

# Seek The Living God



Insert 1

## Initiating New Members

### An Overview of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

Mary Ann was a beautiful and enthusiastic young woman of twenty-four, who had just one year before married George, a life-long Catholic. Never a member of any church, she had received no formal religious training. Yet her family had always prayed together, and she deeply believed in God. She yearned to share her faith with others, and especially with her husband George. Her longing led Mary Ann to the local Catholic parish, where she asked to be baptized and confirmed, and to be welcomed to the eucharistic table.

Rick had just graduated from a Midwestern college and moved to a new city in the East to begin his first job. As an infant Rick was baptized in his father's Catholic faith. Rick's parents were divorced, however, when he was very young, and he lived with his mother until he left for college. Because his mother was not active in any church, Rick was never catechized in the faith, and never received any of the other sacraments. As he began a new life in a new city, he was eager to find some guidance for his life and to enjoy the support of a community of Christians who shared his values.

Patricia, a twenty-nine year old single woman, grew up in a strongly Lutheran family. She was baptized as an infant, attended Sunday school, and received confirmation and communion in her parents' Lutheran church. However, during her college years she began to drift away from God and from the Church. Although she had very little interest in religion as a college student, many of her friends were Catholics, and occasionally she attended Sunday Mass with them. After eight years as a social worker, she began to feel the need to be part of a Church community where she could once again nurture, celebrate and share her faith in God.

#### The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) provides a process for people like Mary Ann, Rick, and Patricia, people who are searching, people who wish "consciously and freely [to] seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit enters their hearts" (RCIA 1). The reasons why people are initially attracted to the Church are as varied as the inquirers themselves, and yet all those who enter the RCIA share a desire to come to a living faith in God as members of the Christian community.

The initiation of adults is "a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful" (RCIA 4). In fact, there are four periods in the initiation process, each of which corresponds to a person's growth in faith and entry into the life of the Christian community. Catechumens' growth in faith and their gradual conversion and incorporation into the Christian community are marked by liturgical celebrations as they move from one period to the next. The role of the whole community in the initiation of new members is most evident in the celebration of the important rituals in these four periods of initiation:

**Evangelization and Precatechumenate** In the period of *evangelization and pre-catechumenate*, newcomers are given the opportunity to reflect on the experience of God in their lives and to ask their questions. The community in turn shares with them the good news of Jesus Christ. The purpose of this period is to guide inquirers to an initial conversion to Christ.

**Catechumenate** The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens marks the beginning of the period of the *catechumenate*, a substantial period of formation in the Christian

life. During the catechumenate a person's initial conversion is deepened by embracing the Christian community's way of life; by participation in worship, especially the Sunday liturgy of the word; by catechesis based on the word of God; and by taking up a share in the Church's mission.

**Purification and Enlightenment** The Church sets aside a time of immediate and intensive preparation for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation. This period, known as *purification and enlightenment*, coincides with the season of Lent, the forty days before Easter. Through the liturgies and the reflection of this period, the whole community joins candidates in focusing on the transformation of one's whole person to the way of Christ, to a life based on the gospel.

**Mystagogy** The sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, eucharist) are celebrated with great festivity and solemnity at the Easter Vigil. During the subsequent period of *mystagogy*, the fifty days of the Easter season, the newly initiated and the whole Christian community savor the experience of the Easter sacraments, reflect on their meaning for their lives, and once again embrace their share of the Church's mission in the world.



### For Whom is the RCIA Intended?

The RCIA is intended primarily for unbaptized adults, who like Mary Ann, seek to enter the Church through the three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. These persons are referred to as *catechumens*.

In the United States, the RCIA also includes liturgical rites and provides guidelines for the formation of baptized but uncat-echized Catholics who seek to complete their initiation through the sacraments of confirmation and the eucharist. Similar rites and guidelines are also provided for adults baptized in other Christian churches who seek to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church. In the formation of baptized persons, the Church acknowledges that they are already part of the body of Christ through baptism. Therefore, those like Rick and Patricia who are already baptized are never referred to as catechumens, but as *candidates*.

The RCIA is the concern not only of the catechumens and candidates themselves, but of the whole Christian community, which is itself renewed in the celebration of initiation: "By joining the catechumens in reflecting on the value of the paschal mystery and by renewing their own conversion, the faithful provide an example that will help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously" (RCIA 4).

