

WHAT IS THE RCIA?

The RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) is the formal and normative way by which the Roman Catholic Church initiates non-Catholic adults into full membership and communion with the Church. To understand better what that means, it may be helpful to look at each word above individually.

First, the RCIA is a “Rite,” or ritual. To be more exact, it is in fact a series of rituals, some of which are repeated many times, others which are celebrated only once, all culminating in the celebration of the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and first Eucharist. A common misperception about the RCIA is that it is primarily a course of study meant to instruct people about the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. While it does involve a certain degree of instruction and discussion, the program is not so much about information as formation. Through the celebration of various rituals within the context of the community of faith at St. Boniface, supported and deepened by study, participants in the RCIA are gradually introduced in ever deepening ways to the God who creates and calls them into relationship. In Scripture, in prayer, and in various blessings, they come to know God, who in turn transforms them, ultimately through the sacraments of initiation, into his sons and daughters.

The RCIA is not just a rite, though, but a “Christian” rite. The God who creates and calls us, and whom participants in the RCIA come to know in ever more profound ways, reveals himself to us so that we can know and love him. He has done this in various ways throughout history, but he has done it definitively, once and for all, in the person of Jesus Christ, who reveals God as love. To know Christ is to know God. Therefore, the RCIA finds its center in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. The entire program receives its life from him and is directed toward him, leading all its participants to God through Christ.

The RCIA is also a process of “Initiation.” Into what are the participants initiated? They are initiated, or brought into, the life of God, offered to all through Jesus. By professing one's faith in Christ and passing through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and first Eucharist, one is given a share in Christ's divine life. Participants do not do this alone, though. They join with all people throughout history who have done the exact same thing; they join the entire Christian people, called the Church. The Church manifests itself concretely on the local level through various Christian communities, or parishes, of which St. Boniface is one. Through the RCIA, people enter into the life of God and take their place among his people, the Church. This not only benefits the initiates, but it also acts as a powerful and ongoing sign to all Christians of our own need for constantly growing deeper into our life with God and each other.

Finally, the RCIA is for “Adults.” We may be more familiar with the idea of initiating children into the faith, but the initiation of adults is considered the normative practice in the Church. This is not to say that the initiation of children is somehow defective. It simply means that, theologically, the meaning of the process derives from the initiation of adults. By participating in the RCIA, initiates reveal to all of us the meaning of our own initiation into the faith, the total transformation of our lives by God, freeing us from the bondage of sin and death and making us his sons and daughters for all eternity.