

Christian Initiation of Adults

Rite of Acceptance

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“You have followed God’s light, and the way of the Gospel now lies open before you.”
Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 52

Becoming Catholic

Responding to God’s Call

God works in many different ways. Most of the time, God works through ordinary people and events—a parent, a friend, a beautiful sunset, a song, an inspiring story. Other times, we hear God’s call during crisis moments or major life-changes—a birth, an engagement, a sickness, a death. Sometimes, we just have a feeling that something is missing.

No matter what a person’s reasons are for becoming Catholic, the Church’s hope and prayer is that when God calls them, they will respond.

One part of the Catholic Church’s mission is to help people respond to God as best they can. For Christians, initiation and on-going participation in the life of the Church are the primary responses to God’s call. Through the process of becoming Catholic, we try to help

people learn how to respond to that call not just for the moment of baptism but for everyday of their lives. The way we learn how to become Catholic is by actually doing what Catholics do. So the process of being initiated into the Church is not so much about learning things as in a classroom but learning a way of life as an apprentice learns a discipline from a master and that master’s community.

Do you remember when you first heard God’s call? Was it through a person or a significant event? What were you being called to do? How did you feel about what you were being called to do? Who helped you take the next step?

Being Accepted

Becoming Catholic is a process. The Catholic Church has recently recovered and developed a process that some of the earliest Christians had used when people came to them asking to be baptized. The first part of this process is called “Evangelization and Precatechumenate.”

In this initial phase, an unbaptized adult or child over seven is moved by some experience to inquire about the Catholic Church. Through some informal contact with a member of the Church, he or she begins to explore issues of faith, questions they’ve always had about the Church, or anything that has moved them to seek some kind of relationship with the Church. This part of the process can happen anytime for as long as needed.

When the inquiring person and the Church community believe that the person is starting to

show some signs of a Christian faith and is ready to commit to becoming Catholic, the person is invited to celebrate a ritual called a “Rite of Acceptance into the Order of the Catechumenate.” By celebrating this rite, the person is officially and publicly declaring his or her intention to enter into a formal relationship with the Church, learning its ways and participating in its lifestyle. The Church, in turn, accepts their commitment and pledges its support throughout the person’s journey of faith.

This rite makes the person an official member of the Church as one who is preparing to be baptized. Therefore, the person is given an official title and role to play in the Church, that of “catechumen” which means “one in whom the Word of God echoes.” In preparation for this rite, the Church also gives the inquiring person a gift—one of its own baptized

Words to know

catechesis: Greek, meaning “sounding down” or “re-echoing down to another”; a way of communicating faith

catechumen: Greek, meaning “one in whom word echoes”; one who celebrated the Rite of Acceptance

dismissal: a sending; catechumens are sent after homily to reflect on God’s Word; the baptized are sent at Mass to “go, love and serve the Lord;” not meant to separate but to enable one’s mission

evangelization: first stage of RCIA, of unfixed duration, also called inquiry or pre-catechumenate; proclaiming faith in Christ; mission of the baptized

inquirer: name given to the unbaptized who are drawn to the Christian way of life

RCIA: stands for “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults;” process for becoming Christian

Rite of Acceptance: first public rite for those becoming Catholic; marks transition from inquiry period to catechumenate period

signing of the senses: ritual act of tracing the sign of the cross on the catechumen’s forehead and other parts of the body during the Rite of Acceptance

Diana Macalintal
Diana@TeamRCIA.com
TeamRCIA.com

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members to be a sponsor or companion of the person through the next part of the process of becoming Catholic called the “Period of the Catechumenate.”

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- What important commitments have you made? How did you symbolize making that commitment? Who supported you in making it?
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The Threshold

The door or threshold of the Church is an important symbol in many Catholic rites. Doors symbolize transitions and new ways of life. For Christians, Christ, the Good Shepherd and the gate for the sheep, is the most important door, because “whoever enters through [Christ] will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (John 10:9). But doors are also liminal spaces, in-between places that are neither here nor there. Even though Christ has died and risen to save us from death, we still live in the in-between time until Christ comes again to welcome all of creation through the doors of the kingdom of God.

