

Q What is the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA)?

A In 1962 the Second Vatican Council directed that the ancient process for initiating adults be restored. The Church's description of the restored process and its liturgical rites, *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, or RCIA, became available in English in 1974, was revised in 1988, and by the authority of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, has been used in parishes since then. Its vision is to accompany and provide formation for adults who wish to become disciples of Jesus Christ in the Roman Catholic Church.

The rite envisions a process that (1) takes place in the midst of the community of the faithful who provide prayer, support, and examples of a life of discipleship, (2) honors the journey of each person who, having heard the invitation from God, freely responds and seeks to develop a relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church, (3) is marked by celebrations that honor the journey, culminating at the Easter Vigil with the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, and (4) takes as long as it takes for each person to develop.

The process consists of four periods and three steps.

Period One: Evangelization or Precatechumenate.

A time when the Gospel is proclaimed and inquirers come to first faith and initial conversion to Jesus Christ.

Step One: Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. At this formal rite in the midst of the assembly, inquirers declare their intention to accept the Gospel and follow Christ, their senses are signed with the Sign of the Cross, and they are now known as catechumens (listeners).

Period Two: The Catechumenate. In this period the catechumens are dismissed after the homily to reflect on the Word of God, they receive catechesis (deepening their understanding of Scripture and becoming acquainted with the teachings of the Church) and formation (participating in the life of the community, including service), and are nourished by prayer. This period should last at least one full liturgical year.

Step Two: The Rite of Election takes place at the diocesan cathedral on or near the First Sunday of Lent. When the catechumens and their sponsors and catechists discern that they are ready for the final preparation for the sacraments of initiation, they are declared by the bishop to be among "the elect."

Period Three: Purification and Enlightenment.

During this period, which coincides with Lent, the elect engage in deep prayer, reflection, and self-searching. At three rites, called scrutinies, on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, the community prays that the elect will be freed of sin, healed of weakness, and strengthened in their preparations for initiation at the Easter Vigil.

Step Three: The sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) are celebrated at the Easter Vigil, the high point of the liturgical year. In the light of the Paschal Mystery, the elect are made new creations, joined to Christ, and incorporated into his body of disciples. Now fully initiated, they take their place at the Eucharistic table.

Period Four:

Postbaptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy. For the fifty days of Easter the neophytes (newly planted Christians) will continue to meet to ponder the mysteries of the new sacramental life they are experiencing and to integrate it into their daily lives. They participate (now fully) in liturgy, continue to ponder Scripture, join with parish groups to serve in the world, and witness to the Gospel with their new lives of faith. The parish welcomes them with joy and helps them find their place in the community. In some sense these are lifelong activities for all disciples.

