

The R.C.I.A. Process:

An Explanation and Guide

What is RCIA?

The **Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)** is the process (*processus*) through which adults (14 yrs. and older, there is a separate process for children called “Rite of Christian Initiation for Children”) enter into full sacramental communion with the Catholic Church. By Baptism one is incorporated into the mystical body of Christ, the Church. This is further strengthened when by the Sacrament of Confirmation one is perfectly bound or chained to the Church so as to share perfectly in the gifts of the Holy Spirit which animate the life of the Church. This is all consummated in the reception of the Eucharist, which makes present for us the fruits of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins and a share in His eternal life, in His body and blood.

RCIA is a *processus*. In Medieval theology the *processus* was used to instruct a person on a particular passage of Scripture in order that it may more perfectly and fully become a part of their life. This work of integrating the Word of God in one’s life requires a step-by-step process of learning about the depths of meaning the Word of God has for a person’s life. Likewise, RCIA is a *processus* to help a person engage on the pilgrimage of integration of faith, hope and love developed by an encounter with the Word of God, Jesus Christ, in their life. The RCIA *processus* seeks to integrate the Word of God, Jesus Christ, experienced in the life of the person seeking full union with Christ and His Church through the sacred Scriptures and Sacraments. Each step toward full communion with the Church is a spiritual, moral and intellectual *processus* that encounters the purifying, illuminating and perfecting/uniting love of God. Throughout the RCIA process we experience God through the mediation of His Church and this descending revelation of God toward us gives us the grace needed to make an ascending return pilgrimage of spiritual/moral purification (the purgative way/period of purification), intellectual illumination (the illuminative way/period of enlightenment) unto full communion with God (the unitive experience). This is done with the assistance of a sponsor and lead by a priest, deacon and/or team of catechists who each bear responsibility for the interested person’s formation unto the likeness of Christ Jesus.

The sacred liturgy hold primacy of place for the formation of catechumens and candidates as it is in the sacred liturgy that persons seeking full communion with the Church experience the Word of God most perfectly in Scripture and Tradition. Christ Jesus is the wellspring of Divine Revelation from which flows two rivers, Scripture and Tradition, and these two rivers form a unity in the sacred liturgy where they reach their most perfect expression in the self-revelation of God to humanity. In the proclamation of the Word of God during the Liturgy of the Word (Liturgy of the Catechumens) the catechumens and candidates are illumined by the Word as by a light and this light seeks to purify them from the darkness of sin and ignorance.

Just as the Liturgy of the Word gives way to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, likewise the RCIA process moves the catechumens and candidates to prepare for communion with Christ Jesus in the Eucharist, the source and summit of the life of the Church.

What are a Catechumen and the Catechumenate?

In the early Church, as it is today, there was the need to provide a process for people to enter the Church. This begins with what is known as the **pre-catechumenate**, the period where a non-baptized person first hears the proclamation of the central Gospel message, the *kerygma*, that Jesus suffered death and rose again for the salvation of humanity, and expresses heartfelt interest to fully know and love Christ Jesus. The experience of God in holiness and love renders us awe-struck and desirous of a more perfect relationship with Him. This period should manifest the beginnings of a true faith, repentance for past sins, a growing dependency upon prayer and a sense of the Church and the community of the faithful.

Once this discernment is completed the inquirer enters upon the Catechumenate rendering one a catechumen. A catechumen is an unbaptized person already explicitly willing full communion with the Church and is thus conjoined to the Church. The inquirer is officially received into the Order of Catechumens at the **Rite of Acceptance**. The catechumen now embarks upon a period of moral and spiritual purification, intellectual illumination unto unity with Christ and His Church through the mystery of the Easter Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist.

What is the Process of the Catechumenate?

Rite of Acceptance: The Rite of Acceptance is where the catechumen makes explicit their desire to enter the Church, thus conjoining them to the Church. Here God's grace showers upon them and they are consecrated, set apart, to journey in faith, hope and love toward full unity with the Church. The rite consists of the presentation of the candidate, by name, to the Church; the catechumen's first acceptance of the Gospel, the affirmation of the sponsors and assembly; the signing of the catechumen with Cross (this is always done on the forehead, but may include the other senses: ears, eyes, lips, breast, shoulders, hands and feet); Liturgy of the Word, which includes the optional presentation of a Bible, intercessions for the catechumens, prayer over the catechumens and dismissal. Other optional rites include: a first exorcism; renunciation of false worship; the giving of a new name; and the presentation of a cross/crucifix.

After the Rite of Acceptance there are: the Penitential Rite Scrutiny, three Scrutinies, two Presentations (Creed and the Lord's Prayer) and the Preparation Rites of Holy Saturday. This all occurs during the Period of Purification and Enlightenment (Illumination). The rites celebrated during this period seek to purify the catechumen of those spiritual and moral influences that lead them to sin and introduce the catechumen to the spiritual life lived in the light of Christ. This requires knowledge of Christ Jesus in order to discern His will for the catechumen's life. It is in knowing Christ that we become better at loving Him.

Period of Catechumenate

While one remains a catechumen until they are baptized, the initial period following the Rite of Acceptance is specifically called the period of catechumenate. It is during this time that the catechumen receives specialized training and instruction in the Christian life and tradition. This period is meant to last for an extended duration of time. This period is meant to last as long as is necessary for the conversion and faith of the catechumen to become strong. The celebration of certain liturgical rites, such as: Celebrations of the Word of God; Minor Exorcisms; Blessing and Anointings; Presentations, are all meant to accompany the catechumen in strengthening their conversion and faith. Once the prudential judgment is made that a catechumen is strong in their conversion and faith they are sent for the Rite of Election.

