



Introduction

We have been entrusted with cherishing the children that God sends to our parishes. The child is a spiritual embryo encircled and enfolded by divine light. Our responsibility is to embrace the holy, sacred being he or she is and to welcome them as Jesus welcomed them. The process of initiation is just such a vehicle for welcoming children who seek initiation in the Catholic Church.

RCIA is an acronym for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. When the church uses the word *adult* in reference to Christian initiation it includes children of catechetical age. There is no specific rite for children or teens; thus, there is no RCIC or RCIT. All the principles of the RCIA are simply age-appropriately adapted for children.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* says that, “For the purpose of Christian initiation, children who have reached the age of reason, generally understood as seven years of age, are considered adults in a limited sense” (36A, 3). In other words, what we do with adults we adapt for children.

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The primary blueprint for this resource is set forth in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) regarding children. However, if we hope to understand what we do with children, we must understand what we do with adults seeking full initiation.

The sections of the RCIA that deal with children are paragraphs 252–330; and the National Statutes, 18–19. RCIA 252 reminds us for whom the rite is intended: children not baptized as infants, those who have reached the age of reason and whom the *Code of Canon Law* insists are of catechetical age—around the age of seven for most children. (The role of discernment is critical, however, because many children meet that requirement before the age of seven.) The rite is also intended for children who:

- have been presented by their parents or guardians;
- have not been presented but who nevertheless have parental permission;
- are capable of entering into a personal relationship with Jesus and are able to nurture that faith; and
- are beginning to form a conscience.

The RCIA insists that formation for children of catechetical age “requires both a conversion that is personal and somewhat developed, in proportion to their age” (253). Two priorities exist when it comes to adapting the RCIA for children: first, children’s conversion of heart, and second, their catechetical training as set forth in paragraphs 75–82 (in an age-appropriate adaptation). It is thus important that catechists who minister to children are conversant with the principles of the adult process.

Stages of the RCIA

The RCIA is an ongoing process that is designed especially for people who wish to be baptized in the Catholic Church. It is also for those who have been baptized in another faith tradition and wish to be fully initiated in the Catholic Church, as well as baptized Catholics who would like to complete the sacraments of initiation by celebrating the sacraments of confirmation and Eucharist.

There are four stages, and the doorway into each stage is a community ritual that celebrates what God has done in their lives in the previous stage and serves as the threshold into the next. It is a gradual process, a journey toward a lifetime commitment.

First Stage

The *Precatechumenate/Inquiry* (also known as the Period of Evangelization [RCIA 36]) is the first stage of the process and is for baptized or unbaptized persons (adults and children) who have yet to embrace a meaningful relationship with Jesus. This first period of the process is a time to grow more deeply in friendship with him—to be evangelized.

That includes unbaptized children (catechumens) and baptized but uncatechized children (children who were baptized Catholic or in another Christian denomination but received no further Christian instruction). Children seeking full initiation could be children of parents in the process, children attending Catholic school or religious education in the parish, or children whose parents are not practicing their Catholic faith but have given parental consent for a guardian, grandparent, or other person to bring the child and commit to supporting them throughout the process.

During this first phase of their journey, inquirers grow in faith and personal intimacy with God; they witness to God's presence in their lives. The overarching dynamic of this period is welcome and hospitality.

The content of this period is found in paragraphs 37–42 of the ritual text. The period of evangelization asks the questions: Who is God, Jesus, the Blessed Trinity? Who are they for me? The period of evangelization teaches us that the Christian life invites us to take up our cross each day, to self-sacrifice, and join our lives to Jesus' life—his death and resurrection (Paschal Mystery, RCIA 8). The message of salvation and God's grace is communicated in this period (9.1). Children reflect on ways that God has been present up to this point in their lives. They become aware that they are sinners who need God's forgiveness.

Children in inquiry are invited to reflect God's action and how God invites us to grow in the midst of suffering. Children come to realize that when things are bad, they can bring their suffering to the cross and offer it up for the ongoing redemption of the world. It is a time for children to become aware that Jesus is their best friend and is with them no matter what happens. Children are capable of wisdom beyond their years. Our job is to help them discover that wisdom within themselves.

Children in the period of evangelization will also begin the practice of calling on God in prayer. Children will share their stories of faith and have companions, companion families, catechists, and other parishioners share theirs. Every session should begin by having children describe a way in which they experienced God's presence in their lives during the past week or recently. Also, no matter what the topic, issue, or group conversation, time should always be taken to connect a story or their story to the topic at hand. For example, when talking

about what it means to be a disciple, one girl shared how she reached out to an ostracized classmate and as a result became ostracized herself.

