

# **The Catechumenate**

## **The journey of Faith in becoming a Catholic**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This pamphlet aims to bring Catholics of today to an understanding of the revised catechumenate and the place of catechumens within the Church. A catechumen, or a person on the catechumenate journey, is a person in the actual process of becoming a Catholic Christian, a person moving towards baptism and complete membership of the Church. The catechumenate was a strong part of Church life until the time when Europe and much of the then known world became Christian. The emergence of the Church's missionary activity over the past couple of hundred years, especially in Africa, along with the present situation in Western countries of less people being Christian, led the Second Vatican Council to call for the re-establishment of the catechumenate within the life of the Church.

#### **A revised rite**

In 1972, there appeared in response to this call, the revised Rite 'Of Christian Initiation of Adults. It is now commonly referred to by its abbreviated title' R.C.I.A. This rite has been taken up in many parishes in Australia. These parishes are not only finding the way of the R.C.I.A. to be an effective means for the nurturing of new adult Catholics in faith, but are also finding it to be a stimulus for the renewal of the faith of those who have been Catholics all their lives, and this has meant a strengthening of local parish life. The R.C.I.A. has been called the radical rite because it takes us back to our beginning, forcing us to reflect and act upon what it means to be the Church and challenging each parish most deeply to be an evangelising, serving, celebrating and witnessing community of believing people who are journeying together upon the way of Christian conversion. It has been said that in this, the last of the sacramental rites to be revised and implemented as a result of Vatican II, we have a blue-print for the renewal of the whole Church. 'Different programmes and movements can assist in the faith renewal of certain parishioners, but nothing else affects the whole parish continuously as much as this rite which is far more than a liturgical ceremony.

The rite does include liturgical celebration, but it also includes all that leads up to and comes from such celebration: the whole process of moving from unbelief to the faith celebrated in the sacraments of the Church. The rite respects and celebrates the different stages individuals pass through on their journey into membership of the Catholic Church, from their first hearing of the Gospel to their being regular participants in the Sunday Eucharist.

#### **Involvement of the whole parish**

Pope Paul VI said, "the Church exists in order to evangelise". Fundamental to the purpose of our being the Church, is the mission to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and in action. It is the task of the whole Church to evangelise, to encourage those who respond, to nurture them in faith, to share the Tradition with them, teaching them how to believe, pray, serve and witness as members of the community which lives by the death and resurrection of Christ. Where best to learn this, but in the midst of the community through sharing in its life? For far too long, we have tended to reduce adult conversion to "instruction", and we have seen this as being the task of the clergy or religious. But clergy and religious. are not the Church, they are her servants. The responsibility of christian initiation belongs to all who have been baptised into the mission of the Church, and that means all Catholics.

The R.C.I.A. sees the whole parish as having a role in the initiation process: in offering witness and encouragement, in extending hospitality and friendship, in giving support through prayer and companionship, in joining together in that worship which is Christian celebration. Some parishioners will be called upon to exercise particular roles and ministries such as being catechists or sponsors, but that does not mean that the R.C.I.A. involves only these people.

People coming to the R.C.I.A. for the first time may find it complex in its concept and also in its language. It would be wrong to put it aside because of this, or to explain it away as being a 'fancy way of doing convert instruction'. It is given to us in response to the present needs of the Church, it is firmly based on the tradition of the church and it brings to us the wisdom and experience of the past centuries of Christian living.

Facing the implications of our baptism

Vatican II has launched us into a new era. Nothing else brings the recent changes of the church together more closely than this rite. Nothing else strikes more deeply at the heart of each parish community. The reason? The R.C.I.A. forces us to face the implications of our own initiation: to accept and to live by the fact of our own baptism, confirmation and our sharing of the Eucharist. It demands that we continually take the Gospel to heart, both as individuals and as community. It requires that we be serious about our celebrating the feasts and seasons of the Church, most especially those of Lent and Easter.

It is an ancient adage that "Christians are made, not born". The making of a Christian is the work of the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit works to do this through those who are already Christian. The R.C.I.A. is a process by which those who are already Christian work together with the Holy Spirit in the formation of new Christians. To help the reader to understand the R.C.I.A. and its process which is generally called the catechumenate, there are five sections in the pages which follow.

- 1 - The stories of two people who have been through the catechumenate - Jill who was brought to baptism and Jean who came as one already baptized.
- 2 - A description of the periods and stages making up the catechumenate process.
- 3 - An explanation of four of the basic principles.
- 4 - A couple share their reflections after being sponsors.
- 5 - An Archbishop speaks after a liturgical celebration with catechumens.

## TWO STORIES OF FAITH

### 1. THE STORY OF JILL

I chose to become a Catholic because of many different experiences, a kaleidoscope of people and occasions. No one answer can be given, as a faith commitment is never one experience on one occasion; it is ongoing. I am a person of the present and yet I cannot deny the past, as it is the past, my own personal history which has shaped me, making me the person I am today. My story, the influences in my life, family traditions, people who have entered my life's journey, have contributed to my uniqueness.

