



The parish family of St. Vincent de Paul in Elkhart, Indiana celebrates the sacrament of Baptism during the Easter Vigil on April 19, 2014

Photo by Kevin Haggengjos; reprinted with permission of Kevin Haggengjos Photography (www.khp-studios.com)

THE RCIA AS A THEOLOGICAL DATUM

WHAT THE ANCIENT CATECHUMENATE TELLS US
ABOUT THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY SEAN INNERST, TH.D.

PROMISE OF THE RCIA

The 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)* makes a remarkable statement about the teaching of the faith: “The model for all catechesis is the baptismal catechumenate when, by specific formation, an adult converted to belief is brought to explicit profession of baptismal faith. . . . This catechumenal formation should inspire the other forms of catechesis in both their objectives and their dynamism.”¹ This is a reference to the RCIA, or Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, a revival of the ancient form of baptismal preparation called for by the Second Vatican Council, promulgated in the Latin in 1972, and made normative for Catholic parishes in the United States in English translation in 1988. The *GDC* tells us that so important is this ancient form of evangelizing and initiating new Catholics that all forms of catechetical teaching ought to be based upon that model.

The report from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on the implementation of the RCIA, *Journey to the Fullness of Life* (2000), found that after twelve years of RCIA practice, both those involved in leading and teaching parish RCIA programs and those coming into the Church through the RCIA were generally very satisfied with the process.² The consensus seemed to be that the RCIA holds great promise for the future revitalization of the parish and the Catholic Church in the United States. But some of the responses to the study evoked concern from the bishops.

Although respondents generally expressed a very high satisfaction with what they experienced in RCIA, and the way it introduced them into the local parish community, some (10–20 percent) felt that they had received an inadequate introduction to the Bible, as well as other aspects of Church life and teaching.³ Only

about half of parishes that responded were found to be employing a fulsome version of the essential last phase of the RCIA process called mystagogy, which is intended to “help the newly baptized to interiorize [the] sacraments and incorporate themselves into the community.”⁴ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that only 64 percent of those who responded reported that they attended Sunday Mass on a weekly basis⁵ (after having been Catholics for only one to five years).

If the promise of the RCIA is to be fulfilled in the U.S. Church and beyond, there is real work yet to be done. The establishment of a Pontifical Council for promoting the New Evangelization, the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the issuance of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* during the recent Year of Faith, and the still more recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* by Pope Francis all suggest that this moment in the life of the Church presents us with a rare

opportunity to undertake that work. At just the time when the evangelistic and catechetical efforts of the Church are poised to receive new energy for a renewal of the Church's original mandate from our Lord to "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations,"⁶ it is critical that the promise of the RCIA be realized, not just for the sake of those who experience it on their way into the Church, but also for all those evangelistic and catechetical efforts for which it is to serve as a model.

It is my contention that the reason that the promise of the RCIA has not been entirely fulfilled and that the *GDC*'s call for a catechesis modeled after catechumenal formation has not been answered in the U.S. Church is that the "objectives" and "dynamism" of the RCIA to which *GDC* §59 refers are not sufficiently understood. Consequently, they have neither inspired our practices in the RCIA nor produced new catechetical methodologies.

OBJECTIVES AND DYNAMISM OF THE RCIA

The RCIA is modeled on the ancient patterns of initiation from the patristic age and are largely the fruit of the liturgical and biblical movements prior to the Second Vatican Council. The rites are a conscious attempt to replicate in the experience of the contemporary Church the initiatory practices of the first three Christian centuries.⁷

In my judgment, our current use of the rites discloses two obstacles to their effective implementation. First, while the rites resemble those of the early Church very closely, the catechesis which ordinarily accompanies those rites does not. The irony here is that what we know about the rites is precisely derived from ancient catechetical instructions which refer to them. We've instituted the rites but have divorced them from the catechetical atmosphere that gave them life.

The second obstacle to our effective use of the rites is that we don't generally understand the spirituality behind the rites as they were practiced in the fourth century. The initiatory practices of the early Church called for a high degree of moral and spiritual

commitment from the initiate. The rites were understood to be conversional and the initiate was expected to show signs, not only of moral rectitude as a prerequisite to participation in them, but was also expected to advance toward sanctity by their reception.

