

## THE RCIA: THEN AND NOW PART 1

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” (Tertullian).

This famous 2nd century quote from the Christian apologist Tertullian reflects the mystifying truth about the rapid spread of early Christianity. Beginning as a ragtag group of eleven grieving and terrified fugitives, in less than a century Christianity had spread to practically every major city and town of the far-flung Roman Empire, and even beyond. What is so mystifying about this is not just how quickly the faith spread, but the fact that it did so while being banned by the Empire. This was the age of martyrs, when Christians were rounded up and publicly executed in the most horrific ways that the Romans could devise, and yet, far from deterring people from joining the Church, people flocked to the banner of the cross in droves. Unlike the shallow, detached ritualism of the various pagan religions of that time, the heroic martyrdom of so many saints actually inspired more people to believe in this faith that was worth dying for.

The massive influx of new believers in this time of persecution led the ancient Church to develop more sophisticated, protracted, and intensive ways of initiating them into the Christian community than had been done in the first few generations of Christians. The purposes of these new practices were several, but among them were two very important reasons: to weed out possible spies sent to infiltrate the Christian community by the local Roman government in order to identify and arrest the community's members; and to make sure that those seeking initiation truly understood what they were doing and how serious it was - they were in essence signing their own death warrant.

With the legalization of Christianity in the 4th century, and the subsequent elevation of Christianity to the official religion of the Roman Empire, these measures no longer seemed necessary, and, with infant baptism on the rise due to a more developed doctrine of original sin, simpler ways of initiating the faithful became the norm. This was the case for most of Church history until the late 20th century, when the reform efforts unleashed by Vatican Council II sought to re-energize the Church's missionary spirit and to recover the more serious, more prayerful, more community-oriented approach to Christian initiation that was present in the age of martyrs. The result was the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, or RCIA.

*Tune in next week part 2 of THE RCIA: THEN AND NOW!*