

**A Handbook
For
RCIA Directors**

A THEOLOGY OF LAY LITURGICAL MINISTRY

"But you are a 'chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises' of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pt. 2:9).

All liturgical ministers are, first and foremost, members of the Body of Christ. Through their baptism they are the "holy people and royal priesthood" whose right and privilege it is to participate in the ministry of Christ. How the lay faithful exercise this ministry in the world varies, but the fullest and most fundamental expression of it has always been "conscious, active and fruitful participation in the mystery of the eucharist" (General Instruction Of The Roman Missal - GIRM, Introduction #5).

Since the celebration of the Eucharist is the "action of the whole Church" (GIRM, Introduction #5), everyone in the assembly has "an individual right and duty to contribute their participation" (GIRM #58). Some of the faithful are called to serve God's people in a more particular way through one of the many liturgical ministries that have flourished in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. This diversity of roles, functions and ministries enriches our celebrations and assists us in our prayer. Serving in one of these ministries is both an honor and a responsibility, and those who commit to it need nurturing and support. This handbook has been prepared to help you grow in a deeper understanding and love for the liturgy, your ministry and ultimately the Lord whom we all serve.

I. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RCIA

One of the major outcomes of the Second Vatican Council was a re-examination of the ways in which adults are brought into the Church. In 1972, following almost ten years of study and preparation, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) was published. Although it may still seem new in the light of the Church's long history, the RCIA has its roots in the ancient Church. It is a revival for modern times and contemporary situations of the Catechumenate, the process in the early Church through which adults were gradually and systematically introduced into the life of the Church with the help and support of the entire Christian community.

Like its ancient predecessor, the RCIA "is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful" (RCIA #4). The process provides unhurried time for inquiry, instruction, prayer and discernment so that those preparing for initiation can deepen their awareness of God's grace in their lives, as well as their understanding of what the Church teaches. The RCIA divides the initiation process into four basic stages or "periods." Each period has its own special character and concludes with a major liturgical celebration or "step."

- **Period of the Precatechumenate:** The time for inquiry on the part of the candidate and initial evangelization on the part of the Church.
- **First Step:** Rite of Acceptance in the Order of Catechumens
- **Period of the Catechumenate:** The time for catechesis and growing conversion.
- **Second Step:** Rite of Election
- **Period of Enlightenment and Purification:** The time, customarily coinciding with Lent, for more intense spiritual preparation immediately before the sacraments of initiation.
- **Third Step:** Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation
- **Period of Postbaptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy:** The time, usually during the Easter season, for the newly initiated to deepen their understanding of the mysteries they have experienced and to begin living as full members of the Christian community.

A team of parishioners, usually under the guidance of a qualified director, works with the parish pastor, priests and/or deacons to support the candidates as they move through the process. This team forms the immediate community for the candidates, but since "the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized" (RCIA # 9), the entire parish is expected to take an active part. This takes place above all through the rites accompanying each step. During these rites, which are most properly celebrated during the Sunday Mass, all of the faithful pray with and for the candidates and accompany them on their journey of conversion.

II. PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

IMPLEMENTING THE PROCESS

"The rite of initiation ... varies according to the many forms of God's grace, the free cooperation of the individuals, the action of the Church, and the circumstances of time and place" (RCIA, #5).

An important decision parishes need to make early on is how to implement the RCIA in a way that respects both the individuality of each person's faith journey and the communal nature of the process. Most parishes follow one of two main models for implementing the RCIA.

One popular model structures the process to follow the academic calendar. In this model the Precatechumenate typically extends from late August to early December, with the Rite of Acceptance usually taking place on the first Sunday of Advent. The Period of the Catechumenate extends from December to the Rite of Election on the first Sunday of Lent, and is longer or shorter depending on the length of time between Advent and Easter. The Period of Purification and Enlightenment and the Period of Mystagogy correspond to the liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter, respectively, as specified in the rite (#138, 247). In this model unbaptized adults, baptized adults from other faith traditions and baptized Catholics who have not received Confirmation or First Eucharist usually follow the process together and celebrate initiation or reception into the Catholic Church together at the Easter Vigil.

