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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

1

Moving from a Good RCIA to an Excellent Initiation Process

I first “discovered” the catechumenate when I went to a diocesan workshop in the late 1970s. Of course, I didn’t know it was called *catechumenate* back then. All I knew was there was a diocesan meeting on one of the changes initiated by Vatican II. And somewhere about halfway through the presentation, the priest who’s leading us through the rite says something about the “catech-somethings” (the folks who want to be Catholic) leaving church in the middle of Mass! Before the collection! Whoa!

If I were a cartoon character, you would have seen a big bright light bulb appear over my head at that moment. It dawned on me that dismissing the catechumens from Mass would be so *shocking* to Catholics that it had huge potential for igniting dozens and hundreds and maybe thousands of conversion experiences.

In most parishes, this practice is so common now that it has become unremarkable. But try to remember or imagine the church of the 1970s in middle America. It was a *very* structured, top-down, by-the-book kind of place, at least where I grew up. The reforms of the Second Vatican Council, however, soon began to have an impact in local parishes. Folks who were there have differing stories about how well or badly the changes were handled, but one thing everyone agrees on is there were a lot of changes. With any change there is struggle. Even those who were highly enthused about the vision of the Council would feel the strain of so much newness all at once. It was in *that* moment that the reform of the adult initiation process began to trickle down to ordinary parishes.

While I was excited about the possibilities this new rite could offer my parish and the parishes of my diocese, many parish leaders were plain worn out by the time the RCIA was handed down to us.

THE “GRAB THE LAST BOTTLE” APPROACH

Did you ever get invited to a party you didn’t really want to go to? You knew you had to go, but you were praying for a small lightning storm to knock out the power around town on the day of. No such luck. Sunny beautiful day. Still, you procrastinated. The hour approached, and you’d find yourself completely immersed in cleaning the cabinet under the kitchen sink that you’d been meaning to get to for years. You looked at your watch and suddenly “remembered” you had to be somewhere. You dashed into the shower, threw on some clothes, and were almost out the door when you remembered you really should bring a gift. You really should. Your eye fell on the small wine rack atop the refrigerator. One bottle left that someone brought to *your* last party. You grabbed it, blew the dust off, and headed out the door.

That feels to me like the way a lot of parishes started their catechumenate processes. Reluctantly, last minute, not well thought out. Certainly we’ve come a long way, and fewer and fewer parishes today could be described as implementing the RCIA so haphazardly. There are even many parishes today that would say they are doing a good job with the catechumenate.

Good is not good enough

And that’s a problem. We’ve moved from the “grab the last bottle” approach to doing some actual planning of the way the rites are celebrated and the catechumens are formed. This is such a step up from where we were that we’ve become satisfied. We’ve gone from nothing at all, to slap-dash, last minute, to not so bad. But is that enough? What would it take to have an excellent catechumenate? What would it take to have the best initiation process your parish is capable of?

It would take a lot. No kidding, it would take a lot of time and energy. And aren’t we doing okay as it is? Some regions have tons of people joining the parish, and, amazingly, enough volunteers (barely) to help out so a few people aren’t doing all the work by themselves.

You deserve a breather, you really do. Some folks have been working in initiation ministry almost non-stop for 20 or 30 years. For some of you reading this

book, you might be the sole reason your parish has any catechumenate process at all. If you haven't been thanked enough for that ministry (and you should have been), THANK YOU! Because of your dedication, we are in a place where we are able to move on.

And move on we must. In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins says, "Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great" (p. 1). We will never have great catechumenate processes if we are satisfied with good-enough ones. And only an excellent catechumenate process will consistently and powerfully lead not just the catechumens but the entire parish to an experience of profound, intimate communion with Christ. When that light bulb clicked on in my head, that's what I saw—radical, passionate conversion to Christ on a massive scale. The RCIA envisions nothing less.

An excellent catechumenate does take work. But it doesn't take miracles. To get started, you need two things, two gifts, which the Holy Spirit will be happy to give to you if you ask. Maybe you already have them.

