

A Pastoral Response to the CARA Report on the RCIA Survey

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Last January in the Archdiocese of Chicago, we hosted a gathering for RCIA parish ministers to support one another in our initiation ministry, to share best practices, and to offer some ongoing education. I took the opportunity to do my own mini-survey to get a picture of what is happening in the field. I was surprised to discover that only 4 of the 16 parish groups represented knew what we were referring to when we spoke about the National Statutes! In the September 2014 issue of *America* magazine, Nick Wagner wrote a fine reflection on the status of the RCIA in American practice. A side bar commentary by the publisher referred to the Statutes as “guidelines for implementing and adapting the initiation process in the United States.”

As we review of the National Statutes for the Catechumenate, these two examples serve as a reality check on how the Statutes are being received by those working in initiation ministry. The gathering we held for RCIA ministers was a bit of a wake-up call. I'm not so sure that all who are responsible for ministering in Christian initiation are paying much attention to the National Statutes which constitute **particular law for the United States**. They were approved by the NCCB (USCCB) on November 11, 1986 and confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship on June 26, 1988. In addition to the US Statutes, universal Canon Law covers many of the same principles and are conveniently placed in the RCIA appendix. I wonder if these canons are as invisible as the Statutes appear to be. Are pastors and Diocesan leadership referring to these Statutes and relevant Canons in establishing their pastoral practice? The Statutes are intended to give shape and direction to our Initiation ministry. Is anyone being held accountable for the lack of attention to these Statutes? Imagine if we took the same approach with the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* and treated them simply as a set of guidelines for celebrating Mass? I suspect there would be some admonitions issued and corrective measures taken. It's not a matter of becoming legalistic in our approach to our rituals and pastoral practice. The concern is that we do not lose the spirit and intention of the Church in regards to the Sacraments of Initiation.

Some have suggested additional statutes to provide some muscle to the RCIA. But judging by what I see happening in the field, I believe fewer statutes that are well crafted would be better than too many that get overlooked. However, there may be a need for a more definitive introduction that states clearly the intention and value of these statutes and their weight as liturgical law

The RCIA Umbrella

My first impression after reading the survey responses was that the **RCIA** acronym is apparently being used as an umbrella for any model or style of preparing and initiating individuals into the Church, whether they are unbaptized or baptized individuals preparing for the sacraments or making a profession of faith in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. For example, at a major national conference on parish life recently, a keynote speaker mentioned that she was a convert, but that her pastor decided they would do a one-on-one RCIA. A one-on-one initiation process conducted by the pastor in his study is not the RCIA. The Rite has multiple options but except for the death bed, this is not one of them. Is the RCIA recognized as a Rite of the Church, like we recognize the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of Marriage as rites of the Church? You don't find people asking you whether your parish does the Penance program or the Anointing of

the Sick program? No, these are not “programs” but rites of the Church which celebrate the saving action of Christ and define who we are as Catholics. Persistent reference after all these years to the “RCIA program” leads me to believe that this initiation rite is not perceived to be on the same par as other sacramental rites of the Church and is thus treated like a program with which we are free to do whatever we like.

With these preliminary remarks, let us look more closely at some of the results from the CARA study.

Liturgical Rites

The survey results left me with the impression that the Liturgical Rites are not well integrated into the whole initiation process. Or perhaps it is better to say the elements of the process are not being well integrated into the Rite.

- The survey tells us that 11% of those responding do not celebrate the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. Why is that?
- Only 37% include Celebrations of the Word, even though paragraph #79 of the RCIA states: “Among the rites belonging to the period of the catechumenate, then, celebrations of the word of God are foremost.”
- 30% of parishes do not celebrate the rite of the Presentation of the Creed or the Presentation of the Lord’s Prayer.
- 14% do not celebrate the Scrutinies.
- 45% do not celebrate the Minor Exorcisms.
- 25% do not anoint the catechumens.
- 47% do not celebrate the Preparation Rites.
- Only 15% use the Lectionary as a foundation for catechesis.

I’m left questioning whether we are employing the liturgical tradition of the Church as a principle means of formation. Our Tradition teaches us that prayer is formative. The statistics leave us with the impression that the liturgical rites are sprinkled into the process but not looked at as substantive.

The good news is that 99% of adults who are being baptized at the Easter Vigil are also being confirmed and receiving the Eucharist at the same celebration (99%). This is a healthy sign. In 1974 we conducted a survey in the Archdiocese of Chicago to determine how many parishes were baptizing at the Easter Vigil. Very few parishes were baptizing adults at the Vigil and even when they did, it was more of a coincidence that the converts’ instructions ended at the conclusion of Lent.