The rites themselves disclose this second point very clearly and most of the first portion of this essay will be taken up with a few brief references from the RCIA chosen to explicate the conversional character of the rites. Particular attention will be drawn to the way in which the "periods" and "steps" of the rites parallel the classical descriptions of the stages of the spiritual life leading toward sanctity. Next, the question of a need for a catechesis which is both aware of the intentionally ritual and conversional character of the RCIA process and the ancient mode of catechesis which accompanied the rites will be taken up. Then, I will consider how the insights gained in the first two parts of the essay might inform a program for the New Evangelization, as recently described by Pope Francis.

THE CONVERSIONAL CHARACTER OF THE RITES

The RCIA is carefully structured to follow the normal course of spiritual development. It consists of four periods punctuated by three ritual or liturgical steps. The four periods are: Evangelization and Precatechumenate, Catechumenate, Purification and Enlightenment, and, lastly, Postbaptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy. The three ritual steps fall precisely between each of these periods. They are: Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, Election or Enrollment of Names, and Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation.

I suggest that the first period, the first step, and the second period roughly parallel that stage in the spiritual life which has traditionally been called the Purgative Way; the second step and the third period approximate that stage which classical spiritual theology titles the Illuminative Way, and the third step and the fourth period are indicative of the third classical stage of the spiritual life called the Unitive Way.

RCIA	Spiritual Stages
Evangelization-Period 1 Rite of Acceptance-Step 1 Catechumenate-Period 2	Purgative Way of Beginners
Rite of Election-Step 2 Purification and Enlightenment-Period 3	Illuminative Way of Proficients
Sacraments of Initiation-Step 3 Mystagogy-Period 4	Unitive Way of the Perfect

It is necessary to issue two cautions here: first, against seeing anything that is said here about the spiritual life as representing hard and fast rules. The term “normal” is meant here to reflect the stages of spiritual development in the ideal soul, abstractly considered, and as outlined by the spiritual masters in the Church’s tradition, such as Saints Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross.⁸ Second, proposing that the stages of the RCIA can be compared to those of spiritual evolution is not

to say that the RCIA ought to turn out mystics in rapid order. The comparison is suggested as a heuristic tool to remind us that the catechumenal process of formation in faith ought to be spiritually transformational, not to suggest an exact parallel between the two. What remains for us, then, is to examine what the RCIA says of these phases and to see if they can be paired with the spiritual stages as I have done.

EVANGELIZATION, ACCEPTANCE, AND THE CATECHUMENATE

We know very little about how the ancient Church would have conducted what the RCIA calls the “pre-catechumenate.”⁹ This is a period of evangelization and introduction to the Church and her faith. Strictly speaking, the RCIA—that is to say, the rites proper—does not begin until Rite of Acceptance, which is also understood to indicate “the point of initial conversion” in the seeker.¹⁰ The RCIA recognizes the variability of this stage with just five paragraphs (§§36–40) suggesting the importance of “help and attention” and that kind of an introduction to the faith which is properly called evangelization.¹¹ The attitude of the seeker is simply that of good will in pursuing the truth. In many parishes this period is called “inquiry” and consists of introductory catechetical presentations and the teaching of prayers. Since the seeker or inquirer is not yet ritually attached to the Christian community and has not yet received the gift of faith, we might best conceive of this part of the process as a preface to the spiritual life as I’m considering it here, since the seeker hasn’t yet received those graces that make the spiritual life, in its fullness, possible.¹²

The Rite of Acceptance follows the precatechumenate for those who show “evidence of the first faith that was conceived during the period of evangelization.”¹³ The norms counsel an evaluation and purification of the “motives and dispositions” of the candidate for Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens.¹⁴ The signs indicative of such are repentance and prayer, which suggest the beginnings of the spiritual stage traditionally called the Purgative Way. Believers at this stage are those whose main effort is aimed at striving against sin. The character of the step taken is suggested by the reception of the Gospel for the first time (often this includes the gift of a Bible from the parish) and the inscribing of the Cross on the forehead, and then on ears, eyes, lips, breast, shoulders, hands, and feet.¹⁵

These are signs of the gravity of the step that the aspirant is about to take and the ascetical combat that he or she is about to begin to undertake. The signing with the Cross indicates the opening of the human powers to the word received and protection against demonic power. This is further suggested by the optional rites of exorcism and the renunciation of false worship.¹⁶

In the Purgative Way, one must undertake the difficult task of acquiring the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Old habits must be discarded and new ones formed. One begins to engage in vocal prayer, especially petitionary in nature. Mortal sins must be rejected and an active purification of the senses must be undertaken as part of one’s combat against the presence of evil in a fallen world.