1. You need the gift of humility.
2. You need the gift of passion.

If you have these two gifts, or if you are willing to pray for them, you can learn everything else you need to know to make the catechumenate a great process of conversion in your community.

2

Guide to the Catechumenate

A friend of mine likes to hunt, but he's a city boy. Whenever he ventures out into the wilderness, he hires someone who knows the area. So on one trip, he and a group of buddies are being led through the woods by a local guide. After a while, my friend realizes the group is lost and confronts the guy.

"You told us you were the best guide in Colorado!" says my hunter friend.

"I am," replies the guide, "but I think we're in Wyoming now."

An important part of any journey is knowing where *not* to go. You don't want to wind up in Wyoming if your destination is Colorado.

ROMAN CATHOLIC INTELLIGENCE AGENCY— WHAT RCIA IS NOT

The catechumenate process is so often referred to as the "RCIA" that our understanding of what it is has become blurred. We don't always remember what the initials mean, and it is too easy to project on them whatever we want them to mean.

So here is a quick list of what the RCIA is not.

- It is not an adult confirmation program
- It is not an adult education program
- It is not a marriage preparation program, even if one person in the couple is not Catholic

- It is not CCD for adult Catholics who “dropped out” after confirmation
- It is not a place for sponsors or spouses to “catch up” on facts of the faith
- It is not a small faith sharing community
- It is not a support group for dealing with emotional distress
- It is not a class
- It is not a club
- It is not a program for making Protestants into Catholics

Welcome to the church’s transmogrifier

So what is the RCIA? If you are a *Calvin and Hobbes* fan, you’ll understand when I tell you that the RCIA is a transmogrifier (see tinyurl.com/2cxafa). A transmogrifier is an upside-down cardboard box with a dial drawn onto the side. According to Calvin, “You step into the chamber, set the appropriate dials, and it turns you into whatever you’d like to be” (*Calvin and Hobbes*, March 23, 1987). In a similar way, the RCIA transmogrifies an unbeliever into a believer, a person of little or no faith into a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Conversion machine

Go get your copy of the rite and look at paragraph 1. It says so right there:

The rite of Christian initiation...is designed for adults who...consciously and freely seek...[to] enter the way of faith and conversion.



Whenever we refer to a line from a ritual text, we always refer to the paragraph number, not the page number. Several publishers have published the RCIA, and the page numbering is different in each edition. The paragraph numbers are consistent.

The RCIA is a transmogrification machine. Or if you prefer, a conversion process. You put the “Calvins” into it, and disciples come out of it.

Of course, the process is not a cardboard box. It’s much more complex than that, and oftentimes we don’t get disciples in the end. But that is what the pro-

cess is built to do—make disciples. Unlike Calvin’s box, you cannot just turn the dial and get whatever you want at the end. The process only has one setting: Disciples. If we put folks who are already disciples into the process, it won’t make them “better” disciples. That’s not what the process is designed to do.

Or, to return to our hunter story, if we want to hunt in Colorado, we have to be sure our guide knows how to move around Colorado. We have to be passionate about using the RCIA as a conversion process and only as a conversion process.

I think that word “conversion” is where we sometimes go astray and wind up in Wyoming. Because aren’t we all in need of conversion? Isn’t discipleship a lifelong conversion journey? Well, yes and no.

Grab your copy of the rite again, and flip to the back. In the appendix titled “National Statutes for the Catechumenate,” paragraph 2, read the following:

The term “convert” should be reserved strictly for those converted from unbelief to Christian belief...

There is an initial conversion, after which you can never be “converted” again. You can be a bad convert, and your conversion may require some serious maintenance. You can fall away and even deny your conversion ever happened. And these are serious issues that need to be remedied. But the catechumenate is not the remedy. The catechumenate is a process of conversion for those who have never believed—even a little.

So in the church’s transmogrification process, we put catechumens in the transmogrifier, adjust the dials, and take out disciples. And what exactly goes on inside that amazing “cardboard box”?

That’s what we’re going to explore.