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## The Ministries of Adult Initiation

Bill's wife Janet had been raised as a Baptist, but after their marriage Janet began to attend Sunday Mass with Bill. Five years and two children later, Janet decided to enter the Catholic Church. During the year that she spent in formation, Bill participated in almost every aspect of the initiation process. His own faith, already very strong, became even more important to him.

At times Bill even feared that he might be deriving more benefit from the formation process than Janet or her sponsor. The following year, when he was asked to become a catechist for adult catechumens and candidates, he wondered if he had the ability to guide others in deepening their faith, but accepted the invitation in spite of his doubts.

Roberta entered the catechumenate with very little religious background, since her own family was rather hostile toward religion. Through the support of her husband and her own longing for God, however, she grew in her ability to articulate a deep personal faith in God, and became increasingly involved in the community's outreach to the poor. Throughout the period of the catechumenate, and during her first year as a fully initiated member of the Church, she was tireless in her work for the homeless in the city where she lived. She expressed to the catechumenate director in her parish a desire to share the faith she valued so much. Roberta was delighted to receive an invitation to serve on the precatechumenate team, where she could be of service to inquirers.

### The Ministry of the Christian Assembly

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) provides liturgical rites and a process of formation in the Christian life by which unbaptized adults are joined to Christ and to the Church. The RCIA also contains adapted rites and guidelines for the

formation of baptized Catholics who have never been catechized or received any of the other sacraments, and also for those who were baptized in other Christian churches and desire to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church.

Because "the initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful" (RCIA 4), the primary minister of the initiation rite is the community itself.

All the people of God have been entrusted with the mission of proclaiming the good news of Christ. All share in the responsibility for inviting others to become disciples and to be immersed in the life-giving waters of baptism. Because the initiation of new members is a ministry of the whole community, the RCIA directs that "the people of God, as represented by the local Church, should understand and show by their concern that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized" (RCIA 9). There are a number of ways that the whole community exercises its ministry for catechumens and candidates:

**Hospitality** Especially during the period of evangelization and precatechumenate, the whole community is invited to welcome newcomers into its midst. The RCIA suggests that the faithful should "show themselves ready to give the candidates evidence of the spirit of the Christian community and to welcome them into their homes, into personal conversation, and into community gatherings" (RCIA 9).

**Witness** The goal of adult initiation is conversion to Christ and a life of discipleship in the Christian community. As companions for one another on the journey of faith, we welcome catechumens and candidates to walk the way of Christ with us. We offer them the example of our own Christian life of word, worship, community and service. Our witness is also important

for attracting newcomers to join us. By the example of our lives we are evangelizers, bringing to others the good news of Jesus Christ.

**Liturgy** By their full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy, the Christian assembly ministers to the catechumens and candidates. The worshipping community expresses its faith in word and in action: by its enthusiastic song, its earnest prayer, its attentive hearing of God's word. During the catechumenate, which is a substantial period of formation in the Christian life, the catechumens join us every Sunday for the liturgy of the Word, and after the homily they are dismissed to continue their reflection on the word of God. The enthusiastic participation of the faithful in the liturgy each Sunday can help to strengthen catechumens as they seek to deepen their faith.

In addition to the Sunday liturgy of the word, the entire initiation process is marked by liturgical rites which correspond to the catechumens' growth in faith and their gradual incorporation into the Christian community.

The active participation of the faithful is presumed in all of these celebrations, which take place "within the community of the faithful" (RCIA 4).

### Specialized Ministries in the Initiation of Adults

While all the people of God have a share in ministering to catechumens and candidates, the rite calls for a number of specialized ministries within the assembly.

Catechumens are given *sponsors*, who accompany them and present them to the assembly at the rite of acceptance at the beginning of the catechumenate. The sponsors serve as their companions throughout this period, sharing with them their own faith and offering support as they grow closer to God and to the Christian community. Baptized candidates likewise receive sponsors from the community to accompany and support them during their period of formation.

Catechumens may choose their *sponsors* or other members of the faithful to serve as godparents. At the beginning of Lent, the godparents are called upon to give testimony regarding the catechumens. They assist the catechumens in their period of Lenten preparation for the sacraments of initiation. They accompany them at the Easter Vigil, when the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist are celebrated. Finally, they join the newly initiated throughout the Easter season in celebrating and reflecting on the meaning of the sacraments they have celebrated in the midst of the assembly.