The RCIA reflects this struggle for hard-won virtue by the aspirant in the first reference to the period of the catechumenate, which it describes as “aimed at training them in the Christian life.”¹⁷ It acknowledges the hard fact that this will require a “progressive change of outlook and conduct” and will also likely entail “divisions and separations.”¹⁸ The catechumen will find himself a stranger in a strange land. Like Abram whose story of risk in obedience to the divine commandment is read at the Rite of Acceptance, he will have to leave his accustomed country and wander in a new land.¹⁹

The purgative character of this stage is also indicated by the rites peculiar to the catechumenate period, celebrations of the Word and alternate exorcisms and blessings. As the Lord counseled in Luke 11:24, supernatural, no less than nature, abhors a vacuum. So when the demons of sin are “oathed out” by exorcism—the literal meaning of the term—one must fill up the space left in the soul with blessings. This is a vital

principle for the aspirant to learn. It is not enough to reject sin; one must embrace virtue. In a manner that could be described as typical of all the spiritual masters when addressing this phase of infancy in the spiritual life, the text explains: “minor exorcisms...draw the attention of the catechumens to the real nature of the Christian life, the struggle between flesh and spirit, the importance of self-denial for reaching the blessedness of God’s kingdom.”²⁰

It is worth stopping at this point to note what ought to be obvious but which may be too obvious to see, especially if one has Catholic eyes. An important element in this period is that conversion is accompanied by rites, by ritual action. In this sense, the rites themselves reinforce the sacramental vision into which the aspirant is being initiated. That is, our first conclusion about what a catechumenal catechesis entails is that it is specifically ritual or liturgical. The aspirant learns by this regime to look to the ritual action of the Church for grace.

RITE OF ELECTION, PURIFICATION, AND ENLIGHTENMENT

This period of proximate preparation for the reception of the sacraments at Easter is akin to that referred to as the Illuminative Way. The name suggests a growing enlightenment and that is what is expected of the catechumens after the foregoing period. After the Rite of Election, the elect are called *illuminandi* to suggest that they are approaching the light provided by faith at Baptism.²¹ In the ancient Greek-speaking Church, they were called *photizomenoi* after their election at the beginning of Lent.²²

They are also referred to as *competentes*, which the English version of the RCIA translates as “co-petitioners,”²³ but, in fact, the term *competentes* could be just as well translated by the term that is often applied to those in the Illuminative Way, that is, as “proficients.”²⁴ This highlights the growing acumen in virtue expected of those at this stage of initiation. They have not yet arrived, however. The Lenten period after election is “a more intense preparation . . . during which the elect will be encouraged to follow Christ with greater generosity.”²⁵ But to be chosen,

“the catechumens are expected to have undergone a conversion in mind and in action”²⁶ during the catechumenate.

In the ancient Church, this moment of election was surrounded with tremendous solemnity. The aspirant was asked to present himself lightly clad, like a slave, before the bishop, and to stand barefoot on haircloth to represent the treading underfoot of the sin of Eden. What follows is recounted in the pilgrimage journal of Egeria:

The bishop questions the neighbors of each person who comes in, saying, “Does he lead a good life? Does he respect his parents: Is he given to drunkenness or to lying?” If the candidate is pronounced beyond reproach by all those who are thus questioned in the presence of witnesses, with his own hand the bishop notes down the man’s name. But if the candidate is accused of failing in any point, the bishop tells him to go out, saying, “Let him amend his life and when he has amended it, let him come to Baptism.”²⁷

As in that stage of the spiritual life called the Illuminative Way, these *electi* are supposed to have made progress in the virtues by the light of faith and contemplation of the Word of God, yet the moral struggle continues. In fact, the ancient texts speak of a heightened combat with the devil as prefigured in the temptation scenes from the Garden of Eden and Christ's temptation in the wilderness. Jean Daniélou, SJ notes that the use of that Gospel passage on the first Sunday of Lent is a relic of that ancient rite of enrollment on that Sunday.²⁸

There is in the rites of this Lenten period a dual theme of moral struggle—indicated by the series of scrutinies—and enlightenment, indicated by the presentations of the Creed and the Our Father to the

elect.²⁹ Just as in that second phase of the spiritual life the increasing light of faith intensifies the shadows cast by the remaining sin as one begins to undergo passive purifications of the spirit, so also in this phase of the RCIA the candidate for Baptism is asked to use what he has learned to bring himself to a deeper repentance.

