

The Rite of Christian Initiation: “R.C.I.A.” Questions and Answers

The RCIA process has long been available at St. Francis, but many parishioners find the whole concept something of a puzzle. Perhaps the following questions and answers will help to clarify this very beautiful opportunity that the Church offers:

Q: What do those letters stand for?

A: Just like “F.B.I.” is shorthand for “Federal Bureau of Investigation,” R.C.I.A. is simply an abbreviated way of saying the “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.” This is the standard process by which adults are formally welcomed into the Roman Catholic Church, through the sacraments of initiation (that is, Baptism, Confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist).

Q: Who is it supposed to be for?

A: The RCIA is designed to welcome people in three distinct categories: **(1)** an individual who has never been baptized, but who wants to explore the possibility of being joined to Christ through Baptism and the other sacraments. This person might be Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, or of no particular religious persuasion. **(2)** an adult who has already been baptized, but in another Christian denomination (for example, Presbyterian, Methodist, Greek Orthodox). This person already belongs to Christ, but would like to be received into the *Catholic* Church. And **(3)** a baptized Catholic who has never had the opportunity to receive Holy Communion and Confirmation. A typical RCIA group might include men and women from each of these three categories.

Q: How does it work? Is RCIA a kind of “convert class”?

A: In years past, people looking to enter the Church would often meet privately with a priest for “instructions.” The Church’s approach has changed considerably since then. To begin with, RCIA is usually *a group experience*, with a number of candidates working with a small team of volunteer parishioners. After an informal period of inquiry, the participants generally meet on a weekly basis, from early fall through late spring. A typical evening together might include prayer, catechesis (or instruction on a given theme), discussion, refreshments, and reflection on the Gospel for the coming Sunday. The atmosphere is meant to be relaxed and inviting; there are no classroom desks, no exams, and no papers.

Q: Sounds like a big commitment . . .

A: It is. The amount of time involved is substantial, and it’s always hoped that the people participating in the whole process are genuinely interested in discovering the Lord Jesus, and taking an active part in the life of his Church. That kind of life-change usually requires more than simply reading a book, or attending a handful of lectures.

Q: So, when does a person moving through this process actually become Catholic?

A: For those who are not yet Roman Catholic, the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are celebrated as part of *the Easter Vigil*. The Vigil is the dramatic and very moving liturgy that takes place on Holy Saturday, the night before Easter Sunday. Those who are already baptized Catholics, but have never received Communion and Confirmation, may also receive those sacraments at the Vigil.

Q: Does the parish get to see any of this happening?

A: Yes. In fact, the participation of the parish—primarily through their prayers and encouragement—is vital to the journey being made by the candidates. It is not simply the RCIA team, or even a particular priest, who is welcoming a man or woman into the fullness of our Church's life; that privilege belongs to the entire parish community. For that reason, too, the year is punctuated by a series of *rites* (that is, ceremonies or rituals) which take place at Sunday Mass, and mark the deepening commitment of the candidates, in the presence of the community.

Q: I know somebody who's not Catholic, but I think I'd feel strange asking her about joining the Church.

A: That's natural. But go ahead and ask anyway! Aren't we all supposed to be involved in the work of bringing others closer to Christ? It's one of our first responsibilities as disciples. Of course, it's usually counter-productive to be forceful or heavy-handed. Don't get preachy, and if it happens to be a spouse or a relative you have in mind, don't nag about the subject over and over. A gentle, respectful question put to the friend/relative/co-worker is all you need do. Let the Lord do the rest, and according to his timing.

Q: Do people ever begin, and then "drop out"?

A: That does happen sometimes. It might not be the ideal time in a person's life to undertake this kind of faith-journey. Or a person might listen for a bit, and decide that membership in the Church is not for them. There is never any "obligation" for someone to follow through to the Easter Vigil, simply because he or she has begun the process. A person might even decide against baptism at the very last minute; we need to respect that person's freedom.

Q: Whom should an interested person contact?

A: Those who would like to hear more about the RCIA process can contact anyone on the parish staff, or a call can be made to the rectory (634-4957). Sister Pat or one of the RCIA team members will then be in touch with the person who is inquiring, to offer him or her more information. It never hurts to ask!