

Christian Initiation: A Liturgical, Catechetical, and Pastoral Process

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“ . . . the OCIA process seeks to prepare people not merely for assent to eternal truths but more so to fall in love with an eternal Lover. If participants are falling in love with the person of Jesus, then it is only reasonable that, like anyone we love in the human order, they would want to *know* him more.”



THE ORDER OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION FOR ADULTS (OCIA) is a privileged and, in many ways, challengingly complex form of adult formation. Its complexity flows from the need for the process to be authentically truthful (implying catechesis that is far removed from the easy, sound-bite answers and errors of the culture), authentically personal (implying pastoral flexibility and sacrificial effort to call forth deep conversion), and authentically unitive (implying insertion into a profoundly countercultural liturgical way of life to realize union with a divine Spouse). In other words, to the degree that the OCIA process is complex, it

is so because it must be *fully human* so that it may be fully open to the divine. The restoration of the ancient catechumenal process,



as called for in no less than five documents of the Second Vatican Council, is a reflection of the Church's wisdom in going back to a tried-and-true practice in order to lovingly bring people into her fold.

The catechumenal process is not a program. Programs have a fixed length of time and a determined course of studies. No one can “program” the Holy Spirit as he moves individuals to conversion; each person's conversion journey is unique.

While a parish may do things systematically and make a calendar of events each year, the OCIA team's primary task is not to run a program but to be present to help facilitate conversion. For this reason, it is not desirable to call what parishes do “the OCIA program,” as this invariably creates a false impression for all involved and tends to imply that the journey of the participants is an isolated endeavor within the community of faith.

Catechesis is understood to be concerned with conversion in Christ and with how to live continuously in such a manner not only prior to but after initiation as well. . . . Catechumens are viewed not as anonymous attendants at private educational inquiry classes, but as public persons in the local church. Their faith, progress, and prognosis in communal faith-living are the concerns of the entire local church met for solemn public worship.¹

¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1978), 128, see also 120–22.

One way to understand the Christian initiation process is by breaking it down into its three distinct aspects: liturgical, catechetical, and pastoral. *All three are equally important.* It is an injustice to those considering union with the Church for a catechist to be unambiguously catechetical to the detriment of the liturgical aspect, or be wonderfully pastoral while offering poor catechesis. In order for OCIA to be what it has the potential to be, directors and catechists can benefit greatly from understanding the implications of its liturgical, catechetical, and pastoral dimensions to make available the fullness of the process as intended by the Church.

The catechumenal process is divided into four periods: (1) the Precatechumenate up to the Rites of Acceptance and Welcoming; (2) the catechumenate proper up to the Rites of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion, normally held on the first Sunday of Lent; (3) the period of Purification and Enlightenment, which normally coincides with Lent; and (4) Mystagogy, which traditionally spans the seven weeks of the Easter season, followed by the Neophyte Year, which lasts until the first anniversary of one's initiation. It is useful to discuss the nature and scope of these periods in light of the three aspects.

The First Aspect of the Process: Liturgical Formation²

The OCIA process is dynamically moved along by liturgical rites that serve as gateways into the major periods of the process. Beginning with the Rite of Acceptance (for unbaptized catechumens) and the Rite of Welcoming (for baptized candidates), and going through all the subsequent minor rites and major gateways, liturgy propels the process and motivates conversion. The Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist—are the powerhouses for the whole process, and grace comes with every liturgical moment. This grace—all that it means to be reborn in Christ, to be infused with the theological virtues, to become a coheir with Christ, to be sealed with a deeper configuration to

2 See *The Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* (International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 2022), nos. 40, 75.1, 75.3, 79, 141, 147, 247. Hereafter cited as OCIA.

the crucified One, and to come to the table of the Lord among his people—abundantly provides the ongoing impetus for the conversion process. All involved in OCIA must understand the Catholic sacramental and liturgical sense of reality:³

