

Liturgical symbols



The initiating community

First symbol of Christian life.



The Word of God

Read at length during the Easter Vigil. It tells the history of God's dealings with us.



Water

Water is vital to life. It washes and purifies. The triple pouring of the water of baptism plunge the candidate into the death and resurrection of Christ - the Paschal Mystery.



Oil

Oil is the traditional symbol of strengthening and healing. Chrism is the oil used at Baptism.



White Garment

It speaks of the new life in Christ and the dignity of Baptism.



Light

The newly baptised are now awakened to the flame of faith. The symbol of light reminds us of the Risen Christ with us.



Bread & Wine

The 'work of human hands'. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ.

proudly accompanied by their sponsors and RCIA team celebrate the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist for the first time.

The Role of the Sponsor

Most people, when asked to be a sponsor, are very honoured but have lingering doubts about whether they will be able to adequately journey with another.

However, by the time the Easter Vigil arrives, sponsors often admit that they thoroughly enjoyed the experience. It is often looked on as a renewal of their own faith - a sort of 'refresher' course.

The role of the sponsor is that of a fellow traveller and spiritual friend to the catechumen. The sponsor meets frequently with the catechumen in a gentle, non-threatening way so that together faith and life can be shared. The sponsor supports, encourages and helps the catechumen to absorb what 'being Catholic' means in the everyday life of the faith community.

It is a very ancient custom of the Church that adults are not admitted to baptise without godparents (sponsors), members of the Christian community who will assist the candidates at least in the final preparation for baptism and after baptism will help them persevere in the faith and in their lives as Christians. [RCIA 8]

The Role of the Parish Community

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

The Vatican Council II document *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* [Ad Gentes, No 14] tells us: The people of God, as represented by the local Church, should understand and show by their concern that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptised.

The faithful should remember that for the Church and its members the supreme purpose of the apostolate is that Christ's message is made known.

They should therefore show themselves ready to give the candidates evidence of the spirit of the Christian community and to welcome them into their homes, into personal conversation, and into community gatherings. [RCIA 9]

Carmel Fitzgerald is RCIA Coordinator in her parish. She has been involved in RCIA on many levels both diocesan and State since 1990. She is part of a Sandhurst diocesan forum writing team which has produced a series of pamphlets explaining RCIA to people in parish communities. She writes in consultation with Father Elia Capra SDB Coordinator of RCIA in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Fr Elia is a well known speaker among many liturgical groups, gatherings of priests and conferences throughout Australia. He has completed a doctoral thesis on RCIA.

How can a parish community support catechumens

1. Be aware of the wonder of God's reality in our own lives and in the life of our parish community.

2. Believe in the importance of the commitment our fellow travellers are making.

3. Always welcome them each week as they become more closely connected to the community.

4. Offer assistance wherever possible - no matter what contribution we make during this time and in what capacity we help, it is a privilege to be involved in any way. Our faith is sheer gift from God and we must share it.

5. Constantly remind ourselves that the essential mission of the Church is to evangelise. This is our deepest identity. It is often difficult to share our lives, let alone our faith journey. We need courage to take small steps.

6. Pray - Without prayer we can often lose the enthusiasm and courage to speak and live the paradox of the Gospel. Prayer is something we can all do - any place, any time.

INFORM

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73

REGISTERED BY AUSTRALIA POST PRINT POST APPROVED PP243504/0004 APRIL 2001 - 3 KEATING STREET LIDCOMBE NSW 2141

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

...a journey of faith ...a time of possibility



The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) names the process by which individuals desiring to become members of the Catholic Church, embrace a journey of spiritual and personal formation. The Rite explained in the content of this article is for those who have never been baptised. **Carmel Fitzgerald** and **Fr Elia Capra SDB** explain the steps in this process and the roles played by pastors, sponsors and parish team members.