In the Rite of Acceptance, those wishing to answer God’s call are met at the threshold of the Church by the baptized and are ritually welcomed to enter into the Church’s doors.

The Cross

To enter into Christ also means entering into his dying and rising, for he said, “whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Those who answer God’s call will need to learn how to let go and die to their old ways of life, and this will often be painful and difficult. But the cross is also the sign of our salvation. So in the Rite of Acceptance, the Church consecrates—sets apart and makes holy—those who are committing themselves to following Christ by signing their bodies with the cross.

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- Think of all the ways the cross touches you—in the sign of the cross, in crosses you wear. What does the cross mean to you?
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The Word and the Assembly

In order to learn how to take up the cross of Christ each day of their lives, these catechumens will need to be nourished by the Word of God, for “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). In the Scriptures that they will hear every Sunday in the Mass, God speaks, and in the Gospels, Christ proclaims to all those assembled that God’s promises last forever. No matter what things the catechumens will encounter—suffering, pain, obstacles, doubt, fear, sin, death—God will never leave them. God’s love through Christ never fails.

Where we encounter Christ and his love most clearly is in the assembly. When God’s people gather on Sunday to proclaim the Scriptures, offer prayers for the world, and remember Christ in the sharing of a meal—the Eucharist—Christ is truly present. It will be through the assembly that the catechumens learn how to live as Christ. The assembly models for them how to die to selfishness, how to forgive others, how to preach the Good News, and how to live in hope through the Holy Spirit. The catechumens will depend on the Spirit of God found in the assembly to apprentice them into a life of discipleship.

Because they are not yet baptized, the catechumens cannot yet participate in the prayers of the faithful. These prayers are the Creed, the General Intercessions, and the Eucharistic Prayer which climaxes in Communion. Therefore, after the homily, the catechumens, accompanied by a member of the baptized, are sent to feast on the Word of God, to reflect on how God is continuing to call them in this part of their faith journey, and to discern how they are to respond.

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- What are your favorite Scripture passages? How have these words nourished you? How do you see these words lived out in the assembly? What do these words call you to do?
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Joined to the Church, the catechumens are now part of the household of Christ, since the Church nourishes them with the word of God (RCIA 47).

Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens

(italics show optional parts of the Rite)

Receiving the Candidates

Gathering song
Sign of the Cross and greeting
Procession to the doors of the Church
Greeting the candidates
Opening dialogue asking what they seek
Candidates’ acceptance of the Gospel
Affirmation by sponsors and assembly
and acceptance of the candidates by the Church
Signing of candidates with the cross
Invitation to hear the Word of God
Procession into the Church

Liturgy of the Word

Instruction of the catechumens to prepare them for the Word
First reading
Psalm response
Second reading
Gospel acclamation and Gospel reading
Homily
Presentation of a Bible
Intercessions for the catechumens
Prayer over the catechumens
Dismissal of the catechumens
Liturgy of the Eucharist

Christian Initiation of Adults

Discernment

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“Receive the sign of the cross on your ears,
that you may hear the voice of the Lord.”
Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 56

Listening to God’s Voice

Hearing and Responding

A big part of becoming and being Catholic is learning to hear God’s voice and responding. Our Scriptures tell us many stories of people hearing God and responding.

Abraham heard God’s voice from an angel, a “messenger” of God, asking him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Confused and probably afraid, Abraham responds by trusting God’s voice (Gn 22). Moses heard God’s voice coming from a surprising and unusual source—a burning bush. He responded to this unexpected encounter with the Divine by taking off his shoes and accepting God’s call to set his people free (Ex 3). The Samaritan woman at the well heard God’s voice in the midst of her everyday chores, in an ordinary conversation with a stranger. She responded to Jesus by becoming the first evangelist proclaiming the Good News to her village (Jn 4). And Mary heard God’s voice in an angel with unbelievable and perhaps terrifying news for one so young—she would bear God’s child. She responded in faith with amen, “let it be done” (Lk 1).

