Becoming Catholic

The vast majority of Catholics, including most of the adults reading this essay, entered the Catholic Church as infants. We were born into a Catholic family and baptized soon after. As we grew, we learned about the Catholic faith from our families and perhaps at Catholic schools or in our parish religious education programs. At First Communion we were admitted to the table of the Lord where we could fully celebrate the Eucharist along with the rest of the community. Eventually, most of us were confirmed, and somewhere along the line, we made our own heartfelt commitment to our faith.

But what if you didn’t follow this particular path of slow growth in faith? What if, as an adult, you were drawn for the first time toward a Catholic community like Old St. Joseph’s?

This is the reason that in 1972 Pope Paul VI gave the Church the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Pope Paul was following the mandate of Vatican II to restore the catechumenate, a common practice of the early Church. The word *catechumen* comes from the Greek and means ‘one who is instructed.’ The *catechumenate* is the period of discernment and formation that prepares new members for full initiation into the Catholic Church through Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation. A deepening of faith and genuine conversion are the goals of the RCIA, leading the newly initiated to take their place within the Catholic Christian community and join its life of service to the Gospel and building the Kingdom of God. But the RCIA does not just affect those undertaking the process of initiation. The RCIA can form, and transform, the community in which it is celebrated.

In order to appreciate how this happens, it helps to know the steps of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. The very first paragraph of the ritual book for the RCIA states as its purpose:

*The rite of Christian initiation...is intended for adults. They hear the preaching of the mystery of Christ, the Holy Spirit opens their hearts, and they freely and knowingly seek the living God and enter the path of faith and conversion (RCIA, 1).*

The RCIA “process” is divided into stages, with liturgical celebrations marking the transitions between some stages. The first stage, the Period of Evangelization, or Pre-Catechumenate, is often an individual experience, when someone experiences the preaching of the Gospel and notices the first stirrings of faith. The next stage, the Catechumenate, is a time for information and formation into the basics of the faith, for getting to know and pray and work with the Catholic Christian community. It’s at this stage that individuals often become part of a group instructed by catechists in

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When a catechumen is ready, the Rite of Election is celebrated. The catechumen travels to the cathedral to be presented by the parish to the diocesan Bishop or Archbishop and “chosen” to receive the Sacraments of Initiation, Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, at the next Easter Vigil. This begins the Period of Enlightenment or Intense Preparation, which coincides with the observance of Lent, and culminates on Holy Saturday night at the Vigil.

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults ends with the *mystagogia*, a time during the Easter season when the new Christians, or neophytes, reflect on the significance of the ‘mysteries’ they experienced in their initiation at the Easter Vigil. The word neophyte comes from the Greek for “new plant;” faith has been newly planted in the neophytes, and its blossoming will continue to develop.

Reflecting a pastoral concern for the complex realities of modern life, the RCIA also makes provisions for those who have been baptized in another Christian community and for those who may have been baptized in the Catholic Church but whose growth in faith stopped short of First Communion or Confirmation. In the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, those seeking such full communion with the Catholic Church may share in the RCIA and complete their initiation on the first Sunday after Easter.

Now, what does all this have to do with the whole community? How is the parish affected by one person’s or a small group’s journey through the RCIA?

Again, the ritual book of the RCIA provides the beginnings of an answer:

*The initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful. By joining the catechumens in reflecting on the value of the Paschal Mystery and by renewing their own conversion, the faithful provide an example that will help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously (RCIA, 4)*.

The presence of catechumens in the parish offers all the members of the faith community an opportunity to reflect on the state of their own discipleship. As catechumens move through the RCIA, we may ask ourselves, how well do I answer the Gospel’s call? How well does our parish reflect Gospel values in all its actions? Are we a welcoming community, inviting in all people as brothers and sisters? How loving are we to one another? Do we share our bread with the poor and welcome the widow, the orphan, and the stranger into our lives? How wisely do we use our resources to build the reign of God in our world?

It is good for us regularly to ask these questions; all of us are called to continual conversion. When we join with catechumens as they progress through the RCIA, we also open ourselves to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We look to see where we have been faithful and where we are in need of correction. When we renew our baptismal vows on Easter, we can recommit ourselves to the call to discipleship; we can help align our parish a little bit closer to our Gospel mission of working for the Kingdom.

On the surface, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults looks like a far more arduous process than getting baptized as a child. The timing is obviously different, but the goal and dynamics are the same. Whenever we experience our initiation into the Catholic faith, we do the same things: we listen for the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we grow in our relationship with the God who loves us and Jesus Christ who saves us, and we do all these things with the help of a community that accompanies us on our journey of faith.

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