

Module 1 The single most important thing you need to know about children in the RCIA

Session 1: Uncover the most successful process the church has ever devised for forming children in faith

Objective: Learn the three essential steps for designing a conversion process.

What's at stake

Here is a classic, simple description of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA):

The RCIA is a process of conversion

It's important to understand children's RCIA as a process of conversion for two reasons:

- Understanding conversion influences our entire approach to preparing children for the sacraments of initiation
- And it influences how we involve the family in that process

Approaching children's RCIA as a process of conversion means that we see the entire process of initiation as (1) a gradual and complete journey of faith that (2) leads the child into the mystery of Christ through (3) the sacraments of initiation.

And, the child is not alone in this journey of conversion. She or he is accompanied by parents or guardians, sponsors, companions, and indeed the entire Christian community.

All of this means that children's RCIA is much more than a series of "catch-up classes" for kids who aren't baptized or who "missed the sacraments." **Think of children's RCIA as a journey.** Your role as the coordinator or catechist is to guide them along that journey.

Let's look deeper at what the child's journey of conversion and initiation looks like.

How a ten-year-old and his mom came to love Jesus more than Wal-Mart

The phrase "journey of conversion" evokes an image of change. In the context of initiation, what kind of "change" do we mean?

Consider for example ten-year-old Cory. When he and his mom, Amy, first inquired about preparation for baptism, they weren't sure they could come to sessions on Sunday morning because that's when the family went to Wal-Mart every week. Gradually, however, they abandoned their Wal-Mart ritual, and Cory's dad and younger sister also joined the RCIA group for the family session and eventually for Sunday Mass.

Cory and his family slowly changed from a Wal-Mart-centered Sunday to a Sunday that was focused on Jesus Christ and the Christian community. Of course, there are many types of conversion. Sometimes conversion can be simple, like moving from little knowledge of God to a rich, full relationship with our loving God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Or, a child may move from feeling friendless and alone to feeling connected to Jesus Christ and the community of loving disciples.

How does conversion happen?

Conversion happens through God's grace. Our parish community and the RCIA process serve as channels of God's grace to help and guide the child and family along the way.

Conversion happens not so much through the classroom but by the child and family's slow immersion into the life of the Christian community. In other words, think of children's RCIA as children and families gathering with catechists, other children, and adults for a formation process. This image better suits the picture given to us in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults than a classroom approach whereby parents drop off their children for a baptismal preparation class.

What the rite says about conversion and children

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults gives us three very clear directions for designing a children's initiation and conversion process.

Personal

First, the Rite says very directly that the Christian initiation of unbaptized children of catechetical age "requires both a conversion that is personal and somewhat developed, in proportion to their age, and the assistance of the education they need" (RCIA, no. 253).

Think about that for a minute. What does the rite mean by "personal and somewhat developed" and assisted along the way by the "education they need"?

- It means that the process of initiation is personal and based upon the needs of the child
- It means that initiation is not a one-size-fits-all curriculum that works the same year after year

Adapted

The rite also says that the initiation process is adapted to the children's "spiritual progress" and "to their catechetical instruction." Notice that this spiritual journey is tailored to the needs of the child and that it may last "several years" (RCIA, no. 253).



Stages

Thirdly, the rite goes to great lengths to point out that the children's journey of initiation takes place in stages. This is based on the adult journey of initiation. The children follow the same steps and periods as the adults.

Later in this course, we'll look at how all the steps and periods of the RCIA apply to children seeking initiation. For now, let's continue to focus on the notion of conversion with children. Complete Exercise 1 to help you better understand children's conversion.

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Session 2: Your absolute, primary, indispensable teaching objective: meet Jesus

Objective: Learn the core elements of the conversion process for children's RCIA.

In the first session, we described children's RCIA as a process of conversion. In this second lesson, we'll describe the core elements of conversion that guide the initiation process with children. These core elements are the pieces you must include in your children's RCIA process.

At the core, the center, the heart of children's RCIA is the person of Jesus Christ. As we said in Session One, the journey of conversion is leading children to the mystery of Christ, so everything we do is focused on Jesus Christ. Everything we do is leading children and families toward Christ.