At this stage prayer ought to have begun to deepen. The candidate should be moved from simple discursive prayer to contemplation, aided by the unveiling of the Gospel as it is presented in the Mass of the Catechumens, or the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass. The aspirant should begin to surrender his will to that power which has increasingly laid claim to his heart.

INITIATION AND MYSTAGOGY

In this last phase of the RCIA, the elect are united to the Church and to God by a sacramental embrace. In the ancient Church, a great effort was made to surround the liturgies of the Easter Vigil with mystery. The initiates were told very little about the sacramental mysteries in which they were to participate for the first time. This was not done simply to heighten suspense or the sense of mystery but because of the conviction that without the graces the sacraments impart, those same sacraments cannot be properly appreciated. This is the root of the “law of the *arcana*,” which forbade the disclosure of the content of the sacraments, especially of the Eucharist, to nonbelievers.³⁰

Once one has been united to God, one is made privy to things which are unutterable. To those of us who have allowed the awesome mysteries to which we

have been admitted to become stale by familiarity and inadvertence, the unitive character of the Holy Eucharist, the Holy Communion that it is, will not be properly appreciated either. In that sense, many of us have put ourselves outside of the *arcana*. But to those for whom the mysteries are still precisely that, for those who have been well prepared and receive the bath from sin, are christened and admitted for the first time to the marriage banquet of the Lamb, the union is palpable. Just as in the imagery employed by the saints to describe the Unitive Way, the union in sacramental grace is manifestly marital in character. The “mystical marriage” is foreshadowed and experienced in foretaste in the Eucharist. The Eucharist, “the climax of their initiation and the center of the whole Christian life”³¹ is not merely a foretaste but a real participation in the heavenly banquet.

Just as lovers will return in memory to the high points of their romance, the Church has since her beginning recognized that sacramental initiation requires a return to those mysteries by the neophytes after they have been experienced. This last period of the RCIA called mystagogy intends to bring the newly initiated to “a fuller and more effective understanding of mysteries through the Gospel message they have learned and above all through their experience of the sacraments they have received.”³²

In mystagogy, the new Christians might be told that what they had formerly struggled to achieve in the way of virtues has now been given to them passively, without cost. What could not be known by unaided human reason can now be professed with certainty by a graced assent of faith. Just as the saints reported a movement from acquired to infused prayer, so also the neophyte might be told that in being joined to the Church he has entered into her prayer, which takes place from east to west, every hour of every day.

By the sacraments, and by any single reception of any one of the sacraments, one can achieve the holiness of the saints who have become in their God as coal is to fire.³³ That is the character of the highest stage of the spiritual life called the Unitive Way. This is the common call of the faithful of Christ. As the fifth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* assures us, “It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.”³⁴

Once again, I do not mean by this analysis that anyone who has progressed through the RCIA, however well conducted, will be on a par with the greatest saints and mystics. (Perhaps our own personal experience or that

with initiates makes that suggestion even comical!) My point in this analysis is that the RCIA process is intended to be *conversional*, to inculcate sanctity, and this is as a consequence of the heritage of the initiation practices of the first centuries. In the fourth century, the Church was still a community of martyrs and confessors, those who had risked much to hold, profess, and practice their faith. To be a Christian was to be a saint. One need only note the reluctance on the part of many catechumens, St. Augustine among them, in those first centuries to approach Baptism. The Christian call seemed to many to be too high a standard to risk being held to until one could be sure that the flames of youthful passion had entirely cooled.³⁵

While we would not want to go that far today, it would be an undeniable good for the Church if her members were of such a high level of rectitude that new initiates would be moved to believe themselves unworthy of membership. We *are*, of course, unworthy of the graces God gives us in the Church, but our problem today seems to be that very few in the Church recognize that fact. That is, we suffer from just the opposite problem faced in the early Church. Perhaps a renewed mystagogy for the whole Church would be in order.