Rite of Election: The bishop is the visible sign of unity in his local Church and expresses the unity of faith and morals as well as unity with the apostolic origins of the Church for the flock entrusted to him. Thus, at the Rite of Election all the catechumens are elected by the bishop to be fully incorporated into the Church and through the Rite of Election catechumens are conjoined to the Church. The Rite of Election formally sets the catechumen on the path toward full Sacramental unity with the Church. The unity that is expressed in this rite, which conjoins, is brought to its perfection in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil.

Period of Purification & Illumination

Penitential Rite Scrutiny: This occurs on the Second Sunday of Lent and is followed by the Sacrament of Penance for candidates.¹ A general examination of one's conscience should occur where they look back on their life and prepare to confess their sins. After their confession a sense of joy and unencumbered zeal to progress in the spiritual exercises should be had by the penitent.

The Scrutinies: There are three Scrutinies that occur on the third, fourth and fifth Sunday's of Lent. In each case, after the proclamation of the Word of God in the sacred Scriptures and its illumination in the Homily, the catechumens are prayed for by the Christian community, receive an exorcism, so as to deliver them from the presence of the darkness of evil in their life, and are then dismissed.

The Presentations: The Presentations of the Creed and Lord's Prayer occur on the third and fifth Sunday's of Lent, respectively. In each case, after the proclamation of the Word of God

¹Catechumens need not receive the Sacrament of Penance as their Baptism washes them clean of both original and actual sin. For catechumens, this week should be a time of catechesis in regards the Sacrament of Penance and how this period of purification and illumination in God's light will be more completely embraced at their Baptism. The catechumen should also be instructed in the importance of the Sacrament of Penance following their Baptism for the remission of sins thereafter.

in the sacred Scriptures and its illumination in the Homily, they are then presented with the Creed or Lord's Prayer, are prayed over by the priest and then dismissed.

Holy Saturday Preparation: Having entered the Sacred Triduum with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on the evening of Holy Thursday and having experienced the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday, the catechumen receives their final preparation for the Rites of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, on Holy Saturday morning. This is the day in which the Church celebrates Christ's harrowing of hell, thus preparing the holy ones that waited to share in the glory of the kingdom of Heaven, which is won for them with the Resurrection of Christ Jesus on Easter Sunday. Likewise, the catechumens, after professing the Creed, receive the rite of *Ephphetha* ("Be Open") where they are made open to sharing in the resurrected glory of Christ Jesus. The catechumen then chooses a Christian name and prepare for the Sacrament of Penance. They can prepare using the Penitential Rite Scrutiny, which also occurs on the Second Sunday of Lent.

Sacraments of Initiation/The Unitive Experience

The period of purification and illumination comes to its fulfillment at the Easter Vigil, where the catechumens are sacramentally united with Christ Jesus and His Church through Baptism, Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist. While each person continues their spiritual and moral purification and intellectual illumination throughout their life, the celebration of the Easter Sacraments provides the catechumen the sacramental union with Christ and His Church so as to live in and draw with a greater capacity the sanctifying grace needed for our faithful acceptance of the salvation Jesus freely offers.

What is a Candidate and What is their Process?

A Candidate is any person who is validly baptized, whether in the Catholic Church or in any other Church or ecclesial community, but has either not been catechized as a child and received the rest of the Sacraments of Initiation (Holy Eucharist and Confirmation) or is converting from another ecclesial community and is in need full incorporation into the Catholic Church through the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation (Holy Eucharist and Confirmation).

Rite of Welcoming: Candidates are officially welcomed into this process with the Rite of Welcoming, which occurs separately from the Rite of Acceptance of Catechumens and typically occurs during Lent. This rite includes the candidate stating their intention, the affirmation of their sponsor and the assembly and the signing of the candidate with the cross on their forehead. The candidate also makes a profession of faith.

Rite of Sending Candidates for Recognition by the Bishop and Calling Candidates to Continued Conversion: Here those candidates for Confirmation and Holy Eucharist are presented, affirmed, recognized and prayed over. They are received by the Bishop; the sign of unity (see "Rite of Election" above).

Period of Purification and Enlightenment: Thus also the candidates enter the Period of Purification and Enlightenment (Illumination) as do the catechumens stated above. This is consummated with their reception of the Sacraments of Initiation and experience of union as is stated above for catechumens.

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Sacraments of Initiation/The Unitive Experience

The period of purification and illumination comes to its fulfillment at the Easter Vigil, where the candidates are sacramentally united with Christ Jesus and His Church through Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist. While each person continues their spiritual and moral purification and intellectual illumination throughout their life, the celebration of the Easter Sacraments provides the candidate the sacramental union with Christ and His Church so as to live in and draw with a greater capacity the sanctifying grace needed for our faithful acceptance of the salvation Jesus freely offers. ***Reception of Baptized Christians:** This rite is celebrated for those Christians from other Churches or ecclesial communities, not uncatechized adult Catholics. It includes the Profession of Faith; Act of Reception; Celebration of Confirmation (when appropriate); Celebrants Sign of Welcome; General Intercessions and the Sign of Peace.

What is Mystagogical Catechesis?

Mystagogical Catechesis is that period of catechesis, typically from Easter to Pentecost, after the reception of the Easter Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist, that instructs the neophytes, new faithful, in the significances of the signs and symbols of the Sacraments and sacred liturgy, so as to increase their full, conscious, active participation.