

# RCIA

Perhaps you or someone you know is considering becoming Catholic or would like to become Catholic, but is unsure how to get started. I invite you in the name of St. Hugo's Parish Community, to contact me if you are considering the journey of faith provided to you by joining the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA).

**What is the RCIA?** In general, the RCIA is a *process of conversion*. It is divided into four *continuous* phases that correspond to the candidate's progress in Christian formation. This article will outline the underlying principles of the RCIA and present the specific structure and phases of the Rite.

## The Six Principles of the RCIA:

1. **The RCIA is first and foremost a faith journey process.** RCIA is for and about people whose *faith journey* cannot be programmed because programs as such do not cause conversion; only God brings about conversion.
2. **The RCIA is a community event.** The initiation of adults is about the Christian community initiating new members into itself, and therefore it must take place in community. It is never a private process. The RCIA sees the Church as community, as us, and it also sees us as the primary ministers of the RCIA.
3. **The RCIA ministry is basically one of witness and hospitality.** The document is particularly strong in this respect when it says: "...the Initiation of adults is the concern and business of all the baptized" (RCIA, #41). Although the RCIA involves many parishioners in various ministries (sponsors, catechists, prayers, spiritual advisors, etc.) everyone in St. Hugo's Community is responsible for ministering to the prospective converts by the witness of their lives and the openness of their attitudes.
4. **The RCIA is ongoing and multi-dimensional.** The process of conversion takes time. For this reason there is nothing instant about RCIA. The commitment to gospel values and perspectives is a personal journey which is never accomplished by an educational program alone. Doctrinal instruction as well as spiritual formation is included in the RCIA.
5. **The RCIA restores the baptismal focus of Lent, and reinstates the Easter Vigil as the honored time of initiation.** This means that the whole initiation process centers on the candidates' gradual incorporation into the Paschal Mystery — the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. The sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist celebrate in one symbolic action, one's initiation into that mystery.
6. **The RCIA is a step-by-step journey highlighted with corresponding rituals.** The document sees the process of initiation divided into four basic steps. Between each of the

steps, the community celebrates a special ritual which brings closure to the preceding period and moves the candidates into the next step.

### **The Four Steps of RCIA:**

1. **STEP ONE:** The pre-catechumenate is a preliminary step in the journey of faith. It is a time for inquirers to hear the Word and it is a time for community members to listen to the inquirers and answer their questions. When the inquirers are ready to proceed to the next phase, the catechumenate, a ritual called the "Rite of Entrance to the Catechumenate" takes place, during the Sunday Mass, so that the community can welcome the inquirers to the second step of their journey of faith.
2. **STEP TWO:** The catechumenate phase involves joining with sponsors from the parish community who serve as guides, companions and models of faith for them. Sponsors commit themselves to being a vital link between the catechumens and the community. They present the candidates to the Church and also represent the Church to the candidate throughout the RCIA process. This step is often the longest period in the RCIA, lasting from a few months to a few years, determined by the needs of the catechumen, and by the community. The catechumens are invited to worship with the community; they are dismissed after the Liturgy of the Word with their catechists to ponder the Scripture readings they have just heard. When the catechumens are ready to respond totally to God's call to faith through the Sacraments of Initiation, the RCIA provides a ritual, the Rite of Election, to mark this step in the conversion process. This Rite takes place on the first Sunday of Lent. The ritual provides an opportunity for the catechumens to officially request entrance to the Church through the Easter Sacraments of Initiation, and for the community to respond to that request by saying, "We confirm God's call to faith in your life, and will welcome you into the Church this Easter."
3. **THE THIRD STEP:** Beginning with the first Sunday of Lent, the catechumens enter into their "40-day retreat" to focus on deepening their awareness of God's grace through prayer. During this time the Church also celebrates other rituals with the catechumens, called "Scrutinies." These are prayers of healing prayed by the community (on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent) that the catechumens will have the strength to withstand evil, and remain pure and free from sin as they journey toward initiation and growth in faith. While we minister to the catechumens, they provide a visible reminder to each of us of the meaning and purpose of Lent, and minister to us through their presence. Finally the night of the Easter Vigil arrives — at which the Sacraments of Initiation are celebrated and the catechumens are made one with the Body of Christ called Church. The community says, "Now you belong, for you have been born again of water and spirit. Come, you are welcome at the Table of the Lord."

4. **THE FOURTH STEP:** The concluding part of the journey to faith is called the "Mystagogia", which comes from the word, mystery. In the early Church it was the time when the community explained the mystery of the sacraments the catechumens had experienced. Today, this step is seen more as time for the newly initiated and the community to move forward together toward a closer relationship with each other and toward a deeper understanding of God's Word, of the sacraments, and of everyday Christian life. The RCIA place this step during the Easter Season (the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost). In reality, this step in the journey continues for the rest of the Christian's life along with the entire community of the faithful.

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