Perhaps Adam and Eve’s sin was not just disobeying God but not responding when he called, for when they heard his voice after eating the apple, they hid themselves (Gn 3).

We pray for these your servants who have opened their ears and hearts to your word. Grant that they may grasp your moment of grace (RCIA, 102).

Voices in My Head?

Unlike some of the Scripture stories, however, we will probably hear God’s voice in much more ordinary ways. Most of us will never have an angel appear to us with a divine message from God. Nor will many of us encounter a burning bush or other supernatural revelation of God. More than likely, we’ll hear God the way the woman at the well did—in a simple conversation with another person while doing the simple things we do everyday—or the way Mary did—in an unexpected turn of events.

As Catholics, we believe that God is constantly trying to reveal God’s self to each person, using the ordinary things we experience in our lives to be the “messengers” for God’s word. In our family, friends, and the familiar events of our life, through the stranger and the new experience, and most especially in

the poor, the outcast, and those events that shake us to the core, God is trying to say, “Here I am. Listen.”

At critical moments in our lives, God’s voice may be very strong: at the birth of a new family member or at the death of a loved one; when we fall in love, or when we break up; when tragedy happens or when we are overwhelmed by goodness; when we are deciding on a career, a vocation, a life-long partner; when we are hurt, or when we cannot forgive; when we need to choose a new way of life.

When we hear God’s voice, we might feel unsettled or out of sorts. We might feel that we need to do *something*, to make a change or be more resolved. Discovering who God intends us to be (our truest self), what God is asking of us at this moment in our life, and making a decision to act is called discernment.

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Words to know

assembly: the baptized and catechumens gathered together in prayer, especially for the sacraments

catechumen: Greek, meaning “one in whom word echoes”; one who celebrated the Rite of Acceptance

discernment: from Latin, *discernere*, meaning “to cut away;” a lifelong process for listening and responding to God and being the person God intends us to be

conversion: a lifelong process of seeing and choosing a new path in light of God’s call; an internal process revealed in external practice

dismissal: a sending; catechumens are sent after homily to reflect on God’s Word; the baptized are sent at Mass to “go, love and serve the Lord;” not meant to separate but to enable one’s mission

RCIA: stands for “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults;” process for becoming Christian

sponsor: a person given as a gift from the Church to catechumens, to serve as their companions who help them discern God’s will for them, share their own faith and discernment, and support them with prayer, guidance, and presence at the rites

Do you remember a time when you heard God’s voice and knew it was God speaking? Where or who did it come from? What did you feel when you heard God’s message for you? How did you respond?

Diana Macalintal
Diana@TeamRCIA.com
TeamRCIA.com

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☞ When was the last time something critical or significant happened in your life? What was God communicating to you at that moment?

Discerning God's Call

For Catholics, there are four honored places we listen for God's voice: in Scripture, in our Catholic tradition and teaching, in the Church community, and in our own conscience. Those who are preparing to become Catholics—the catechumens—participate in an on-going process of discernment throughout their preparation, learning to listen for God's voice in these four principle ways. They do this to continue growing in their new faith in Christ and to know when they are ready to take the next step toward initiation into the Church. We who are already baptized serve as models for the catechumens, teaching them by our example how to listen for God's voice each day, especially when we need to make an important decision.

Scripture

The Scriptures reveal who God is and how God relates with his people. The Scriptures project God's voice most clearly when it is proclaimed in the assembly within the liturgy and connected to the real-life stories of that assembly in the homily. In the Gospel, especially, we believe that Christ is speaking directly to us, calling us again to listen and respond.

In a special way, the catechumens listen and respond to God in the Scriptures by “breaking open” the Word. They are dismissed from the Mass with a catechist to “feast” on the Scriptures and homily they just heard—to chew on them, in a sense—and to discover together what God is calling them to do at that moment in their faith journey.

Church Tradition and Teaching

You can't find answers in the Scriptures to every one of life's problems. But you can find Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit will remain with us always, guiding us, instructing us in everything (Jn 14:26). That Spirit has led our Church through the ages, inspiring saints and holy women and men to hear and

respond to God's voice in their own time and situation. Church tradition is the collective wisdom and presence of that Spirit, showing us how our ancestors interpreted not only Scripture but also the signs of the times through which God was acting.