Adapted Rites for the Baptized

The Adapted Rites for the Baptized in the 1988 USA edition of the RCIA are one of the issues that require our serious review. I was on the ad hoc working group for the RCIA for the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Divine Worship that recommended the adaptations and the combined rites. The pressing concern at the time was that parish ministers were including everyone into one process and one set of rites. We recognized that both theologically and ecumenically this was not appropriate. But the pastoral impulse to treat every candidate and catechumen the same was very strong. We knew we had to do something to change pastoral practice but we also realized that at that time we weren’t prepared to issue a statement that parishes could no longer include the baptized but uncatechized candidates in the rites. We also recognized that there was a value to including some kind of rituals that would accompany the journey of faith for the already baptized. If we hadn’t done this, parish ministers would continue to have created their own solution which we might not be happy with. That was then. This is now. Do we still need these adapted rites? Should they be edited or rewritten? Do we need some directives on pastoral care of the baptized? The concern we should have about these adapted rites is first of all ecumenical. What are we saying to our fellow Christians when they see us

celebrating these rites with individuals they baptized? And secondly, we should be concerned about how these adapted rites are affecting our theology and spirituality of Baptism.

In retrospect I think the mistake we made in composing texts for the baptized candidates was that we chose to adapt the texts provided for the unbaptized which correspond to their unique status and spiritual development instead of starting fresh and composing texts that mark the distinctive path of the baptized. The distinctive points when ritual prayer may be appropriate may or may not correspond to the stages of the unbaptized person's movement to the font and Eucharistic table.

New Rites

Two examples of completely new rites for the unbaptized are the Rite of Election for Children and the Rite of Sending Catechumens to the Bishop for the Rite of Election. In the first instance we shouldn't interpret the omission of a Rite of Election for Children to have some deep theological reasons for not being found in the *editio typica*. I remember an enlightening conversation I had with Dr. Balthasar Fischer, one of the principal architects of the RCIA. I asked him why there was no rite of election for children. He paused and said, "Would you like one?" He went on to say that there was no mysterious reason for its omission except that the Roman Commission, which he chaired for the RCIA, had a limited budget and could only meet a few times to get the work done. He also added that the group recognized that they were a committee of old but very prestigious scholars who didn't know much about children and were worried that maybe too many rites would scare the children. In the absence of such a rite in the *editio typica* there is, of course, the option of including children in the adult Rite of Election.

Another addition, the Rite of Sending, was a pastoral compromise because what we were hearing at the time from pastoral ministers was that they weren't planning to go to Rite of Election with the Bishop at the Cathedral because it would deprive the local parish assembly of having direct involvement at this stage with the catechumens.

Combined Rites

The CARA survey tells us that 77% of parishes use the combined Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens and the Rite of Welcoming Baptized but Previously Uncatechized Adults. What we do not know is how the catechumens and candidates are prepared for these rites nor do we know how the congregation is being catechized.

We know that 76% of the parishes polled celebrate the Rite of Reception into Full Communion at the Easter Vigil. Statutes #33 and #34 permit this practice but at the same time do not encourage it. The language in these two statutes remains somewhat ambiguous. We read: in Statute #33: "It is preferable that the reception into full communion not take place at the Easter Vigil." But Statute #34 states: "Nevertheless....for pastoral reasons and in view of the Vigil's being the principal annual celebration of the Church, the combined rite is to be followed." As a pastor and liturgist I have always found that combining the Rite of Reception into Full Communion with adult baptism at the Vigil tends to diminish the significance of the baptisms especially as they are wedded to the Vigil liturgy. We would be wise to review Statutes #33 and #34 and offer a more direct theological, liturgical and ecumenically sensitive directive.

The adapted rites for the already baptized and the combined rites are very popular and continue to be used. There is some good pastoral thinking here that every journey of faith profits from ritual prayer along the way. What the prayer and ritual might be is what we have to look it. When I asked our parishes at the Chicago RCIA gathering what they would do if the adaptations and combined rites were eliminated in the next revision. They answered: "We'd continue to use them anyway."

Minister of Confirmation

Statutes #11,12, & 13 offer clear direction about who can confirm and when. I would advocate keeping these three statutes in place. They answer a lot of questions which I'm sure bishops, chancellors, and diocesan directors of worship have to answer all the time. Nevertheless, there continues to be confusion about this matter. Diocesan bishops who have tried to reserve the confirmation of all adults to themselves, including children of catechetical age, have to reckon with Statute #13 that not only gives the priest who baptizes the right to confirm, but says that he is bound to use that faculty and cannot be prohibited from using it (see canons #866 and #885). In regard to Bishops, Statute #13 states clearly: "A diocesan bishop who is desirous of confirming neophytes should reserve to himself the baptism of adults in accord with canon 863".