But, in fact, postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy of the kind practiced in the ancient Church—which would attract large crowds of those already baptized and not just the recently initiated—is not common in the RCIA. As noted above, the 2000 USCCB’s study on the RCIA called this important postbaptismal catechesis, which traditionally took place in the fifty days from Easter to Pentecost, “the weakest area of RCIA’s implementation.”³⁶

THE QUESTION OF A CATECHUMENAL CATECHESIS

That suggests our next point, which is a brief one. If the objectives and dynamism of our modern catechesis are to be inspired by the RCIA, we will need more than just an appreciation of the ritual/liturgical action and the conversional spirituality of the rites. There was a catechetical content that was proper to the catechuminate in the first centuries of the Church as well. The *GDC* notes the existence of this ancient catechetical content:

In patristic catechesis, a primary role is devoted to the *narration* of the history of salvation; as Lent advanced, the *Creed* and *Our Father* were handed on to the catechumens together with their meaning and moral implications; after the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, mystagogical catechesis helped [the catechumens to] interiorize them and to savor the experience of configuration to Christ and of communion with him.³⁷

The *Directory* goes on to list “seven basic elements” in the catechetical tradition which include the customary four pillars (Creed, Decalogue, Sacraments, and Our Father) and “the three phases in the narration of the history of salvation (the Old Testament, the life of Jesus Christ, and the history of the Church).”³⁸ This last element, the traditional *narratio* of ancient catechesis, is almost entirely missing from our catechesis, inside and outside of the RCIA. In the ancient Church, those who first sought entry to the Church—and, for that matter, any among the faithful who sought a deeper appreciation of the faith—could hear it expounded by the bishop or his assisting presbyters or deacons in a narration of the events of biblical history, drawing out the meaning of each episode for the contemporary experience of his hearers.³⁹ This is really the pastoral root of what has come to be called patristic exegesis.

One of the many advantages of this process is that it introduced the catechumen to a whole worldview. That is, this approach, which the *GDC* recognizes as being based on the “divine pedagogy” which God used first to form Israel and, out of her, the Church, presents a unified vision of man and history which invites a response in faith, hope, and love.⁴⁰ The initiate is asked to enter the stream of a reality which is disclosed fully in Christ, who is the center and *telos* of human history.

It is precisely this synthetic salvation-historical sort of presentation that is lacking in our catechesis. In the past our catechisms were too propositional, today our catechisms are too topical; neither comes close to the vision of the ancient catechesis and the power it exercised in helping initiates to see that God had mercifully endured a long, gradual process of maturation by the human family into which one entered when becoming a Christian. However, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does make some use of this vision in its heavy stress on the theme of salvation history,⁴¹ particularly in those sections dealing with the sacraments. At the beginning of each treatment on the individual sacraments (with the exception of that on the sacrament of Penance) the *Catechism* recounts their prefigurations in the “economy of salvation.”⁴²

It is to be hoped that the *GDC* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* presage the future in minor catechisms and the revival of the *narratio*. If we want to catechize a new generation of martyrs and confessors, we could take no better model than that of the ancient Church that produced so many. If that is to happen, we must reinfuse our own catechesis with both the conversional spirituality which gave life to the ancient rites of initiation and the *narratio* which inspired so many to faith, hope, and charity.⁴³

A PRESCRIPTION FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

Lastly, what brief conclusions can we derive from the foregoing catechetical reflections on the RCIA for the conduct of the New Evangelization? The key lies, I believe, in the brief mention I made above of the modeling of the catechumenate on the divine pedagogy. The *GDC* says about “this gradual and progressive conception of Christian formation, arranged in stages,” that “the fathers model the catechumenate on the divine pedagogy; in the catechumenal process the catechumen, like the people of Israel, goes through a journey to arrive at the promised land: Baptismal identification with Christ.”⁴⁴

In his recent and much debated interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica* (and run world-wide in other Jesuit journals), Pope Francis referred to the world of today as a “field hospital” and called for a reform of attitude in the Church, stating that what was most needed in the Church today is “the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful.” This program would involve “nearness,” “proximity.” He goes on to say, “In pastoral ministry we must accompany people and heal their wounds.” For the Holy Father, this means starting “from the ground up.”⁴⁵ He continues, “Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God.”⁴⁶

