

In Depth

The new rite: Part I

RCIA becomes 'the business of all the baptized'

EDITOR'S NOTE: This week we begin an in-depth series on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. This installment takes a broad view of how parish RCIA programs are implementing the newly finalized rite. Future segments — which will appear periodically throughout the winter and spring — will focus on one parish's program.

By Teresa A. Parsons

Sixteen years ago, words from one of the Church's most ancient rituals began echoing throughout 20th-century parishes. At the time, theologians and scholars predicted that the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), developed in the age of catacombs and restored by the Vatican in 1972 to prepare adults for the sacraments of initiation, would radically transform the life of the Church.

Parishes and dioceses are only beginning to reap the fulfillment of that promise, according to Father Robert Kennedy, a professor of liturgical studies at St. Bernard's Institute.

"We've been working at it for 10 years, and we're just beginning to catch on to its implications and see its value," he said. "The reformers had in mind that the RCIA is the norm for initiation. Theologians and pastoral ministers took the idea and saw that they could make it the model for the whole of Christian life."

This year, Church officials took yet another radical step, approving a new and final version of the rite, and establishing it as the ordinary way to bring adults to full initiation.

Father Kennedy believes the new rite will prove to be "either the most revolutionary or the most stupid step the Church has taken." On one hand, the new rite risks placing greater demands than ever before on parish staff members and volunteers who comprise parish RCIA teams. Some observers fear that the changes will push the process beyond the reach of small parishes and those just beginning to establish the RCIA.

On the other hand, individuals involved with RCIA at the grassroots level say the process is more than meeting its promise of renewal.

Father Ronald Harley initiated the RCIA at two small, rural parishes where he served from 1984 until earlier this year. This fall, he is revamping the process at St. Francis DeSales in Geneva, where he has been assigned since June. His experience attests to the subtle, yet significant changes RCIA brings to parish life. "I see it changing the liturgical life of the parish. When (parishioners) witness people making a public profession of faith, the so-called 'cradle Catholics' begin to take a more serious look at their lives, and take a more active part in the liturgy," he explained. "Some wanted to come to the catechetical sessions. Their appetites were whetted."

After deciding two years ago to base the parishes' RCIA sessions on each Sunday's readings — known as lectionary-based catechesis — Father Harley also observed a new reverence for the Liturgy of the Word among many parishioners. "As they see the lectionary become the source of instruction for the candidates and catechumens, the whole Word of God takes on new implications," he said.

Maribeth Mancini, diocesan RCIA coordinator, has observed similar trends on a broader level. "This rite is changing our church — it is transforming our church," she said. "It really calls on the people in charge to call forth the gifts of the community, to train the community to take charge."

"When it works in a parish, wonderful things happen," she added. "It's a very hopeful thing."

Diocesan parishes currently stand at almost every stage of response to the RCIA. Some parishes are only beginning a process. Others, like Blessed Sacrament in Rochester and St. Joseph's in Rush, have well-established processes which must mainly adapt to such changes as the call for year-round periods of preparation and follow-up for catechumens — those who are unbaptized.

To parish coordinators and staff members in either category, however, the challenges presented by the new rite can seem overwhelming.

"We're running on our knees — we don't have time to stand up," said Deacon Bill Hunt, is serving as RCIA coordinator at St. Philip's Parish, Penfield. Hunt and his team plan to study the new rite between Easter and Easter, and to begin implementing it at weeks before Easter, 1989. "Looking at it where we are now, 1989 looks like a journey with a lot of work to it," he said, "once we go through and come out the side, I think we'll say 'That wasn't so

bad."

Like Hunt, most RCIA coordinators plan to implement the new rite gradually, although it took effect September 1, 1988. However, at least a few parishes — particularly small rural and urban communities — have yet to adopt the RCIA at all. St. Michael's in Lyons, for instance, has no RCIA because "no one has really come forward to get involved in it at this point," explained Father Richard J. Orlando, pastor.

Among urban parishes, meanwhile, staff members struggle with high neighborhood turnover, limited resources, and a plethora of other pressures. "The problems people are trying to deal with sometimes in addition to coming into the Church at the same time can be monumental," said Sister Anne Marie Lennon, pastoral assistant at St. Andrew's, Rochester.

St. Andrew's already offers an RCIA process, but is exploring the possibility of cooperating with several neighboring parishes. Cooperation offers the advantages of expanded resources and a larger, more diverse group of participants.

Other groups of parishes throughout the diocese are exploring similar options to cope with the demands of the new rite on staff members. "Few parishes have paid RCIA coordinators," said Sister Mary Kay Ryan, RCIA coordinator at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Hamlin. "Is that another job for the religious education coordinator?"

"When you do it the way the book really envisions, it's almost beyond the scope of one parish," she added.

Proponents of the process point out that the RCIA provides parishioners with spiritual fuel to more than compensate for what the process demands. Eventually, as envisioned by the American bishops, the RCIA should be "the focus around which things are happening" in a parish, according to Mancini.

"The initiation of adults is the business of all the baptized," she explained. "We have to figure out how we can respect the integrity of this vision as we practically implement it in our parishes."

The new rite, which became effective September 1, 1988, is actually the full restoration of one of the Church's most ancient rites, adapted to accommodate current realities.

For instance, fewer unbaptized people participate in the present-day RCIA process as compared to the early Church, in which only the unbaptized were initiated. Thus, all the additions to the new rite are directed toward combining in the same process and rituals the unbaptized — catechumens — and candidates — those who have been baptized in a Christian denomination, but who seek full communion within the Catholic Church, according to

Father Kennedy.