Church Community

The apostles didn't receive the Spirit as individuals but as a community. We believe that in the faithful, there is a “sense” of what God is calling us to be. When two or three are gathered, God is there. And so learning to hear God's voice is a group exercise. Together we listen for God with those we trust and who know us best—our companions, literally, those we share bread with. Our companions help us to hear and see the things we may be missing. They do this not just by what they say but also by how they live. Catechumens are given special companions called sponsors to help them discern God's voice throughout their journey to initiation.

☞ Who are your companions? Who is looking to you be their companion in faith? How can your own actions model for the catechumens a life of listening and responding to God?

Our Conscience

For those with faith, God's word is not far from them—“it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts” (Dt 30:14). God's Spirit is in us, guiding our conscience into knowing the path God wants us to take. If after consulting all the other areas of discernment, we still feel uneasy, it may be because our conscience, God's Spirit in us, knows it is not satisfied. But if after true discernment, we feel at peace, even with a hard decision, we can trust that we have listened and responded well to God's voice.

Helped by the example and support of sponsors...and the entire Christian community, the catechumens learn to turn more readily to God (RCIA, 75).

A Process for Discernment

When faced with a difficult decision or turning-point in your life, or you just need to know better where God is leading you at this time, try this process.

Pray daily

Praying is less about saying things to God and more about being still to listen to God. Find a quiet place, and just be still and open to what God is trying to reveal to you. Making the sign of the cross, reading the Bible, or praying the Lord's Prayer may help you focus on being attentive to God.

Participate at Mass

Keep your eyes, ears, mouth, and hands open to encountering God when you participate at Sunday Mass. Read the Sunday readings before you come to Mass. Be present to those around you, especially the stranger. Bring your concerns to prayer in the community. Reflect with others after Mass.

Look to the saints and other holy people

Read about the saints and their writings. Read Scripture stories about our ancestors in faith. Pay attention to people in your church or in your life whom you admire because of their life of faith. Share your faith with them, and let them be your companion and sounding board.

Return to prayer

Be still again in prayer, and listen to the small voice within you. Imagine making your decision, and notice your feelings. Journal about them if it helps. Which decision gives you a sense of peace? Which choice feels right with who God intends you to be? When this peace comes, give thanks to God.

Christian Initiation of Adults

Rite of Election

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“God is always faithful to those he calls.”
Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 133

Chosen By God

Witnessing God at Work

Our country knows a lot about elections. Each year, we're bombarded with candidates telling us why they would be the best choice for our vote. There's a lot of self-promotion, but not a lot of testimony, at least not in the way the Church thinks of being elected.

In the Bible, we hear many stories of God choosing a person or even an entire people. The Israelites were God's "chosen people." David, the shepherd, was chosen by God to be king of God's people. The angel Gabriel brought Mary the news that she had found favor with God and had been chosen to be the mother of God's Son. And of course, Jesus is called the Messiah, the "chosen one" of God.

It is God who chooses. God takes the initiative and claims a person or a people as his own. Yet God's choice is always witnessed by another. God's choice is witnessed by the Church, God's own people. We know whom God has chosen because we can see God's influence clearly in that person's life. In that person, we see God at work.

Election begins with God and is witnessed by the Church. To be elected means to be chosen by God to be the way God wants to act in the world now. It is one way God continues to be present in our world, and it is how the Church continues to proclaim God's faithful presence to his people today.

This step is called election because the acceptance made by the Church is founded on the election by God, in whose name the Church acts. (RCIA 119)

Chosen for Baptism

When an adult seeks to be baptized, the Church is always looking for signs in that person's life of God at work. Here are some signs we look for: Does the person listen to God's word and respond to it? Have they changed their way of life to match the way of life presented in the Gospel? Do they pray with the Church and do the things the Church does? Do they live a spirit of charity in their family and work life? Have they learned to sacrifice themselves for the good of others? When we see these signs in the person's life, we can affirm that God has chosen them to be baptized.