I was not baptised as an infant or small child most likely due to the fact that my parents just did not get around to the formality. I say 'formality', as I consider that is what it amounted to, certainly to my way of thinking until several years ago. For years I can recall stating on any forms I had to complete that my religion was Protestant, little knowing I did not even have that comfort. With the turn of events now, I am thankful to my parents for not baptising me as an infant, yet not wishing to state emphatically this should be the norm for others. For myself, I appreciate the benefits of coming to a faith response as an adult, having the ability to make a conscious decision of my own free will.

It is only now I can see that subconsciously I must have absorbed some concept of spirituality as a child. I attended various Sunday Schools, usually choosing the church which had the best Sunday School picnics - not the best of motives! Many years later I chose what I thought to be the most attractive looking church for my marriage; once again my motives were more than questionable. My way of thinking at that time did not include Christ as being a part of marriage; the church was just a venue.

#### The Search for God

Despite my lack of consciousness of Christ, there was still a small flicker which managed to arise at various times over a period of some twenty years. At times this resulted in a restlessness and longing for something I could not name. This search resulted in attendance at several churches over that time in what I have been told is the 'supermarket trick'. Whilst I was made very welcome in these churches there was an indefinable lack. And so my attendances were brief, of two or three Sundays and then I would give the idea away for several more years. Eventually I had occasion to make enquiries about a Catholic college for my daughter and following a conversation with the Priest I decided to give the Catholic church a try. Prior to that it had never figured in my reckoning.

A new world now opened up in front of me with a Christian community of welcoming people. Friendship was there but something deeper impressed me. Here was a community of believing people. It was a community of faith. It took some two years of attending Mass on a regular basis before I felt ready to take any step towards commitment. From the beginning, the Liturgy and Eucharist had meaning and appealed to my spiritual senses. I realized that our life story is a part of a greater story. Our story is grounded in the biblical and we are heirs to a culture of centuries of Christian belief.

There were times during those two years when probably due to my own perversity I came to a standstill, asking myself what I was doing and why was I attending this church? I recall staying away from Mass for several weeks but I discovered that I missed the liturgy and the community and so I returned. And there were times of serious Questioning and obstacles to be overcome.

#### The Turning Point

The turning point came for me one Sunday. Up until then I had been quite content to remain as I was, perhaps once again clinging perversely to that because of my adversaries continually questioning when I was going to become Catholic. I had felt so much an accepted part of the community, not feeling it necessary to take such a big step. Being a great observer of people, that particular Sunday I was watching the faces and expressions of the people going up for communion. I think God zapped me at that point! I was aware I felt the need for more I could not remain sitting on the fence so to speak. I experienced the desire to become a part of this 'one body'; to share in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, to be a full member of the community. I saw it as being similar to going into the home of a friend, the house is filled with people all seated around the dinner table, the friend is presiding at table. I am made to feel welcome, and am included in the conversation, the singing and laughter. In the beginning I do not partake of the food and the wine as the hunger and thirst are not apparent. After many such visits I sense my loss and come to the realisation I too am hungry and thirsty.

### A Gentle Introduction

From that point I enquired seriously as to what was involved. I undertook a Renewal of Faith course, which though beneficial, was not sufficient for me. It was then that I heard of the Catechumenate in a neighbouring parish. It was decided by our clergy to introduce the Catechumenate into the parish; happily I was to become a pioneer of that. I have since been involved with two subsequent Catechumenates, believing this to be the greatest means of evangelization in a parish. I can see similarities between the Catechumenate and the story of The Transfiguration Luke 9:28-36. Jesus takes Peter, John and James up on to the mountain, there is the brilliance of transformation of Jesus (as I have witnessed to happen to Catechumens), Peter wanting to remain in the situation, not wanting to move ahead to the uncertainty of the future as foretold by Moses and Elijah. We can all identify with those feelings of wanting to stay where it is comfortable. Then Jesus gently leads his disciples back into the ambiguity of life and the mainstream of the community. The Catechumenate is very much a gentle introduction to the community as a whole. It is also an opportunity for conversion, renewal and transformation for the whole parish.

The Easter Sacraments are where the Catechumenate journey leads, pausing for some respite only to move on again into life's journey and ultimately towards God. There have been painful struggles along the way and I feel that my faith has been tested. But I have found that through the sacraments God offers transformation to us in everyday situations of life. And coming to know God has meant coming to know more about myself. As St. Paul says in Gal. 2.20, "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me."