INFORM

A publication of the Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney designed to provide wide access to current thinking on Catholic issues. Published five times a year, it can be obtained from:



Locked Bag 888, Silverwater NSW DC 1811 Tel: (02) 9643 3660 Fax: (02) 9643 3669

Published with ecclesiastical approval. ©2001, Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney.
EDITOR: Patricia Bolster RSM LAYOUT & DESIGN: Annette Loughlin-Smith

INFORM - 60¢ per copy (minimum order: 10 copies). Single subscription is only available with *Alternatives* - Newsletter of the Catholic Adult Education Centre: \$22 per year, 5 issues. Single back issue of INFORM in print: \$40 per set.

Encountering people who wish to join the Catholic Church in their adult life is a humbling, exciting and sometimes challenging experience for RCIA Teams, Sponsors and local parish.

'Inquirers'- people searching for meaning in their lives, or seeking to belong to a community- invite the members of a parish RCIA team to become fellow travellers with them on their spiritual journey. What a privilege it is when we set out on the journey.

What is the RCIA Process

It begins with the initial approach, sometimes to a priest, sometimes to a neighbour or on the sporting field, but in reality the process began way back when the inquirer first heard the Spirit of God calling him/her to a deeper relationship. The priest welcomes, affirms and spends time with the inquirer in order to share some of that person's story. Then the priest refers the inquirer to the RCIA coordinator who spends time getting to know the inquirer: beginning to formulate plans for 'Inquiry Time' and for a suitable parish sponsor.

What is Inquiry like?

This is the period of initial settling in, when inquirers and team begin to share their stories, a time when the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church are gently unfolded, a time where hospitality and welcome are paramount. Inquiry Time takes as long as is necessary and depends on the faith background of the inquirers. It can range from a few weeks to a few months. At the conclusion of Inquiry Time the inquirer is accepted into the Order of Catechumens - the first official step.

Liturgical Rites

As the ceremony of acceptance begins, the celebrant asks a few questions:

What do you ask of God?

What do you ask of this community?

Candidates respond, simply and spontaneously with words like faith, baptism, entrance into the Church, acceptance into the Catholic Church. This is a profound moment between the candidate and God and the beginning of a journey towards initiation into this community of faith. It is a moment when candidates affirm the support of the whole community and the RCIA team whom they have begun to know and trust.

Are you ready to accept the teachings of the Gospel?

A very provocative question!

Candidates respond in the affirmative and are encouraged to read and reflect on the work of God in the lives of the people mentioned in Scripture and to begin to hear God's Word and to make it their own in this new spiritual journey.

Forming the community

The celebrant addresses the parish sponsors, the RCIA team and the assembled faith community with this question:

Are you ready to help this candidate find and follow Christ? The sponsor and the RCIA team have certainly pondered this question and made a serious commitment to do just that, but what a question for the people sitting in the congregation! It is a moment of truth for those who say 'Yes, I will support this person'. Adequate opportunities therefore need to be offered to the community and the candidate to meet, so that the promised support may become a reality.

To seal this pledge, the celebrant invites the sponsor and members of the community to come forward and place the sign of the cross (signifying the new way of life as catechumens) firstly on the forehead with these words:

'It is Christ himself who now strengthens you with this sign of his love. Learn to know him and follow him'.

Then follows the signing of the other senses - ears, eyes, lips heart and

shoulders-feet too! Each signing is supported with an appropriate prayer and a sung refrain. A celebration of the Word of God followed by intercessory prayer for the candidate are included. Thus the candidate, the sponsor and the RCIA team begin the second period of the journey.

In multicultural Australia we are becoming more likely to meet people from different cultures and religious backgrounds, so the following may be worth noting: *In regions where false worship is widespread, whether in worshipping spiritual powers or in calling on the shades of the dead or in using magical arts, the conference of Bishops may introduce a first renunciation of false worship.* [No 70]

In regions where local non-Christian religions have the practice of giving a new name to new members, the conference of bishops may decide that after the signing of the candidates with the cross, the catechumens may be given a new name. (In other cases it will suffice to explain the Christian understanding of the catechumen's given names). [73]

Steps in the process

1. Catechumenate

The Church embraces the catechumens as its own, nourishes them with the Word of God and sustains them by means of liturgical celebrations. If a candidate dies during the period of catechumenate, he or she will receive a Christian burial. [RCIA 47]

The RCIA team and sponsors journey with the catechumens, gathering with the worshipping community at the usual weekly Eucharistic celebration.

