



Create a mentoring community

Objective: In this session, you will acquire the skills to create a community-wide process of drawing the catechumens more deeply into the Christian life.

The primary formation of the catechumens takes place in the midst of the worshiping assembly.

Think about that for a minute. What we do with the catechumens outside of worship is very important. But it is not primary. There is nothing more important than their encounter with the Risen Christ in the liturgy. If we take that seriously, we need to face some hard questions.

- Does the worshiping assembly see their primary ministry as baptized Christians to be the ministry of initiation?
- Does the entire parish consider itself to *be* the RCIA “team”?
- Is there a parish-wide sense that the RCIA “classes” in your parish take place every Sunday in the liturgy?

For those of us who lead the catechumenate process, it can be tempting to point the finger of blame at the members of the parish for not better understanding their role in the initiation process. We feel their displeasure when we celebrate a catechumenal rite at Mass that might extend their time in the pews by 10 or 15 minutes. We hear crickets chirping every time we ask for volunteers for the team or to become sponsors. And it may very well be the case that the parishioners need to step up more. But before that can happen, we have to examine our own assumptions.

A few hard questions

Do we assume that catechesis happens primarily in class-type catechetical sessions that take place outside of Mass?

We’re so used to referring what we do as “RCIA” that we often overlook that this is a *rite*. We do not do the *Curriculum* of Christian Initiation of Adults. The *Rite* of Christian Initiation of Adults is a ritual, sacramental process that takes place primarily within the worshiping assembly. That means that—as

a parish—we have to give at least as much attention to the Sunday liturgy as we do to the follow-up catechetical process. It also means that the catechetical process must be based upon and flow directly from the Sunday liturgy.

Do we assume that our parishioners are not qualified to initiate?

We can easily fall into the trap of waiting until we have the ideal parish before we completely entrust them with the ministry of initiation. However, the catechumens we have today are not being initiated into the ideal church of tomorrow. The rite does not say that initiation takes place within the community of the faithful only after they are much better at being “faithful.” We have to constantly remind ourselves that initiation is their responsibility right now—warts and all.

Do we assume that the “doing” of the liturgy is the job of the pastor, liturgy committee, and musicians—and therefore not our job?

The celebration of the liturgy is the work of the people. As catechumenate leaders, we have to be fluent in the language of ritual and be able to fully engage in the symbolic elements of the celebration. Our gift as catechists is to be able to help others unpack and reflect on the encounter with Christ that sacramental ritual provides.

Do we assume that we are leading the catechumens on a journey of faith?

Or do we realize that we are on the same journey, all of us together being led by the Holy Spirit? The Mystery of Christ is so vast that it is impossible for us to somehow “explain” that mystery to the catechumens. The best we can do is explore the mystery with them.

Engage the parish

Only after we have gotten past our own assumptions about what we do in the RCIA can we begin to call the rest of the parish to a clearer vision of their responsibility for initiation. Once we have done that, here are some ways to bring the parish more deeply into the initiation process.

- Publish the complete schedule for the year of liturgies that will include rites for the catechumens
- Explain to the parishioners what their responsibilities will be in these rites
- For example, encourage them to sing, respond to the prayers, extend their hands in prayer if asked, etc.
- Ask them to arrange their schedules to be sure to be at these liturgies
- Ask those who participate at other Mass times to switch their schedules for these Sundays
- Make your expectations clear
- Directly ask parishioners to take on their responsibility

Then do your part.

- Rehearse, rehearse, and rehearse the rites so there are no glitches

- Bumpy and awkward transitions kill participation
- Collaborate with the musicians to be sure the music at these liturgies is drop-dead-easy to sing
- Schedule the best lectors so the assembly will be drawn into the readings
- Schedule a team meeting with the pastor to brainstorm best ideas for the homily
- Use big symbols that everyone can see, hear, and smell
- Remind all the ministers to smile and relax

Then, after the rites, do some follow up.

- Do a 45-second (practice until you have it down) explanation of the rite afterward, during the announcements
- It's clearer for folks if they've experienced it before you explain it
- Also, write a note in the bulletin the week after the liturgy, thanking all the parishioners who participated
- Post some reactions of the catechumens to the rite on the parish website
- By showing the parishioners how their participation had an effect, you will assure their participation in the next ritual

A virtuous cycle

If you do the work and spend the energy it takes to make the Sunday liturgy the primary catechetical event in the lives of the catechumens, your parishioners can't help but get engaged. The catechumens' presence at liturgy will energize them. Which, in turn, will draw the catechumens more deeply into the paschal mystery. Which, in turn, will energize the assembly. And so on.

In the next session, we'll look at how to engage parishioners in the formation of the catechumens throughout parish life—not just in liturgy.

Please go to <http://tinyurl.com/wpeval4> to evaluate this session.