As leader of the local Church, the *bishop* has a special responsibility for the initiation of new members. The diocesan bishop "sets up, regulates, and promotes the program of pastoral formation for catechumens" (RCIA 12). On or near the first Sunday of Lent, he presides at the rite of election, in which the call of catechumens to the sacraments of initiation is affirmed

and celebrated. If possible, he should also preside at the Easter Vigil and lead the assembly in celebrating the sacraments of initiation.

As the bishop oversees the initiation of new members in a diocese, so *pastors* are responsible in parishes for establishing a process of formation for catechumens and for celebrating the various rites that are part of their Christian initiation. The rite calls on *priests* to be especially attentive to the pastoral care of catechumens, "especially those who seem hesitant and discouraged" (RCIA 13). They also approve the catechumens' choice of godparents, and help them in their ministry. *Deacons* also "should be ready to assist in the ministry to catechumens" (RCIA 15).

Many parishes have established *catechumenate teams* to be responsible for the formation of catechumens and candidates. Members of catechumenate teams serve as leaders of the pre-catechumenate for adults who are just beginning a period of inquiry, and as catechists for catechumens and candidates during their time of formation in the catechumenate. They also lead the Lenten preparation of candidates for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, and guide the newly initiated to reflect on the meaning of the sacraments during the Easter season, known also as the period of mystagogy. In addition, team members take responsibility for recruiting, training and providing for the ongoing formation of sponsors; for coordinating hospitality and finding opportunities for the catechumens and candidates to be involved with other members of the community; for helping them become active in service to others; for giving them spiritual direction on an individual basis; and for working with members of the liturgy team to prepare the celebration of the various rites which are part of the RCIA. Above all, the members of the catechumenate team are to help the assembly take its rightful part in the initiation of new members.



### An Invitation

If you feel called to serve in one of the specialized ministries of the RCIA, please speak to a member of the parish staff or to a member of the catechumenate team. Even if you are not prepared to take on one of these ministries, however, your willingness to be welcoming, to give witness, and to participate actively in the liturgy are vital ministries in the initiation of new members.

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# Seek The Living God



Insert 3

## The Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate

### Welcoming

**H**enry, a twenty-seven year old journalist, was married to a Catholic woman and had recently agreed to the baptism of their infant daughter in the Catholic Church. Although Henry's parents were members of a Unitarian church, they were relatively indifferent to religion and had influenced him to regard faith in God with vigorous intellectual skepticism.

Yet the witness of his wife's strong and simple faith, along with the miracle of their daughter's birth, began to chip away at his doubts. Even though he was unsure about the extent to which he could accept the teachings of the Church, he was very attracted to the sense of God's presence that he experienced in the gatherings of the local Catholic community.

Patricia, a thirty-four year old mother of two, had been divorced for just over a year. Her former husband was a Catholic by upbringing but never practiced the faith during the eight years of their marriage. Patricia's own parents were not active members of any church, attending as a family only on Christmas and Easter.

Her divorce left Patricia with the feeling that her life lacked a sense of purpose, and she envied the strength that some of her Catholic friends derived from their faith. She was eager to find out what these other women had that she did not, even though she felt insecure about her complete lack of training in religious faith.

### Welcoming the Inquirers

The reasons why people seek God and faith through membership in the Church are as varied as the inquirers themselves. Some are drawn by a desire for a common faith to unite their young families, while others are attracted by the wonder of God's presence in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church.

Still others, who have lacked a clear sense of direction in their

lives, are seeking moral guidance and spiritual support in the face of sometimes difficult personal crises.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) provides for those interested in embracing the Catholic faith a period called *evangelization and precatechumenate*, during which the Christian community welcomes inquirers, listens to their stories, and responds with the good news of Christ.

During the precatechumenate we, the members of the Christian community, extend to inquirers our *hospitality* and stand ready to make them a part of our community.

The Church seeks first of all to *listen* to the stories of the inquirers. God is already present and active in their lives, and it is our first task to help them identify that presence, and then to affirm and celebrate it.

As we listen to their stories, usually in a small group setting, we also read and reflect together on stories from the Bible. In God's word we hear the good news that in Christ we are loved more than we could dare to imagine.

In the period of the precatechumenate, inquirers are also given the opportunity to raise questions that they have about God, faith and the Church. Some inquirers are puzzled by what seems like a multitude of Catholic practices, while others are struggling with difficult moral issues. Dealing with all of these questions is an important step in helping inquirers to make a decision about whether or not they are prepared to become catechumens or candidates. No question is too great or too insignificant.

