

THE RCIA: THEN AND NOW PART 2

The ancient Church had developed a very involved, personally challenging but spiritually enriching way to initiate new members into the saving life of God's grace in the Church that could take months, even years. As Christianity grew from being a persecuted minority to the official religion of the Roman Empire, and as the practice of infant baptism became more common, the more complex approach to Christian initiation declined and was replaced by simpler methods. This situation endured until the late 20th Century, when the missionary spirit of Vatican Council II and the liturgical reform movement sought to recover the richer celebration of Christian initiation practiced in the ancient Church.

The result was the development of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, or RCIA. The emphasis in this approach is on the discernment of God's Spirit, calling people to the saving water of baptism. This discernment is first of all done by those seeking initiation, with the help of faithful members of the Christian community, but the community itself is also called to discern the working of God's Spirit in the lives of the initiates and to assist them with the community's prayer, support, and witness.

Thus the process is at heart a rite, or ritual, the focus of which is on God and his work in the hearts and minds of those seeking initiation. The process is marked by a series of rituals, each associated with a major phase in the process. The first ritual is the Rite of Acceptance, when, after a period of inquiry and the first stirring of the person's faith, a person is accepted into the period of faith formation known as the catechumenate. Now called a catechumen, the person grows in his or her knowledge and belief in the Christian faith by ever-deepening reflection on the Word of God and its expression in the teachings of the Church, and for the first time he or she will have his or her own place within the faith community, albeit not as a complete member.

The next ritual is the Rite of Election, in which the catechumen formally requests to be initiated and he or she is elected, or chosen, by the head of the community, the pastor of the parish and the bishop of the diocese, to receive the sacraments of initiation - baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. This begins the period of enlightenment, typically the season of Lent, when the catechumen, now known as the elect, engages in an intensive final period of discernment and personal preparation for initiation, especially by renouncing sin and performing works of penance. The whole community joins the elect in this effort by our own Lenten purification and renewal, preparing ourselves for the new birth of our community through our welcoming of new, fully initiated members at Easter.

The final ritual is the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, normally done at the Easter Vigil on the Saturday night of Easter weekend. This is the highpoint of the Church's liturgical year, when we celebrate the moment that Christ rose from the dead. We initiate new members at this celebration because they too now share in Christ's death and resurrection. The Easter season then marks the final phase of the RCIA, the period of mystagogy, when the newly

initiated, now called neophytes, reflect more deeply on the mysteries they have celebrated and their new life as disciples of Christ and fully initiated members of the faith community. In a way, this period never ends but extends through the rest of the life of all who are initiated into Christ in his Church, whether as adults or infants, because the saving mystery of which we now are a part has no end. We can never fully mine all of its riches, but must keep going deeper to find ever more precious gems. That is the life of those initiated into Christ, and that is why the RCIA is a model for our life as a parish.

Tune in next week for part 3 of THE RCIA: THEN AND NOW!