

An Overview of the Process By Which St. Raphael's Parish Welcomes and Prepares Adults Who Want to Become Catholic

St. Raphael's Parish welcomes and prepares adults who want to enter the Roman Catholic Church ("Church") through the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (the "RCIA"). A person is considered fully initiated into the Church when he or she has received the Sacraments of Initiation, which are Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. The RCIA also applies to children who have not been baptized, have reached the age of reason (age seven), and who want to join the Church.

[What is the RCIA?](#)

The letters "RCIA" stand for the "Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults", which is a formal ritual that flows from the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) that convened between 1962 and 1965. The RCIA ritual was originally written in Latin in 1972, and eventually translated into English. Since, September 1, 1988, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has stated that use of the RCIA *is mandatory in the dioceses of the United States*.

In the modern years leading up to Vatican II, adults seeking to enter the Church would usually receive a few one-on-one meetings with a priest, after which the Sacraments of Initiation would be celebrated privately. The Church's bishops observed that this formation method did not always produce deeply committed Christians who understood that the heart of a Christian way of life is *personal and communal* prayer, service and worship. This formation method was also opposite of the ancient formation practices of the Church which were community based.

In the earliest centuries after Christ's death and resurrection, adults who expressed a desire to become Christian would enter into the "catechumenate" (which means time of serious study). The catechumenate model formed adults by inviting them into small Christian communities. Within these communities, an adult would experience friendship with other Christians, be introduced to the Word of God, reflect upon the mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection, and experience *communal* prayer, worship and service. After a period of apprenticeship, and with the approval of the community, an adult would receive the Sacraments of Initiation in one celebration.

Becoming Christian in the earliest days usually involved a sharp break with the surrounding culture. Sometimes it meant finding a new way to make a living. Sometimes it meant considerable risk of persecution. Thus, the small Christian communities provided vital support to the adults in formation as they prepared to enter into a sacramental way of life, which demanded deep commitment to Christ and the Church.

By the time of Vatican II, there were widespread requests from bishops living in all regions of the world to restore the ancient catechumenate in a manner that would be suitable for contemporary discipleship. And so the Second Vatican Council decreed the restoration and revision of the ancient catechumenate in a manner that was adaptable to local traditions.

The Church believes that the revived catechumenate, *with its focus on formation within community*, helps new Catholic Christians live in our modern, secular world, which is often at odds with Christian values and beliefs. Like the earliest Christians, modern Christians need careful, gradual preparation and loving support as they prepare to live a full sacramental life.

[Preparation at St. Raphael's: Process Not Program](#)

The St. Raphael RCIA Ministry abides by the guidance provided in the RCIA, namely that each person receive a suitable catechesis that is both gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated by the liturgical year and solidly supported by celebrations of the word. RCIA par. 75(1). The amount and form of this formation depends upon each individual's circumstance. As such, the RCIA process at St. Raphael's has no definite start and end date for catechumens or candidates.

For an individual seeking Baptism (a "catechumen") the RCIA calls for a formation period of at least one year (National Statutes for the Catechumenate par. 6). This allows an individual to experience, at a minimum, a complete Church year, so that he or she can make an informed decision to become Catholic.

For an individual who is a baptized Christian (a "candidate"), the length of the formation process depends upon *the extent to which the baptized person has lead a Christian life within a community of faith and been appropriately catechized to deepen his or her inner adherence to beliefs expressed in our Profession of Faith.*

The RCIA cautions that the term “*convert*” should be reserved strictly for those converted from unbelief to Christian belief and *never used* when describing baptized Christians who are received into the full communion of the Catholic Church when they are ready.

Our mission for the St. Raphael RCIA ministry for both catechumens and candidates is to: (1) assist in revealing the Holy Spirit working in their lives by sharing faith journey stories; (2) catechize in small communities using Scripture and Tradition; (3) initiate through revitalized ancient liturgical rites; and (4) form adults who are prepared to answer Christ’s call to discipleship.

We value the power of the RCIA to bring catechumens, candidates and the entire parish community into deeper relationship with God and with each other through shared reflection on Scripture and Tradition, prayer and service, and full and active sacramental lives that are nourished by the Eucharistic liturgy.

We see the power of the RCIA to contribute to our faith community by more fully embracing a sacramental life, respect for all creation, and service to the world for the greater glory of God’s Kingdom.

[The First Step: Inquiry](#)

Each prospective RCIA catechumen/candidate has an informal conversation with the Director of Adult Faith Formation. The purpose of this conversation is to determine whether the RCIA is the right place for an individual and which sacraments are required for full initiation.

During this period of inquiry, adults seeking Baptism learn that the RCIA process requires an investment of at least one year, sometimes longer. They also learn that the Sacraments of Initiation are celebrated at the Easter Vigil, unless certain pastoral exceptions apply. The reason for this is that the Easter Vigil is the principal celebration of the Church year and the celebration of Baptism particularly symbolizes our dying with Christ and the joy of the resurrection.