The goal of evangelization and precatechumenate is to help inquirers come to an initial conversion to Christ. By "initial conversion" we mean an ability to see the presence of God in

ordinary life experience; the beginnings of a life of prayer; and a willingness to seek to follow Christ and to come to know God more intimately.

The precatechumenate is a preliminary period for those who seek to become members of the Church. It leads to a ritual celebration in which they begin the period of the catechumenate, a substantial period of formation in the life of the Catholic Christian community. At this liturgy unbaptized persons become *catechumens*.

There is also a ritual celebration for welcoming as *candidates* persons who were baptized in other Christian churches, as well as those baptized as Catholics but never instructed in the faith. Baptized persons are never referred to as catechumens.

### **An Invitation**

Do you recognize yourself in the stories or descriptions above? If you yourself are such a seeker, we invite you to participate in the precatechumenate. Please feel free to approach a priest or deacon, a staff member, or a member of the parish catechumenate team to find out where and when precatechumenate sessions are held.

Do you know someone who might welcome an invitation to participate in the precatechumenate? All of us are entrusted with the task of initiating new members. You have a wonderful opportunity to help another person come to a deeper faith and a richer life in Christ. Will you extend the invitation?



Sammy

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Insert 4

## Following Christ Living The Gospel

### The Rite of Acceptance and Period of the Catechumenate

When Henry began attending precatechumenate sessions at the local Catholic parish, he already felt a tug toward God. Although he had never been baptized, he became acquainted with Catholic belief and practice through the deep and simple faith of his wife and her family.

During the precatechumenate the witness of parishioners and his own reflection helped him to bring to articulation what he already knew in his heart: that God loved him more than he could ever dream. Now he was ready to accept the invitation of Christ to follow the path of discipleship by becoming a catechumen.

The pain from her divorce led Patricia to the realization that her life lacked a sense of purpose. Even though she had been baptized in another Christian church, she found at Sunday Mass and in the precatechumenate sessions that she was beginning to experience God's presence in her life as if for the first time.

Still she struggled to understand the teachings of the Catholic Church on many issues, especially in the areas of sexual morality and on the question of divorce and remarriage. Over the course of the eight months that she participated in precatechumenate sessions, she more and more came to terms with these issues. At last she felt ready to become a candidate for reception into full communion with the Catholic Church.

#### The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens

Unbaptized persons like Henry, who desire to enter the catechumenate, are welcomed by the local Christian community during the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens, which is the first major liturgical celebration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). The rite of acceptance takes place at

a Sunday liturgy or at another liturgical celebration where the community is gathered.

In the rite of acceptance, the community welcomes the inquirers, affirms them in their desire to follow Christ, and sets before them a new phase in their formation into the Christian life. The following are some of the key elements of this rite: **Welcome** Reflecting the joy of the community, the priest "greet[s] the candidates in a friendly manner" (RCIA 49), then asks each of the inquirers to state before the assembly what they are asking of the Church.

**First Acceptance of the Gospel** As they prepare to begin the catechumenate, the inquirers are asked to give voice to their acceptance of the gospel of Christ and to commit themselves to a journey of faith "under the guidance of Christ" (RCIA 52).

**Sponsors** Each catechumen is accompanied by a sponsor from the community who will be a companion not only at this rite, but throughout the period of the catechumenate.

**Signing with the Cross** The catechumens are signed with the cross to show that they now belong to Christ, and that they are now to follow him on the way of the cross.

**A Place at the Table of God's Word** Since they are "are now part of the household of Christ" (RCIA 47), the catechumens are led into the church and given places in the assembly where from now on they will join the community each Sunday in celebrating the liturgy of the word. After the readings and homily they may be presented with a book containing the gospels.

**Dismissal** Beginning at the rite of acceptance and continuing until the celebration of the sacraments of initiation,

catechumens are sent from the assembly before the profession of faith and the general intercessions. They remain together, however, under the guidance of community members, to reflect on the word of God and to “share their joy and spiritual experiences” (RCIA 67).

### The Rite of Welcoming the Candidates

Baptized but uncatechized Catholics, or baptized Christians who seek to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church, may be welcomed as candidates in a rite that contains nearly all the elements listed above. Since they are already joined to Christ and to the Church by virtue of their baptism, baptized candidates are never referred to as catechumens.