The sacraments [in the catechumenate of the early Church] were seen as a totality coextensive with the Church's life itself. . . . The liturgy was not seen as a matter of exquisite ecclesiastical ceremony to occupy clergy and religious but as the way a Christian people live in common. . . . [The rites of initiation] were a unified sacramental discipline through which both convert *and* community moved in the Spirit from what each had been toward what each was capable of becoming under grace in that same Spirit—a movement shot through with both pain and glory, with affirmation and renunciation, exorcism and celebration toward a new degree of communion in faith that would leave both convert *and* community irrevocably changed.⁴

The OCIA process aims to lead participants to become “liturgical people,” moving them toward full and active participation in the worshipping community around the one table:

Here is the last and most decisive reason why teaching through worship is superior to all other forms of Christian teaching: *The liturgy gives what it teaches*. It not only presents the mystery of Christ concretely; it also lets us immediately participate in this mystery. If there is anywhere in Christianity that a true initiation into the mystery of Christ takes place, it is here.⁵

3 See Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998), no. 85. Hereafter cited as GDC.

4 Kavanagh, *Shape of Baptism*, 118, 120–21 (italics original).

5 Johannes Hofinger and Francis J. Buckley, *The Good News and Its Proclamation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 56 (italics original).

The liturgical aspect in each particular period is the driving force behind the whole process and the primary means of inserting those along this journey into the mystery of Christ. In the first period, the Precatechumenate, the liturgical aspect is at a minimum. There are no formal liturgical rites during this stage because the inquirer has not yet entered a publicly recognized relationship with the Church. While no formal liturgy takes place at this stage, prayer is an important part of evangelization. Singing hymns, which is a form of prayer, can help draw the heart up to God and facilitate conversion.

The first liturgical rites, the Rite of Acceptance and the Rite of Welcoming, establish (for a catechumen) or deepen (for a candidate) a relationship between the Church and the participant and are the gateways into the period of the catechumenate. There are numerous liturgical moments in this period that impart grace to participants and help them continue along the path of conversion. Blessings, minor exorcisms, anointings, and celebrations of the Word are all designed to introduce those in the catechumenate into the liturgical life of the Church and the benefits of the graces of liturgy.

The next gateway, the Rite of Election (catechumens) and the Continuing Call to Conversion (candidates), begins the intense period of preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation. Participants are greatly helped by the Scrutinies (catechumens) and the Penitential Rite (candidates), as well as the Presentation Rites and Preparation Rites, all directed toward their final preparation for complete Christian initiation. Lent becomes a rising crescendo of liturgical graces, the war against sin at the height of its strength (see Rom 5:20).

The third gateway, reception of the Sacraments of Initiation, fully inserts participants into the mystery of Christ. This is the climax of the catechumenal process, and it is not by accident that it occurs during the Easter Vigil, the Church's greatest and most solemn feast of the year. This third gateway produces the new "fledgling Catholics," or neophytes, who, while enjoying the fruits of all the sacraments like the rest of the

faithful, are still cared for in a special way during their first year. The Neophyte Year begins with seven weeks of Mystagogy, that is, Post-Baptismal Catechesis. During this period, neophytes are invited to participate in the main Sunday Mass of the parish as a group, and the readings during this time have been selected by the Church to meet their needs.

It is important to communicate to both current and future Catholics that liturgy is much more than



ritual, and that it is through the liturgy that our relationship with Jesus Christ becomes as intimate as possible outside of heaven. As OCIA participants move toward full communion with the Church, nothing is more fundamental to their catechesis, or more crucial to impart to the worshiping community, than the fact that a foundational relationship with Jesus is most firmly established through these liturgical rites and the sacramental participation to which they point.