The pathway to Christ

Imagine a long, long pathway. The pathway is an image for the journey of conversion. Of course God is with the children throughout their journey, but at the "peak" of the pathway is Jesus Christ. The children are united with Christ at the Easter Vigil when they celebrate the sacraments of initiation. When they are initiated, they will be incorporated into the paschal mystery. The paschal mystery is the mystery of Christ's passion, death, resurrection, and glorification. After the Easter Vigil the children are fully initiated disciples of Jesus Christ and members of the church. Their pathway continues as does their journey of conversion, but now they are one with Christ. (We will look more deeply at what we mean by "paschal mystery" in the second module.)

Walking along the pathway are family and friends

There are many people and pieces along the pathway that help the children on their journey to Christ and the paschal mystery. These are elements or "pieces" that will help facilitate conversion along the way:

- Family (parents or guardians, possibly siblings and others)
- Community (peer companions, sponsors, godparents)
- Pastoral formation (including catechesis, prayer, community, service)
- Liturgical rites

Let's briefly talk about why each piece is important in the child's process of conversion. Each of these core elements will be covered more completely later in the course.

Conversion is a family affair

When eight-year-old Haley insisted that mom and little brother Jack pray with her before dinner, it affected the entire family dynamic. Mealtime prayer indicated that the family was becoming more aware of God in their midst. Even a relatively simple change like this is an example of how conversion affects the whole family. A change in one family member affects the entire family.

The RCIA says that children are "dependent on their parents or guardians" (no. 252). Then, as if to emphasize the point, it's repeated again two paragraphs later when we hear that the children's formation "depends on . . . the influence of their parents" (no. 254). Of course, there are times when parents cannot be involved, and we'll address that later.

Conversion is communal

Three of Megan's best girlfriends were preparing for first Communion and so Megan decided that she wanted first Communion, too. Thus began the journey of conversion for Megan and her family. Although Megan's motives may not have been completely pure in the beginning, the story illustrates that same-age peer companions have a great influence on children. Her second-grade girlfriends accompanied Megan for the next 18 months as she prepared for baptism and full initiation.

Once again, the RCIA tells us that children are not only dependent upon their parents, but their formation "depends on the help and example of their companions" (no. 254). In addition to companions and parents, other members of the parish community also help and support the children along the way (see RCIA, nos. 10-16).

Conversion means training to live like Jesus

Ryan went over and sat at the cafeteria table with the kid that nobody ever sits with. Ryan's older brother, Conner, told the story one day in a children's RCIA session when we were talking about what "difference" the catechumenate process had made in the children's lives. Ryan then admitted that the process had taught him to treat other people as Jesus would.

Through the children's RCIA, we show children what it means to live as a follower of Jesus. Indeed, the children "are given suitable pastoral formation and guidance, aimed at training them in the Christian way of life" (no. 75). Yes, formal catechesis is a part of their "training," but true conversion happens when children and their families walk with others.

Conversion is marked by major, intense liturgical rites

"I felt like I was really important because everybody was looking at me and smiling," said Andrea after celebrating the Rite of Acceptance. Andrea, age 13, was one of six adopted children who journeyed through the RCIA with her siblings and her new parents. She had grown up in the foster care system and had never felt very important. Her journey of conversion helped her to see just how special she was and just how much God loved her.

The liturgical rites of the RCIA are “major, more intense moments of initiation” (no. 6). Some of the rites help to “complete the conversion” of those in the initiation process (no. 141). The symbols, gestures, sights, sounds, and smells of the rites make them particularly effective and meaningful for children.

The pieces on the pathway

Let’s return to the pathway that you imagined earlier in this exercise. Remember—you imagined a pathway that “peaked” at the Easter Vigil, and then the children continued through life united to Christ. Now, let’s see how all these pieces of conversion fit along the pathway. Take a look at Exercise 2 to help you imagine the children’s pathway to Christ.



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Session 3: Start off on the right foot: three steps to success in your children's RCIA process

Objective: Identify the steps you need to take in order to make children's RCIA a journey of conversion.