At times a parish community may have both unbaptized and baptized adults to be welcomed into a period of formation. In the United States the RCIA makes provision for a combined rite in which clear distinctions are made between catechumens and baptized candidates.

### The Period of the Catechumenate

“The catechumenate is an extended period during which the candidates are given suitable pastoral formation and guidance, aimed at training them in the Christian life” (RCIA 75). This period is less like a course of study than it is like an apprenticeship, during which catechumens and candidates grow in faith by actively participating in every aspect of the life of the community. In the United States, unbaptized persons are normally expected to begin the catechumenate at least one full year prior to the celebration of the sacraments of initiation. During this time of formation they are to take part in four key areas of the Church’s life:

**Worship** Celebrations of the word of God are at the heart of the catechumenate period. These include both the Sunday liturgy of the word, as well as special celebrations of the word held especially for the benefit of the catechumens. Ordinarily, catechumens are to be “kindly dismissed” (RCIA 75) after the homily at Mass, since they cannot yet participate in the eucharist. In addition to celebrations of the word, the Church also provides for blessings, exorcisms, and anointings “to purify the catechumens little by little and strengthen them with God’s blessing” (RCIA 75).

**Catechesis** The catechesis of catechumens is “solidly supported by celebrations of the word” and is “accommodated to the liturgical year” (RCIA 75). In a sense the Lectionary for Mass is the Church’s basic catechism, since it provides a plan for nourishing God’s people with the word in keeping with the seasons and feasts of the Church year. Pope Paul VI encour-

aged all God’s people to look to the Bible as their primary source book, calling it “the abiding source of spiritual life, the foundation for Christian instruction, and the core of all theological study” (Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution, *Missale Romanum*, April 3, 1969).

Through their reflection on the living word of God as it is proclaimed in the midst of the community, catechumens come to a deeper understanding of the doctrine of the Church. Even more important, however, they come to a deeper relationship with the living Christ, who speaks to us in the word.

**Community Life** Catechumens have set out on “a spiritual journey” (RCIA 75) with the support of their sponsors and of the entire community. This journey of conversion to the way of Christ calls them to lay aside old ways of thinking and acting and to embrace the community’s life of prayer, witness, love, and self-renunciation.

**Mission** Catechumens participate actively by word and deed in the Church’s mission of making known the good news of Christ. Many parishes involve their catechumens in social ministries, such as feeding, clothing or sheltering the poor, or caring for the elderly.

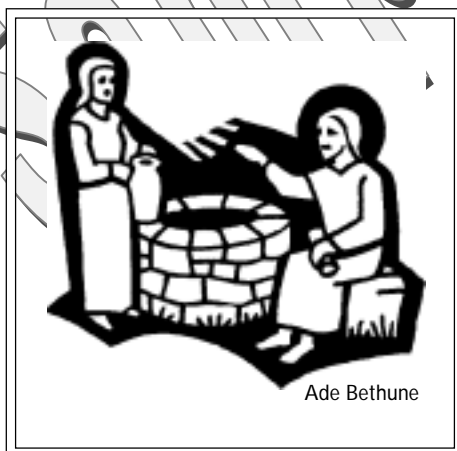
### The Ministry of the Christian Community

The initiation of new members is a ministry of the entire Christian community. One way that the community expresses its support for the catechumens is by its participation in the Sunday liturgy and at the other rites belonging to the catechumenate period. At these celebrations the faithful “should seek to be present whenever possible and should take an active part in the responses, prayers, singing and acclamations” (RCIA 9).

Another important way that the members of the local Church participate in the initiation of adults is by taking seriously

their own spiritual journey. “By joining the catechumens in reflecting on the value of the paschal mystery and by renewing their own conversion, the faithful provide an example that will help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously” (RCIA 4).

By accepting their part in the formation of new members, the members of the local Church show “that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized” (RCIA 9).





# Seek The Living God



Insert 5

## Adult Initiation: The Lenten Journey

### Rite of Election and the Period of Purification and Enlightenment

**E**lena could hardly believe that an entire year had gone by since she was welcomed into the catechumenate. She had never been baptized or belonged to any church, but she began the catechumenate with a deep sense of her need for faith in God to give her life direction and meaning. During her twelve months as a catechumen, Elena came more and more to think of herself as a member of the Catholic community. Aside from her participation at the Sunday liturgy of the word and the catechetical session immediately following the dismissal of the catechumens from the liturgy, she and her husband Juan were actively involved in coordinating meals at a shelter for the homeless. As Lent drew near, her sponsor and members of the catechumenate team met with her and affirmed her call to the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil.

