

RCIA and Lent – Part 5

Often you will attend Mass during a Sunday in Lent, and right after the homily the priest/deacon or lay leader will call some people up in front of the congregation. You may wonder: "Who are these people?" These are people who are going to be initiated into the Catholic Church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. These people are called "the elect." There are others who have already been baptized and are joining the church who are called "candidates." There are various rituals such as the sending rite (to the Cathedral) and the three scrutinies that will lengthen the Mass by about ten minutes. You might be thinking: "Is this unique to our local parish?" No, this is happening in Catholic churches throughout the world during the Sundays of Lent.

Back in 1963, the Second Vatican Council called for the restoration of the ancient catechumenate. For the first three centuries after the apostolic era, the early church had a prescribed way of initiating people into the church. When Christianity was legalized in 313 by Emperor Constantine, fewer and fewer adults were baptized because infant baptism became the norm. Finally, after Vatican II, the way adults were initiated was restored and connected with Lent.

Originally, Lent began as a short period of fasting before Easter. After some years, that period was lengthened. In time, the period of preparation for those being baptized and joining the Church was connected with Lent. After the legalization of Christianity (312/3 A.D.), as more infants were baptized and fewer adults were initiated, the emphasis of Lent focused more on all believers preparing for Easter. After the restoration of Vatican II, Lent and the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) were reconnected. Now the emphasis of Lent is once again on baptism – preparing those who are to be initiated in addition to all of the baptized who will renew their baptismal promises. The final rite was issued in Latin in 1972. After some revisions, the finalized English text was released in 1988.

When you see all those people gathering before the sanctuary during Mass at Lent, it is not a strange disruption of the normal Mass at all. Rather, the RCIA process (it is a process, not a program) is the way to bring people into the Catholic Church. Lent is not a privatized devotional period for us individuals. Rather, we journey with the whole of the body of Christ. During this season, we believers journey with those who are seeking baptism and wanting full communion with the Church. As they are instructed, prayed for, and scrutinized in many ways, so are we along with them. Let us take a closer look at what the RCIA process is so that we can understand the season of Lent and our participation in it more fully.

The Four Stages

There are four main stages to the RCIA process. The first is the Pre-Catechumenate. When a person (including youth) has a desire to become a Catholic, they are invited to inquiry sessions. These gatherings are held at their local parish. The number of people coming together varies depending on the size of the parish and the number of inquiries in each particular year. There is no obligation on behalf of those seeking entry into the church at this time. If a person wants to seek baptism or to be received fully into Catholic communion, they enter the second phrase.

Once leaders discern that they are ready, the inquirers are welcomed into the catechumenate by a formal rite of acceptance. This rite can be celebrated on any Sunday in Ordinary Time, usually before Advent. For the candidates (those already baptized in another denomination but seeking full communion with the church), this rite is called the rite of welcoming. The two rites – acceptance and welcoming – can be combined.

So that you will be familiar with the designations, a person who seeks baptism is at first called an "inquirer." After they are accepted into the RCIA, they are called "catechumens." Once they are formally elected at the Cathedral during the first week of Lent, they are called "the elect." Once baptized at the Easter Vigil, they are called "neophytes."

Along with these people, others who have already been baptized in another denomination and seek full communion with the Catholic Church are always called candidates. Catechumens (who become neophytes) and candidates (who fully joined the church) have different designations but learn and progress together.

Catechumenate

The second phase of the RCIA is called the catechumenate. This is an extended period of pastoral formation and guidance. There are two types of entrance. The first are those who have not been baptized and want baptism into Christ. These are called catechumens (meaning instructed). The others, who are already baptized but seek full communion with the Church, (confirmation and Eucharist) are called candidates (but are not officially part of the Catechumenate).

This phase usually begins in a particular parish in early September when most schools start, although latecomers can usually join in the process if it is a few months before Lent. Otherwise, they can participate in next year's process. The Catechumenate is an extended period of learning, pastoral formation, and guidance. In this time, each person seeking baptism and full communion hears what it means to be a Christian and learns about the history of Catholicism as well as the present-day Church. Learning who Jesus is and how to follow him are crucial elements of the catechesis.