The other model adheres more closely to the liturgical year and is especially respectful of those who are already baptized. In this model the Periods of Purification and Enlightenment and Mystagogy correspond to the seasons of Lent and Easter as above, but the Precatechumenate and the Catechumenate are on-going periods of no fixed duration. Candidates who are already baptized participate only in those periods for which they have a need, for only as long as they need, and celebrate the necessary rites when they are ready at appropriate times during the liturgical year. This model acknowledges that not all candidates need to participate in the entire process along with the catechumens, or complete their initiation or reception into the Church at the Easter Vigil (Appendix III, # 26, 30-33).

STRUCTURING THE TIME

"The time spent in the catechumenate should be long enough . . . for the conversion and faith of the catechumens to become strong (RCIA, #75).

Determining how long is "long enough" is one of the most important, yet challenging, tasks facing pastors and directors. The rite refers several times to the gratuitous nature of grace, which must always be respected, and the open-ended nature of the Precatechumenate and the Catechumenate. Useful guidance in determining the minimum duration of the Catechumenate in the United States is offered in Appendix III, #6. "The period of catechumenate . . . should extend for at least one year of formation, instruction and probation . . . from at least the Easter season of one year until the next; preferably it should begin before Lent in one year and extend until Easter of the following year."

Ample time during the catechumenate should be devoted to all aspects of Christian life including catechesis, prayer and spiritual development and active involvement in the life of the parish. This

should be accomplished in a way that is "gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the word" (RCIA, #75).

Likewise guidance on the importance and duration of the Period of Mystagogy is offered in Appendix III, # 2. ". . . the program for neophytes should extend until the anniversary of Christian initiation, with at least monthly assemblies . . . for deeper Christian formation and incorporation into the full life of the Christian community."

MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

"The rite of Christian initiation presented here is designed for adults who, after hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed, consciously and freely seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion . . ." (RCIA, #1).

It quickly becomes apparent that people seeking Church membership come with very different needs. Some are adults who have never been baptized, while some are adults who were baptized as infants but received no religious instruction and have never been confirmed or received communion. Still others are children who were not baptized as infants, or baptized and confirmed non-Catholics who have been very active members of their former congregations. And it is not at all uncommon for adult Catholics who have been away from the Church for a number of years, or practicing Catholics who desire to become better informed in the faith, to seek out the RCIA. It can be a challenge to determine which parts of the process are most appropriate for the needs of which individuals.

It is essential to determine first of all whether the person inquiring into the faith has already been baptized. A clear distinction exists, and must be maintained, between *catechumens*, people who have never been baptized, and *candidates*, baptized persons seeking to complete their initiation. "The liturgical rites of Part I, designated for catechumens, address the reality of the non-baptized person . . . and were never meant to be celebrated with persons who have already been baptized" (NCCB, Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter, vol. 28, Jan/Feb 1992).

Part I contains the "complete and usual form" for use with adults who have never been baptized. This complete form is adapted in Part II and Appendix I for the needs of those in special circumstances and adults who are not catechumens. Here we find guidelines for preparation and rites for children of catechetical age, baptized, but uncatechized adults and non-Catholic Christians preparing for reception into full communion with the Catholic Church. Appendix III contains "National Statutes"--adaptations that apply to the process in the United States.

Returning Catholics, or those seeking adult education in the faith, should certainly be welcomed and supported in their faith journey, but the RCIA is not suited to their needs. They are better served by parish or diocesan programs geared specifically to them like "Re-Membering Church" or parish faith formation classes.

OFFICES AND MINISTRIES

". . . all the followers of Christ have the obligation of spreading the faith according to their abilities. Hence, the entire community must help the candidates and the catechumens throughout the process of initiation. . ." (RCIA, # 9).

The RCIA is, by its very nature, a communal undertaking that no single person can implement alone. In addition to the parish community as a whole, the rite names and describes particular individuals who have important roles in the initiation process. They are sponsors (#10), godparents (#11), the bishop (#12), priests (#13), deacons (#15) and catechists (#16). Since there is a real need for someone to coordinate and direct the efforts of the "entire community," many pastors appoint RCIA directors or coordinators to this task.

The director should be thoroughly familiar with the basic structure of the rite and the ways in which it can be adapted for particular needs and circumstances. It is also beneficial for the director to take as full advantage as possible of opportunities for further education and to network with others involved in the process. Beyond that, most directors gather a group of parishioners to work with them in planning and accomplishing the many tasks involved in RCIA ministry.

