lent, those in RCIA are called before the parish, which prays for them and sends them forth to present themselves to the bishop. They are presented to the bishop because he is the chief pastor of the diocese and admits them to the Easter Sacraments on behalf of the entire Church.

5. Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion: This rite is usually held on the First Sunday of Lent and marks the catechumens and candidates' final preparation for the Easter Sacraments. They reaffirm their intention to join the Church. In the presence of the bishop, the catechumens inscribe their name in the Book of the Elect. From this point forward, the catechumens are called *the elect*.

6. Period of Purification and Enlightenment: This period begins with the Rite of Election and is a season of intense spiritual preparation and reflection on the Paschal Mystery. The elect and candidates are called to deepen their relationship with Christ, and the parish community is called to increase their prayers and support of the elect and candidates.

7. Scrutinies: The Scrutinies are rites of conversion and repentance. They include prayers of intercession and exorcism and are intended to deliver the elect from sin, protect them from temptation and invite them closer to Christ, who is the living water, the light of the world and the Resurrection and the Life. The three Scrutinies are celebrated on the Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent.

8. Presentation of the Creed and Lord's Prayer: After the first Scrutiny, those in RCIA are entrusted with the Creed and after the third Scrutiny, the Lord's Prayer. The Creed professes the faith, and the Lord's Prayer teaches believers to call upon the Father as Christ did. At the Easter Vigil, those in RCIA will for the first time publicly profess the Creed and participate in the Liturgy of the Eucharist to pray the Lord's Prayer.

9. Easter Vigil: The "most blessed of all nights," as proclaimed by the Exsultet, is the night the Church joyfully anticipates Christ's Resurrection. The elect receive all three Sacraments of Initiation and candidates for full communion receive confirmation and/or the Eucharist. For the first time, the elect and candidates are welcomed to the Lord's Table as full disciples of Christ.

10. Mystagogy: After receiving the Easter Sacraments, the neophytes (newly initiated) continue their faith formation during the period of *mystagogy* (which means "interpretation of mystery"). Mystagogy is the time of post-baptismal catechesis. It typically lasts for one year. This time allows the neophytes to reflect on their experience of the sacraments, Scripture, grow closer to Christ through the Eucharist and participate more frequently in the parish. The parish community is called to mentor the neophytes as they begin to live as Christian disciples and fulfill their baptismal vocation to evangelize. One way to support our newest brothers and sisters in Christ is to invite them to join a parish ministry or to dinner!

Jeannine Marino is a program specialist at the Secretariat of Evangelization and Catechesis of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Posted by [Sr. Mary Ann Walsh](#) at [11:52 AM](#)