Catechesis

The catechumenal process in 71% of the parishes is ordinarily a nine month process. This appears to be **a school year model**. Only 23% report a catechumenate process that is longer than 9 months. There is a heavy emphasis on doctrinal catechesis as is evidenced by the selection of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults and other program packages from publishers. None of us, I am sure, question the importance of catechesis. Paragraph #75 of the RCIA clearly presumes that we are catechizing catechumens. But I'm not sure if everyone has comprehended the full message of paragraph #75.1. It states, "This catechesis leads the catechumens not only to an appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts but also to a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate." An "appropriate acquaintance of dogma" is different than studying for a comprehensive exam for a theological degree. "A profound sense of the mystery of salvation"? How are we accomplishing that under this big umbrella called "catechesis?" Paragraph # 78 in the RCIA refers to catechesis as "presenting Catholic teaching in its entirety, but also enlightens faith, inspires apostolic activity, and nurtures a life completely in accord with the spirit of Christ."

Paragraph #75.2 speaks about becoming "familiar with the Christian way of life and helped by the example and support of sponsors, godparents, and the entire Christian community..... and to practice love of neighbor, even at the cost of self-renunciation." Paragraph #75.3 tells us: "The Church, like a mother, helps the catechumens on their journey by means of suitable liturgical rites.....Celebrations of the word are arranged for their benefit." And finally we are instructed: "Catechumens should also learn how to work actively with others to spread the Gospel." (75.4) That's quite a bit to accomplish in nine months or less, don't you think?

I hope that I will not be misinterpreted here as advocating catechetical minimalism. Quite the contrary. We Catholics believe in the value of enlightened faith. But is our working definition for catechesis too narrow? The National Directory for Catechesis states: "The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity." (#19B) What this kind of catechesis suggests goes beyond an academic class syllabus. So we are talking more about pedagogy than the amount of content. How do the teachings of the Church and the life story of an individual who is influenced by the culture, come together to encounter the living Christ? Have we made any progress in developing a pedagogy that takes culture into consideration as we try to feed hungry hearts in the new millennium? Contemporary cultural meanings of spirituality, for example, have changed to the degree that if we are catechizing in the same way as we always did, our message may not be heard. We need to focus on developing an effective pedagogy for the catechumenate and cease arguing about the amount of content. In developing an effective pedagogy we have to take the culture into account so that we are not just passing along religious truths framed within traditional Catholic cultural-religious meanings to catechumens who have little identification with this authoritative view. For many people in our culture whose thinking is framed by a secular culture, religion may simply be regarded as an optional resource for living, but not the bedrock of one's life. Effective catechesis requires that we break

through this cultural impasse. This should not be interpreted as a concession to culture, but an acknowledgement of a cultural mindset that may need to be challenged.

It's important that we get this right since the National Directory makes the catechumenate the model for all catechesis. "The baptismal catechumenate is the source of inspiration for all catechesis." (#35D) We need to be very clear then about what we are saying about the RCIA, if we are going to apply the inner dynamics and pedagogy of the RCIA to our entire catechetical ministry.

Much of what we have initially used as resources for the RCIA needs to be updated to incorporate the insights of recent Church documents, the writings of recent popes and other great minds. Pope Francis, for example, offers us a beautiful definition of catechesis in Joy of the Gospel. He says, "Catechesis is a proclamation of the word and is always centered on that word, yet it also demands a suitable environment and an attractive presentation, the use of eloquent symbols, insertion into a broader growth process and the integration of every dimension of the person within a communal journey of hearing and response." (166) (*my emphasis*) In addition to the quotes from Council documents in the appendix of the RCIA, perhaps some of the more recent insights like that of the above quote of Pope Francis' should be included.

While the survey indicates that in 99% of the parishes the baptized have participated in at least some of the process with catechumens, for 77% of parishes, catechesis in the catechumenate period includes both catechumens and candidates. I've found that in some places the circle is widened to include parishioners who want to know their faith better. Is the 9 month model occurring because the already baptized are influencing the pedagogy and the timeframe for catechesis, when it should be the other way around? What the catechumens need should be the determining factor. I understand the pastoral dilemma. If you have 12 baptized candidates preparing for Confirmation and Eucharist or Reception into full Communion but only 3 catechumens in the group, the inclination is to plan for the needs of the majority. Is this diluting the whole catechetical process for the catechumens?

