

America

A MORE AUTHENTIC WAY

[Sept. 1-8, 2014](#) [1] | [Nick Wagner](#) [2]

Can the RCIA meet the needs of modern-day spiritual seekers?

In his new book, *Becoming Catholic*, the sociologist David Yamane tells the story of Deacon Zeke, the coordinator of adult religious education for a parish in the Midwest. Professor Yamane sat in on several of Deacon Zeke's classes for people participating in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and notes that for 90 percent of the time, Zeke lectures from a diocesan-approved "comprehensive catechesis for the RCIA." When he does ask an occasional question, Zeke does not seem to expect a response from the participants. "He fills in the dead spaces himself with more lecturing," says Mr. Yamane. The participants, as one might expect, "are not visibly responsive: no acknowledgement of what he is saying with facial expressions, nods of the head, or audible confirmations."



THE RITE STUFF. Ennio Mastroianni, center, helps lead a group of catechumens with Patrick Rogers, S.J., and Minerva San Juan in a chapel at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., Feb. 20.

The Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions will meet in October to discuss the current practice of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States and to offer consultation to the U.S. bishops on a possible revision of the "National Statutes on the Catechumenate," the guidelines for implementing the catechumenate in the United States. If instructional sessions like Zeke's are any indication, this meeting arrives not a moment too soon. This event also is timely given that a retranslation of the ritual texts may be on the way, now that the Roman

Missal project is complete. This moment in the history of adult Christian initiation in the United States can have a major impact on the way seekers are initiated into the faith in coming decades. It offers both hope and challenges.

Finally, Full Implementation

To paraphrase G. K. Chesterton, the Christian initiation process for adults has not been tried and found wanting—but it has been found hard and, too often, has not been tried. Mr. Yamane reports that more than 80 percent of U.S. parishes are using “some version of the RCIA process.” While that might sound as though the rite has been widely and successfully implemented, the qualifier—“some version”—is telling. Many parishes are engaged largely in a membership transfer process that helps already baptized members of other Christian communities to understand the differences between the faith tradition of their childhoods and the requirements of the faith tradition of their Catholic spouses or fiancées. While this is not insignificant, the process of joining the Catholic Church too often is for them a rather bland process, not a spiritual journey by which they, having heard “the mystery Christ proclaimed, seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion” (*RCIA*, No. 1). Conversion, as David Snow and Richard Machalek define it in an article in the *Annual Review of Sociology* (1984), is a “complete disruption” and a “radical discontinuity in a person’s life.” Less extreme changes are identified as “alternation” or “consolidation”—“actions that combine two prior but contradictory world views or identities.”

Certainly, elements of the RCIA can be helpful for those who are moving toward full communion with the church. The U.S. bishops say as much in the “National Statutes”: “Those who have been baptized but have received relatively little Christian upbringing may participate in elements of catechumenal formation so far as necessary and appropriate....” However, they “should not take part in rites intended for the unbaptized catechumens” (No. 31).

However, consider as an example a faithful Christian whose father was an ordained Methodist minister, who went to a Methodist college with the intent of perhaps seeking ordination himself, who can quote copious amounts of Scripture from memory, who has an active prayer life and who has assisted his Catholic wife in preparing their three children for first Communion. He now seeks to become Catholic. When we put him “in the RCIA,” we not only fail to recognize properly the dignity of his baptism; we also do not fully honor the “radical discontinuity” of the conversion process of other participants, seekers who were truly lost and are now found. If we view the catechumenate process as simply a membership-switching mechanism, we diminish the normative vision of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as a process of radical conversion.

Renewed Interest in Evangelization

I once suggested to a pastor that he stop receiving catechized, baptized Christians into full communion at the Easter Vigil, though this is a valid option according to the “National Statutes” (No. 33). His face turned pale, and he said, “If we did that, we wouldn’t have anyone to do the rites with at the Vigil!” Years later, I heard someone give a response that I wished I had thought of at the time: “If no one died in our parish this year, would we press someone into service as a pseudo-corpse just so we could celebrate the funeral rites?” If we have no catechumens at our Easter Vigil, what does that say about our parish as an evangelizing community? This is not an idle question. According to statistics from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, the number of adult baptisms has dropped by approximately half since 2000.

The reason baptisms are declining certainly is not because we have accomplished the mission and there is no one left who needs to hear the good news. The Pew Research Group reports that “the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.” The reason for this growing lack of affiliation is not completely clear. The Pew study suggests that young adults, in particular, are steering clear of organized religion because of political backlash, broad social disengagement, secularization of American society and the fact that many are delaying marriage, a life event that traditionally brought couples back to the church.