### 1. THE STORY OF JEAN

I chose to become a Catholic because I had at last found a community of people who were effectively teaching Christianity in a way that made good sense. I found the Catholic Church had a responsible attitude to God and to the community in which they were living. I was already a Christian of some years standing but I wanted to become part of this community which, I felt, had a much deeper understanding of the gospel message. Catholics have nearly 2000 years experience in teaching and in handing on their faith. With such knowledge to draw on they have so much to offer. I had found Bible study a great help in giving a sound grounding but most of us need some help, both in interpretation, and also in how to apply it to the best advantage to everyday life and the society in which we live.

## A Community

It is refreshing to find a community sufficiently mature to acknowledge some of their past mistakes and to be open enough to try to remedy any errors that have developed over the course of time. It is reassuring to see that any change made is in complete harmony with the teaching of Christ and the Gospel. It is good to meet a group of Christians who recognize the importance of living out their faith in their own homes and local community and yet reaching out to the whole brotherhood of mankind. I know that this is the way we should live. Unfortunately we so often get caught in our own problems that we cease to reach beyond ourselves, limiting the power we have to share the love of God with the whole world.

## An Enquiry

I didn't start off with any intention of becoming a Catholic. After all I did have a commitment to the church where I was a member at that time. Being involved in church life in the area in which I was living I had noticed for some time there were many misunderstandings between the Churches through ignorance. An advertisement in the local paper was instrumental in my enquiring if it would be possible for me to "sit in" on the meetings being offered as to "What it means to live as a member of the Catholic community". Here was an opening. to find out about the Catholic Church and what it really taught.

I got a few surprises. One of the first things that I noticed were the people. Here was a community made up of all ages and types of people. It was beautiful to see whole families worshipping together. then I noticed the way in which they lived out their lives, the way they worked through any problems they had. I saw their loyalty to the Church and I noticed the way in which the Church in turn supported them by the teaching and leadership it was giving them. I found it a great help to me to work through some of my own problems which I had at that particular time.

The Catechumenate group which I joined contained quite an assortment of people with a wide range of ages and backgrounds. Some like myself were from other Christian churches. Some were not Christians and some were Catholics. I little realized when I set out how much I was going to learn from them.

A great feeling of friendliness gradually built up between us as we met regularly and this flowed over into daily lives and Sunday Worship. I enjoyed, and still do, the feeling of warmth and fellowship of the community. And it was good to be in a situation where all those questions that had been waiting for answers for years could be asked, aired and answered instead of being buried and the bewilderment never resolved.

## Mutual Support

The most significant things that happened to me along the way were my change in outlook on life and in attitude to those about me. With this came the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit in all fullness to support me, particularly in times of stress. I now have a much deeper sense of peace.

I had set out to find out more about the Catholic community merely to allay some of my misunderstandings. But I found out much about myself and that in turn helped me to a much deeper understanding of my faith and also my relationships that I became aware that I wanted to become part of the Catholic community. This was not some thing I could take on lightly as it involved others beside myself. It involved my family, particularly my husband. We were used to doing things together. We attended Inter church meetings together. Nearly all our friends were members of the

same church. I did not wish to make any awkwardness or create ill feeling between churches because we live in an ecumenically minded area. Yet in spite of this there was no doubt in my mind that there was so much more opportunity for me to grow in a Catholic community.

With prayer all things are possible and I shall never forget Easter when I became a full member of the Catholic church. There was so much love abounding as I was hugged by the Catholic community after the Easter Vigil. This was followed by being hugged by my former community on Easter morning. I still enjoy worshipping with my husband and friends although I no longer share in the Eucharist with them. My husband enjoys worshipping with me. Our Sunday mornings are full. We are all happy and continue to entertain old friends and as an added bonus we have made many friends in the local Catholic community where I am now a full member. I certainly have no regrets about the decision I made. My only regret is that the opportunity to make the choice had not come earlier in my life.

What did I find in the Catholic Church that was so special? I found a caring community of people who were living out their faith in the world and were prepared to help me do the same. I found what a stimulating experience Christianity could be. I gained an enriched faith and had all my questions answered with the authority of the Church behind the answers.

#### THE SHAPE OF THE CATECHUMENATE

Each of the previous stories tells of what it has meant for the authors to have become Catholics. For Jill, it is a story of coming to faith and to baptism. June's story is different. Already having been baptised, hers was a story of coming to be received into the communion of the Catholic Church. Both related their experiences of the people who form the Catholic community and how these experiences nurtured their conversion: Both in different ways found their Christian conversion invited, fostered, deepened and celebrated through the experience of a parish catechumene.

Many Catholics would be confident that their parish would be ready to respond to adults inquiring into the Church. Not so many would be familiar with the catechumenate to which both Jill and June referred. 'Catechumenate' is the name often given for the whole process of what happens to a person who moves from not being Christian into being fully a member of the Catholic Church. It is also the name given to the central period of the process. When a person already baptised in another Christian Church approaches the Catholic Church, that person's baptism is respected and the catechumenate process is adapted to suit this particular Christian status.