When Gary began his time of formation, he approached it cheerfully, knowing that it would be a period of some months. Even though he had not belonged to a church community for nearly ten years, Gary was a baptized Christian and expected that his formation into the Catholic community would be interesting and informative, but hardly transforming. Over the course of the many weeks that he gathered with other baptized candidates, with catechumens, and with sponsors, Gary began to hear God's word in a way that was fresh—and challenging. For the first time in his life he heard the word as really pertinent to him as a husband, as a father of two children, and as an administrator. As he joined the other baptized candidates and the catechumens in beginning their Lenten preparation for Easter, he was a changed person.

#### Rite of Election or Enrollment of Names

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) includes liturgical rites and a process of formation for unbaptized persons who seek to be joined to Christ and to the Christian community by the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. It also includes similar rites and suggests a corresponding process for baptized but uncatechized Catholics who seek to complete their initiation by the sacraments of confirmation and eucharist; and also for Christians baptized in other churches who desire to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church.

Unbaptized persons ordinarily spend at least one full year in the period of the catechumenate, which is “an extended period during which the candidates are given suitable pastoral formation and guidance, aimed at training them in the Christian life” (RCIA 75). On or near the First Sunday of Lent, those catechumens who are to be initiated at Easter are affirmed in their call to the sacraments of initiation in the rite of election. Prior to this celebration the catechumens choose *godparents* who can give testimony about them at the rite of election, and who can accompany them in their final preparation for the sacraments of initiation.

The rite of election is normally a gathering of the whole diocesan church at which the bishop presides. At this celebration the bishop seeks the affirmation of the godparents (and the assembly) regarding the catechumens, who are invited to sign the Book of the Elect. As leader of the local church, the bishop declares that the catechumens are now “members of the elect, to be initiated into the sacred mysteries at the next Easter Vigil” (RCIA 133).

Baptized candidates are never referred to as catechumens, because they are already joined to Christ and to the Church through baptism. As they seek to complete their initiation, however, the RCIA provides rites corresponding to those used with catechumens. At the beginning of Lent, the diocesan church may gather to celebrate *the rite of calling the candidates to continuing conversion*. As in the rite of election, the bishop seeks the affirmation of the sponsors (and the assembly). In response to this testimony, the bishop recognizes the desire of the candidates to complete their initiation, and invites them to “join with us this Lent in a spirit of repentance” (RCIA 454). The rite of calling the candidates to continuing conversion may be celebrated at the same liturgy as the rite of election of catechumens, but clear distinctions are made between the two groups.

Often the rite of election and calling of candidates to continuing conversion are celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent, late in the day, or even on a weekday evening during the first week of Lent. On Sunday morning or at some other time prior to the diocesan rite, parishes may celebrate a *rite of sending* which incorporates many of the same elements, and allows the local community to hear the testimony of the godparents and sponsors. Some communities have encouraged the godparents and sponsors to give such affirmation in their own words. Also, if catechumens are to sign the Book of the Elect before the actual rite of election, they may do so at this parish rite.

### Period of Purification and Enlightenment

The rite of election and its related rites are publicly and solemnly celebrated at the beginning of Lent, a season of renewal for the whole community. The whole Church prepares for the Easter celebration by reflecting on baptism and repentance.

For the elect (the unbaptized candidates who are preparing to celebrate the three sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil), this Lenten time of preparation is called the *period of purification and enlightenment*. Their Lenten preparation “is intended to purify the minds and hearts of the elect as they search their own consciences and do penance” (RCIA 139). The elect are to join the whole Church in doing penance by prayer, self-denial and works of charity. During this period the elect are also to be enlightened by a deep and personal knowledge of Christ our Savior. By confessing Christ as Savior of the world, the elect and the whole community receive strength to acknowledge their weakness and face their sin.

### Scrutinies

The primary liturgical rites of this period are the *scrutinies*, which are celebrated on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. The scrutinies are based on three important stories from the Gospel of John: the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:5–42); the man born blind (Jn 9:1–41); and the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:1–45). The Samaritan woman, the blind man, and the sisters of Lazarus all encountered Jesus in a way which transformed their life and understanding. They came to see themselves, the world, and Jesus himself in a new way. By facing their own

powerlessness, they were able to confess their faith in Christ as Savior of the world.