Pope Francis has reiterated in his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* themes which call Christians to a radical embrace of the Gospel, without compromise, that is, conversion. At the same time, those of us on the inside of the life of grace are called to be merciful and inviting to those who stand on the borders, or even entirely on the outside of the Christian life. He says that, “without detracting from the evangelical ideal, they need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively

occur.” He goes on to say, “Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.”⁴⁷ I would suggest that Pope Francis’ stress upon the importance of the primary Gospel proclamation that God has loved us and wishes to show mercy is in keeping with the pattern of the divine pedagogy and the catechumenate which imitates it. “The life of the Church should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that ‘he has loved us first’ (1 Jn 4:19).”⁴⁸

It is this initiative of God in loving us that is the very substance of the *narratio*, that initial proclamation of the precatechumenate, given to those approaching the Church, about which St. Augustine says with reference to this same text from 1 John 4:19, “what stronger reason could there be for the Lord’s coming than that God intended to reveal his love among us and to prove it with great force?”⁴⁹ Augustine goes on to remind us that the whole content of the Scripture, and so also the narration which recalls it, “tells of Christ and calls to love.”⁵⁰

Both Augustine and Pope Francis are insistent that we have to rely upon the attractive power of the divine love and mercy, and to reawaken our memory of it, and to pass that memory on to others whom we evangelize and catechize. “Memory is a dimension of our faith which we might call ‘deuteronomic,’ not unlike the memory of Israel itself.”⁵¹ Like the fathers who told the biblical story in the context of the progressive, ritualistic, conversional catechumenate in order to replicate in their catechumens the journey of Israel toward the promised land, Francis reminds us that the memory of God’s loving mercy is what renews the evangelist or catechist and which makes him a real instrument of the divine

pedagogue. “The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. ... The believer is essentially, ‘one who remembers.’”⁵²

Only after this first proclamation which highlights God’s love and mercy and which stresses the gradual, staged, and life-long process of conversion—that will later be made possible by regular reception of the sacraments—does one preach the high and heroic call of Gospel love. As Pope Francis noted,

A beautiful homily...must begin with the first proclamation, with the proclamation of salvation. There is nothing more solid, deep and sure than this proclamation. Then you have to do catechesis. Then you can draw even a moral consequence. But the proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives.⁵³

That is, only after God’s love has been made manifest to us (as in the narration of salvation history) are we asked to love God in return. This divine pedagogical pattern has been shown from the beginning, first in the saving action of the Exodus, then, in the giving of the Law on Sinai. It is only in this way that obedience to the law avoids becoming a mere moralism. The Gospel law of love, to be love, must be a loving response to the God who “has loved us first.”

The RCIA informs our evangelization by reminding us that God observes a law of gradual growth, in steps and stages, which he replicates in the patterns of growth in the spiritual life. As the *GDC* puts it, “God transforms the events in the life of his people into lessons of wisdom, adapting himself to the diverse ages and life situations.”⁵⁴ The fathers arranged the catechumenate to replicate the pattern of Israel’s growth in maturation toward her fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 49:6 that she would be “a light to the nations.” If we hear the call of Pope Francis to recognize and embrace our own need of salvation and enter the Gospel joy of recollecting the grant of his mercy, we may yet fulfill the promise of the RCIA, we may yet be ourselves a “light to the nations” (or perhaps even to the “field hospital”) in this still New Evangelization.



Sean Innerst, Th.D. is the Theology Cycle Director at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary and a founding professor at the Augustine Institute in Denver, Colorado. He is the author of From Blessing to Blessing: The Catechism as a Journey of Faith and the series Pillars: A Journey through the Catechism, both from Ascension Press.