Because the catechumens cannot partake of the Eucharist the celebrant sends them forth, with the catechist, after the Liturgy of the Word, to go and ponder and break open the Word and homily which have been proclaimed.

The catechumenate is an extended period of continuing conversion during which individuals are given formation and guidance aimed at training them in the Christian life. In this way, the dispositions manifested at their acceptance into the catechumenate are brought to maturity. This is achieved in four ways:

(i) A suitable catechesis is provided: planned to be gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by the celebrations of the Word.

(ii) As they become familiar with the Christian way of life and are helped by the example and support of sponsors, godparents and the entire Christian community, the catechumens learn to turn more readily to God in prayer, to bear witness to the faith, and in all things to keep their hopes set on Christ.

(iii) The Church, like a mother, helps

the catechumens on their journey by means of suitable liturgical rites, which little by little strengthen them with God's blessing.

(iv) *Since the Church's life is apostolic, the catechumens learn how to work actively with others to spread the Gospel...* (RCIA 75)

This time of catechesis opens the catechumens to the riches of the Lectionary: Catholic belief, practice, doctrine and theology and the consequent pastoral and doctrinal issues.

The duration of the catechumenate will depend on the grace of God and various circumstances. [RCIA 76]

2. Enrolment of Names

The ceremony of enrolment of names is another liturgical rite which takes place in the parish church. The catechumens reaffirm their intentions; the Church ratifies their state of readiness and the catechists and godparents testify that the catechumens are indeed ready by answering 'yes' to these questions:

"Have they faithfully listened to God's Word proclaimed by the church?"

"Have they shared and responded to that Word and begun to walk in God's presence?"

"Have they shared the company of their Christian brothers and sisters and joined with them in prayer?"

This is indeed a challenging question for any parish community.

After the catechumens sign the Book of the Elect there is an official 'sending forth' from the local parish community of the newly elect to the Bishop. In the diocesan cathedral, parish teams and their candidates gather from all parts of the diocese. It is in this setting that a sense of the universal church is truly present. The bishop accepts and ratifies the election of the parish and calls the catechumens elect to the Easter ceremonies. From this time on, they are known as 'the elect'. [RCIA 124]