I am also concerned when we see the figures for the baptized participating in the catechumenate process. Is everyone no matter what their background expected to participate in a full catechumenate? Each person that approaches the Church should be respected for their background and not simply corralled into one same process that is designed to fit everyone.

Period of Evangelization

Statute #1 refers to the Precatechumenate or Period of Evangelization. Except for mentioning interviews during this initial period – 85% of parishes interview inquirers before the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens - the survey does not give us a clear picture of what is happening during the Precatechumenate. I'm beginning to think that the reason there is only one Statute for this initial period is that we don't know what to do about evangelization. It clearly needs to be more than just telling our stories, sharing our personal history, and articulating our questions and doubts. There needs to be an evangelization period that consists of a "kerygmatic proclamation and the personal witness of evangelizers that leads to a personal conversion and to a thorough change of life." Those words are taken from the 2008 Aparecida document prepared for Latin America with Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio as one of the writers of that powerful document. This seems relevant for our purposes in initiation ministry.

Evangelization is not the same thing as catechesis. Many parish ministers approach evangelization in the same way as catechesis. Evangelization lights the spark that leads to an encounter and genuine relationship with the living Christ. If our catechetical component is weak, maybe it's because our Precatechumenate /Period of Evangelization is weak. The number of catechumens each year is rather small when you stop to consider the increasing number of unbaptized adults in our society. Could it be that there is no fire to our evangelization efforts in our parishes? What would lead someone to the RCIA, if they have never heard a proclamation of hope, a witness to mercy, or have never experienced solidarity in a community that

lives for Christ? Are seekers meeting Christ or just being told something “about Him”? The Precatechumenate begins long before an individual knocks on our door and says, “I’m thinking of becoming a Catholic.” Evangelization ought to be an integral part of the ongoing mission of a parish, not exclusive to the RCIA. I’m not sure if that means we need another statute to address this, nor does this imply another program, but it is a pastoral issue that needs to be addressed.

Children

Canon #852 states clearly that children of catechetical age are considered adults as far as the sacraments of Christian initiation are concerned. There is no mention in the rites of the Church of an “RCIC” (Rite of Christian Initiation of Children) - an acronym that deserves Christian burial. It was not encouraging to read that only 47% of children of catechetical age are receiving all three Sacraments of Initiation when they are baptized into the church. This is clearly contrary to National Statutes #18 & #19 and to the spirit of post-Vatican II theology of Christian initiation. There is an impoverished sacramental theology at work when Confirmation and Eucharist are delayed after the Baptism of an adult or child of catechetical age. I have heard pastors and catechists say “The children are ready for Baptism but not ready for Confirmation.” What is it that is so necessary for Confirmation that isn’t necessary for Baptism?” I understand the messiness that Directors of Religious Education have to deal with when children are being confirmed at different ages. However, we need to do what is already expected of us in establishing the initiation polity of the Church before we can sort out the particulars of a pastoral plan for the full initiation of our children. We tend to become slaves to our systems instead of developing systems that reflect our values and beliefs.

A further indication that something isn’t right when it comes to initiating children of catechetical age is that the CARA survey results report that 64% of the children of catechetical age are being prepared for baptism in less than one year. What does that formation process look like? Do we believe that children are capable of a genuine conversion and a relationship with the living Christ? If we do, then we cannot arbitrarily plan to foster conversion, catechize, teach prayer, and form young people as missionary disciples in nine months.

I’ve also met pastors who are using the Rite of Baptism for Children (infants) for children of catechetical age. Do we need to clarify what is the proper ritual book?

Furthermore, survey results tell us that only 50% of the parishes celebrate the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens for children. This is evidence that we haven’t done enough to develop a genuine catechumenate for children. Given the change in our national demographics, we can no longer dismiss the issue of an unbaptized child of catechetical age as an unusual or rare occurrence. What was once an exception - a 12 year old seeking baptism - has now become commonplace. Do we need a Statute that addresses our concern about the initiation of children?

RCIA Ministers

Now we get to the source of many of our pastoral issues. The CARA study tells us that the bigger the parish the more likely it is that a paid staff member is responsible for initiation ministry. In smaller parishes the pastor appears to be more involved. Volunteers are also taking responsibility in parishes. What the survey doesn’t answer, but would be good to know, is how many parishioners are involved? The survey seems to indicate that for at least the larger parishes, there is generally a team of five. Is it just a professional team that takes responsibility for the RCIA year after year? The involvement of the community is an indicator of whether parishes have a genuine RCIA or whether they are hosting glorified convert classes.