#### A Journey

The whole process of Christian initiation is often described in terms of a journey, and because it takes place with others in the midst of a community of faith, it can also be called a pilgrimage. The duration of the journey can differ from person to person depending upon circumstances and needs, and the development of growth into the faith and life of the Church. Nevertheless, for all undertaking the catechumenate journey there are periods of growth and stages or steps which mark the conclusion of one such period and the beginning of the next.

#### The steps on the journey

The whole of the catechumenate encompasses four major periods and includes three major steps. Some of the periods can vary in length and the whole process can even take a number of years. The stages or steps taken are celebrated liturgically, usually within the setting of a Sunday parish Mass

when the parish community gathers with those on the journey and marks with them the wonderful things God is doing in their lives. The four periods are given the technical and descriptive names of:

- The period of the Pre-catechumenate
- The period of the Catechumenate
- The period of Purification and Enlightenment which is the period of Lenten preparation
- The period of Post-baptismal catechesis, or Mystagogy.

The stages or steps linking these periods are:

- The Rite of Becoming a Catechumen
- The Rite of Election
- The celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

The whole catechumenate journey can be mapped out thus:

- Pre-catechumenate
- concluding with Becoming a Catechumen
- Catechumenate
- concluding with the Rite of Election
- Lenten Preparation
- leads to the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist
- Mystagogy
- repeated celebration of the Eucharist as a full member of the Church.

#### 1) THE PERIOD OF THE PRE-CATECHUMENATE.

This is the starting point, the time of initial conversion. People approach the Church for a variety of reasons (note the differing reasons which Jill and June related earlier). Usually they come from varying backgrounds with their own questions and needs, with differing motivations prompted by their differing personal experiences. This initial period is a time of inquiry, a time to check out what the Church is about, a time to discern whether the Catholic Church is able to offer meaning and direction for life. This period lasts for as long as it may take the person to come to accept and believe in Jesus Christ and to want to live faith in him as a member of our Church. It is not unusual to find that people approaching the Church admit to a stirring that has been happening within their hearts for some years, a stirring which has now led them to the Church. The Pre-catechumenate formally begins when they approach the Church and are accepted as inquirers.

#### Response of the Church

The first response of the Church to the inquirers is one of acceptance and welcome. It is the very life of the Church to show forth the love of Christ to all whom she meets. The Church (always finding expression through the members of a particular parish community) welcomes the questions and the searching of the inquirers. As the inquirers tell of what has brought them to the Church, the Church in return tells its own story and the story of Jesus which lies at the very centre of its life. The story of Jesus unlocks the meaning of all human stories, and invites all who hear it to accept it and to shape their lives according to it. The story of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, is the story of God's intense love for us. It is what we call the gospel, the Good News which brings life and salvation to all who make it their own.

The inquirers who do accept it and who express the wish to live according to that Good News are invited to journey further toward membership of the church. And so they move on to the next of the periods which go to form the whole catechumenate process.

#### The First Step - Becoming a Catechumen

The stage or step by which they move from this initial period into the next is celebrated at a parish Sunday Mass. Here, they ask to join the church and in response the community formally welcomes them, calls them in the name of Christ to live by his Word, and gives them the 'sign of the cross', the sign which marks them out as followers of Christ. This liturgy is called the Rite of Becoming a Catechumen. No longer are they treated as inquirers, for now they are named as 'catechumens'. Although not yet baptised, catechumens, because they are joined to the Church by faith, have a real place within the Catholic community.

### 2) THE PERIOD OF THE CATECHUMENATE

This second period is a time for growing further into the faith and the way of life and community of the Church. The first proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ which belonged to the period of the pre-catechumenate is what is called evangelisation. The task now in the period of the catechumenate is one of catechesis, that of building upon the catechumen's faith in Jesus so that it may be more firmly grounded and find expression in daily living. This is the time for the Church through the ministry of the catechists, to give the necessary instruction in the basic teachings of the Church on matters of doctrine and Christian morality. It is the time for growing further in the ways of Christian prayer through joining with others at prayer and liturgical celebrations of the Word. It is a time for growing further into the community of the Church by mixing with members of the community and joining in with the activities of the Church.

#### Assistance

To enable this growth to take place, the catechumens have the assistance of those they meet at the catechumenate meetings, the catechists and those who conduct the meetings, the sponsors appointed to support and encourage them, the priest of the parish who oversees the whole process, and the community as a whole by its own prayer and example.

#### The Second Step - Rite of Election

This period of the catechumenate lasts for as long as is felt necessary. For some it may be a matter of months, but for others it can even last for some years. It lasts until it is felt that the catechumens are ready to begin preparing for the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist. The step into the next period of preparing for those sacraments is what is celebrated in the Rite of Election. In this liturgy the bishop or his delegated priest formally 'calls' or 'elects' the catechumens to those three sacraments by and in which they are constituted fully as members of the Church.