Adults who are already baptized (either as Catholics or in another Christian tradition) and seek Confirmation and Eucharist learn that they may receive the remaining Sacraments of Initiation when they are deemed ready, through their own discernment, the discernment of their sponsors and the RCIA catechists. The journey of a baptized adult can be very similar to that of the unbaptized adult, especially

when the baptized adult has received minimal information about the Christian way of life.

Next, adults are invited to inquire further by attending one-on-one meeting time with a RCIA team member designated as the Inquiry Minister. These meetings are designed to provide an individual with a comfortable environment to ask questions and bring up any issues they want to talk about related to the Catholic faith and their spiritual journey. Most frequently, these conversations turn towards the individual's experience of God leading to the present day.

The Rite of Acceptance/Rite of Welcome. When two or more adults express a desire to enter into a more serious time of study (a.k.a. the catechumenate), we prepare to celebrate the first major rite of the RCIA process. The emphasis on celebrating the rite with more than one adult is related to the communal nature of the RCIA with regard to formation.

For *catechumens*, this rite is called *the Rite of Acceptance*, and the Rite is mandatory. During this rite, catechumens are marked with the sign of the cross on their ears, eyes, lips, heart, shoulders, hands and feet – a symbol of both the joys and the costs of Christ's discipleship. The Rite of Acceptance symbolizes the *catechumens'* first acceptance of the Gospel and they receive a Catholic bible.

For *candidates*, we have the option of celebrating the Rite of Welcome. Like the Rite of Acceptance, the candidate is marked with the sign of the cross. The Rite of Welcome is most appropriate to celebrate for candidates that have not been catechized during their life, in which case they are very much like catechumens who are turning to the Gospel for the first time in their life. Candidates also receive a Catholic bible.

Often we have catechumens and candidates ready at the same time to move into the catechumenate. In that circumstance, we are able to celebrate a combined *Rite of Acceptance and Rite of Welcome*, where a clear distinction is made between those seeking Baptism and those who are already Christians through Baptism.

[The Second Step: The Catechumenate](#)

The catechumenate officially begins with the celebration of the *Rite of Acceptance/Rite of Welcome*. For catechumens especially, the celebration marks the Church's public embrace of them as her own.

Catechumens are often soothed by knowledge that the celebration of the *Rite of Acceptance* entitles them to a Christian burial, in the event that they should they die during the catechumenate. RCIA par. 47.

At St. Raphael's, the RCIA catechumenate consists of small community meetings, where adults read scripture together and enter into facilitated discussion with a RCIA catechist. We intentionally keep our groups small (no more than 12) to make it easier for community to develop.

Our primary catechesis flows from and builds upon the Sunday lectionary. We also use the Foundations in Faith materials that provide a teaching plan for the specific themes that arise from the lectionary each week. The catechists are invited to review the following lectionary based websites for additional teaching material: <http://www.word-sunday.com/> and <http://liturgy.slu.edu/>. Also, catechists are encouraged to refer to the Catechism of the Catholic Church and other Church documents for particular questions and topics.

We practice what is called "Dismissal Catechesis" at St. Raphael's. This means that our catechumens and candidates attend the 9 a.m. Mass on Sundays through the homily, after which they are kindly dismissed by the presider with these or similar words:

My dear friends, this community now sends you forth to reflect more deeply upon the word of God which you have shared with us today. Be assured of our loving support and prayers for you. We look forward to the day when you will share fully in the Lord's Table. RCIA par. 67

In this way, our adults in formation have the opportunity to hear God's Word with the larger parish community. They can observe how Catholics celebrate the Mass and gradually become comfortable with our parish community. In turn, our parish community begins to recognize our adults in formation and prays for them. Moreover, the community is reminded of its' continual call to conversion and discipleship.

After dismissal, we meet for one-half hour to further reflect on the Sunday readings, the homily, and introduce the topic for the week. Our extended catechesis occurs on Wednesday evenings from 7 to 9 p.m. The first half hour of our Wednesday meeting is social

(coffee/dessert) allowing people to trickle in and visit with each other, thereby building community. The remainder of our Wednesday meeting is dedicated to more extensive reflection on the previous Sunday's readings, as well as facilitated discussion on the topic of the week.

Sponsors. Our catechumens and candidates do not travel alone during this period. Parish sponsors are always provided even in those circumstances when the catechumen or candidate has chosen a family member or friend as a sponsor. *Sponsors* are chosen from the parish community to act as spiritual companions, providing personal support, sharing their experience of Christian life, and helping to make the catechumens and candidates feel at home with the Catholic Christian way of life. In particular, we ask our parish sponsors to invite RCIA participants to parish functions and also to introduce them to other parishioners.

Sponsors do not dismiss with the catechumens and candidates on Sunday. However, we ask sponsors to attend as many of the Wednesday meetings as possible. In the case where a candidate or catechumen has two sponsors, we ask that the sponsors alternate between them when it comes to attending the Wednesday meetings. The reason for this is that our group would become too large if each catechumen/candidate attended with both sponsors present.