We should all be concerned about whether clergy and laity are being trained adequately for this ministry? Where do people go for training and formation, not only to get acquainted with the rite, but the theology that underscores the rite and the training needed to be a catechist for adults? The pressing issue,

again, isn't really about content, but how we are using the content to build faith, change lives, and foster a mature spirituality. This is a huge pastoral concern. There are fewer well trained lay leaders today than in the past. Budget cuts in parishes and dioceses have led to fewer opportunities for ministerial development. We should still be mourning the loss of the North American Forum on the Catechumenate which trained thousands of RCIA ministers over the years. What is a Bishop or Pastor to do now? We also need to look at seminary practice. I'm told that not all seminaries even offer as much as an introduction into the RCIA.

Initiation into the Body of Christ or into an RCIA Society?

The question rises when we see that 64% of neophytes are being channeled immediately into service in the catechumenate. The fostering of a very closely knit RCIA group is not the ultimate goal. Initiation into the Catholic community is. This tightly bonded RCIA community may also have a bearing on why so many parishes continue to include the candidates for reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church in the Easter Vigil liturgy. They can't bear to see themselves divided into two groups. The more a parish community gets involved in the process of welcoming, catechizing, praying with catechumens, and forming and apprenticing catechumens, the less likely it will be that the catechumenate circle becomes its own society.

Smaller Parishes

The survey results tell us that the smaller the parish the fewer parishioners are involved and the fewer rites being celebrated. The engagement of parishioners in small parishes is understandable from one perspective. However, is it not conceivable that a small parish becomes the catechumenate? Its whole social and spiritual network would become the nurturing community that prepares an individual for initiation. An option for smaller parishes, especially in rural areas, is to consider sharing the process with other parishes. Rites would still be celebrated in one's own community. This is all the more achievable when a priest serves as pastor of two or three parishes.

Mystagogy

The survey tells us that 21% of parishes offer no mystagogy for neophytes. That's not an alarming figure, although we can't be too sure what mystagogy looks like in the 79% who claim that they do offer mystagogy. The RCIA holds up the Easter Liturgies as the principal source for mystagogy (cf. RCIA #247 & Statutes #22). From that perspective, if neophytes are present for Sunday Masses during the Easter Season then they are presumably being drawn into mystagogy through the scriptures, music, prayers and preaching. The current statutes prescribe a full year for mystagogy. (#24) While we might want to suggest that pastoral care of the neophytes (cf. RCIA 244-251) be extended for a full year, suggesting that a "program of mystagogy" be provided from Easter to Easter, is probably unreasonable as most pastors would attest to. Nevertheless, within the Easter Season a suitable mystagogy that draws from the liturgy and the Paschal Mystery would be valuable for the neophytes. What may be problematic is that an acquaintance with mystagogical preaching and catechesis may be an art that is not well known or developed. Opportunities for gathering the neophytes outside the Easter season Masses would be pastorally desirable so that they can delve more deeply into an awareness of the mysteries they have celebrated and "derive a new perception of faith, of the Church, and of the world." (RCIA #245)

Conclusion

The National Statutes for the Catechumenate are valuable but invisible to many. Some editing would be welcome. I'm not sure that additional Statutes need to be added, but perhaps what is now in place may need some editing to better convey their intention and importance.

Even if the Statutes remain just as they are, I believe this is the time for a new and fresh invitation to rediscover the *Ordo initiationis christianae adultorum* in our Church's life at a time when we are being asked to take seriously a new evangelization and to become missionary disciples. Perhaps a national Pastoral Letter could reawaken interest in the RCIA. Or perhaps a well produced video would be helpful for RCIA ministers.

Diocesan directors of liturgy with the collaboration of the FDLC may suggest additional steps for developing initiation ministry, perhaps publishing a set of pastoral notes that supplement the purposes of the Statutes.

Despite an incomplete and uneven development, the Rite of Christian initiation of Adults has been a blessing for the Church. We have learned to appreciate the Sacred Triduum, the dignity of Baptism, the significance of the Paschal Mystery, the call to conversion, and the identity of a Catholic community as a community of missionary disciples. There are parish ministers in large cities and rural communities who are working very hard and with great pastoral wisdom in the true spirit of our initiation rites. We don't want to overlook those good efforts even as we refine our pastoral methods and grow in our understanding of the rites of initiation. We can take the best of what we've accomplished with God's help and continue to build our pastoral practice upon it.