### 3) THE PERIOD OF LENTEN PREPARATION

As the title suggests, this period coincides with the liturgical season of Lent, the period of weeks by which the whole Catholic community prepares for the celebration of Easter. After their election to the sacraments at the beginning of Lent, the catechumens are now called the elect. For them this time of Lenten preparation is a period of purification and enlightenment. It is a time of spiritual preparation, a time of prayer and reflection. As the elect are preparing to make their baptismal commitment, the rest of the community lives Lent with them, using it as a time to prepare to renew



their baptismal commitment. So those who are preparing for baptism, and those who are already baptised make the Lenten journey to Easter together.

## Lent

The Church's way of living Lent, directed by the Scripture readings of this season, especially those of the Sunday Masses, provides the elect with the means of preparing themselves for the sacraments. Through the Lenten programme of daily Scripture readings, the elect are prompted and helped to reflect upon their lives more deeply and turn their hearts more and more to the Lord in whom they are placing their faith. God's Word invites them to choose to die to sin and themselves in order to rise to a new life with Christ. During this period, there are liturgies celebrated by the community with the elect in order to strengthen them for the commitment they are to make at Easter when they will be sacramentally initiated into the church.

## The Third Step - Sacraments

That sacramental initiation celebrated in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist is the final step in the whole conversion process for them. Their baptism invites and effects their dying with Christ and rising to share in his life. Born again in baptism, they are also confirmed. This seals their baptism and empowers them to live by the Holy Spirit sent by Christ to unite the Church and to mould it into his likeness. Celebrating the Eucharist with the rest of the community completes their initiation. Their first full participation in the Eucharist declares and deepens their communion with Christ and his Body the Church. Although they are now fully members of the Church, the whole process of their initiation is not yet completed.

## 4) THE PERIOD OF MYSTAGOGY

Entering into this final period of their initiation, the newly baptised are called neophytes, an ancient title which means the newly planted. The strange sounding name for this period, mystagogy, indicates that this is a period for further reflection upon the mysteries celebrated by the Church at Easter, the mysteries which the neophytes have celebrated in the sacraments. Once again through using the Sunday gospel readings, the neophytes now reflect upon the meaning of the sacraments which they have received and which now give shape and direction to their lives.

## A Full Share in the Life of the Church

This period of post-baptismal catechesis usually lasts for the seven weeks of the Easter season, concluding with the celebration of Pentecost. Thus the whole R.C.I.A. journey of initiation concludes with those who were initially inquirers now regularly sharing in the community Eucharist of the Church. They now share fully in the life, of the Church and are completely one with the community which welcomed them and helped form them into becoming disciples of Jesus Christ. The whole of the catechumenate has not brought them to an end-point, but rather to a new beginning. With their new-found faith and the new life begun in baptism, a whole new journey now lies before them. But now it is not a journey they make alone, but it is the journey of Jesus which they make with their brothers and sisters who with them make up the Catholic Church where they live.

## Some Adaptations

This has been a rather broad outline of the whole journey into membership of the Church as it is undertaken by unbaptised adults. At the present time in Australia, over 50% of those coming to the

Catholic Church have already been baptised in another Christian Church. While they may initially approach the Church for reasons similar to those who have never been baptised, and while the pattern of their conversion may be similar, the process is adapted for them out of respect for the baptism they have already received. These baptised are commonly called 'candidates', and as they move from one period of growth into another, the celebration of this step or stage, is adapted to take their baptism into account. Similarly the catechesis these candidates receive may also be adapted to suit their situation and their needs. Thus it was that Jill made the journey of the catechumenate and was eventually made a member of the Church through baptism. June however attended catechumenate meetings as a baptised person and she was eventually received into the communion of the Catholic Church, and at this reception received the Catholic sacraments of confirmation and eucharist, which Jill also received but within the same celebration as her baptism.

#### FOUR BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE R.C.I.A.

The Church has existed for some two thousand years. The experience and wisdom of all those years of nurturing and forming new members have been taken up into the catechumenate of today. In our very recent past, Catholics spoke about 'convert instruction' when speaking about the initiation of adults into the Church. At times such instruction while good, tended to be very private and much inclined to be lessons which were book and information oriented. The revival of the ancient catechumenate with its adaptation with respect to the needs of today, has sought to bring a renewed balance to the Church's basic mission to make new Christians. Within the renewed R.C.I.A. there are four important principles upon which the whole process rests. These are areas of concern which parishes are called to attend to as they welcome new members into the community.

