

THE RCIA AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

AN OVERVIEW BY XIMENA DEBROECK, M.A





The theology of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is integral to understanding the New Evangelization

Christian initiation of adults is primarily about a process of conversion toward a life as a disciple of Christ. Therefore, careful reflection on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults offers critical insight into crucial elements of theological importance to gain a fuller understanding of the New Evangelization. Unfortunately, our current practice of the sacraments of initiation does not always reflect the process of conversion inherent to Christian initiation.

The Second Vatican Council called for a restoration of the ancient Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults; this call was expressed in five of the conciliar documents.¹ In 1972, the Holy See promulgated the Latin text *Ordo initiationis christianae adultorum*. A provisional English translation was issued by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) in 1974 for interim use. A final text of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was approved by the United States Bishops Committee on the Liturgy in 1986 and subsequently confirmed by the Apostolic See; the National Conference of Catholic Bishops called for a mandatory implementation of the RCIA in all United States dioceses beginning in September 1988.²

A careful and prayerful analysis of the text of the RCIA presents important theological points concerning Christian initiation:

- Christian initiation is a gradual process—not a program—that happens within the community of the faithful. Members of the assembly are able to reflect on their own conversions and also offer witness with their lives.³
- Christian initiation is a spiritual journey towards discipleship. The journey is not the same for all; it varies depending on the diverse forms of God’s grace, on the response and cooperation of each individual with that grace, and on circumstances of time and place.⁴
- The journey of Christian initiation consists of four periods or stages, and transitions between the periods are marked by three distinct liturgical rites. The celebration of the sacraments of initiation is the liturgical rite that marks the transition from the period of enlightenment and purification to the period of mystagogy or post-baptismal catechesis.⁵
- The unity of the three sacraments of initiation is clearly expressed as normative in the rite. The celebration of the three sacraments is described as the “third step.” It is the final step of the elect (not of the entire journey of initiation) in which they become God’s adopted children, are led by the Spirit, and share in the Eucharistic meal. This third step is celebrated during a single liturgy, generally at the Easter Vigil.⁶ The unity of the three sacraments of initiation is normative also for children of catechetical age.⁷ For these children the three sacraments are to be celebrated at the Easter Vigil without any separation,⁸ as has become the case with children baptized as infants. This celebration is not one of three separate sacraments, but rather one of a unified process of sacramental initiation.⁹

From the time of the promulgation of the Latin text, groups of theologians and liturgists from different parts the world gathered in many locations to study the restored rite, to reflect on the theology it expressed, to propose pastoral guidelines for implementation,

and to encourage further study. Among the earliest contributions to the faithful in the United States were those offered by the Murphy Center for Liturgical Research at the University of Notre Dame. Almost forty years later, their observations continue to be relevant and challenge us to have a more consistent theology of Christian initiation in our pastoral practices. Our endeavors in this area will greatly serve the New Evangelization.

Aidan Kavanagh proposed that many of the pastoral challenges of the time immediately following the restoration of the rite were of a strategic nature and thus needed to be addressed in a strategic way rather than in a tactical manner. In other words, the details of “how” something could be remedied in a tactical or specific way are not very helpful unless we can first identify “what” needs to be changed. Kavanagh offered suggestions on how to consider certain challenges to Christian initiation from a strategic approach:

- Baptism could be understood as a defining moment for the entire community in which—individually and communally—they share in the Death of Christ and also share in his Resurrection among the faithful, rather than simply an extrication of the infant from the powers of hell. This would signify a strategic shift in the understanding of Baptism.
- Confirmation could be understood as a climax of baptismal graces by the Holy Spirit preparing the individual in a more complete way to share at the Eucharistic celebration, where others filled with the Spirit of the Father and the Son are gathered, rather than a passing ceremony centered around a rite of passage into mature faith.
- Catechesis would be understood as a means to ongoing conversion rather than an exercise in religious education or schooling.¹⁰

The unity of the three sacraments of initiation is expressed unmistakably during the Easter Vigil for all unbaptized, including children of catechetical age. However, the current pastoral praxis for these sacraments, apart from those who journey through the RCIA, does not reflect a theological unity of Christian initiation centered on conversion. Nevertheless, in the context of diversity in practice, it is still possible to focus on this unity by changing and redirecting the paradigm of current formation, in order to communicate clearly that the goal of the three initiatory sacraments is conversion toward a life as a disciple of Christ. The next column in this series will present new possibilities for the practice of infant Baptism and the celebration of the Eucharist as instruments of the New Evangelization for families and the entire community.



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NOTES

1 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states that the catechumenate for adults is to be restored; this period of suitable formation is to be sanctified by liturgical rituals at specified intervals. Additionally, the simple and solemn rites of Baptism of adults are to be revised (§§64–66). *Lumen Gentium* explicitly affirms that catechumens are already joined to the Church by their desire of conversion (§14). *Christus Dominus* exhorts the episcopal leaders to renew the instruction of adult catechumens (§14). *Ad Gentes* addressed the

conversion of non-Christians, who moved by the proclamation of the Good News, accept the invitation to a personal relationship with Christ, and enter a spiritual journey of conversion throughout the catechumenate. This period is to be marked by liturgical rites, and is a time of apprenticeship into the Christian life, not just a learning of doctrines. Additionally, *Ad Gentes* calls for a restoration of the Lenten and Paschal seasons so that the catechumens' journey may be further illumined and also in order that the entire community may renew their own conversion (§§13–14). Lastly, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* directs priests to form catechumens and newly baptized in a gradual way so as to come to know God better and live the Christian life more fully (§§5–6).

2 National Conference of Catholic Bishops (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops after 2001), *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA]* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), viii-ix.

3 *Ibid.*, §4.

4 *Ibid.*, §5.

5 *Ibid.*, §§6–7.

6 *Ibid.*, §§206–207.

7 Children of catechetical age are children who have attained the use of reason (*RCIA* §252). According to canon law, children older than seven years old are said to have the use of reason. See *The Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983): "A minor before the completion of the seventh year is called an infant and is considered not responsible for oneself (*non sui compos*). **With the completion of the seventh year, however, a minor is presumed to have the use of reason**" (c. 97, §2, emphasis added).

8 *RCIA* §§256, 305.

9 Mark Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered" in *Alternatives Futures for Worship, Vol. 2: Baptism and Confirmation*, ed. Mark Searle (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 29.

10 Aidan Kavanagh, "Christian Initiation: Tactics and Strategy" in *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 4.