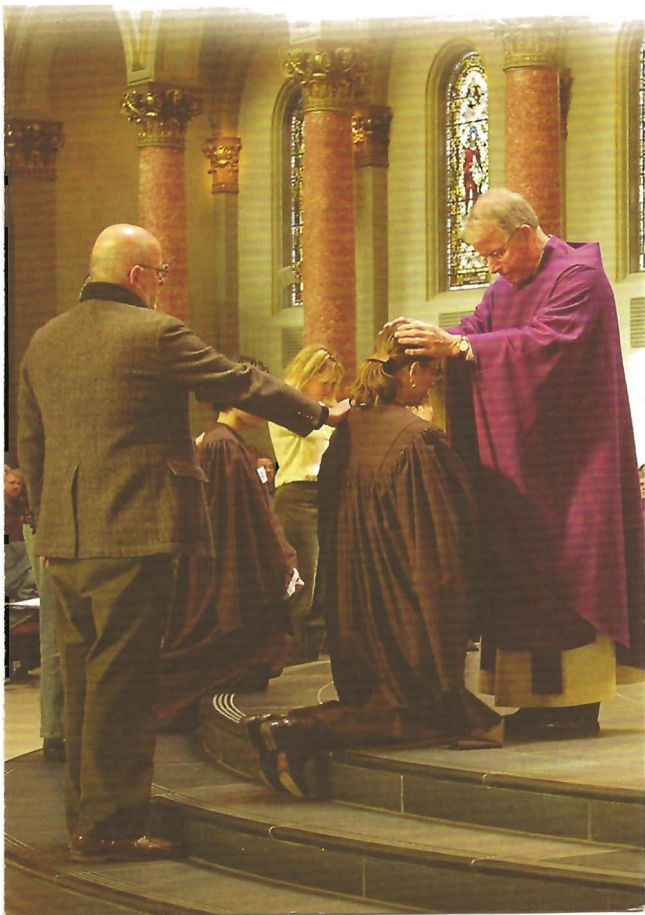


What Is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults?



The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is the Church's ritual process for calling adults to a conversion of mind and heart and preparing them for a full and active life in the Church as disciples of Jesus. During the process, adults participate in liturgical rites that both mark the progress of their journey and form them more deeply by God's grace. The culmination of that ritual process is the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.

Unlike our usual understanding of ritual that takes place at a specific moment, the RCIA is spread *over* a longer period. The process of becoming a mature Christian *involves* more than just learning about the faith of the Church. Becoming a Christian presumes a relationship with God who becomes the ground of our being. To be a Christian means that we have claimed the *values* of the Gospel as our own and *have* committed ourselves to the teaching of Jesus. The RCIA aims to transform the entire person into an individual who has truly put on Christ Jesus. Obviously, this kind of conversion of the whole person takes sufficient time to mature.

For whom is the RCIA intended?

The RCIA is primarily intended for those who are unbaptized and preparing for the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. *However*, the rite provides adaptations for those who are already baptized but may be preparing for a profession of faith and full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Some parish communities include baptized candidates in the catechetical and formation process designed for unbaptized candidates. Once unbaptized inquirers are formally accepted into the initiation process they are called catechumens.

What does the initiation process involve?

Although the full process of becoming a Catholic is referred to as a rite, it *involves* more than liturgical ceremonies. A number of elements form the whole process. Key among these elements are evangelization, engagement with the community, catechesis, formation for mission, and the sacraments of initiation.

Evangelization

Holy Scripture is the foundation of our faith. God reveals himself in the scriptures and invites us into a personal relationship with the Trinity. Through the ministry of *evangelization*, God's word is proclaimed and we come to know who God is and what God's plan for humanity demands of us. Evangelization also includes learning how to read the signs of God's presence in our lives and learning how to respond with a generous heart to God's grace at work within us.



Engagement with the community

This journey of faith is not made alone. The community of believers surrounds catechumens with love, support, prayer, and Christian witness. As members of the Christian community share their faith, the catechumens begin to catch the spirit and values of the Church as they are lived out daily in the lives of its members. The community participates in the rites of initiation, praying for and with the catechumens. Catechists, sponsors, clergy, and parishioners form a smaller community within which the catechumens experience a more intense and intimate way the dynamics of the Church's life, her values and beliefs, and the demands of Christian discipleship.