The bishops of the Second Vatican Council first called for the restoration of the RCIA 25 years ago. They acted in part because the then-current practice of offering several weeks of "convert classes" in the rectory was seen as insufficient and overly lenient.

The restored Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults was first published in Rome in 1972, and was introduced in U.S. dioceses several years later. Among parishes in the diocese, the RCIA has spread and taken root only within the past decade.

In the meantime, the U.S. bishops' committee on liturgy commissioned research to gauge parish and diocesan reactions to the provisional rite. From that research came the rite's final version, approved by the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and by the bishops of the United States earlier this year.

The provisional version of the restored rite emphasized "time, ritual and communal support in the conversion process," according to diocesan sacramental guidelines. The rite called for catechumens to take part in four distinct periods of preparation, during which three major liturgical rites are celebrated.

The rite begins with the pre-catechumenate, a period of evangelization and inquiry. Next comes the catechumenate, a period of formation, beginning with the Rite of Becoming a Catechumen, which presents and welcomes the candidate to the community, and concluding with the Rite of Election, which celebrates the choice of catechumens to be baptized, and the choice of the community to baptize.

During Lent, candidates observe the period of purification and enlightenment, a time of intense spiritual formation which concludes at the Easter Vigil, when they receive the sacraments of initiation — baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. The final period of mystagogia, extending until Pentecost, integrates the new members fully into the church community.

The new rite's most sweeping change in practical terms is the mandating of a year-long period of preparation for catechumens, and an additional year of mystagogia. In contrast, most parish RCIA processes currently begin inquiry sessions in the fall, and conclude the mystagogia in June at Pentecost.

For several years, RCIA proponents have tried to define it as a process, not a program. The new rite takes a further step in that direction, calling for appropriate pastoral catechesis accommodated to the liturgical year. Most coordinators interpret that as a call for lectionary-based catechesis, in which RCIA sessions are based on the Scripture readings for each week, rather than on a prescribed curriculum.

Whereas the new rite in some ways defines

the process more strictly, it also allows for greater flexibility in other areas. For instance, candidates who have previously been baptized may now be received into full communion not only at the Easter Vigil, but according to their readiness and previous religious education.

"People can enter the process according to where they are in their journey of faith," Mancini said. "We have misunderstood the rite when we imagined that the goal of the process is the Easter Vigil. In fact the goal of the process is the Eucharistic table."

The rite also calls for greater emphasis on spiritual direction in determining when a candidate or catechumen is ready to take each new step in the RCIA process. "We've got to remember that this is not graduation. This is formation ... and we're working toward transformation," Mancini said.

The new rite adds an optional rite of election for children of catechetical age — usually defined as seven or older. Few parishes in the diocese offer an RCIA process exclusively for children. Nevertheless, coordinators of the rite believe that adapting it for children is both practical and symbolically significant.

Since 1983, nearly one-third of the 97 people who have participated in the RCIA at Sister Mary Kay Ryan's parish — St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Hamlin — have been children between the ages of 9 and 16. Sister Ryan has generally organized separate catechetical sessions covering the same topics for adults and children, while bringing the groups together for prayer and socializing. On occasions when both adults and children are present, Sister Ryan and other team members have included wording from the children's rite in the readings and prayers.

"It makes catechists and those working in the RCIA process aware that children have special needs," she said.

The new rite also more clearly defines who does not belong in the RCIA. Experience has taught RCIA coordinators that, while parishes need a process to welcome people returning to the Church, the RCIA is not appropriate.

Nor do Catholics seeking only confirmation fit neatly into the RCIA process as defined by the new rite, which does not envision confirmation being received apart from at least one other sacrament of initiation.

On the other hand, the RCIA does provide "a guiding vision" for both situations — and in Father Kennedy's view — for the whole range of Christian formation, beginning with baptismal preparation and ending "maybe an hour after death."

"Everybody's in a process of ongoing conversion," he said. "If the RCIA is the model of how to deal with conversion, it isn't just for the unbaptized, it's for all of us."

New rite could put confirmation back in it

No aspect of parish life is likely to feel the impact of the new Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) more than sacramental preparation programs.

Already, pastoral ministers envision a "rite of engagement" for couples preparing for marriage, and sponsors for parents seeking baptism for a child.

But the new rite has even more immediate implications for the sacraments of initiation, as several dozen religious educators were startled to learn during last Saturday's regional Catechetical Congress at Christ the King Parish in Rochester.

Participants in a workshop on the sacraments of initiation found that their current pastoral practice outright contradicts both the Church's tradition and its rite as presently written.

In fact, confirmation is just plain out of order.

The Church's initiation rites describe baptism, confirmation and Eucharist as the sacraments of initiation — always referring to them in that order, explained Father Robert Kennedy, professor of liturgical studies at St. Bernard's Institute. He presented the workshop, but he did not make provision for the sacraments of initiation separate from baptism.

"Nowhere in the new rite is there a provision for confirmation as a separate sacrament," he said. "The rite of initiation, baptism, confirmation and Eucharist, do not remain separate sacraments."

Many religious educators, however, have

traditionally viewed confirmation as a sacrament distinct from baptism. Some, however, have seen confirmation as a sacrament that should be received at the same time as baptism. The new rite, however, clearly states that confirmation is a sacrament that should be received at the same time as baptism.

On the other hand, some religious educators — in some cases, both lay and priest — have seen confirmation as a sacrament that should be received at a later date than baptism.

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