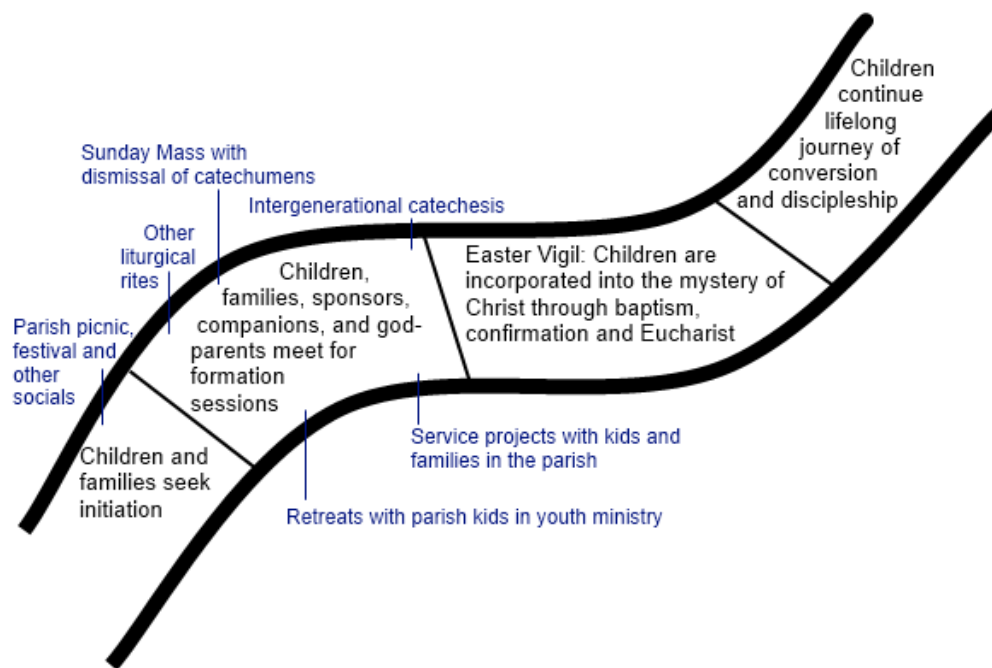
Think about what would happen in your parish if children's catechumenate process were seen as a journey of conversion where children are "seekers" being guided on a pathway to new life in Christ. Depending upon your parish, here are some of the things that will happen:

- Children in the catechumenate and their families will be active, committed disciples of Jesus Christ. They'll continue to grow and participate in continuing religious education and faith formation opportunities in your parish.
- RCIA catechists, companions, sponsors, and godparents will be renewed in their commitment to Jesus Christ and be more active in their discipleship.
- Through their participation in the liturgical rites and their witness to the candidates and catechumens, the parish community will be called to take more seriously their responsibility to initiate new members.
- The religious education programs, sacramental preparation programs, Catholic school, youth ministry, and other formation programs in the parish will be inspired and challenged to focus their efforts on the lifelong journey of conversion to Jesus Christ.

And that's just the beginning of what will happen in your parish when you *really* do the children's catechumenate as it's given to us in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

The first step

Once you commit to really doing children's catechumenate according to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, you need to seriously reflect upon the "pathway" you created in Session 2. It might look something like this:



The children's RCIA pathway in your parish will look different from the one given here for it is unique to your parish. After looking at the one given here, is there anything you need to add or subtract from the pathway you designed for your parish?

Also, remember that the pathway will grow and change. It will change as you adapt your RCIA to the needs of the children who come to you. It will also change and develop as you deepen your understanding of the RCIA.

Now it's time to get practical. Consider this: What are the first steps you must take to make the children's RCIA in your parish a journey of conversion? Listed below are some possible first steps. Reflect upon your parish situation. Circle three of the first steps listed here or name steps of your own.

After you've named your three first steps, we invite you to answer the online dialogue question. This will give you feedback on your "first steps" and help you learn from others the best way to go about designing a children's RCIA pathway that will work in your parish.

Possible first steps

- Talk to my parish catechetical leader, pastor, or catechumenate coordinator about my plan to make children's RCIA a process of conversion instead of baptism prep classes for kids. Explain my thinking and ask for their wisdom and input.
- Find a copy of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and read Chapter 1 in Part II, "Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age."
- Meet individually with each parent who has asked for his or her child (who has reached catechetical age) to be baptized. Find out what it is they are seeking for their child.

- Meet individually with each child (who has reached catechetical age) who is seeking initiation and find out what it is they are seeking.
- Talk to those who have been involved in children's RCIA in the past. What has been successful and meaningful and what has not?
- Name your own first steps....

Once you've named the first steps you need to take for the implementation of the children's RCIA in your parish, we'll begin to put the structure of the children's RCIA in place. In other words, we're going to put the structure to the pathway you've designed. We'll give an overview of the steps and periods of the RCIA for children in a later session.

