

INTRODUCTION

Every year, thousands of people are received into the Catholic Church. In years past, inquirers were normally prepared in individual or small-group private sessions by a priest and were received at any time of the year. In 1971, in response to the call of the Second Vatican Council, the Church dramatically revised the process of becoming Catholic. It promulgated what is called the "**Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.**"

The RCIA, while new in a sense, was not really new. It was an effort to restore the spirit of early Christianity by emphasizing conversion as a participation in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, as well as the role of the entire praying, witnessing and teaching Body of Christ in giving support and shape to that journey.

What is the RCIA?

It is a series of rites, conducted in the context of learning about the faith and spiritual formation through which a person is fully incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Church.

There are four stages in the RCIA: the [Precatechumenate](#), or period of inquiry and evangelization; the [Catechumenate](#), which is a time of serious and dedicated formation; the [Period of Purification and Enlightenment](#), which coincides with Lent; and [Mystagogy](#), which lasts from Easter to Pentecost. All of these stages are marked by distinct liturgical rites.

How Long Does It Take?

There is no set time period for the process of becoming a Catholic. Different parishes and dioceses may set their own timetables. However, the Church makes clear that what is important is not meeting a schedule, but instead ensuring adequate preparation. Some may require more, some less, depending on their spiritual readiness. Whatever precedes it, though, the Sacraments of Initiation should normally be celebrated during the Easter Vigil.

The Precatechumenate

The Precatechumenate is also called "the inquiry stage" in many parishes. For individuals, this is the stage when they might first contact the parish about their interest and start attending inquiry sessions or meeting privately with a priest or catechist. For some who have engaged in their own study or attended Mass attentively and regularly, the Precatechumenate might last months. For others who have little background in Catholicism or Christianity in general, more time might be needed.

Who Are They?

People involved in the RCIA process are either catechumens or candidates. **Catechumens** are those who have never been baptized. **Candidates** are those who have been baptized in other Christian denominations, whose baptism is recognized as valid. There are special rites for unbaptized children who have reached the age of reason and are seeking to become Catholics. Many parishes also adapt some of the elements of the RCIA for those who were baptized in the Catholic Church but have never learned or practiced their faith.

The Catechumenate

When a person has decided to join the Catholic Church, s(he) begins the Catechumenate. This begins with a Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, which is often combined with a Rite of Welcoming for Candidates when there is a mixed group of the unbaptized and the already baptized.

This rite occurs at a Sunday parish liturgy. The catechumens proclaim their readiness to accept the Gospel and candidates declare their intent to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church. The catechumens and candidates are signed with the cross on their foreheads, ears, eyes, lips, breast, shoulders, hands and feet as a sign of their readiness to bear witness to Christ with their whole lives. A Bible or cross is usually given.

The period of the Catechumenate can last for months or even years. Catechumens are "brought to maturity" in the faith during this period through formal study of Church teaching by a deeper commitment to living the Christian life, prayer and by witness of their faith in the world. Catechumens are considered part of the Church. If a Catechumen dies, s(he) is buried with Catholic rites.

Catechumens are being formed to be members of the Body of Christ, and it is the responsibility of the entire parish, not just a few people, to participate in this formation through witness, support and prayer.

Where Are They Going?

In the early Church, only those who had been fully initiated into the faith were allowed to remain at Mass after the Liturgy of the Word. This is why, for centuries, the first part of the Mass was also known as the "Mass of the Catechumens." In that spirit, some parishes today

"dismiss" catechumens, and sometimes candidates, after the Liturgy of the Word. They are not sent out into the street, however. Accompanied by a catechist, they go to reflect on the Scriptures that have been proclaimed in order to be more deeply formed in the faith.

The Period of Purification and Enlightenment

In the early Church, baptisms only occurred at Easter; so the weeks before Easter were a focused time of preparation for catechumens. This period evolved into what we know as Lent. Today, for catechumens and candidates, the role of Lent as a period of final preparation for initiation has been restored.

This stage begins with the Rite of Election which normally occurs on the First Sunday of Lent. Catechumens and candidates are presented to the Bishop of the diocese at the cathedral. The catechumens' names are inscribed in a Book of the Elect and candidates commit to continuing conversion.

During the Period of Purification, catechumens participate in several rites during parish liturgies. On the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent are Scrutinies, during which special prayers are offered for the catechumens "to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out then strengthen all that is upright, strong and good." (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, no. 141).

During the First Scrutiny or the week afterward, the catechumens are presented with a copy of the Creed. During the Third Scrutiny or the week afterward, they are given a copy of the Lord's Prayer in accord with ancient tradition in which catechumens were not taught the words to the Lord's Prayer until soon before their baptism.

Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation

In the early Church, the Easter Vigil was the only liturgy of the year in which people joined the Church. This was because at Easter we celebrate Christ's victory over death and our sharing in that victory through baptism. The journey during that all-night vigil was a journey from darkness to light, from death to life. This is the journey that new Christians share as they descend and rise from the waters of baptism in which they are reborn.

At the Easter Vigil, catechumens are baptized and confirmed; candidates are confirmed. The new Catholics complete their initiation by approaching the Lord's table for the first time to receive His Body as full members of His Body at last.

Mystagogy

The final period of Christian initiation is called "Mystagogy" (from Greek, meaning "interpretation of mystery"). It continues through the Easter season, up until Pentecost. During this period, the new Catholics, or "neophytes," are "deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and . . . Making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the Eucharist and doing the works of charity" (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, no. 244). Throughout the RCIA, the support and witness of the entire parish has been important. That role continues during Mystagogy as the parish welcomes the neophytes and continues to offer them encouragement on their journey with us toward Christ.

Some parishes may continue some sort of formal catechesis during this time, but the focus of Mystagogy is the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy at which the neophytes, their sponsors and the entire supporting parish community hear the words of Scripture that focus on the life of the early Christians and are nourished and unified in their new and growing faith by sharing the Body and Blood of Christ.

Why Can't They Do This in Private?

The rites of Christian initiation all occur at Sunday parish liturgies. What is happening there is not something "extra" or an interruption. These rites, with some dire exceptions, must take place during Sunday liturgy. The Church exists to bring souls to Christ. The people who stand before us during these rituals are evidence that the Church is doing its work. They are drawing closer to Christ through His Body, the Church. Their presence among us is an occasion of celebration and gratitude.