

St. Anthony ✦ St. Cecilia ✦ St. Margaret-St. John

EASTSIDE PASTORAL REGION

THE R.C.I.A.: FOUR STEPS TO BECOMING A FULLY-INITIATED CATHOLIC



THE BIG PICTURE

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (Commonly known as the R.C.I.A.) is the normal way in which adults become full, active participating members of the Catholic Church.

The R.C.I.A. is more than a “convert class” with a new name. It looks different too. Special rites are celebrated during the Sunday liturgies at various times throughout the year. Adults involved in the R.C.I.A. may be dismissed each week after the homily to go and reflect on the scriptures they have heard. The R.C.I.A. involves the whole parish – in prayer as the rites are celebrated, in hospitality as new members are welcomed, and in specific ministries like sponsor, team members, or dismissal leader.

The most important thing to keep in mind about the R.C.I.A. is this: it is not merely a new way to prepare adults for Baptism; Baptism is only one step. The goal of the process is full communion, which means “full, conscious, and active participation” (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 14) in the Eucharist and in the whole life of the Catholic faith community.

Many persons who want to join the Catholic Church have already been baptized in another Christian Church. They will not be re-baptized. They will follow a form of these four steps adapted to the particular needs and concerns of Christians from another faith tradition.

FIRST STEP: PERIOD OF INQUIRY

How someone comes to consider joining the Catholic Church is unique to each individual. Years of marriage to a Catholic spouse, conversations with a Catholic friend or coworker, or even something written or reviewed in the media can move an adult toward membership in the Catholic Church. Informally, this can go on for years!

At some point, the person may contact a Catholic parish and begin to meet with other adults who are also inquiring about the Catholic faith. These adults, with members of the R.C.I.A. team, will take time to tell their own stories and connect them with the faith stories in scripture.

SECOND STEP: PERIOD OF THE CATECHUMENATE

Some of the inquirers become firm in their desire for initiation and decide that they would like to begin more formal study of the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church. They are admitted into the next step through a special ceremony called the Rite of Acceptance in the Order of Catechumens. In this ritual, the Church symbolically claims these men and women for Christ by signing them with the cross.

This is the first time that the inquirers publicly declare their faith before the parish community. Each inquirer is accompanied by a sponsor. Sponsors may be chosen by the individual or provided by the parish. Sponsors provide support and companionship for the rest of the R.C.I.A. process.

After this rite, the inquirers are called catechumens. This name indicates that they are learning the teachings of the Church and beginning to accept Catholic tradition and practices.

Even though they are not yet permitted to receive the sacraments, the catechumens do enjoy other important rights. They have the right to assistance as they grow in faith by learning about the teachings of the Church and to participate in works of service in the parish. They also have a right to be married in the Church and to receive Christian burial.

THIRD STEP: PERIOD OF PURIFICATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

The period of the catechumenate ends when the catechumens discern, with the help of their sponsors and the parish R.C.I.A. team, that God is calling them to receive the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist) at the next Easter Vigil. Before they can be initiated, they must be officially called to the sacraments by the bishop or someone designated by him. This Rite of Election is often celebrated on the First Sunday of Lent in the Archdiocesan cathedral.

The Rite of Election marks the end of formal study of the teachings and practices of the Church. The catechumens are now called the elect. The weeks of Lent are a time of intense prayer as the elect prepare themselves to celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord at Easter and to receive the Sacraments of Initiation.

On the Sundays of Lent, the elect are prayed for in a special way to help them prepare more fully for the sacraments. The sponsors continue to accompany the elect in church and support them in their Lenten preparations.

FOURTH STEP: INITIATION AND MYSTAGOGY

On Holy Saturday, the parish assembles for the Easter Vigil. The Church has always recognized that in Baptism we die to sin in Christ's death so that we may rise to new life with him. The Easter Vigil is the primary celebration of the Lord's Resurrection and is, therefore, the most appropriate occasion for the elect to celebrate their Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion.

For the newly initiated, now called neophytes, the time between Easter and Pentecost is a special opportunity to reflect on the commitment which they have made to the Lord, to the Church, and to the local parish community. This time of unfolding the meaning of the initiation sacraments is called Mystagogy. The Sunday Scripture readings, which explain the meaning of the Resurrection and the Baptism, have special meaning for these new Catholics.

The journey of faith lasts a lifetime. The weeks after Easter are a time for new Catholics to seek out their place in the parish community. Other parishioners can reach out to welcome them, helping them to get involved and feel at home.