

RCIA is bringing the "Good News" alive in the modern world ...

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 together with the whole community, in which new Catholics embarks on and joins the Church 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 -- a close friend or a potential spouse. Still others are drawn by seeing the example of a Catholic life well lived, or by exposure to a Catholic writer like St. Augustine, Thomas Merton or Dorothy Day. 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.

In her book *Turning: Reflections on the Experience of Conversion*, Emilie Griffin reflected that "conversion" is the process of "**turning over one's life and energies to God.**" While we know that the concept of "*turning*" is apt -- the root image of conversion is the proverbial "one hundred eighty degree change" -- we also know from our own lives and experience that conversion is an ongoing, lifelong process of personal spiritual growth as well as a social process in which we strengthen and draw strength from others. The RCIA recognizes both the ongoing quality and the communal nature of conversion, providing an intellectual and spiritual framework and a faith community in which an individual's conversion experience can be understood and supported. Caring for people in the midst of this life-changing experience is the goal of the RCIA ministry.

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 St. Thomas 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.

As each inquirer desires to continue the conversion journey within our faith community, he or she is invited to experience the first major rite of the RCIA process, the **Rite of Acceptance**. During a Sunday Mass inquirers enter this 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 another area to continue reflecting on the Scriptures.

Our catechumens and candidates do not travel alone during this period. **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 Blessed Sacrament 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. 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 nine months to one year or can be more. 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 time 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."