
Module 2: A new vision—your parish guide to the journey of faith

Session 1: A brand new way of doing faith formation (that's as old as the hills)

Objective: Use this session to uncover the church's ancient secrets for forming folks in the faith and then apply those principles to modern-day children.

"These children want to become Catholic." That's what the handwritten note on my desk said. The year was 1985, and I was just beginning my first job as a director of religious education. I knew how to teach Catholic kids about the Catholic faith, or so I thought. But the kids on "the list" weren't baptized and were not from Catholic families. They were students in our Catholic school, which was comprised predominantly of students who were not Catholic.

I miraculously stumbled upon a little tan book which was an early edition of what we now know as the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA). This document and the people of St. Andrew the Apostle Parish, who were already doing the RCIA for adults, helped me figure out what to do.

Here are some of the main things I learned from that early experience at St. Andrew:

- **Welcome people as they are.** Rejoice that their journey has brought them to us, right now, in this time and place.
- **It's about Jesus.** Share your faith in Jesus. Tell your story and the church's story of faith in Jesus Christ.
- Once the relationship with Jesus is there, then part of deepening that faith is **telling the "Catholic story"** of what we believe as Catholic Christians.
- **The whole parish catechizes.** It's not just the director's job, or the catechist's job, or the RCIA team's job. The parish catechizes by who they are, by what they do, and by how they worship.

Lloyd, one of the elder catechists at St. Andrew, was a church history buff. He taught me that although this "new" document called the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* came out of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, it was really an old way of doing things.

A little bit of history

- In the early church, small "house churches" took interested persons into their communities and showed the "inquirers" the Christian way of life. (By the way, at St. Andrew, adults and children who were "inquiring" about the faith met in Lloyd's home for precatechumenate.)
- During the first five centuries, a more organized "catechumenate" was developed with formal steps and stages.

- In the Middle Ages, the catechumenate diminished because huge numbers of people were being baptized and infant baptism had become the norm.
- During the 19th and 20th centuries, missionaries, especially in secularized France and in Africa, began to use the catechumenate again.
- In the 1960s, Second Vatican Council called for a return to the use of the catechumenate for initiating new Christians.
- In 1966, the first edition of the revised catechumenate was written. Then, later editions were published. In 1986, the U.S. bishops approved the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* and mandated that *all* dioceses in the United States use the RCIA by September 1, 1988.
- Within the RCIA, Part II, is Chapter 1, “Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age.”

It’s important to understand this history so as to understand that the church just hasn’t dreamed up a “new” way of doing things. We are returning to our ancient roots because Catholics over the centuries have found that this is the most effective way to initiate new members of all ages.

What’s new

What’s new to us who are used to a “teaching model” is that we typically envision “teaching” as a classroom model. In a classroom model, the teacher teaches and the students learn. In an RCIA conversion-based model, the community “teaches” by modeling a Christian way of life.

A gradual and complete process

So, here’s what the RCIA says about how we show our new members the Christian way of life. We show them gradually and completely through a series of steps and stages. You can find this outline of the steps and stages in the ritual text. Go to paragraph 35 and turn the page. It’s between paragraphs 35 and 36. Or, you’ll find it with Exercise 1. Do that exercise next.

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Session 2: Getting ready for the trip: make sure the children pack evidence of their conversion

Objective: Learn what happens in precatechumenate—before the “hard core formation.”

It was Christmastime, and I was trying to teach our newest little inquirers about the Nativity. Jacob and Sarah were seven and eight years old. I could see that the whole Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus in a manger thing was not really registering. So, I brought out a beautifully illustrated children’s book showing the angels above the stable in Bethlehem. I thought that “angels” would grab their attention and help remind them of this story that *surely* they had heard before. Hasn’t every child in America heard the Nativity story? At least on TV?

Blank. Maybe not totally blank stares, but their stares were fairly blank. The angels, the star, the stable, the manger—none of it sounded familiar to them, least of all the fact that baby Jesus, the Son of God, was born of Mary. It didn’t take me long to figure out that we needed to back up and do some pre-work, some pre-catechesis.

Pre-catechesis in the pre-catechumenate

I’ve since figured out that the reason the Nativity story wasn’t impressive or important to Jacob and Sarah was that, at this early stage, Jesus wasn’t impressive or important to them. They did not really *know* God and they certainly did not have a relationship with Jesus. So, we backed up and started doing some pre-catechesis during the period of precatechumenate. We helped them to see that God was already a part of their young lives and that Jesus made a difference in their lives. Once they understood that, then the story of the Nativity was important. Now, they could see that God becoming human was a *big* deal.

