

## Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults: A Journey of Faith

*The R.C.I.A. is primarily a journey of faith "from the awareness of stirring of faith and curiosity within one's heart...*

- *Through stages of asking and seeking*
- *Through beginning involvement with the Catholic Christian community*
- *Through hearing the Gospel proclaimed and by faithful reflection and prayer on God's Word*
- *Through study and discussion about the Catholic experience*
- *Through doubts and hesitations*
- *Through involvement in the works of charity and justice*
- *Through discernment of God's call for them as individuals*
- *Through the steps of commitment*
- *Through the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist)*

*...to a life of faith, love, and justice lived in communion with Catholics throughout the world.*

### **Conversion, a gradual process**

- The R.C.I.A. marks stages along the path to full commitment in the Catholic Church; the R.C.I.A. as a process, describes in broad terms what this gradual commitment means.
- The R.C.I.A. as formation gradually looks both to the inner transformation of the individual to God's call as given week by week in the lectionary of Scripture readings at the Sunday Eucharist and to the gradual transformation of the person to an active member of the local church wherever he or she lives.

### **The R.C.I.A. contains five main stages or phases:**

#### **Stage 1: The Period of Inquiry**

The Period of Inquiry has as its purpose a time to become acquainted with the Catholic Church and to hear the good news of salvation from Jesus Christ our Savior. It is a time to look within at one's life story and see connections to or need for the gospel story of good news. During this period, the gospel of Jesus is proclaimed, and inquirers look within their own story to make and mark connections. This reflective process becomes a continuing, on-going method used by inquirer and member alike. This period lasts as long as the person needs it to last: from a few months to several years, if necessary. During this period, some may decide that this is not the right time for them to consider membership in the Catholic Church, either because of their own life circumstances or because they feel some other Tradition is better for them.

#### **Stage 2: Period of the Catechumenate**

The Period of Catechumenate embodies the first stages of commitment leading to full membership. It begins with the Rite of Welcome that introduces the seeker to the community who offers blessing and support. For a person to enter this phase, she or he must already have come to faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and sincerely desire to become a member of the Catholic Church. During this phase, the catechumens now gather with the Catholic community on Sundays for the first part of the Mass, during which, together, we hear the Scriptures, respond to them, and reflect on the meaning of God's Word for us, personally, and as community through the homily. This reflection will continue in small group gatherings.

During this period, the initial conversion is deepened and appropriated. The person comes to know more and more deeply the love of God in their own lives and in the midst of the Church

community. This period, too, lasts as long as the person needs it to last: from a few months to several years, if necessary.

### **Stage 3: Period of Purification or Illumination**

The Period of Purification corresponds to that time known in the Catholic Church as Lent, the six weeks of preparation for Easter. The catechumens, now known as the Elect, and the candidates spend this time prayerfully preparing for their moment of welcome as full members and are established as such by the Sacraments of Initiation.

This period is begun by the Rite of Election on the first Sunday of Lent, when they are accepted as candidates for the Sacraments, representing the fact that this decision is not theirs alone. Throughout Lent, special prayers are offered at the Sunday Eucharist for the Elect and candidates. These prayers are for strengthening them in grace and virtue, and for their purification from all past evil and any bonds which hinder them from experiencing the love of God. Throughout this period, the Elect are invited to join with the whole Church in a deeper practice of works of charity and in the practice of fasting.

During this period, the common reflection on the Scriptures continues. The readings of Lent are chosen with the themes of continuing conversion in mind. Toward the end of the period, the Church continues the custom of "handing over" to the Elect the Creed (the summary of our faith) and the Lord's Prayer (which represents its practice of continuing prayer after the command of Jesus who taught us to pray).

### **Celebrating the Sacraments of Initiation**

The Sacraments of Initiation are celebrated at the Easter Vigil, the Saturday evening liturgy before Easter. It is an extended night-watch of prayer, singing and hearing the Word of God. By the waters of Baptism, a person passes into the new life of grace and becomes a member of the Body of Christ. Anointing with special holy oil called chrism seals the initiation by the power of the Holy Spirit (Confirmation), and participation at the Table of the Lord in the Eucharist marks full membership in the church.

### **Stage 4: Period of Mystagogy**

The Period of Mystagogy lasts from Easter Sunday until the completion of the Easter season, 50 days later on Pentecost Sunday, and completes the initiation process. Those who have just shared in the Sacraments of Initiation are now called Neophytes, and during this period of Easter joy, they reflect on what they have just experienced, and look to the future as to how they can now share in the mission of Christ who came to bring salvation and life to the whole world. This period of time reminds the whole Church that a life in Christ constantly calls us to grow and to look for new ways to live the life of grace, personally, and together.

### **Catechumen or Candidate?**

By participating in the process described above, interested non-baptized persons become Catechumens, and Catechumens become full members of the Catholic Church by means of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist: the Sacraments of Initiation.

However, when one speaks of a baptized person from another Christian tradition who is preparing for reception into full communion in the Roman Catholic tradition, we call him or her a candidate. By this we mean that this person is a candidate for the Catholic Sacrament of

Confirmation and a candidate preparing to receive Holy Communion in the Catholic Church thus becoming a full member of the Catholic Church, the Catholic Communion. The focus on continuing conversion is appropriate for any Christian, especially at a time of transition. An understanding of Catholic beliefs, the practice of Catholic observances in the Church liturgical year over an appropriate period of time, and the experience of Catholic community are all necessary for an informed commitment that will last forever.

The R.C.I.A. is a responsibility of the whole Church. In view of this commitment and obligation of the Church, we provide an outreach person (a sponsor) for each person who presents himself or herself as a "seeker." These church-provided sponsors will serve as spiritual companions as they seek to discover God's call.

### **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 one to two years. 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, in addition to Sundays and liturgical seasons the way Catholics observe them.

One of the best times 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.