##### 1) THE R.C.I.A. IS CONCERNED WITH COMMUNITY PREPARATION AND CELEBRATION

The Catholic Church is not an abstract ideal or a vague idea. It is living. It is flesh and blood people living and sharing faith under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is to be found and experienced wherever people gather of a Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. Each celebration of the Mass indicates that the Church is present and alive. This means that a person wishing to become a Catholic needs to be brought to take his or her place within that celebrating community of faith. to come to know the belief of the Catholic Church means to come to know the belief of the people of the Church.

This is why the catechumenate relies heavily upon the active participation of members of the Church. The task of welcoming, instructing and generally assisting the catechumen does not belong to the priest alone. Those who form the parish under his leadership share in this task with him. invariably the inquirer approaching the Church will find him or herself, meeting with a group of parishioners and other inquirers, with each contributing and gaining something from the group. The inquirer will come to know and grow into the faith of the Church through sharing with and listening to the other members of the group. As the Church becomes visible and tangible in a particular way when it gathers for Sunday Mass, it follows that this is the most appropriate occasion for the celebration of the rites of the R.C.I.A. These various steps or stages mentioned in the previous section are celebrated in the presence of the community and by the community, for the community itself is being enriched and touched by God through what he is doing in the hearts and lives of these he has brought to add to the community and to enrich it.

#### Involvement of Parishioners

To assist the inquirers through the various periods before them on their journey, various parishioners may undertake to accept particular roles in the process. Some may offer particular welcome and support in prayer. Some will assist by teaching or giving instruction. Others will befriend, support and encourage through being sponsors.

Because by its very nature the Church is a community of believers, the community itself has a part to play in the process of forming a person into being a member of the Church. Failure to respect this principle would be to deprive the inquirer of a proper experience of the Church and the learning and nurturing which comes from that. It would also deprive the community of its right to exercise the ministries which derive from the sacraments which its members have received.

## 2) CHRISTIAN INITIATION AIMS TO FORM PEOPLE INTO BEING CHRISTIAN

To say that this initiation is about convert instruction would be to imply that we are merely concerned with the imparting of information about the Church. The catechumenate is not a class or lecture room enterprise wherein the catechumens are passive vessels whose duty it is to absorb the Christian information which is to be meted out to them. From the catechetical aspect, our aim is not to give them a complete course in theology. Rather, the aim of the whole process is to enable the person to be attentive to the Word of God and to be taught how to respond to it. The instruction they receive is to foster this.

There will be some basic information which the catechumens will want and need to know. But the imparting of such information is not one of the chief aims of the R.C.I.A. In the process of Christian formation, there are four areas which need to be attended to, areas where there needs to be understanding, areas in which growth in the Christian life takes place. Some call these the areas of the four "C's":

CREED - there is the need to grow into' the belief of the Church as it is summarised and expressed in our Creed.

CODE - by this is meant the Christian code of living, the area of Christian morality arising from our acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

CULT - an important area in Christian formation is that of growing into the way of Christian prayer and community worship.

COMMUNITY - concern is given that the person does in fact grow into membership of the local Catholic community, and comes to share in the mission and apostolic activity of the Church.

Signs of growth and development in each of these areas indicate that conversion is in fact taking place and that true Christian formation is being achieved.

## 3) A PARISH CATECHUMENATE RESPECTS THE MOVEMENT OF THE LITURGICAL YEAR

Each year the Catholic Church lives a cycle of feasts and seasons. This cycle is the means by which the Church expresses, celebrates and thus renews its own conversion to Jesus Christ. Whatever Catholics hold as important and basic to their faith is celebrated in some major feast or season of this annual cycle, for the cycle itself draws attention to all the major aspects of the Mystery of Christ. The high point of the year is the feast of Easter with its celebration of the Easter Vigil, the celebration of the Lord's resurrection from the dead. This is the occasion of the year on which the elect come to the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist. Their sacramental initiation is

itself an inspiration to the rest of the community and prompts all members to solemnly renew their own baptismal commitment. It would only be because of exceptional circumstances that an adult would be initiated into the Church at any other time of the year.

Easter then is the occasion for the making of new members, and Lent is a natural way of spiritually preparing them for the sacraments. As the other feasts and seasons of the year draw the attention of Catholics to particular aspects of their faith, so those who are in the process of becoming Catholics need to be drawn into the observance of those feasts and seasons too, and by this means they will find they are being drawn into the lived experience of being a Catholic.

The shape of this liturgical year, this cycle of feasts and seasons, along with the three-year cycle of the Sunday lectionary Scripture readings, serves as a kind of backbone for the life of the Church, and as such provides those responsible for planning the catechumenate with the direction they need to follow in conducting a parish catechumenate programme.

#### 4) CHRISTIAN INITIATION IS TO DO WITH CONVERSION OF MIND AND HEART

The Church has learnt through experience that for conversion to be well grounded, time needs to be taken. She tends to be suspicious of instant conversions. The full conversion of mind and heart involved in becoming a Christian may take up to some years. The realisation that conversion does take time, is one of the reasons why there are various periods and stages within the catechumenate process. The actual length of the process can differ from person to person, and its length depends both upon the catechumens themselves and also upon what the Church has a right to expect before allowing a person to come to baptism.