The “pre” ensures conversion

Not just in children’s RCIA, but in all catechetical formation, the “pre-catechesis” ensures conversion. The *General Directory for Catechesis* says it this way:

The Church usually desires that the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion. . . . This task is normally accomplished during the “pre-catechumenate” sometimes called “pre-catechesis” (no. 62).

We ensure conversion by making sure the children have an intimate relationship with our loving God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. How do we do this? By making connections between their young lives and God's life.

Making connections and telling stories

I still tell the story of the Nativity during the period of the precatechumenate. But, instead of trying to impress the children with the beautiful illustrations of angels and giant stars, I listen to their stories of how their parents show their love for them. (I'd know from previous conversations if a lack of loving parents was an issue and then adapt).

In a later module, I'll show you **how to** listen to the children's stories and tell the story of God's great love. I'll give you the concrete steps of **how to** do precatechumenate sessions and what they look like. But for now, I'm just giving you the general flow of the initiation process. So, let's keep moving.

Assume that the initial conversion of the period of the precatechumenate has happened as described in paragraph 42 of the RCIA.

Thus there must be evidence of the first faith that was conceived during the period of evangelization and precatechumenate and of an initial conversion and intention to change their lives and to enter into a relationship with God in Christ.

Once you and the parents have discerned that this initial conversion has happened, the children celebrate the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. This rite is a culmination of all that has happened during the first period—the precatechumenate. The Rite of Acceptance is also the beginning of the catechumenate stage of the process. We'll look at that stage next. Before we do, however, be sure to complete the exercise for this session.

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Session 3: Catechumenate: on-the-road training for a new way of life

Objective: Master the four things that must happen in the catechumenate stage to form children in a Christian lifestyle.

I learned to be a Catholic Christian by growing up in a Catholic family. Every Sunday and every Holy Day, even on vacation, we went to Mass. During Lent, every night after supper, we prayed the rosary as we knelt on the living room floor. I saved my pennies to light votive candles at the Mary altar. But that was a hundred years ago, and children in the RCIA most often don't grow up in a "typical" Catholic family—whatever that is. That's why they are in catechumenate, because they are unbaptized and most often their parents have not been active in the church.

So, it's during the catechumenate period that we show them the Catholic way of life. Of course, their formation began in the previous period of evangelization and precatechumenate, but it's in this second period that we aim "at training them in the Christian life" (RCIA, no. 75).

The Christian way of life

How do we, the Christian community, go about "training" children to be followers of Jesus Christ? The RCIA is very direct. The catechumens are formed through the following ways:

- suitable catechesis
- the help and example of the community
- liturgical rites
- active works with others (See RCIA, no. 75.)

The rite is pretty clear that it takes more than classes to learn the Christian way of life. Let's look at each of the four ways that formation happens.

1. Suitable catechesis (RCIA, no. 75.1)

It was a catechumenate session that happened on Sunday morning. We'd had our coffee, juice, and doughnuts, and we were settling back in to talk more about the gospel. Ten-year-old Kristi recalled for the adults and kids who had joined us after Mass what had already been discussed by the child catechumens. "Jesus is teaching us to forgive, and so we talked about forgiving people who are mean . . . like the girls on the playground. I know they make fun of me."

The catechumenate group, comprised of child catechumens, some baptized Catholic children, parents, and sponsoring families, continued to talk about Jesus and stories of forgiveness. From there, we moved into the church's teaching on forgiveness and in later sessions into teachings on the sacrament of penance and reconciliation.

Points to note:

- Word of God proclaimed at Sunday Mass
- Connect with the child's story

2. Help and example of community (RCIA, no. 75.2)

The lenten fish fry is a big annual event at St. Joe. Proceeds go to our sister parish in Haiti. Kristi, her mom, and her younger brothers came with the Sappingtons, their sponsoring family. They ate and visited with one another and with other parish families. They even took a shift in the kitchen: filling cole slaw cups, washing trays, experiencing the life of the community.

Points to note:

- Social events are formative
- Sponsoring families

3. Liturgical rites (RCIA, no. 75.3)

On the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C, we hear that Jesus unrolled the scroll and read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me." At the end of our session that day, Fr. Richard joined us and anointed Kristi and the unbaptized children with the oil of catechumens. At the next session, we talked about what the anointing meant.