People gather in formal settings with their leader. Sometimes other teachers will come in and give presentations according to their expertise. The best process allow for storytelling and increased interaction within the catechumens and candidates themselves. These are not classes to be "passed" but for the formation of human souls. The goal is not so much knowledge as growth in faith as well as initial and ongoing conversion. Through faith sharing and telling stories, faith is caught (not so much taught) and conversion deepens. During this time of study, learning, and sharing, participants are assigned a formal sponsor. This sponsor will be a witness of Christian faith and virtue. They will journey with the catechumen and candidate. Celebrating important liturgical rituals, the sponsor will stand with the catechumen and vouch for their readiness to go forward.

During this significant period, many areas are addressed. The participants learn how to pray. They grow in Christian virtue. They listen to the Word of God. They come to understand the meaning of the sacraments more fully. They discern how to become a loving person. They realize the importance of getting involved in community and the necessity of evangelization. Most of all, they turn away from sin and develop their relationship with God. This is what ongoing conversion is. These are areas we all need to embrace and grow in during our journey of Lent.

Purification And Enlightenment

The third stage is the period of purification and enlightenment that corresponds with Lent. In a nutshell, Lent is a season of purification and enlightenment for all of us.

Lent is a period of increased discernment and growth in virtue and with God. This time is more like a retreat, although learning does occur. The aim is to turn away from sin and increase in holiness (purification). Also, we seek to be illumined by prayer, reading, and seeking God (enlightenment). During Lent there are several rites and scrutinies. The baptized people of God witness and support those seeking baptism and wishing to join the Church. We pray for them and witness their steps towards fullness. We also journey with them as we are purified and enlightened through our Lenten journey.

Although most of us have already been baptized, confirmed, and received the Eucharist, we are all in need of development and maturity. While others are joining us, we join with them in the process of formation and growth. We turn away from sin. We practice self-discipline and fasting. We listen to the Scriptures and pray. We get involved with people. We pray with and for the elect and candidates. There is much to learn about our Church and faith. Along with them, we also need to be cleansed from our guilt, shame, and past hurtful memories. We need purification from selfish, sexual, and relational sins. We seek further moments of enlightenment from God's gracious presence. Lent (and mystagogia in the Easter season) are when we journey with the elect and candidates along the path toward the sanctification of wholeness and holiness.

Lent is not a season where we strive to grow solely in a solitary fashion. The Hebrews journeyed through the desert together, as a community, towards the Promised Land. Likewise, we journey as a body in solidarity with those joining the Church. Together we grow, are formed, and receive purification and enlightenment from God. We also work on ourselves alone in an individual fashion.

If a catechumen decides they want to continue towards baptism and full incorporation into the Church and are approved, they are "sent" to the Cathedral by the local parish community. This sending usually occurs on the first Sunday of Lent as does the rite of election. At the Cathedral, the Bishop welcomes the catechumens and candidates from around the diocese. Sometimes they, along with their sponsors, godparents, and family, will number in the thousands. When sent to the Cathedral, at the rite of election, the Church formally ratifies their readiness for the sacraments of initiation. At this liturgy, they publicly acknowledge their desire to receive baptism/communion with the church. From now on, those who will be baptized (catechumens) are called "the elect."

During the Sundays of Lent, the elect will continue to join the community at one of the Sunday Masses and listen to the readings and homily. This is the final, more intense preparation for the reception of the sacraments of initiation. They will leave the gathered assembly before the "Creed" is professed (an ancient practice) to continue to reflect on God's Word and what it means to be a follower of Christ. The elect and candidates are presented with the "Creed" on the third Sunday of Lent and the "Our Father" on the fifth Sunday of Lent.

As a means of purification and grace, the elect are scrutinized on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. (Candidates are not formally scrutinized.) The scrutinies are not so much examinations by the community as they are a rite of grace to help those in the RCIA. Along with the elect, we the baptized believers are also scrutinized by the Sunday readings. After the readings and homily, there is prayer for the elect and the candidates. A portion of the prayers are intercessions. Then the prayer for exorcism is offered. Exorcism is not a formal prayer to cast out demons but prayers asking God to strengthen and protect the elect. The purpose is to uncover and then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect and to bring out and strengthen all that is upright. The scrutinies are celebrated to deliver the elect (and us) from the power of sin and Satan, to protect them against temptation, and to give them strength in Christ. There is a three year cycle of readings (A/B/C). Year "A" readings are always proclaimed every Lent when the elect and candidates are present and are being scrutinized.