The Second Aspect of the Process: Catechetical Formation⁶

Catechesis, stemming from the Greek verb *katekhein*, can be defined as the re-echoing of that which has been received, making “the faith, as illumined by teaching, a vital, explicit and effective force in the lives of men” and concerning “itself not only with nourishing and teaching the faith, but also with arousing it

6 See OCIA, nos. 38, 75.1, 78, 139, 245.

unceasingly with the help of grace, with opening the heart, with converting, and with preparing total adherence to Jesus Christ on the part of those who are still on the threshold of faith.”⁷

The three major liturgical gateways of the OCIA process help to define the methodology and scope of catechesis during each of the four periods. During the Precatechumenate, the focus is mainly apologetic and evangelistic, with a delivery of the basic Gospel message and unreserved answering of questions:

From evangelization, carried out with God’s help, arise faith and initial conversion, by which each person feels called away from sin and into the profound mystery of divine love. The entire Period of the Precatechumenate is devoted to this evangelization, so that the will to follow Christ and to seek Baptism may mature. (OCIA 37)

The Precatechumenate prepares for and is ordered to the first liturgical step, the Rite of Acceptance (catechumens) or the Rite of Welcoming (candidates).

In the catechumenate, the focus moves to a systematic, organic catechesis involving the complete delivery of the essential elements of the deposit of faith, laying the flesh on the bones of the Gospel proclaimed in the previous period. Describing the deposit of faith, Vatican II stated:

Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes. . . . Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church.⁸

⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus*, no. 14; *Catechesi tradendae*, no. 19. See also Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, *General Catechetical Directory* (1971), no. 17.

⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Dei verbum*, nos. 8, 10.

The catechumenate is typically the longest period of the Christian initiation process, lasting “long enough for . . . conversion and faith to mature, even over several years, if need be” (OCIA 76). It is also the most densely catechetical. Catechesis is to be “fully presented, suited to the liturgical year and supported by Celebrations of the Word” (OCIA 75). The character of the instruction received during this period should be such that, “as every aspect of Catholic doctrine is explained to [catechumens], faith is enlightened, the heart is directed toward God, participation in the liturgical mystery is fostered, apostolic activity is encouraged, and the whole of life is nourished according to the spirit of Christ” (OCIA 78).

This systematic and organic delivery of the deposit of faith seeks to ensure that, by the second liturgical gateway, participants sufficiently understand and desire to live the faith so that they may choose without hesitation to enroll their names among the elect or, if candidates, confidently continue their progress toward full communion with the Church. These rites call forth power and grace to nourish the elect (unbaptized) and the candidates (baptized) during the next period.

During Purification and Enlightenment, the catechist places stronger emphasis on the spiritual and mystical life. The ritual book’s guidelines for this period, as well as the associated rites, direct catechists to shift focus from an exposition of the deposit of faith to spiritual, reflective, and meditative preparation for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation. In this, the Church seeks to foster a state of repentance and effectively arouse the life of prayer and the practices of self-denial and charity. Before they receive the sacraments of initiation, the elect “should resolve to achieve an intimate sense of Christ and the Church. Above all, they are expected to progress in genuine self-knowledge through a serious examination of their lives and true penitence” (OCIA 142).

In Mystagogy and Post-Baptismal Catechesis, the focus is on a deepening of the neophytes’ understanding and practice of the sacramental life, in light of now being able to receive the

fullness of sacramental grace, and to present ways to synthesize all that they have learned, applying it to their lives. The rest of the Neophyte Year would then be devoted to substantiating, strengthening, and deepening their understanding of the faith that will lead to more committed and mature Christian lives. “The character and value of this period should arise from this new personal experience both of the Sacraments and of the community” (OCIA 247).

The Third Aspect of the Process: Pastoral Formation⁹

The OCIA process is a growth in intimacy as much as in knowledge. Aidan Kavanagh, in *The Shape of Baptism*, refers to the catechumenal process as “a structure of Christian nurture.”¹⁰ Along with the powerful liturgical moments of the process and the catechetical endeavor, there is also an intense pastoral activity, which must be initiated from the first time an inquirer expresses interest in the Church. This activity operates with the knowledge that each participant will vary in his or her background, lifestyle, motivation, and state in life. Those doing the OCIA apostolate steep themselves in the lives of participants with gentleness, prudence, and a genuine desire to open their hearts wide to any whom the Spirit draws (see 1 Cor 6:11).