In the scrutinies the elect and the community acknowledge the powers of evil that weigh us down and divert us from the way of Christ. “The scrutinies are meant to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good” (RCIA 141). This healing and strength is powerfully signified as the presider silently lays hands on each of the elect and prays that they may receive the power of Christ. Although baptized candidates do not participate in the scrutinies with the elect, the RCIA includes a *penitential rite (scrutiny)* for them which follows the same structure, and which may be celebrated on the Second Sunday of Lent or on a Lenten weekday.

### Presentations

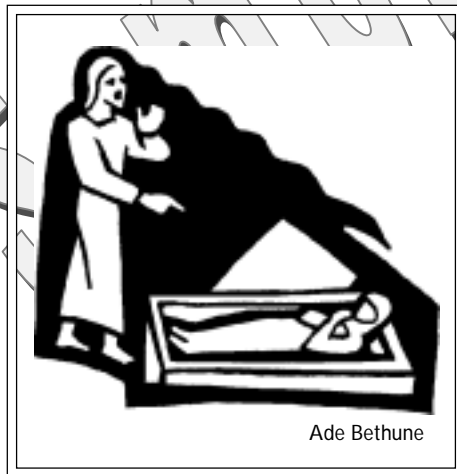
In initiation rites of the early church, the elect were presented with the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer during their final period of preparation for initiation. The presentation of the Creed prepared them to make their baptismal profession of faith. They received the Lord’s Prayer, so that they could join the rest of the faithful in singing this prayer when they came to the eucharist for the first time.

The RCIA provides for the presentations to take place at weekday liturgies during the period of purification and enlightenment, unless they have been celebrated earlier in their formation, during the catechumenate. These two great ancient texts “have always been regarded as expressing the Church’s faith and prayer. These texts are presented in order to enlighten the elect” (RCIA 147).

**Our Continuing Call to Conversion**  
Conversion to Christ is the focus during Lent not only of the elect and the bap-

tized candidates, but also of the whole Church. As we respond to God’s call to continuing conversion, we are to support those who are preparing for the sacraments of initiation. “During Lent, the period of purification and enlightenment, the faithful should take care to participate in the rites of the scrutinies and presentations and give the elect the example of their own renewal in the spirit of penance, faith, and charity” (RCIA 9).

By accepting their part in the formation of new members, the members of the local Church show “that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized” (RCIA 9).



Ade Bethune

# Seek The Living God



Insert 6

## The Easter Mysteries: Joined to the Risen Lord

### Sacraments of Initiation and Period of Mystagogy

**F**or Elena Holy Saturday morning brought with it a tremendous sense of anticipation. It had been eighteen months since she first asked about being baptized, and fifteen months since she was welcomed into the catechumenate. The Lenten preparation had been a very powerful experience for her, and now she was ready for initiation during the night at the Easter Vigil. The celebration of the scrutines and her own Lenten penance jarred her into seeing the world around her and her own past life in a whole new light. She was acutely aware of the power of sin, but also confident in the even greater power of Christ to set people free. She longed to stand in the water and to be plunged into the new life that God was offering her.

George was baptized in the United Methodist Church, but after he married Margaret, he began attending Sunday Mass with her every week. The birth of their second child prompted him to inquire about becoming a member of the Catholic community. For George his five months of formation were a time for nurturing an already vital faith in Christ and for strengthening bonds in the community that he and Margaret had already formed. On one of the Lenten Sundays, he and the other baptized candidates celebrated a penitential rite (scrutiny), which led him to reflect on his continuing conversion to Christ and the way of the gospel. As Lent drew to a close, he participated with other parishioners in a communal penance service, during which he and the other baptized candidates had the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of penance. He eagerly awaited the celebration of the Easter Vigil, when at last he could be one with his wife and the other members of the Catholic community at the eucharistic table.

### Sacraments of Initiation

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) includes both liturgical rites and a process of formation for unbaptized persons who seek to be initiated into the Catholic community. The initiation of new members reaches its culmination in the celebration of baptism, confirmation and eucharist.

These sacraments of initiation are normally celebrated for adults at the Easter Vigil, since “the initiation of Christians is the first sacramental sharing in Christ’s dying and rising” (RCIA 8). The Easter mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection becomes present in our midst when the elect are brought into the Christian community through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist.