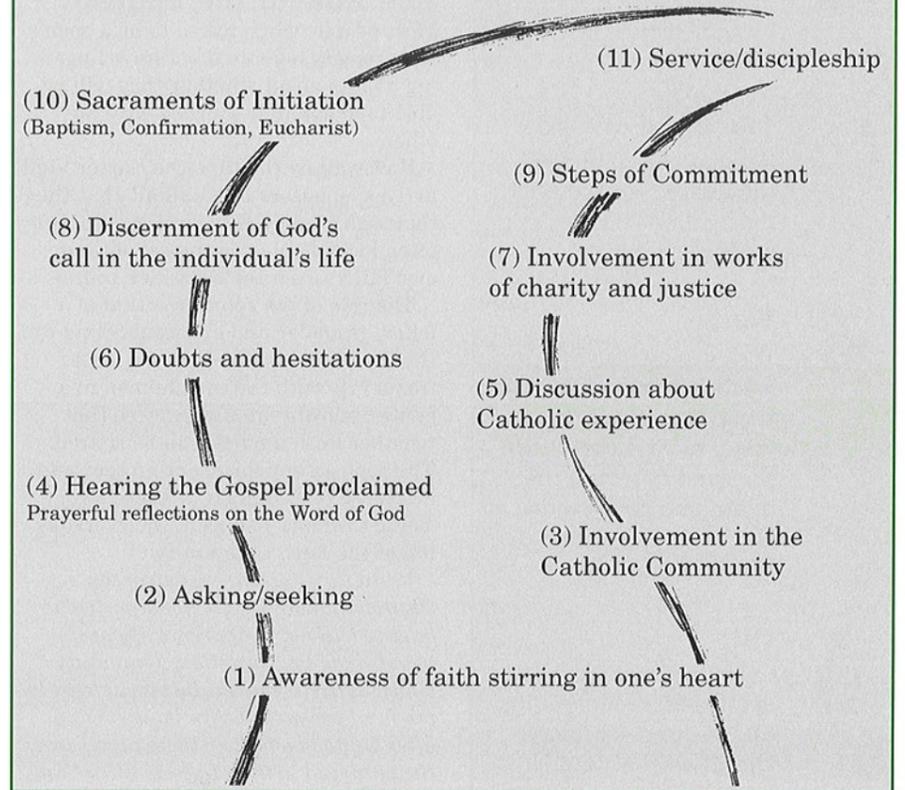
Purification & Enlightenment

The Rite of Election on the first Sunday of Lent heralds the Period of Purification and Enlightenment.

In the liturgy and liturgical catechesis of Lent the reminder of baptism already received or the preparation for its reception, as well as the theme of repentance, renew the entire community along with those being prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery in which each of 'the elect' will share through the sacraments of initiation. [RCIA 125]

It is natural that this Period of Purification and Enlightenment coincides with Lent - a traditional time in the Catholic Church when the faithful are 'taking stock' of their lives and undergoing a change of heart. It is therefore fitting that the official

RCIA - a journey of faith a time of possibility



scrutinies are celebrated on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent.

Celebrating Scrutinies

'Scrutinies' are rites for self-searching and repentance and have above all a spiritual purpose. The scrutinies are meant to uncover then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect: to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong and good. [RCIA 141]

From the first to the final scrutiny the elect should progress in their perception of sin and their desire for salvation. [RCIA 143]

The presiding celebrant should carry out the celebration in such a way that the faithful in the assembly will also derive benefit from the liturgy of the scrutinies and join in the intercessions for the elect. [RCIA 145]

Presentations

Interspersed with the celebration of the scrutinies are the official presentations to the elect of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer.

In many parishes, it has become customary to spend Passion Sunday in reflection and prayer as a preparation for the entry into Holy Week and the very moving ceremonies that take place in the midst of the parish community. The elect are invited to the Holy Week Ceremonies.

Holy Week

Holy Saturday morning sees the elect, sponsors, catechists and team gather with the assembled community to pray together. This is a perfect opportunity to pray the *Prayer of the Church*. An anointing of the elect by members of the gathered community could take place.

If the elect have attended the Chrism Mass where the bishop blesses and distributes the oils to the parishes, they will certainly grasp the significance of the oil with which they will be anointed. The elect are then advised to spend the rest of the day in quiet prayer and reflection in preparation for the coming evening and the celebration of the Easter Vigil.

3. Sacraments of Initiation

These are celebrated during the Easter Vigil the "night of nights" in the Christian tradition when the journey from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom is celebrated by word and ritual. We see the new fire lit, the Paschal Candle blessed and carried in grand procession into a darkened church - the bringing of light into the darkness.

During the readings we hear the story of our salvation history as the Exodus story is read in great detail. This is the time towards which the elect have been journeying, it is the culmination of all that conversion has meant to them up to this point in their lives. The elect,

RCIA Process

The steps in the RCIA process are formally recognised by liturgical rites and carried out within the body of the worshipping community.

Period of Evangelisation & Precatechumenate:

Step 1: Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens

Period of the Catechumenate:

Step 2: Rite of Sending - Parish
Election with Bishop of Diocese

Period of Purification & Enlightenment:

Step 3: Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation

Period of Mystagogy (or post baptismal catechesis)