Catechesis

Catechumens are exposed to the teachings of Jesus and his Church by a thorough process of catechesis. The ultimate goal of catechesis is not just to acquire religious information, but to enter into the mystery of Christ, to encounter the living God, and to discover the meaning of life in Christ. Through catechesis, catechumens learn how to pray, how to make moral choices, and what will be expected of them as faithful members of the Church. While catechesis is central to the RCIA, it is intended to be a lifelong process for all Christians.

Formation for mission

In becoming a Christian, one also becomes a missionary. Once we are baptized into Christ Jesus, we share in the mission he entrusted to his Church. The formation process in the RCIA is intended to prepare men and women for living their faith in the world. Our vocation is to transform society by the values of the Gospel. We are called to be doers of the word of God, peacemakers,

instruments of justice, and ministers of reconciliation. Our call to mission begins at home, but it truly has no borders.

The sacraments of initiation

While many elements comprise the RCIA, the crowning experience of the initiation process is the celebration of the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist. Ordinarily, the sacraments of initiation are celebrated at the Easter Vigil. The Church chooses the Easter Vigil for Baptism because, in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil, we commemorate the mystery of Christ's rising from the dead, breaking the chains of sin and death, and opening the way for us to share more deeply in the life of the Trinity. Through Baptism we are immersed into this saving mystery so that we can say that we, too, have died with Christ and have risen with him to new life. In the sacrament of Confirmation, we are conformed more closely to the image of Christ as we are sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit. When we share in the Eucharist, we are given a taste of heaven's feast and recall the promise of Jesus, that whoever eats this bread and drinks this cup will live forever.

How long is the RCIA process?

Because the process of becoming a Christian is about conversion and the transformation of the whole person, it is difficult to determine how long this process will take. Every person is treated as an individual with a unique history and background. Everyone grows and develops at his or her own pace. Through a process of spiritual discernment, catechumens are led one step at a time to the sacraments of initiation. These steps or periods correspond to the spiritual growth of the individual.

Period of inquiry, or precatechumenate

This is the initial phase of one's faith journey. It is a time for hearing the Gospel, the first stirrings of faith and conversion, a time to sort out questions and motivations, the first introduction to the Church. At this point the individual is called an inquirer.



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Period of the catechumenate

The period of the catechumenate is the time when much of the catechesis or teaching takes place. It presumes an initial conversion and a commitment to the RCIA process. At the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, inquirers declare their intention to the Church, and the Church "accepts them as persons who intend to become its members" (RCIA, 41). The inquirers are called catechumens now and begin to explore the community's beliefs, values, prayer, spirit, and mission.

Period of purification and enlightenment

When catechumens are deemed ready for Christian initiation, they are formally called to the sacraments of initiation. After participating in the Rite of Election, the catechumens are called the elect. Ordinarily, this period coincides with Lent. The Forty

Days of Lent become a spiritual retreat in preparation for the rites of initiation at the Easter Vigil.

Sacraments of Christian initiation

On the night when Christians around the world celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord, the Easter Vigil, the elect are led to the saving waters of Baptism, sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Confirmation, and receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist for the first time.

Period of mystagogy or post-baptismal catechesis

Received as new members of the body of Christ, the newly baptized, also called neophytes, continue their formation as they reflect in this period upon the mysteries they have encountered in the sacraments of initiation. This becomes a period of transition from the RCIA community into the full life of the parish and discipleship in the world.

How do I find out more about participating in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults?

Contact the parish priest or a parish pastoral minister who can share how the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is made available in the local Catholic parish.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIAN INITIATION

What Is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults?

This pamphlet is the perfect resource for helping the parish and inquirers understand the Church's ritual process for calling people to a life of discipleship. It will help the faithful understand that all have a role in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

Other pamphlets in the *Understanding Christian Initiation* series are

- **How Do I Become Catholic?**
- **What Does It Mean to Be an RCIA Sponsor?**
- **What Are the Sacraments of Initiation?**

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