

REFLECTIONS ON THE YEAR-ROUND CATECHUMENATE

A Message to the RCIA Teams of the Diocese of Lansing
from the
Christian Initiation Advisory Committee



Introduction

This paper is the fruit of several discussions held among veteran RCIA directors in the Diocese of Lansing from May through November of 2005. They were called together by the Christian Initiation Advisory Committee for the Diocese of Lansing, which wanted to study the effectiveness of establishing a year-round catechumenate in parishes. Three major realities gave impetus to these conversations.

First, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults calls for such a year-round process. “The initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful...suited to the spiritual journey of adults that varies according to the many forms of God’s grace” (RCIA, 4-5). It is a journey made up of four distinct periods and marked by the celebration of several rites. The pre-catechumenate period, or period of inquiry, is of great importance and should not be omitted (RCIA 36). Essentially, the initiation process balances two ideals: the Church’s evangelical desire to hand on the tradition it has received and each inquirer’s desire to be formed in that faith tradition.

Second, inquirers approach Catholic faith communities throughout the year, whenever the Spirit prompts them. This is not limited to the academic year nor to a nine-month model of catechesis.

Finally, as initiating communities, we are called to accompany each inquirer on a journey of faith which works in God’s time and with God’s grace.

The conversations of the subcommittee surfaced a number of major concerns regarding a year-round catechumenate:

- 1) What is the current model of Christian initiation in most parishes of the diocese?
- 2) What does a year-round catechumenate look like?
- 3) How long should catechumens be in formation?
- 4) How will the year-round catechumenate model better serve those to be initiated?
- 5) When should catechumens be initiated?
- 6) How will an RCIA director coordinate an on-going process?
- 7) How can a parish begin to transition to this model?

A Common Parish Scenario

Perhaps the following scenario is typical in your parish.

The RCIA “class” began in September, since the staff follows approximately the same schedule as the religious education program. Three unbaptized inquirers were present for the first session along with two baptized persons from the Protestant tradition. The sessions met each week for four weeks.

Then, another unbaptized inquirer presented herself. The RCIA director worked with this new inquirer in one-on-one sessions to help her “catch up” with the other group. The parish celebrated the combined Rite of Acceptance/Rite of Welcome with this initial group in late October in an attempt to make the catechumenate period as long as possible in order to “fit in” all the topics which had been planned.

Two weeks after the combined Rite of Acceptance/Welcome, two more people called the parish. Again the RCIA director did one-on-one sessions in order to catch them up to the catechumens and candidates. They were also placed into the Thursday night catechumenate sessions. A couple of weeks later, yet another inquirer was added to the

catechumenate in the same catch-up manner. A second combined Rite of Acceptance/Rite of Welcome was scheduled for a Sunday in Advent. During the middle of November another person called the parish with interest in becoming Catholic. Others called after Christmas to “register for classes.”

Some Pastoral Issues

Because many parishes attempt to adhere to the school year model generally established for religious education within parishes, the whole RCIA process is often crowded into a September-June schedule. Within nine months, some RCIA directors attempt to accomplish all four phases of the RCIA process (inquiry, catechumenate, purification and enlightenment, and mystagogy). The process then becomes only another program. By doing this, the director will always be faced with a type of “catch-up” formation which forces a late-enrolling inquirer into doubling up on sessions in order to be “in sync” with the rest of the “class.” Worse yet, the inquirer will not be allowed the careful discernment which the Rite allows and demands.

There are competing issues. On the one hand, there is a practical mind set that the Christian initiation process should be planned for the academic calendar year like the religious education program. It generally follows that all candidates must be initiated at the Easter Vigil. On the other hand, each new inquirer needs to be interviewed and welcomed into the RCIA process without having to wait for a new group to form or for the next scheduled process to begin.

The constant flow of new inquirers into a parish RCIA process is a blessing to our Church. How we respond to each individual and the pastoral needs of each person is actually the starting point for developing a year-round catechumenate.

The Initial Interview

The starting point of formation is based upon the very important initial interview. At this time, the spiritual, practical, and formational needs of each inquirer are assessed. 1) What is the baptismal status of the inquirer? 2) What are the reasons he/she is inquiring about the Catholic faith? 3) Are there any marriage or annulment issues which might need to be addressed? 4) What is the inquirer’s present understanding of God? 5) Is there support or objection in the rest of the family?

The Period of Inquiry or the Pre-catechumenate Period

Since inquirers present themselves at many different times during the year, one of the initial goals of beginning a year-round catechumenate might be to establish more than one on-going inquiry groups. What is paramount is that no one is ever asked to “wait” for a more convenient time to begin this period.

The inquirers will undoubtedly have many questions about our Church and its practices. Inquiry sessions are based on those questions, not on a preconceived topical format which is more suitable to an educational model. These sessions are informal – a well-catechized couple might be utilized for one-on-one discussions in a home setting or sessions could be led by a welcoming, trained catechist. The sessions could be held every week to address the needs of the inquirers as they arise.