NOTES

- 1 Congregation for the Clergy. *General Directory of Catechesis [GDC]*, (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2008), §59.
- 2 United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2000).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 7-9.
- 4 *GDC*, §89.
- 5 USCCB, *Journey*, 54–55.
- 6 Mt 28:19.
- 7 See Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994). Yarnold outlines the steps and stages of the modern rites and then presents baptismal homilies from Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia which explicate and root those modern forms.
- 8 I rely in this paper on the work of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1945). See also his *The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life*, 2 vols., trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947) and Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1980), 15 and 19.
- 9 Yarnold, *Awe Inspiring Rites*, 2.
- 10 *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA]*, Study Edition, NCCB (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), §6.
- 11 *Ibid.*, §38.
- 12 It is conceded that actual grace is operative in the soul who is honestly seeking, but it has not yet come to flower in the life of grace characterized by the reception and exercise of the theological virtues. Although the rites include variations that countenance the presence of both catechumens and candidates for Confirmation and Eucharist who have already been baptized, for the purposes of simplicity I do not consider these. See the USCCB, *Journey*, which treats of such candidates under the heading “Ecumenical Issues” and “Liturgical Issues” in the “I. Executive Summaries” section and under the heading “Candidates and Catechumens” in the “II. Bishop’s Committee Responses” section.
- 13 RCIA, §42.
- 14 *Ibid.*, §43.
- 15 See Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 2–3 and RCIA, §§52–56.
- 16 Yarnold notes that this rite also included from ancient times the offering of salt to the prospective catechumen, which suggested the savor the Gospel and the Christian bring to the world but also with anti-demonic overtones. *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 4–5.
- 17 RCIA, §75.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Gen 12:1–4a. See Pamela Jackson, *Journeybread for the Shadowlands: The Readings for the Rites of the Catechumenate, RCIA* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 17–24 for a beautiful meditation on the significance of this passage for the spirit of the catechumenate.
- 20 RCIA, §90.
- 21 *Ibid.*, §124.
- 22 Jean Daniélou, SJ. *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 19.
- 23 RCIA, §124.
- 24 F. Van der Meer in *Augustine the Bishop: The Life and Work of a Father of the Church*, trans. B. Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 357 translates the term “seeker along with others.” See also William Harmless’ evaluation of the terminology in *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 62–63.
- 25 RCIA, §118.
- 26 *Ibid.*, §120.
- 27 Quoted in Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy*, 20.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 29 RCIA, §§141–149.
- 30 Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy*, 9 and 11. See also Yarnold: “The ceremonies took place at night, some of them in the dark, after weeks of intense preparation; they were wrapped in secrecy, and the candidate knew little about them until just before, or even after, he had received them. Everything was calculated to inspire religious awe, to make these rites the occasion of a profound and life-long conversion.” *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, ix.
- 31 RCIA, §243.
- 32 *Ibid.*, §245.

33 John of the Cross, “The Spiritual Canticle,” *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), 562.

34 *Lumen Gentium* in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, ed. (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1975), §40.

35 Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 6–7: “Baptism involved such a radical change in life that one would not receive it until one felt completely ready.”

36 USCCB, *Journey*, 47. RCIA §247 notes that the Sunday Masses of the Easter season are the “main setting” for mystagogy, but very few preachers treat the readings of that season so as to imitate the ancient practice of mystagogy. Scott Hahn cites this text from the pilgrimage diary of Egeria: “And while the bishop discusses and sets forth each point, the voices of those who applaud are so loud that they can be heard outside the church. And truly the mysteries are so unfolded that there is no one unmoved at the things he hears so explained.” *Letter and Spirit* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 157.

37 *GDC*, §§129, 123.

38 *Ibid.*, §§130, 124

39 See Rudolph Bandas, *Contents and Methods of Catechezation* (St. Paul, MN: The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine of the Archdiocese of St. Paul, 1957), 7.

40 See especially *GDC*, §§139–144, 137–142.

41 See particularly *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United

Sates Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), §§1, 50–67.

42 *Ibid.*; see especially §§1217, 1286, 1333, 1500, 1539. §1602 on Marriage uses the phrase “God’s Plan.” See also Sean Innerst, *From Blessing to Blessing: The Catechism as a Journey of Faith* (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2011), 39–57.

43 In his classic work on the *narratio* as it was practiced circa 400 in North Africa St. Augustine says, “Keeping this love before you then as a goal to which you direct all that you say, recount every event in your historical exposition in such a way that your listener by hearing it may believe, by believing may hope, and by hoping may love.” Augustine of Hippo, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, trans., introduction, and notes by Raymond Canning, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), §§4, 8.

44 *GDC*, §129.

45 Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America*, September 30, 2013, 24.

46 *Ibid.*, 32.

47 *EG*, §44.

48 *Ibid.*, §12

49 Augustine, *Instructing Beginners*, §§4, 7.

50 *Ibid.*, §§4, 8.

51 *EG*, §13.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Spadaro, “A Big Heart,” 26.

54 *GDC*, §139.