

Diocese of Covington
RCIA Policies and Guidelines Manual
Introduction

I. Introduction

A. Definition – The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is the process established by the Catholic Church by which individuals become members of the Church. The pinnacle moment of the process is the celebration of the Sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) normally celebrated at the Easter Vigil. In the reception of these Sacraments, an individual becomes a full member of the Catholic Church. However, the RCIA is a spiritual journey which begins well before the celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation and continues beyond the Easter Vigil and extends into the entire earthly life of every member of the Church.

“The initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful.” (RCIA Introduction, no. 4) It consists of four major “periods” punctuated by liturgical rites. In very simple form, the structure of the RCIA looks like this:

Period of the Precatechumenate

Rite of Acceptance

Period of the Catechumenate

Rite of Election

Period of Purification and Enlightenment

Rites (Celebration) of the Sacraments of Initiation

Period of Mystagogy

B. Implementation – In implementing the RCIA process, three equally important aspects of the process should be considered: pastoral, catechetical, and liturgical. These three aspects can be explained as follows:

1. *Pastoral Aspect* – The pastoral aspect of the RCIA is critical to the process and to the conversion of the participants both within the RCIA process and during their entire lives as Catholic Christians. The parish community, under the direction and leadership of the pastor and RCIA leader, must begin pastoring the inquirers from the first moment they express interest in the Church. Each person who comes to the RCIA process will differ in his or her lifestyle, state in life, religious background, and motivation for

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seeking the Church. The pastoral aspect focuses on the individual person and where conversion needs to take place in order that their hearts are open to the graces of the Sacraments. We need to know the participants in order to serve each of them as individuals. People will learn about the Church not only from our formal catechesis, but also through our welcome and witness. The parish community should love them into the Church.

Some examples of pastoral concerns that should be given attention during the RCIA process (not a complete list):

- a) Welcoming the participants
 - b) Respecting where each person is in the conversion process
 - c) Assisting them in the conversion process
 - d) Dealing with pastoral issues such as verifying baptismal status, identifying and regularizing marriage irregularities, and identifying and modifying lifestyles incompatible with the faith (e.g., premarital cohabitation, homosexual lifestyles, etc.).
 - e) Discerning readiness to move to the next period at each stage of the process
2. *Catechetical Aspect* – The catechetical aspect of the RCIA generally gets the most attention. Often the RCIA is mistakenly viewed as a purely catechetical process – *those classes people take to become Catholic*. While it is not the only aspect of the RCIA, the catechetical aspect is certainly important and is the dominant aspect during the catechumenate stage of the RCIA. It is important to note that catechesis is much more than simply imparting knowledge of the teachings of the faith. The methodology and scope of catechesis varies by the different periods of the RCIA process. These variations will be highlighted throughout this manual.
3. *Liturgical Aspect* – The liturgical aspect of the RCIA refers to the preparation for and celebration of the rites. This includes both the major rites which are the bridges between each stage of the process, as well as the minor rites, such as the Anointing with the Oil of Catechumens, the presentations of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, the Scrutinies, and blessings and exorcisms. Participation in the Mass and celebrations of the

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liturgy of the Word within the catechumenate are also considered in the liturgical aspect of the RCIA.

- a) Pastors and RCIA leaders must pay particular attention to the proper celebration of these rites within the RCIA. While some rites are required and some are optional, as many as possible should be celebrated for the benefit of the catechumens and candidates, who should be given adequate explanation and instruction as to their meaning prior to their celebration. Catechumens and candidates should also have an opportunity to reflect on their meaning, significance and impact on their Christian journey after the rites are celebrated. This understanding and reflection will allow them to experience more profoundly the liturgical aspect of the catechumenate.
- b) Why is this liturgical experience so important for the catechumens and candidates during their formation? We, as Catholic Christians, are a liturgical people. The Latin phrase, *lex orandi, lex credendi* sums this up: the law of prayer is the law of belief. For Catholic Christians, what we pray is what we believe. The beliefs of the Church are present and evident in the liturgy, whether in the holy sacrifice of the Mass, Liturgy of the Hours – the prayer of the Church, the rites proper to the reception of the Sacraments, or any of the other minor rites and blessings given by the Church to her ministers for use in celebrating with her members, including those belonging to the RCIA. The catechesis of the RCIA should enrich and expand on what is already present in the liturgical prayer of the Church.

- C. **History** – A brief history of the Catechumenate is available in the Appendix for this section.

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D. A Note Regarding Important Terminology – One encounters the use of both terms *sponsor* and *godparent* when referring to those who support a person seeking full initiation into the Catholic Church. The term *sponsor* is used more often because this encompasses all those who support the catechumens or candidates, while a *godparent* is a term used to describe a more specific subset of the sponsors, who fulfill a very specific role. In other words, every godparent is a sponsor, but not all sponsors will be godparents. A more detailed explanation can be found in section V.A. (“What is a Sponsor?”) of this manual. This manual will use the term *sponsor* throughout to refer to both sponsors and godparents, except where it is necessary to make a distinction.

E. Abbreviations Used in this Manual:

RCIA	Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults Note: all quotations from the RCIA ritual book are taken from the RITE OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS © 1988, Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CIC	<i>Codex Iuris Canonici</i> , “Code of Canon Law”
CT	<i>Catechesi tradendae</i> , “On Catechesis in Our Time”; Apostolic Exhortation issued October 16, 1979 by Pope John Paul II
LG	Lumen Gentium “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”, Vatican II
GDC	General Directory for Catechesis
NDC	National Directory for Catechesis
USCCA	United States Catholic Catechism for Adults

Notes