The goal of the pre-catechumenate is to establish initial faith (cf. RCIA 36, 37). Concerned, pastoral care for individual inquirers is necessary. It is imperative that each inquirer enters the next phase of RCIA, the catechumenate, only when he is ready. Readiness is determined by conducting a second interview with each inquirer. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults explains how to identify this readiness:

The prerequisite for making this first step [into the Order of Catechumens] is that the beginnings of the

spiritual life and the fundamentals of Christian teaching have taken root in the candidates. Thus there must be evidence of the first faith that was conceived during the period of evangelization and the pre-catechumenate and of an initial conversion and intention to change their lives and to enter into a relationship with God in Christ. Consequently, there must also be evidence of the first stirring of repentance, a start to the practice of calling upon God in prayer, a sense of the Church, and some experience of the company and spirit of Christians through contact with a priest or with members of the community. The candidates should also be instructed about the celebration of the liturgical rite of acceptance” (RCIA 42).

The Catechumenate Period

By providing on-going inquiry groups, each inquirer has the opportunity to celebrate the Rite of Acceptance when he is ready to blend into a year-round catechumenal group, and to experience, in an entire liturgical year, the annual exploration of the many facets of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.

This model allows for weekly “catechesis in harmony with the liturgical year”(RCIA 75.1). This is contrary to the idea of conducting topical sessions which fit neatly into an academic model. Paragraph 6 of the *National Statutes for the Catechumenate* states the ideal:

The period of catechumenate, beginning at acceptance into the order of catechumens and including both the catechumenate proper and the period of purification and enlightenment after election or enrollment of names, should extend for at least one year of formation, instruction, and probation. Ordinarily this period should go from at least the Easter season of one year until the next; preferably it should begin before Lent in one year and extend until Easter of the following year (NSC 6).

An inquirer can enter a year-round catechumenate conducted with lectionary-based sessions easily and logically at any time of the year. In contrast, if topical sessions are the norm it is often difficult for an entering inquirer to catch up to the rest of the class, since it is often the case that one class builds upon another.

The RCIA Director

With the exception of two or three parishes in the Diocese of Lansing, RCIA is not a full-time ministry. The director’s time is generally limited — either because the person is part-time, or because the full-time person has other major responsibilities. In addition, some RCIA directors in the diocese are volunteers. RCIA Directors can never run a year-round catechumenate alone, nor should they.

The RCIA Team

Directors need to develop an RCIA team that is formed in the vision of the RCIA. Several members should be credentialed for catechetical ministry. Only with a dedicated team of ministers and volunteers can multiple or simultaneous sessions be established to begin a year-round catechumenate.

Some of these dedicated folks may be trained to address the special needs of inquirers. Others can be trained in mystagogical techniques and in the special, more sophisticated needs of the neophytes.

A common practice is to run all or most of a parish’s Christian initiation activity at the same time. But often, the process of formation does not so easily fit into this mold. While it is true that inquiry sessions and the catechumenate could run on the same evening, it must be noted that the needs of inquirers and catechumens/candidates are entirely different. Therefore sessions need to be separate from one another.

Parallel sessions might be a way for all participants to benefit from the interaction of those who are learning about our faith. All the people might interact at a common snack time to get to know one another. The two parallel sessions may occasionally meet for a presentation of the Sunday scriptures, and then break into their separate groups for

discussion. However, the inquiry sessions should always be fashioned from the initial faith questions of the inquirers. Again, inquirers move into the catechumenate sessions only when they are ready.

The Initiating Community

RCIA does not involve just the director and the team. We make disciples one at a time, and the entire initiating community is involved in the process. Making disciples simply means bearing faithful witness to the Christian way of life and helping inquirers understand the paschal mystery. If, as a community of believers, we are doing that, the RCIA process can't help but be successful.

The goal of the initiation process is simply to follow Jesus' command to "go and make disciples." Often, our parish communities succumb to secular convictions that "bigger is better." We get caught up in the numbers game where "how many new inquirers do you have" seems more important than "How are we as a faith community spreading the Good News of Christ?"

If our inquirers see in each of us a faith-filled Catholic Christian — in our RCIA sessions, in our participation in the sacramental life of the Church, by our invitation to parish functions, by speaking with conviction in the workplace — these inquirers will, no doubt, desire membership in our faith community.

Some may not be ready to make that commitment. Have we failed? Of course not! The time spent telling the Good News to inquirers is God's time, and is never in vain. We have presented our 2,000 year old faith to them and have invited them to know the living God and to discern if the Catholic faith is where they might find him.

Inviting the Inquirer

There is an emerging feeling that parishes do not do the right kind of "marketing" for the RCIA. When the parish truly becomes the initiating community, one does not require an advertising campaign. Inquirers best respond to a personal invitation. Campaigns to attract new parishioners become unnecessary; indeed, the idea that everyone is "finished at Easter" and "new sessions begin only in the Fall" does damage to our efforts to evangelize at all times.

Forming on-going inquiry sessions changes the spirit of evangelizing that must permeate our lives and the type of "advertising" we do. With sessions which are designed for each inquirer, called in God's time, we allow inquirers to understand that when they are ready, we as an initiating community are ready.