This discernment, testimony, and election are formally ritualized in the Church's ancient Rite of Election. This rite is the turning point for those who are seeking to be baptized. It is when their months and years of preparation

take the final turn because the Church recognizes that God has chosen them to be baptized at the next Easter Vigil. This rite, which takes place at the beginning of Lent, propels them and the Church into the final preparations for the great Easter celebration. After they celebrate the Rite of Election, the catechumen's baptismal preparation is less like catechesis and more like a retreat. It's a bit like the time before a couple's wedding when their concern is less about getting to know their soon-to-be spouse and more about preparing themselves to make this lifelong commitment.

The Rite of Election has several important symbols and actions that help to communicate the importance of this moment in the life of the Church. Let's look at some of these symbols. If you get to participate in your diocese's Rite of Election, watch for them.

When have you felt chosen? What were you chosen to do? Who testified on your behalf that you were the right choice? How did their testimony make you feel?

Words to know

Book of the Elect: a book that serves as both a record of those elected each year and a symbol of God's chosen people

catechumen: Greek, meaning "one in whom the word echoes"; one who celebrated the Rite of Acceptance

Elect: name given to catechumens chosen by God and affirmed by the Church as ready to celebrate baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist at the next Easter Vigil

election: the formal liturgical act of choosing those who have been called by God to celebrate the initiation sacraments; the election is proclaimed by the Bishop of a diocese

enrollment of names: another name for the Rite of Election; the formal liturgical act of gathering and recording the names of those ready to be initiated at the next Easter Vigil

godparent: a person chosen by a catechumen to be a lifelong companion and mentor in the Christian faith

Rite of Election: a liturgical rite that takes place at the beginning of Lent which formally names those who will be baptized at the next Easter Vigil

Diana Macalintal
Diana@TeamRCIA.com
TeamRCIA.com

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- Have you ever prepared for a significant moment in your life? What were the days and weeks beforehand like? How was that time different from your everyday life?
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Testimony of the Church

Before the Rite of Election, a parish decides who among their catechumens have shown the signs of readiness for baptism. These catechumens are then asked to choose one or two godparents who will be their lifelong companions in the Christian faith. These godparents go to the Cathedral with their catechumens for the Rite of Election. There, the godparents testify and swear before the Bishop that they have seen God at work in the lives of their companions and therefore they are ready to be initiated into the Church. The Church assembly affirms the godparents' testimony, and the Bishop, on behalf of the Church, accepts the godparents' witness.

Enrolling One's Name

The Bishop then asks the catechumens if they are ready to accept God's election of them as verified by the Church. If they are, they are then to give the Church their names.

Your name is very important. God has called each person by name, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says "the name is the icon of the person" (2158). Your name is sacred. When you give your name, you are giving your life. Those deemed ready to celebrate baptism are asked to give their life to God by giving their name to the Church for enrollment in the list of God's chosen ones. These names are inscribed into a book called the Book of the Elect. Sometimes, the godparents will also put their name in the Book of Elect next to their companion's name as a kind of "surety" or endorsement. These names and books are presented at the Rite of Election.

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- What does your name mean to you? Do you know how you got your name? Have you ever put your name on something important?
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Act of Election

Having received the catechumens' names, the Bishop makes a powerful proclamation: "I now declare you to be members of the elect, to be initiated into the sacred mysteries at the next Easter Vigil." This Act of Election officially gives the catechumens a new name. From then until their baptism at Easter, they will be known as the Elect. They are the ones of whom we speak before Communion: "Happy are those who are called to his supper." The Elect are those called by God to be his own, to be washed in the waters of baptism, anointed by the Spirit in confirmation, and nourished by Christ in the Eucharist.

Handing Over to the Godparents

This is a very subtle but important part of the Rite. The Bishop asks the godparents to place their hands on the shoulders of their Elect. This gesture shows that the Elect are now in their care. The Bishop tells the godparents that they are to support them by their love and example, especially during these final days before Easter. As their first act of care for them, the Church prays for the Elect in intercessions and a final prayer.