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers concerning who should be on the RCIA team, how large or small it should be, how best to recruit and organize a team or how to divide up the work that needs to be done. Most teams include people or committees responsible for hospitality and welcoming, communication, catechesis, interviewing, planning/leading prayer and retreats, coordinating sponsors and planning liturgy. Ideally, team members should be a representative cross-section of the parish who through their own living faith "provide an example that will help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously" (RCIA #4).

The experience of being on an RCIA team should be personally fulfilling for the members as well as fruitful for the catechumens and candidates. It is important for pastors and directors to nurture the team by praying, sharing insights, planning and socializing with them at regular gatherings.

III. OTHER AREAS OF CONCERN

"(there exists) a multitude of practical questions, and even dilemmas, that are not necessarily addressed by the rite itself. . . Experience will be the greatest teacher as we deal with these kinds of questions one-by-one." (Blessing and Challenge: Pastoral Letter on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, The Most Reverend James A. Griffin, Bishop of Columbus, 1992).

These words are as true today as when Bishop Griffin first wrote them. Directors of the RCIA from across the Diocese have recently shared their insights regarding some on-going areas of concern.

1. Recordkeeping

- If Catechumens are not sent to the Rite of Election the parish must maintain all records.
- Only one sponsor or godparent per candidate is sent to the Rite of Election.

2. Need for careful interviewing process

- Gather all necessary information as early in the process as possible, especially the need for annulments.
- Develop a form that collects all information to use in interviews.

3. How to recruit and form team members and sponsors.

4. How to invite prospective inquirers into the process; how to find people who are interested in the Catholic Church.

5. Importance of collaborating with all who are involved in the rite when planning the major liturgies.

6. Benefits of sharing ideas, resources, presenters with nearby parishes or on a vicariate level.

As Bishop Griffin has wisely pointed out, the best way to implement the RCIA and resolve difficulties is to share our wisdom as we work together in this ministry.

IV. GLOSSARY

Catechumen	One who is not yet baptized but is enrolled in the order of catechumens (Appendix III, #2).
Candidate	One who is already baptized and preparing for complete initiation (Appendix I, #505).
Convert	One who has converted from unbelief to Christian belief. It should never be used of baptized Christians who are received into the full communion of the Catholic Church (Appendix III, #2).
Elect	Catechumens who have celebrated the Rite of Election (RCIA, # 124).
Inquirer	One who is making an informal investigation into the Catholic Church before or during the precatechumenate (Appendix III, # 1).
Neophyte	A newly baptized person (RCIA, # 217, 247) who is deepening his/her understanding of the paschal mystery and making it part of his/her life(#244).

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Hinman, Karen M. *How to Form a Catechumenate Team*. Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, 1986.

Lewinski, Ron. *Guide for Sponsors*, 3rd edition. Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993.

Morris, Thomas H. *Walking Together in Faith: A Workbook for Sponsors of Christian Initiation*. New York: Paulist Press, 1992.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. The U.S. edition, 1988. (This essential text is available from a number of publishers).

Sinwell, Joseph, ed. *Come Follow Me: Resources for the Period of Inquiry in the RCIA*. New York: Paulist Press, 1990

Wilde, James, ed. *Finding and Forming Sponsors and Godparents*. Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988.

VI. CONCLUSION

This handbook has been prepared by the Office of Liturgy to assist you who are called to liturgical ministry. It defines your responsibilities according to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2nd.edition - 1975) the current directives of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.

Consultation and study of the *Institutio Generalis Romani 2000* is in progress. the actual text of the new Roman General Instruction cannot be changed, however, emendations can be made for its application in the United States. While the NCCB Committee on the Liturgy continues its work, Bishop Griffin has directed that no changes be made to current liturgical practice within our diocese (protocol #09/00).

We are committed to supporting you in this ministry and in your desire to grow in your understanding of the liturgy you serve. It is our hope that this handbook will be the beginning of a dialogue between liturgical ministers that encourages us to reflect upon why we do what we do and how to enter into "full, active, conscious" participation in the liturgy through the ministry to which we have been called.

If you have questions, comments, or ideas to add to the revision of this handbook, please direct them to:

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Peace and all good!

A MINISTER'S PRAYER

(Adapted from an ancient Celtic prayer attributed to St. Patrick).

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.