Whom should you invite? Check your parish records — which spouses of currently practicing parishioners might be invited to learn what the Catholic faith might offer them? Would a simple ad in the local newspaper or parish bulletin every two or three months inviting people to "come and see" be beneficial?

What inspires people to ask about our faith? Ask any recent neophyte and the answer will probably include a personal invitation from a spouse or friend, an experience of gracious hospitality, a well-prepared Sunday liturgy, a moving funeral Mass, or a joyful wedding celebration. Sometimes without knowing it, we are evangelizing at funerals, weddings, picnics, discussion groups, or to non-Catholic families enrolled in our schools. At all times, our very lives bear witness to the faith we proclaim.

Beginning a Year-Round Catechumenate: Assessment and Planning

Perhaps building a year-round catechumenate needs to evolve over a three-to-five-year period. The first step would be to obtain leadership support from your pastor or pastoral coordinator. If there is currently no RCIA team, one would need to be trained. Some of these team members would be trained in specific areas, for example those issues relevant to the period of inquiry. A willing hand is not enough. Anything can come up in an inquiry session, and some training in canonical issues is essential.

Gather the parish staff and RCIA team to discuss the following questions.

1) Become acquainted with the Rite. What does it say about the initiation of adults?

Is it a “a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful”(RCIA 4)?

Is it “suited to a spiritual journey of adults that varies according to the many forms of God’s grace” (5)?

2) Assess what is contrary to the Rite in your current process and celebration of the rites.

Does your schedule tend to restrain the necessary discernment?

When are the rites celebrated?

What rites are celebrated?

How often do you celebrate the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens?

How often do you celebrate the Rite of Welcoming the Candidates?

How long is your catechumenal period?

3) Distinguish carefully among those who are inquiring.

Are they unbaptized catechumens?

Are they baptized into another Christian denomination? Are they candidates for reception into full communion with the Catholic Church?

Are they baptized, but uncatechized Catholics?

What rites are celebrated with each?

What rites are never celebrated with those already baptized?

4) Examine how your parish nurtures the inquirer.

How are inquirers invited to “come and see?”

Are initial interviews of each inquirer being conducted?

How are inquirers placed into the first phase of the RCIA? Must they wait?

Are inquirers being interviewed again before the Rite of Acceptance/Rite of Welcome?

5) How would you change your parish process? What would you do differently this year? Next year?

How can the parish begin to transition to a year-round catechumenate?

Train a functional RCIA team?

Add additional inquiry sessions; train more leaders for inquiry sessions?

Can you celebrate more than one Rite of Acceptance/Rite of Welcome during the year?

Can you begin to develop a year-round catechumenate utilizing lectionary-based catechesis as opposed to topical-based catechesis; will it run from Easter to Easter?

6) How do you provide for the initial and ongoing formation of clergy, directors, catechists, and team members?

Do you attend diocesan workshops?

Have you participated in a “Beginnings and Beyond” experience?

7) When do you initiate catechumens?

Will the Church “lose” prospective members if they cannot be initiated at the next Easter Vigil?

At what other times might they be initiated?

8) How often is the parish receiving candidates into full communion?

How do you discern their readiness?

How do you provide “suitable catechesis?”

Are the candidates interviewed again before being initiated?

9) Does our parish respect the period of mystagogy?

How do we continue to form and mentor our neophytes?

Do we have a mystagogy team?

How do we develop a period of mystagogy which celebrates the new sacramental life of the neophytes, provides for continued study, and incorporates them more fully into the community of faith (RCIA 244-251)?

10) Do we interview often and well?

Who conducts these interviews?

When are they done? Before the Rite of Acceptance/Welcome? Before the Rite of Election? At any other times?

11) Is the initiating community itself well formed in celebrating the rites?

How do we provide catechesis to our assemblies?

Do we create worship aids?

Are our rites celebrated fully?

12) If we only have a small group of inquirers in our parish, how do we collaborate with other parishes?

Can we conduct common inquiry sessions?

Can we conduct common catechumenate sessions?

Should we consider common retreats before the rites?

Do we participate in a common Easter retreat with the vicariate or with several other parishes?

13) How do we select and train our sponsors and godparents?

How are each invited?

What resources are available?

Have they attended diocesan workshops?

Have they attended nearby institutes

14) How do we keep in touch?

Does the telephone number and e-mail address of the parish RCIA director appear on the parish web site and in the parish bulletin? (This will provide inquirers with a way to approach the parish when they are ready to do so.)

Do we use weekly or bi-weekly e-mails to maintain better contact with inquirers, catechumens/candidates and neophytes?

Does the team meet regularly with the pastor?

In the Final Analysis. . .

It takes a lifetime to become a disciple of Christ and to appreciate the Catholic Tradition. The catechumenate was not designed to cram a lifetime of catechesis into one year and certainly not in seven months. The process of Christian initiation is intended to be strong experience of faith formation — not a class of information.

If one attempts to treat this faith journey as only a learning experience, the neophyte will be armed with knowledge, but little else. If, however, the inquirer has been invited to experience the love of Christ, if the catechumen has been formed by a community of faith and by its liturgies, and if the neophyte has richly experienced the sacraments of the Church, then, with the grace of God, faith will bloom for a lifetime.

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