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- Who are your godparents? How have they supported you in your faith? Are you a godparent for someone? How can you help the Elect strengthen their own faith?
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All the baptized are God's chosen people. In each of our lives, Christ continues his mission of bringing peace and light into the world. We do this in very simple ways—by living as Christ in our families and in all our daily interactions. The Elect are chosen not simply for baptism but for mission, Christ's mission. The Elect are signs that God is still indeed with us, blessing our world and recreating it with his Spirit.

After the election, [the entire community] should surround the elect with prayer, so that the entire Church will accompany and lead them to encounter Christ. (RCIA 121).

Rite of Election or Enrollment of Names

Gathering Rites

Gathering song
Sign of the Cross and Greeting
Opening Prayer

Liturgy of the Word

(usually taken from the First Sunday of Lent)
First Reading
Psalm
Second Reading
Gospel Reading
Homily

Presentation of the Catechumens

Affirmation by the Godparents (testimony)
Affirmation by the Assembly (testimony)
Invitation and Enrollment of Names
Act of Admission or Election
Intercessions for the Elect
Prayer over the Elect
Dismissal of the Elect

Liturgy of the Eucharist (optional)

Christian Initiation of Adults

Mystagogy

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“Out of [mystagogy, all Christians] derive a new perception of the faith, of the Church, and of the world.”

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 244

Savoring the Mystery of God

Whodunit? Secret? Science?

God is a mystery, but not like an Agatha Christie novel, or a secret reserved only for special people, or a math problem to be solved.

God is a mystery in the way that grandma’s love is a mystery; in the way you look at your child and can’t imagine anything more beautiful; in the way you marvel at how deeply you still love your spouse even after so many years of being together.

The mystery of God is something that makes us feel so immensely close to God and at the same time so in awe of the tremendous, incomprehensible wonder of God. There is no way to completely, fully express this feeling or describe it to another person. We can only say the same thing we tell children who ask us how they will know when they’re in love—“you’ll know it when it happens to you.”

The word “sacrament” comes from the same Greek root for the word “mystery.” Often, at the beginning of Mass, the priest will say, “to prepare ourselves to celebrate these sacred mysteries....” Every time we gather to celebrate the sacraments, we enter deeply into the mysterious love of God.

We experience this divine mystery most fully in the Eucharist—that intimate act of eating and drinking together with those named after the one we love the most: Christ.

Who do you love so completely that your love for them is a mystery—something you can’t fully explain yet you know is absolutely real. How would you describe that love?

Reflecting on the Mysteries

Those who have been preparing to be initiated into the Church and are then baptized, confirmed, and welcomed to the Eucharistic table at the Easter Vigil are the newest members to be “christened,” that is, named “Christ.” They are those who have most recently and fully been hit by God’s mysterious love. Now, they know what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ because they have experienced it for themselves.

Anyone who is new to love and the overwhelming nature of it needs time to reflect on what happened to them. This “looking backward” to a specific moment when they experienced God’s mysterious presence gives them

This is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery (RCIA, 244).

direction and renewed commitment for moving forward. Just like looking back at wedding pictures can give us more hope and joy for the future, reflecting on the experience of the “mysteries”—the sacraments—can renew our commitment to live according to Christ’s name which was given to us at baptism.

The neophytes are those who were recently initiated into the Church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. During the Easter season, and often throughout the year after, they spend time reflecting on the mysteries. This process is called “mystagogy.” But their practice of mystagogy is simply a participation in what all baptized Christians are called to do. All of us who are baptized, whether last year or many years ago, are called to constantly reflect on our experience of God, discern its meaning, renew our commitment to our baptismal promises, and commit ourselves to living those promises in the ordinary events of our daily life.