Very importantly the Church realises that such conversion is God's doing, and that it takes place in God's time, not ours. In practice this can mean that in a particular parish catechumenate group, some catechumens may be ready to come to baptism before other members of the same group.

The R.C.I.A. also acknowledges that Christian conversion is a life-long journey, and is never really completed in this life. Baptism does not signal a point of arrival so much as a new point of departure. Living as a Catholic is an on-going pilgrimage of faith with its own periods and stages of continual growth. Faith and the commitment which goes with it is in constant need of expression and renewal. This is why the Church observes Lent and celebrates Easter each year. It is part of its response to God's call to grow continually deeper in Christian faith, hope and love.

In the years following upon their initiation, those who are catechumens now will find in the catechumens of the future, not only a remembrance of their own initiation, but a stimulus and an occasion to renew and deepen their baptismal commitment, just as those who are fully Catholic now will find the initiation of catechumens next Easter a means by which God calls them to renew their own commitment to live by the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

#### All are Journeying together

It is inaccurate to say that a person has become a convert, or that a person has been converted, if it gives the impression that the conversion has concluded and that the rest of the community does not need to convert in any way. All of us, no matter at what point in our lives we were baptised, are journeying together on a continual pilgrimage of faith, and every such journey will have its time for rest and reflection, and its time for journeying on refreshed and renewed. On this continual journey of conversion together, we enable each other to hear the Word of God and to respond to it as community and as individual members of the community.

These four basic principle or areas of concern underlying the R.C.I.A. place us firmly within the lived tradition of the Church. The present day revival of the ancient catechumenate is not just an archaic or fancy way of bringing adults into the Church, a way which we can choose to either leave aside or take up depending upon our whim. It is the Church's time tested way of living Christian faith through bringing others to share in that faith. The catechumenate is the best means we have for initiating and forming new members and is a wonderful means for the continual renewal of the whole Church. The parish which declares that it has no need for a catechumenate because it does not find any adults seeking membership of the Church simply needs to be faced with the questions of "why not?"

#### REFLECTIONS UPON BEING A SPONSOR TO A CATECHUMEN by Ruth and Ian Walter.

From our own experience we know that the role of the sponsor is one of the most important ministries in the whole process of welcoming new members into the Catholic Church. The sponsor is a personal link and representative between the catechumen and the Catholic community. The parish community is a very important part of the Catholic Church; in fact it is the Church present in that place. Therefore it is very important that those coming to our Church grow to feel part of it, and learn to recognise Christ present in the midst of the parish community.

The sponsor helps to bring this about. The sponsor needs to be a welcoming and hospitable person. The sponsor acquaints the catechumen with some of the people and the traditions of the Church. Some catechumens may feel nervous about attending Mass as they are not sure what to do and may feel unable to participate and feel quite conspicuous. Sponsors are able to support them by accompanying them to Mass and by giving them guidance and support. Often the sponsor may be asked questions to which he or she does not know the answer, but by the sponsor and catechumen looking at these questions together and by sharing what faith and Church mean to them they enter into what is an enriching experience for both of them.

#### Prayer

The sponsors need to be people of prayer; not only willing, to pray for their catechumen, but also to share prayer with them. It is through prayer that we come to know God more and more. Throughout the whole catechumenate process, the sponsor and catechumen are asked to share together their own belief in God, how He has touched them, and what this means to their lives. The example given by the sponsor can be an insight into what Catholics believe about God, and how this belief affects their lives.

One of the most important qualities in sponsors is the ability to allow the catechumen in their charge to be free. An inquirer must be free to probe and choose. In other words if an inquirer feels the time is not right to be joined to the Catholic Church, then he or she must be free enough to step aside from the process. Often when inquirers withdraw from the process in this way, they later return to become part of another such parish group.

The journey towards God is a never-ending quest of discovering more and more of the security, joy and challenge that faith in our loving God brings. As a Catholic, this journey is a pilgrimage, a journey taken with others. Alone, we can wander far from where we must go, but through being together upon this journey, we can encourage, help and support each other. The sponsor and a catechumen are fellow pilgrims together. While the sponsor is ministering to the catechumen in the name of the Church, helping the catechumen to find a place within the Catholic community, they both progress together on their common pilgrimage towards God.

## AN ARCHBISHOP COMMENTS

The first celebration of a liturgical rite with catechumens that was held in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, was in March 1980 with the Presentation of the Lord's Prayer. It is one of the minor rites of the R.C.I.A. and is usually held at the beginning of Lent. In the four years following this ceremony, one in four of the parishes of the large Archdiocese have begun to implement the catechumenate with a 300% increase in the number of participants.

