Opinion

Guest Voices



A religious sister places her hand on the shoulder of a candidate during the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion ceremony in the Diocese of Brooklyn in the 2016 file photo. (CNS/The Tablet/Marie Elena Giossi)



by Diana Macalintal and Nick Wagner

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

April 5, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

"It works! It really works!" Mary (not her real name) is a parish faith formation coordinator and had traveled across the state to participate in our workshop on the upcoming changes to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

"Our parishioners got to know our catechumens, and it's made a huge difference," she said, her face beaming. "We have so many young adults becoming Catholic, and our parish is really growing!"

The changes in the new translation will be relatively minor: a new English and Spanish text for the U.S. church, clarified terminology and rubrics, more succinct national guidelines.

But what excited Mary were the things that were *not* changing — those fundamental principles of the catechumenal process promulgated in the rite 50 years ago — the same principles that, unfortunately, many parishes have yet to fully embrace.

Advertisement

Sadly, this has led some to say that the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, or RCIA, doesn't work and that we should "explore other routes," as one writer recently stated. This skepticism isn't new. Shortly after the Latin text of the adult initiation rite was published in 1972, Benedictine theologian Aidan Kavanagh lauded it for being the seed of a "revitalized sacramental theology and pastoral practice" but warned that it was "an Achilles' heel" destined to fail.

The rite, he surmised, intimidated most parishes, not because it was complex but because it was "explosive of the conventional patterns of church life." Most clergy, he wrote, "regard its implementation as problematic if not impossible. They are right. For what the Roman documents contain are not merely specific changes in liturgical rubrics, but a restored and unified vision of the Church."

With a new translation coming in the next few years, it's time we fully implement the restored catechumenate process. However (and it's a big "however"), the catechumenate will work only if we ourselves are ready to change.

Here are some changes we need to embrace.

RCIA leads seekers into relationship with Jesus, not into a school. The most important thing we must do is let go of the "school model" of catechesis, a paradigm that Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, called a “chokehold” on effective catechesis.

In the school model, everyone follows a predetermined one-size-fits-all schedule and curriculum focused on presenting doctrine organized by topics. This methodology is so prevalent that many parish leaders believe it to be prescribed.

However, Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel): "Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed." Over and over, the pope urges us "to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary."

RCIA is a process of conversion for unbaptized persons. The catechumenate is not for parishioners to learn more about the faith, baptized practicing Catholics preparing only for Confirmation or faithful Christians becoming Catholic. They are all already living the Christian life. They may need more formation — as we all do — but they do not need to learn the basic disciplines of following Christ because they already are.

Most people we put into our parish adult initiation processes don't belong there. But we put them there because it’s often the only adult faith formation happening in a parish. This results in catechumenate processes focused less on discipleship in Christ and more on information about Catholicism. The latter is important, but it is not the purpose of the catechumenate.

Conversion happens by encountering the entire mystery of Christ unfolding throughout the liturgical year. In life, there is no season for falling in love or deadline for getting married. Falling in love with Christ is similar. The Spirit doesn't work only from September to May, and you can't pre-determine God's timeline.

We need to be ready *whenever* the Spirit opens a seeker's heart. When that happens, we can immediately introduce seekers to Christ because the celebrations of the liturgical year are happening every day! And we share with them the *entire* mystery of Christ throughout the *whole* liturgical year, not just a part of it. This is why the rite says: "The time spent in the catechumenate should be long enough — several years if necessary — for the conversion and faith of the catechumens to become strong." However, "the duration of the catechumenate will depend on the grace of God. … Nothing, therefore, can be settled a priori."

Initiation is a ritual process. That may seem obvious, but often our practice and policies treat it more like a catechetical program with occasional prayers. RCIA is first and foremost an official rite of the church. Therefore, it is not optional or simply one method of adult initiation among many.

Moreover, when the church prays, Christ is present, teaching us to become like him. The rites, as Pope Benedict XVI said about the liturgy, are "the permanent catechesis of the Church, the inexhaustible source of catechesis" and, as the Catechism states, "the privileged place for catechizing the People of God."

Initiation is the responsibility of all the baptized. There is no mention in the rite of an "RCIA team" or "RCIA group." This is because the process of conversion happens in the midst of the community of the faithful (see #4 and 9). Instead of having catechumens meet only with a catechist once a week, our "RCIA teams" can coach all our parishioners to be mentors and examples for the catechumens any time they are with them.

This isn't as hard as it sounds. Parishes, by definition, are spiritual communities that manifest Christ in everything they do. So we can intentionally embed seekers into the parish community (and not merely into a separate "RCIA community") where they will regularly encounter Christ and learn to live as disciples through the life of the parish.

Becoming a disciple is not an acronym. We have a decades-long history of referring to the adult initiation process by the initials RCIA. This is unfortunate because it's insider vocabulary. And it’s too easy to think of those initials as an academic program to complete or an exclusive club to join instead of a relationship with Jesus Christ that changes everything. When the new English translation is approved by Rome (which has not yet happened), the title will be the "Order of

Christian Initiation of Adults." Now is the perfect opportunity to use language that is more descriptive of what the Spirit desires for all of us and more inviting to those who seek the living God.

The rite indeed works, but only if we trust it enough to let it change us, too. If we do, we can expect, as Kavanagh writes, "a community of lively faith in Jesus Christ dead, risen, and present actually among his People," for "when one change occurs, all changes."

Related: Is OCIA the only template that one can use to join the Catholic Church?
Related: Your thoughts on the OCIA process