On those weeks when a sponsor cannot attend a weekly session, we ask that the sponsor meet separately with their catechumen or candidate. Sometimes a catechumen or candidate cannot attend a Wednesday meeting. In that case, we ask that a sponsor attend the Wednesday meeting anyway so that the sponsor can discuss the topic of the week with the catechumen or candidate.

Purification and Enlightenment. Because the normal time for a catechumen to receive the Sacraments of Initiation is at the Easter Vigil, the 40 day period of Lent becomes a time of final preparation for the catechumens. On the first Sunday of Lent, the catechumens travel to St. Raymond's Cathedral to celebrate the second major rite in the RCIA process, called the *Rite of Election*. At the Cathedral, the catechumens join with all the other catechumens from around the Diocese who are also preparing for Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Each catechumen's name is called out and that catechumen processes forward to meet the Bishop. After this rite is complete, the catechumens are called *the elect*.

A similar, *optional* rite is available to candidates in November of each year. This rite is named the *Call to Continuing Conversion*. As with the catechumens, the candidates get the opportunity to meet other candidates from around the Diocese, as well as the Bishop of the Joliet Diocese.

After the *Rite of Election*, our catechumens are now called "*the elect*" and they undergo a period of more intense reflection, purification and enlightenment, in which they deepen their commitment to repentance and conversion. During this period, the *elect* participate in three additional rites, known as *the scrutinies* on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent.

It is our practice at St. Raphael's for candidates in the RCIA process to walk along with the catechumens as they prepare for the scrutinies. In addition, a similar rite is optional for the candidates on the second Sunday of Lent, known as the *penitential rite*.

The scrutinies and the penitential rite are rites of self-searching and repentance. They are meant to shine a light on those parts of us that are weak or sinful, and need healing. These rites also strengthen those qualities in our catechumens and candidates which are positive and good.

In preparing for the scrutinies and penitential rite, the RCIA participants deepen their awareness of the abundance God's love and, at the same time, help them to identify the barriers that keep this love from transforming their lives completely. The power of these rites is their ability to unmask "the deception of evil and sin for what they really are." Morris, Thomas H., *The RCIA: Transforming The Church* (1989) p. 111.

In short, this period of enlightenment and purification is like a 40 day examination of conscience. This period is particularly helpful for candidates who are preparing to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to receiving the sacraments.

[The Third Step: The Sacraments of Initiation](#)

The initiation of the elect occurs at the Easter Vigil, the evening before Easter Sunday. Regarding candidates, the RCIA states that it is preferable to receive candidates into full communion with the Catholic Church at a Sunday Eucharist of the parish community (NSC 32, 33). The Diocese of Joliet has recently provided several approved dates for

the initiation of candidates, namely: the feast of Christ the King, the Baptism of Our Lord, and Pentecost Sunday.

Nevertheless, if both the elect and candidates are discerned to be ready for the Sacraments of Initiation as we approach the season of Lent and the Easter Vigil, and in view of the Vigil being the principal celebration of the Church, the RCIA provides a combined rite for this circumstance. The RCIA also stresses the importance of making a clear distinction between elect and candidates at such a combined ceremony as our candidates are already Christians and one with us through the sacrament of Baptism.

[The Fourth Step: Mystagogy](#)

Following the celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation, the newly initiated begin a period of postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy. Technically speaking, the time of mystagogy for the newly initiated lasts up until Pentecost Sunday. However, in reality, all of us who are fully initiated are in a period of mystagogy for the rest of our lives.

The RCIA stresses that:

“as the term “mystagogy” suggests, [the newly initiated are] introduced into 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. For they have truly been renewed in mind, tasted more deeply the sweetness of God’s word, received the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and grown to know the goodness of the Lord. Out of this experience, which belongs to Christians and increases as it is lived, they derive a new perception of the faith, of the Church, and of the world.” RCIA par. 245.

At St. Raphael’s our experience has demonstrated that two events are particularly helpful in transitioning a newly initiated adult into the larger parish community. Shortly before or after one receives the Sacraments of Initiation, we encourage our elect and candidates to meet with the Director of Adult Faith Formation. This informal meeting is intended to bridge the transition from the RCIA small community to the larger parish community. Our experience has been that for adults transitioning out of the RCIA, this meeting is helpful in discerning where the Holy Spirit is leading them in their Christian walk after the RCIA process has ended.

In addition, it is our practice at St. Raphael's to meet one more time with our newly initiated, shortly after the Sacraments of Initiation are received. At this final meeting, the newly initiated look at all the pictures taken from the initiation celebration and are able to take copies of pictures that are most meaningful to them.

Most importantly, we unpack the meaning of the initiation celebration from the viewpoint of all our senses. As we share comments about our experience of the celebration, we deepen our perception and understanding of God's gift of the Sacraments of Initiation.