It might seem odd to say it, but this moment of crisis can also be a moment of hope—a moment of grace. We Catholics always have been a little shy about sharing our faith. Now, we have no choice. If we are going to grow as a church and, more important, if we are going to continue to spread the Gospel, we will have to learn (or relearn) how to live our faith out loud.

Replacing Stories With Teachings

One fear I have is that in the wake of the coming discussions and the eventual retranslation of the ritual texts, instead of going out into the world and sharing the stories of our faith journeys with those who may need to hear them, we will become like Deacon Zeke and read doctrinal texts to the few seekers who manage to find their way to us. Indeed, if you Google “new evangelization” or “RCIA,” you will find countless study programs, video series, PowerPoint presentations, lecture notes and syllabi. It sometimes seems as though religious educators got together and decided that the reason people are no longer interested in becoming Catholic is that they have not yet had a proper systematic classroom presentation on salvation history. I am all for systematic classroom teaching. I am a successful product of it. But we cannot put the cart before the horse.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) reminds us there are three levels of catechesis. We too often start at the third level, which the directory calls ongoing or postbaptismal catechesis. The first level of catechesis is evangelization, or primary proclamation, which is addressed to those living in religious indifference (No. 61). As I noted, we Catholics can be hesitant to evangelize others. We are very fond of citing the line attributed to St. Francis that we should always proclaim the Gospel and, if necessary, use words. It is now necessary to use words.

For many of the religiously unaffiliated, the best way we can share the story of our faith is at the level the directory calls initiatory catechesis. This is classically the catechesis called for in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, which is also the model for all other forms of catechesis (No. 59). When we hear the word *catechesis*, however, many of us immediately think of *catechism* and a Deacon Zeke-style classroom experience. The directory does not tell us that. Instead, the aim of initiatory catechesis “consists in precisely this: to encourage a living, explicit and fruitful profession of faith” (No. 66). The RCIA tells us that catechesis at this level includes an explanation of church teaching, but it “also enlightens faith, directs the heart towards God, fosters participation in the liturgy, inspires apostolic activity, and nurtures a life completely in accord with the spirit of Christ” (No. 78). This is the way the first disciples proclaimed the good news. They had no classrooms and no syllabi. They came together in faith, broke bread and shared the cup and showed generosity of heart to all people. The result of this simple initiatory catechesis was that “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). This approach might speak to those who, although unaffiliated, are not religiously indifferent. According to the Pew study, two-thirds of this group believe in God and “the majority describe themselves either as a religious person (18 percent) or as spiritual but not religious (37 percent).”

The Christian initiation process for adults should not be accompanied by mandatory syllabi, suggested or required textbooks, or a set number of hours that seekers will need to be in the classroom. All of this violates the core principle that the way of faith is a spiritual journey that “varies according to the many forms of God’s grace” and that “nothing, therefore, can be settled a priori” (Nos. 5 and 76).

I used to teach like Deacon Zeke. I did so because I was afraid I did not know enough and that my own faith story was not strong enough or holy enough to lead seekers to Christ. Often, I am still afraid. When I meet a new seeker, when I hear the often wrenching story of his or her struggle to find peace and hope, I wonder what could possibly qualify me to be any kind of guide for this person. My faith is weak, and I have repeatedly failed to live up to what I will be calling this person before me to do. Wouldn’t it be easier to do a “read along” with a diocesan-approved text? Easier, for sure. But ineffective for most.

Catechists are not teachers in the usual sense of classroom instructors. Pope Francis, in his homily at a Mass for catechists, said:

Catechists are people who keep the memory of God alive; they keep it alive in themselves and they are able to revive it in others.... This is not easy! It engages our entire existence!... Dear catechists, I ask you: Are we in fact the memory of God?

The upcoming meeting of the F.D.L.C. and a new translation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults will not, by themselves, help us become the memory of God. But they will give us an opportunity to think more deliberately about whether or not we are working toward this goal and, if we are not, to ask ourselves what we are going to do about it.

***Nick Wagner** is the founder and president of TeamRCIA.com, a free online resource for parishes that want to form Christians for life.*

What Is The RCIA?

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. This is the English title of the book whose Latin title is *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum* (“Order of Christian Initiation of Adults”).

This book contains the scripts for more than a dozen liturgical ceremonies—that is, the prayers, scripture readings and the rubrics specifying how each ritual should be carried out.

It also contains general introductory material describing the goals and in a general way the methods recommended for the entire initiation process.

There are also introductions to the individual rites that spell out at what point in the initiation process they are to be used and what criteria are to be used to determine when the catechumens and candidates are ready to celebrate them.

The “national statutes on the catechumenate” are also included, which were drawn up by the U.S. bishops as guidelines for implementing and adapting the initiation process for the United States.

All of these elements—ritual texts, introductory materials and the national statutes—are often referred to globally as “the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults” or simply “the RCIA.”

The Editors

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