Words to know

assembly: the baptized and catechumens gathered together in prayer, especially for the sacraments

catechumen: Greek, meaning “one in whom word echoes”; one who celebrated the Rite of Acceptance

discernment: from Latin, *discernere*, meaning “to cut away;” a lifelong process for listening and responding to God and being the person God intends us to be

conversion: a lifelong process of seeing and choosing a new path in light of God’s call; an internal process revealed in external practice

mystagogy: a lifelong process of reflecting on the experience of God, especially in the sacraments, discerning its meaning, and converting one’s way of life to reflect one’s baptismal commitment

mystagogue: a person who practices and is skilled in mystagogy

RCIA: stands for “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults;” process for becoming Christian

neophyte: a person who has recently celebrated the three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist; comes from the Greek word for “new plant”

Diana Macalintal
Diana@TeamRCIA.com
TeamRCIA.com

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Mystagogy My Mother Could Do

The content of faith is the content of my mother's or any mother's life. That is because faith happens in and through our daily life. What we do on Sunday is simply one expression of our faith. We need to connect the messy un-"holy" events of daily life with God and all the things we call "holy." But the most common mistake people make when trying to make sense of life and faith is they go into "Hallmark greeting card" mode. That is, when they talk about faith, they often give religious platitudes like "God loves me," or "Jesus answered my prayer." Though these are true, they won't necessarily lead to conversion or renewed commitment to our baptism. In other words, it won't change the world; but mystagogy will. This way of reflecting makes faith relevant to daily life and makes daily life an expression of faith. But you don't need a theology degree to be a "mystagogue." Here are some simple steps to uncovering the mystery of faith that even my mother could do.

Step 1: Choose an event

Sharing faith starts with an event that engages us or makes us feel deep emotion. Family reunions, Easter dinner, graduation, a child's birth, friend's death, the shared experience of watching a movie or hearing a song—these are ripe with moments where the mystery of faith can be uncovered. Pay close attention to all your senses (what you see, hear, touch, taste, smell) and to what you feel. Engage fully in the experience.

Step 2: Remember what happened

After the event, gather with others who experienced the same thing. Ask these questions: What did you see? What did you hear? What do you remember most? How did that make you feel? Be very concrete in your memories. For example, "I smelled bread baking when I came in the door, and that made me feel welcomed, like I belonged there."

Step 3: Reflect on the bigger picture

What else is going on in your life that needs to be connected to this concrete experience and memory? What issues is your family dealing with? What concerns do you have at work?

What are some major events happening in your community or in the world? For example, "That smell of bread baking makes me think of my own family and how I worry about making sure they have enough to eat. I worry about my job and if I'll still have it next month. I think also of the man I see every morning on the street corner asking for money for food."

Step 4: Connect with your faith

Ask what this memory teaches you about God, about Christ, about church, about community. For example, "My feeling of belonging when I smelled that bread baking teaches me that family can be anyone I share food with. It reminds me of all those Bible stories of Jesus eating meals with others and how we share bread and wine with strangers at Mass every Sunday. These strangers we call brothers and sisters because we eat together. It teaches me that no matter what, I can depend on my family, my community." Find out what the Church and your parish teach about your insight. Connect it to a story in the Bible, and find out what Scripture teaches about this.

Step 5: Make a change

This is the "so-what" step. What will you do differently in your life now that you've made these connections with your faith? Perhaps you might decide to participate in Communion with different eyes, really looking at each person in the Communion procession as your family. Maybe you'll choose to begin each dinner with a simple prayer. You might get others in your family or parish to talk more about issues of homelessness and hunger. You can start a support group for those who have lost jobs or are looking for work.

When we reflect on our everyday life experiences in this way, our faith can and will change the world, one mother at a time.

[Through mystagogy] the neophytes...experience a full and joyful welcome into the community and enter into closer ties with the faithful. The faithful, in turn, should derive from it a renewal of inspiration and of outlook. (RCIA, 246).

St. Augustine says "look over there!"

From Augustine and the Catechumenate, by William Harness, The Liturgical Press, 1995.

On Easter morning, St. Augustine would direct the assembly's attention to the white-robed neophytes who stood in a special section of the church. He would exclaim that if the assembly wanted to see the Scriptures enfolded, it need only gaze at the neophytes: that on the night before, as at the dawn of creation, the Spirit had moved over the waters and God had said, "Let there be light," such that the neophytes themselves had become the first day of a new creation; that they who "were once darkness" were now "light in the Lord"; that "it is about them we sing, 'This is the day which the Lord has made: let us be glad and rejoice.'"