At this great night watch, the Easter Vigil, the Christian community proclaims the light of Christ’s rising in the midst of the darkness; it recounts the great stories of our salvation in story and in song; it celebrates the transforming power of the Spirit in the lives of those who are plunged into the waters of Christ’s dying and rising; and it gathers at the table where the community of the baptized receive the body and blood of Christ, the pledge of eternal life and the sign of unity.

In the early church the celebration of initiation always included baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. The breakup of the sacraments of initiation into three separate events took place over the course of many centuries and occurred for reasons that were quite complex. Today, however, the Church has taken a step toward restoring the unity of these sacraments. When adults or

children who have reached catechetical age are initiated, the three sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist are celebrated together.

It is most appropriate that baptism be carried out by immersion, since it "is more suitable as a symbol of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ" (*Christian Initiation: General Introduction 22*), but pouring may also be used.

After the baptism of the elect, baptized candidates may come forward to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church. The newly baptized then join these previously baptized candidates for the celebration of confirmation, to be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that they "may bear witness to [Christ] before all the world and work to bring the Body of Christ to its fullness as soon as possible" (*Christian Initiation: General Introduction 2*).

Finally, the neophytes (newly baptized) take their places among the faithful for the celebration of the eucharist. "In this eucharist the neophytes, now raised to the ranks of the royal priesthood, have an active part both in the general intercessions and, to the extent possible, in bringing the gifts to the altar" (RCIA 217). They take their part in the eucharistic prayer, the Church's great sacrifice of praise, and also in the Lord's Prayer. Their participation in communion is a moment of great joy, since the eucharist is both "the climax of their initiation and the center of the whole Christian life" (RCIA 243). For baptized Christians who are received into the full communion of the Catholic Church, this sharing in the eucharist signifies their full participation in the life of the Catholic community.

### Period of Postbaptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy

The Easter celebration of initiation ushers in the last period of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the period of postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy. The forty days of Lenten preparation give way to fifty days of Easter celebration and reflection. "Mystagogy" is a term borrowed from the Greek which means "understanding of the mysteries (sacraments)." In the joy of Easter, the whole community joins the neophytes in savoring the life-giving mysteries that were celebrated at the Easter Vigil.

The period of mystagogy is first of all a time for meditating on the Gospel. The scriptures that are proclaimed in this season help to illuminate the meaning of the neophytes' sacramental experience. At the same time, their sharing in the sacraments leads them to hear the Gospel message in a new way. The Sunday readings, and especially those of Cycle A, serve as the foundation for this reflection on the relationship between the sacraments and the Christian life.

During the period of mystagogy, the faithful once again extend a joyful welcome to the neophytes, who are now fully initiated members of the Christian community. The Easter season is a time for dinners, picnics, and parties. As they extend hospitality to the newly baptized and associate with them, the faithful "should derive. . . a renewal of inspiration and of outlook" (RCIA 246).

The Easter season celebration of the eucharist is the main setting for the mystagogy period. At Sunday Mass the neophytes gather with the faithful and take their rightful place in the eucharistic assembly. The readings from the Lectionary which are proclaimed at these Masses are specially geared to reflecting on the relationship between the sacraments and the Christian life which the newly initiated have embraced. In addition to eucharistic celebrations at the parishes, the RCIA suggests that the bishop should meet with the neophytes and preside at a Mass for them to "show his pastoral concern for these new members of the Church" (RCIA 251).

These fifty days are a time for the neophytes and the whole community to reflect on the Church's mission in the world. The reading of the Acts of the Apostles throughout the Easter season is a reminder of the risen Lord's mandate to preach the Gospel in all the world. During the period of mystagogy, the neophytes consider the ways that they are called to share in this mission, especially by "doing the works of charity" (RCIA 244).

### Conclusion

On or near Pentecost a special celebration may be held to mark the close of the mystagogy period. The neophytes should continue to gather at least monthly, however, during the first year after celebrating the sacraments of initiation. These gatherings can offer them continuing support and encourage their full participation in the life of the community.

The neophytes should also be brought together on the anniversary of their initiation to renew their friendship, share their experiences and to give thanks.

There is a sense in which mystagogy never ends. Christians are continually called upon to consider what it will cost them to live according to the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, into which they have been initiated through baptism, confirmation and eucharist. This sacramental union with Christ also beckons all of us to go into the world "to carry out the mission of the entire people of God in the Church and in the world" (*Christian Initiation: General Introduction 2*).