Following that first ceremony, Archbishop Little of Melbourne wrote the following (which is reprinted with permission of the Melbourne "Advocate"): St. Patrick's Cathedral has been the scene of many wonderful and unforgettable ceremonies. Many have been moving, many touching, many awe-inspiring. No doubt you can recall something from your own experiences. One recent event, however, I shall always remember. It was the ceremony of the presentation of the Our Father. You have not heard of it? Then, let me explain.

The Second Vatican council directed that the rite of Baptism for adults be revised. The catechumenate (the period of preparation for baptism) was to comprise several steps; this would enable various rites to be introduced to sanctify the time of appropriate preparation. This Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults was introduced into the archdiocese last year. Father Ron Lewinski, a priest from Chicago, conducted the diocesan pastoral seminar for the priests of the Archdiocese of Melbourne in February 1979. He had already experienced the rich apostolic stimulus provided by the Christian initiation of adults. The priests who attended the seminar were fired by the possibilities.

A great deal of quiet but effective work has been done over the past year. In about 10 parishes 40 people were ready to be baptized or received into full communion with the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil. They had experienced the stages of preparation. One of the rites of preparation was the presentation of a copy of the Our Father.

In the Lord's Prayer, the catechumens acknowledge more firmly the new spirit of sonship by which they will call God their Father, especially in the midst of the congregation assembled for the eucharist. And so, on that evening in Lent, about 400 people gathered in St. Patrick's Cathedral. At one stage during the simple ceremony those who were to be presented with the Our Father were asked to come to the front of the cathedral. That was the moment I shall always remember.

Gradually, and almost shyly, people stood up and made their way to the front. It was like the appearance of a harvest. Our Lord's words came back to me: "The field is ripe for the harvest." One could never imagine that so small a number could make the occasion look so impressive. But it was. It was so touching for me that spontaneously I burst out clapping. My action must have touched a similar chord in the hearts of others. I thought that we would bring the roof down. It was a spine-tingling feeling. Here was a human harvest. Here were people like you and me freely making their decision. Their action meant that they wished to receive in its fullness the faith that you and I have tried to respond to over all our lives. The power of the word of God showed itself visible at that moment. The gospel was fruitful. The command of our Lord to make disciples of all was being met in this evident way.

One valuable aspect of the preparation of catechumens is that they are supported by godparents throughout their preparation. Furthermore the various rites which lead them to baptism are celebrated in the parish community. It means that the whole community is constantly reminded of

its duties and its privileges. Some priests thus say that the program of Christian initiation of adults is better than a parish mission.

The close association of the whole parish with the program is stressed throughout the introduction in the Roman Ritual: "The initiation of catechumens takes place step by step in the midst of the community of the faithful. Together with the ,catechumens, the faithful reflect upon the value of the paschal mystery, renew their own conversion, and b y their example lead the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously." The words remind one of the introduction to the sacrament of confirmation: "It is the responsibility of the people of God to prepare the baptized for confirmation... catechists, sponsors, and members of the local church should participate in the catechumenate."

Yet, we have only looked at a tiny tip of the iceberg. There is plenty of scope for further action in' this program. Do you realize that from figures in the 1976 census 22.7 per cent of this State of Victoria could be described as "unchurched," that is, they were either indefinite about religion (0.4 per cent), or stated that they had no religion (9.4 per cent), or did not wish to state their religion (12.9 per cent)? The harvest is certainly ready.

Are we too self-contented? are we a satisfied church which is not radiating a desire to share? Statistics confirm that 75 per cent of those who attend church regularly on Sundays are Catholics. This is not a figure which should make us proud. It should rather be a constant reminder of the dechristianization of our society and of our responsibility to evangelize. Ay, there's the rub. The Christian problem today is how to evangelize, how to ensure that everyone feels challenged and judged by the Word of God. That is the task of the church today. It is an urgent one. It will only be done through each one of us. Have we lost something of our missionary dynamism because of a false notion of ecumenism? True ecumenism challenges us to renew ourselves in faith and to do all in our power to assist others in a similar renewal.

However, as Pope Paul VI stated: "The Church also has a lively solicitude for the Christians who are not in full communion with her. While preparing with them the unity willed by Christ, and precisely in order to realize unity in truth, she has the, consciousness that she Would be gravely lacking in her duty if she did not give witness before them of the fullness of the revelation whose deposit she guards."

One simple way to proceed with the harvest is to see if there is anyone we know, perhaps a husband or a wife, who could be introduced into a program for the Christian initiation of adults. There could be a friend, someone who is fundamentally Christian but without any affiliation to a church, or someone who is obviously in need of salvation - as, fundamentally, we all are! I see the field ready for the harvest. The bishops at the synod of 1974 summed it up: "We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church."

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