This period of formal purification and enlightenment concludes with the celebration of the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. At the grand Easter Vigil, we are celebrating the resurrection and vindication of Jesus Christ. The elect and candidates are not just joining the Catholic religion. They have made a firm decision for Jesus Christ and have begun their journey as disciples. They love Jesus and want to follow him more fully, making Jesus the Lord of their lives. They are saved through their decision for Christ ratified by the washing and regeneration of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. They have a sense of God's personal love for them. They have committed their lives not just to the Catholic Church but to the person that is the foundation of Catholicism: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Easter Vigil celebration is an inspiring service containing many different parts. We are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus and the hope we have in Christ. Along with our living hope, those being baptized and received into the Church finalize their commitments. At the Vigil Mass there is abundant joy as people finally realize their dream of giving their lives to Christ in the Church.

As the elect are plunged into the waters of baptism, they ratify their decision to follow Christ. They are soaked in the waters of rebirth and regeneration. They die with Christ and rise with him. They are cleansed of all their prior sins and become a new creation in Christ. They are born again in the healing waters. The early Church Father Tertullian (B. 155) wrote: "Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life!" (Treatise on Baptism Chapter 1).

The elect and those being received into the Church are then confirmed in Christ and receive Holy Communion during the Mass. The Easter Vigil liturgy is long in duration, usually lasting from two to three hours. Although lengthy, the Vigil Mass is a celebration of radiant light and life as well as a firm commitment.

Mystagogy

The fourth and final period of the RCIA is Mystagogy or Mystagogia (to lead to the mysteries). This period of further instruction and enlightenment usually continues throughout the fifty day Easter season until Pentecost. Mystagogy, and life learning, will continue until death. Those who have been baptized are now called neophytes. Easter is not just one day. Easter is a long season! We need time to grasp the mystery of Jesus rising from the dead. As we hear the readings from the Acts of the Apostles and Gospels, we soak in the abundant life Jesus promised. We can rise in our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. We can experience new manifestations of God's presence and grace. Easter is a thrilling season of surprises and of new life. There is the sight and smell of Easter lilies. The liturgical garments worn are white. The Easter season culminates in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. It can be said that Lent is a preparation for Easter, and Easter is a preparation for our receiving the Holy Spirit.

Mystagogy is a period of ongoing formation. The neophytes and candidates are not just baptized and received into the church and then that is it. Rather, they are invited to continue their journey of learning, formation, and growth with the community. Unfortunately, some will drop off from attending get-togethers after their baptism. In this period, important sharing of experiences and faith will continue. There will be further instruction and learning as questions are asked and explored. The neophytes will be encouraged to get involved in their faith and learn how to share it with others.

Mystagogia should not be seen as only a limited fifty day period after baptism. Rather, learning the mysteries of our faith is a period that extends for the rest of our lives. In priesthood and religious life this is called "ongoing formation." All of us are learning and growing. The truly educated person never stops going to school. Life is all about learning and growing.

We all need further purification and enlightenment. We must grow in holiness and be open to future God–encounters. We, the baptized, journey with the neophytes in this period also, and beyond. Hopefully we take what we are learning and become passionate, influential Christians who make a difference in the world and become our best selves. Our lives can be extremely significant. We can impact others for Christ and change our society. The Catholic Church is an apostolic church, and her nature is missionary. The apostles turned the world "upside down," and so can we! Mystagogia never ends in the life of a neophyte or in our lives. "Be who you are meant to be," St. Catherine of Siena said, "and you will set the world on fire."

Who are all those people up front during Lent? They are the ones joining us in our way of believing, worshiping, and living. We should be thrilled that our Church is growing by their participation. We journey with those seeking baptism and full communion. Together, as individuals and as a community, we seek purification and enlightenment from God.

Lenten Lessons:

- RCIA is a process for all of us during Lent
- We journey with those who will be baptized and received
- The foundation of Lent is ongoing conversion
- We are all involved in ongoing formation

Lenten Actions:

- Try to attend a Mass that has RCIA people present
- Pray for the elect and candidates

