

National videoconference sparks debate on adult initiation rite

By Tracy Early

New York (NC) — The use of the Church's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults sparked a lively debate Feb. 11 during a national videoconference sponsored by the National Pastoral Life Center in New York.

Panelists on the two-hour program argued about whether the rite was appropriate for all adults converting to Catholicism. Others watching the satellite TV transmission in dioceses around the country called in with questions about Catholic evangelization efforts today.

Paulist Father Kenneth Boyack, associate director of the Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association, argued that while the RCIA was the "normative way" for converts to enter the Church, it should not be the only way.

Pastoral experience indicates that "some people are just not RCIA types," he said. He cited particularly shyness and fear of "public exposure" as factors.

But another videoconference panelist, Daughters of Wisdom Sister Barbara O'Dea, liturgy director for the Diocese of Pueblo, Colo., said the problem was more often not with the convert but with a parish minister who, uneasy with the RCIA, "communicates fear."

The RCIA consists of public liturgical rites for the initiation of adult converts into the Church. It includes acceptance into the order of catechumens, or those formally preparing for baptism; a rite of election, or of calling the catechumen to the sacraments of initiation; and the actual celebration of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist initiating the adult into full participation in the life of the Church.

The RCIA is part of the reform of liturgical rites mandated by the Second Vatican Council.

Many liturgy and religious education specialists have widely praised the whole process connected with the new rite for the depth of formation and preparation it gives adult converts. But others have questioned whether it is always being appropriately applied or whether all converts should be required to go through the whole program.

Father Philip Murnion, director of the National Pastoral Life Center and moderator of the videoconference, noted that some consider RCIA a rather lengthy and demanding process for gaining membership in the Church.

Father Boyack said that if the Church insists on the RCIA for everyone, this amounts to telling converts they are not wanted if they will not "stand up" and go through all the public processes involved in the rite.

But the Paulist priest also agreed with a caller from the Diocese of Bismarck, N.D., who saw a connection between the charismatic renewal of Protestant fundamentalists and some Catholic lay evangelists, and deplored their influence on some Catholic youth.

Father Boyack said some Catholic evangelists have followed their Protestant counterparts in stressing the personal commitment of the moment. He said that was a part of Catholic evangelization but not the whole, and the Paulist association sought to maintain awareness of "other dimensions."

Sister O'Dea said that although shyness should be recognized as a personality factor

among some converts, the public nature of the initiation avoids the danger of making religion solely a private matter. The concept of a private experience of God that avoids involvement with the Church does not accord with Catholic teaching, she said.

Father James B. Dunning, director of the North American Forum on the Catechumenate and another panelist, said the RCIA was mandatory, and he hoped that bishops would encourage its use everywhere. But he said forcing reluctant parishes to follow it would not bring useful results.

A caller from the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis suggested tension between

the RCIA and evangelization was mainly a "political" conflict involving national organizations, not a problem on the local level.

But Father Dunning said the tensions were real on the local level, and some people wanting to institute the RCIA reported being "stifled" by pastors who preferred shorter, more traditional forms of convert instruction.

The videoconferences are sponsored by grants from Catholic organizations and are transmitted by satellite through the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America, which has more than 55 participating dioceses.

RCIA

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Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, restored the lapsed tradition of a catechumenate and directed that "a new rite be drawn up for converts who have already been validly baptized."

Since the RCIA was introduced into the diocese nearly nine years ago, more than 90 parishes have adopted the process. They cover the spectrum of possibility, ranging from campus communities to small rural and inner-city parishes to huge suburban parishes.

"It started at the grass-roots level," Mancini said. "The original parishes infected others with their excitement."

For four years, the diocese has provided someone in Mancini's position to support parishes in undertaking the RCIA. Although it is not a mandated process for people seeking to become Roman Catholics, Mancini describes it as "the norm."

Beyond that, the process varies from parish to parish and person to person. Some parishes extend the process over two years, although normally individuals progress at their own pace. Other parishes combine the RCIA with a general renewal of the faith community or incorporate it into confirmation preparation for adults and children.

"Readiness is the criteria in this diocese," Mancini said, pointing out that it is possible to abuse the RCIA by requiring people already baptized to go through every step.

"Someone who is baptized in the Episcopal Church may not need as much catechesis as someone who has always been outside of any church," she added.

"As long as parishes take the spirit of it — that it's rooted in scripture, prayer, service and community ... the experience of the people is the bottom line," she concluded. "RCIA works, but it has to be part of the life of the parish."

Church officials

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pope "who echo the cries of their fellow bishops."

On Feb. 21, the National Council of Churches called on the United States to suspend "all military aid" to the Philippines. The resolution, adopted by the council's executive committee at a meeting in New York, said the decision was spurred by the Feb. 14 statement by the Philippine bishops' conference and a statement by the officers of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines.

In a Feb. 16 telegram to the head of the Philippine bishops' conference, Bishop Malone told the bishops that "the courage and commitment to democracy of the Philippine people are reflected in your words and deeds as teachers and pastors."

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