Children inquirers learn what it means to be part of a community (RCIA 9). It is thus important that children get connected with other children in the parish. They should be invited to participate in the parish family centered sacramental programs. For example, when second graders prepare for First Communion with their families, children in initiation and their families should also be included in that preparation. If the child is connected to a Catholic school, it is important that he or she be welcomed as a person who is preparing for baptism and that their classmates support them throughout the journey by celebrating various rites with them. For example, perhaps some rituals, such as minor rites, presentations, and the rite of sending for election, could be celebrated at a school Mass to stress that one among them is preparing for initiation and that it is their classmates' responsibility to support them in prayer.

It is also important that the children in initiation be incorporated into any children's ministry groups in the parish such as youth ministry, youth Bible study, and youth retreats.

Similarly, children who are not in the Catholic school but would automatically move to the parish religious education program once initiation is completed, should be incorporated into that ministry every time there is a group event—sacramental preparation, retreats, outreach activities. Both school families and religious education families should be brought together at various times to stress the unity of both entities.

The rite suggests that a companion child or family be asked to journey with the child. While it is true that some parents give permission to a grandparent to bring the child for sacraments, it is nevertheless advisable that this be an intergener-

ational experience—that families, where possible, participate with their child in the process; the faith sharing invites conversion of the whole family.

When children are incorporated in such groups, they are incorporated into the parish community with a community of their peers and those peers support them throughout the process.

The precatechumenate meets every week throughout the year whenever there are children inquirers. Children move to the next stage of the process whenever they are discerned ready to move forward. Evidence of conversion taking root in their lives is the criterion for celebrating a rite of acceptance or rite of welcome with the adults in the parish who are similarly celebrating.

Several catechists rotate and share this ministry. Some parishes have one or two catechists serve for three months and then rotate with another set of one or two. Adaptations must be made for each pastoral setting. When it is time for the other catechist(s) to take their turn, they join the group several weeks before to assess what is going on in the lives of the children before taking over.

As stated, children inquirers move to the next stage when initial conversion has taken place in their lives. The RCIA (42) helps us discern readiness to move to the next stage—initial faith and conversion, calling on God in prayer, acquaintance with the fundamentals of Christian faith, primary stories of Jesus in the gospel and Old Testament, understanding our need for repentance, and a sense of Church and the Christian community. Evangelization *is* the content for this period. Catholic teaching/doctrine comes in the next stage, once a person has been evangelized. Conversion is a gradual process; time is given for faith to take root in those wanting to become Catholic—adults and children.

Getting Started

Initial interview. Children enter the process whenever they come knocking on our doors. They are not asked to wait until next September. Sometimes children come to us already evangelized but not thoroughly catechized in Scripture, primary Catholic teaching, and apprenticeship in the Catholic way of life. Those children do not need the full precatechumenate. They may only need several weeks of getting to know the faith community before they celebrate the rite of acceptance and are placed in the period of the catechumenate. The initial interview asks: “Do you have a personal friendship with Jesus? Do you pray? Do you have any favorite Bible stories? What does it mean to be a Christian? Do you know what it means to be a sinner? Do you think you are a sinner? Do you think it is important to belong to a church? If so, why?” If they are already evangelized they do not belong in the first period.

When discerned ready, the children celebrate the rite of acceptance or optional rite of welcome (for uncatechized baptized children) and move to the next period of the process. Even though the RCIA insists that several rites may be celebrated throughout the year—whenever the parish discerns an inquirer is ready to move to the next stage (RCIA 18), it is advisable to wait until several inquirers are ready if possible.

More about Content

Storytelling is an essential element throughout the entire process. Children have amazing stories of faith if we but tap into them. Stories are crucial in the lives of children and adults—stories from the Bible, stories of the saints, and stories of our lives. The foundation of our faith is based on stories—stories from generations of faith-filled people who went before us. What are those foundational stories that should be shared in

the period of precatechumenate/evangelization?

Four themes in the Old Testament are at the heart of Jewish faith, and they are at the heart of ours too: creation, covenant, exodus, and community.

Creation Story: God created the heavens and the earth and everything in it. God intended that human beings take good care of God's creation. God continues to re-create us—to bless us and renew us and breathe new life into us.

When speaking to children about the foundational principle of creation, we remind them that God created everything in the universe. God spoke and it came to pass. We ask the children: "What does this have to do with us today?" God continues to re-create the world—to re-create us. The cycle of dying and rising occurs every day in the created order. God's creation continues the life cycle of dying and rising. A grain of wheat must die before a new seedling can emerge from the ground. A simple experiment to illustrate this principle is to plant a seed with the children and watch the seedling grow. Remind them too that the caterpillar must become encased in the tomb of chrysalis before the new and glorious butterfly can take wing. Perhaps find a video that illustrates this birthing process.

Similarly, the catechist reminds the children, human beings must die to their sinful selves before the new self can be birthed into the holy creature God imagined them to become in the Garden. The next logical question the catechist asks is, "What are some sinful behaviors that need healing in your life?" We must be prepared for profound conversion in the child and in their families.

When preparing children for reconciliation in my parish, there was discussion about the mystery of sin and how we can become slaves to it and how sin can hurt us and our families.