St. Augustine would point to what lay on the altar,

that is, bread and a cup of wine:

"The food you see here on the Lord's table you are used to seeing on your own tables at home—as far as outer appearance go. It has the same look, but not the same worth. Once the sanctification is added, this bread will be the Body of Christ, and this wine will be the Blood of Christ."

He then would point to the neophytes:

"You are the same people you were before; nor do you bring new faces before us here in the assembly. Yet you are brand-new: your old selves on the outside; but new by the grace of sanctity, something—as it were—utterly new."

How Do I Become Catholic?

TeamRCIA.com

“Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.”

James 1:22

Part 1: God is calling. Now what?

Learning to Respond

God works in many different ways. Most of the time, God works through ordinary people and events—a parent, a friend, a beautiful sunset, a song, an inspiring story. Other times, we hear God’s call during crisis moments or major life-changes—a birth, an engagement, a sickness, a death. Sometimes, we just have a feeling that something is missing. No matter what your reason for thinking about becoming Catholic, our hope and prayer is that when God calls, you will respond. (If you’re reading this, you’ve already begun to respond!)

One part of the Catholic Church’s mission is to help people respond to God as best they can. For Christians, initiation and on-going participation in the life of the Church are the primary responses to God’s call. Through the process of becoming Catholic, we try to help people learn how to respond to that call not just for the moment of baptism but for every-day of their lives. The way we learn how to respond is by actually doing what Catholics do. So the process of becoming Catholic is not so much about learning things as in a classroom but learning a way of life as an apprentice learns from a master and that master’s community.

Always two there are,
a master and an apprentice.
— Yoda, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*

Becoming an Apprentice

Becoming Catholic is like an apprenticeship. In the art department of a university I attended, there was a “master potter” who was the teacher for all the pottery students. But his students didn’t really have classes in a classroom like you would have at a school. What they did have was a lifestyle, or a discipline, and they all agreed to live by that lifestyle. In their discipline, the master potter agreed to teach them everything he knew, and the students agreed to watch the potter and follow his example. In a way, they became his disciples.

Every so often, the potter showed them a new skill, like making a tiny tea cup, while the students watched. Then he told them, “Make 100 tea cups like this every day for the next month. When you can do that, then you’re ready to go on to the next step.”

Yet the potter wasn’t only teaching skills; he was also introducing them to the lifestyle of a being a potter. So he had them eat together (using the plates and cups they made), talk about life with each other, take walks together looking at nature for inspiration, and even chop wood together for the kiln that fired their pottery. Little by little and day by day, the students were becoming potters themselves, learning by watching the master, doing as he did, and living as he lived.

Becoming Catholic is a lot like this. There are stages to follow, benchmarks to watch for, and disciplines to be learned and lived before moving on the next step. The process is called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (often called RCIA). In Part 2: Beginning the Process of Becoming Catholic, we’ll look at the first stage of this apprenticeship into Christian life.

What made you pick up this handout and start reading it? Has something happened in your life that has made you wonder about becoming Catholic? What questions would you ask a Catholic person?

Words to know

baptism: the ritual that makes a person a full member of a Christian religion; in the Catholic Church, the ritual involves immersing the person in water and calling upon God using the traditional names of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Catholic: a person who lives out the Christian faith that follows the disciplines established by the Catholic Church

Christ: the Greek title given to Jesus meaning “anointed one”; in Hebrew, the title is translated as “messiah”; title that acknowledges that the person is specially chosen by God to lead and protect God’s people

Christian: a person who believes that Jesus was the Son of God, the Christ, who follows the teachings of Christ, and is baptized into the Christian faith through the ritual of baptism

discipline: habits of a group that make up a way of life based on the teachings of a person considered the group’s leader

RCIA: stands for “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults;” process for adults for becoming Catholic

Diana Macalintal
Diana@TeamRCIA.com
TeamRCIA.com

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