The pastoral components of OCIA are the *people* who participate, some intimately and others from a distance, in Jesus’ work of conversion and discipleship. The pastoral work of the catechumenal process is accomplished through the love and labor of many people, including the clergy, catechists, ministers of hospitality, sponsors, small group leaders, prayer intercessors, and parish members:

But this Christian initiation in the catechumenate
should be taken care of not only by catechists or

⁹ See OCIA, nos. 42, 45, 75.2, 75.4, 120, 244, 246.

¹⁰ Kavanagh, *Shape of Baptism*, 182.

priests, but by the entire community of the faithful, so that right from the outset the catechumens may feel that they belong to the people of God.¹¹

This work is a people-to-person endeavor—all the people serving this one person for the Lord. The pastoral aspect of OCIA involves both information and formation. By instruction and by the experience of authentic fellowship, the catechumens and candidates learn who God is, what his plan is, and how to follow him as a member of the Christian community, “which lives, celebrates and bears witness to the faith”:¹²

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The People of God, represented by the local Church, should always realize and show that the Initiation of adults is its own concern and a matter for all the baptized. It should therefore show itself always prepared to fulfill its apostolic vocation by helping those who seek Christ (OCIA 9).

Through the pastoral attention of others, participants are informed about him, and formed in him, so that their experience of the community of believers becomes an “apprenticeship of the entire Christian life.”¹³

As with liturgy and catechesis, the pastoral aspects change as participants move through the periods of the process. The Precatechumenate is a time of inviting people to come

11 Second Vatican Council, *Ad gentes*, no. 14.

12 GDC, no. 68

13 GDC, no. 67.

and see, of determining their motivation, and of moving them through the initial stages of faith: an encounter with Jesus, turning away from sin, and finding a home in the Church. During the next period, the catechumenate, the pastoral aim is to facilitate the work of Holy Spirit in moving the participants from initial motivation to firm conviction, with strong elements of fellowship and spiritual guidance. Purification and Enlightenment serves as a time of strong support, spiritual direction, and encouragement for participants to examine their conscience, intensify their life of prayer, and increase in works of charity. In the period of Mystagogy, new Catholics receive help to become more open to the pursuit of holiness by deepening their spiritual life through the communal experience of the sacraments and by strengthening relationships in their new parish family. For the remainder of the Neophyte Year, the pastoral focus is to provide continued support and encouragement in living out a full Catholic life in a parochial setting where they feel comfortably at home. The process aims not just at making non-ignorant Christians—it facilitates transforming them into outwardly-focused Christians growing in an authentic Catholic worldview, sure in the conviction that the fullness of the truth has been revealed and can be shared with joy.

In summary, the OCIA process seeks to prepare people not merely for assent to eternal truths but more so to fall in love with an eternal Lover. If participants are falling in love with the person of Jesus, then it is only reasonable that, like anyone we love in the human order, they would want to *know* him more. Without the teaching and converting aspects of the liturgy and the loving witness of the community, formal instruction runs the risk of becoming just information, instead of light for the path of faith in Christ.¹⁴ The catechumenal process, a balance of liturgical, catechetical, and pastoral aspects, thus becomes an engine of conversion today, as it was centuries ago, fulfilling the intention of its restoration by Vatican II.¹⁵

14 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 89.

15 See Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, nos. 64–66.

The Church can be understood as the earthly configuration of Jesus Christ—to be a member of the Church is to be configured to Christ. Our inner being in Christ has its demands. They are not obligations imposed from outside, although one of the Church's missions is to articulate those demands for our guidance and growth. The Christian initiation process invites a beautifully simple view of the matter: the reason to be a Christian is to be perfectly configured to Christ: to be a saint. The reason to be a Catholic is because within the Church subsists the fullness of the means to become a saint—through her graces, her teachings, her people, and her Head—enabling those who so will to be perfected in love.

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