Points to note:

- Liturgical rites are formative
- Talk about what the rituals mean

4. Active works with others (RCIA, no. 75.4)

All the toys collected at St. Joe had to be at Catholic Charities Christmas Store by November 15. Kristi and her family, the Sappingtons, and the other two families in children's RCIA, met with a handful of parishioners and loaded over 400 toys into the old vans. Then, the same group unloaded everything at the Christmas Store and put it on the shelves. The next week, we met for prayer and pizza and reflected upon the experience.

Points to note:

- Do service with other parishioners
- Talk about it afterward

Leads to the Rite of Election

You can see how this fourfold type of formation would lead to big changes in family life. Kristi's mom commented that Kristi was much happier at school and less worried about "the mean girls" once they began



participating in children's catechumenate. The "churchy" way of talking about this change in Kristi and her family is to say that they experienced conversion.

Once the catechumens have "undergone a conversion in mind and in action" (RCIA, no. 75), the children celebrate the Rite of Election.

The Rite of Election, the second step

The Rite of Election is the ritual, or the step, that leads the children into the third period of their formation. This rite usually takes place on the First Sunday of Lent. It's a celebration of God's grace working in the lives of the children. In the rite, we celebrate that God has "elected" the children for the sacraments of initiation.

This second step is the transition to the third period of formation. But, before we move on, let's reflect a little bit on the period of the catechumenate. And, rest assured, in future modules we'll talk much more about the specifics of how to do catechumenal formation. For now, take a look at Exercise 3.

Session 4: Use Lent to create a powerful, spiritual retreat for your children

Objective: Explore exactly how to make Lent a time of “intense spiritual preparation” in a way that is suited to children.

The final period of preparation for the sacraments of initiation is a time of “intense spiritual preparation.” So, what does “intense spiritual preparation” look like for a seven, ten, or fifteen-year-old? Well, for 14-year-old Cody, it looked like this.

On the Second Sunday of Lent, folks in the children’s RCIA group were talking about our strengths and weaknesses and what we were focusing on for our lenten journey. Cody, who had been in and out of the foster care system, received a fair amount of pressure from a pretty rough crowd at school. He said this:

For Lent, I’m trying to stay focused on school and basketball and not get messed up with the wrong people. I want Jesus to help me make the right choices.

Cody felt like Jesus was leading him and helping him to “turn away” from the wrong crowd and focus on Christ. The gospels of the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent helped Cody to listen and turn his heart to God.

Prepare for a great mystery

The RCIA says that this final period before the celebration of the sacraments is a time for interior reflection more than “catechetical instruction” (RCIA, no. 139). In other words, this is not the time to teach about each of the sacraments. It’s a time for “being prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery” (RCIA, no. 138). Through reflection on the gospels and the celebration of the liturgical rites of this period, the children are prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery at the Easter Vigil.

Meat and potatoes for Lent

The liturgies of Lent, namely the scrutinies and the presentations, are the “meat and potatoes” of this period. By preparing for the liturgies, celebrating the liturgies, and then reflecting upon them afterward, the children are prepared for that “Great Liturgy,” the Easter Vigil and the sacraments of initiation.

Here’s the “meat and potatoes” that the scrutinies and presentations provide for the children.

The Three Scrutinies

- Heal all that is weak or sinful
- Strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good
- Free them from evil
- Protect them from temptation
- Give them strength in Christ
- Complete their conversion

The Presentation of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer

- Gives them the light of faith
- Fills them with a spirit of adoption

(RCIA, nos. 141, 147)

As you can see, it's a big serving of meat and potatoes we're giving the kids. The celebration of these five major liturgical rites is a lot of content for the six weeks of Lent. These rites are the "lenten retreat" for the children and their families. Let's take a quick look at the dynamics of this lenten retreat.

The lenten retreat

The dynamics of this lenten retreat is one of liturgical catechesis. It works like this from week to week:

Prepare for the scrutiny → Celebrate the scrutiny → Reflect on celebration of scrutiny

You repeat this process for the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. Then, you follow this same process for the celebration of the presentations, which occur during the third and fifth weeks of Lent. But, we'll talk about the specifics of how all this works in a later session.

For the time being, let's go back to the period of purification and enlightenment and remember where it takes us—to the celebration of sacraments at the Easter Vigil.

Fun fact

Look at RCIA, no. 138, which is talking about Lent. It's the only place in the RCIA document that the term "liturgical catechesis" is used, even though the entire initiation process is one of liturgical catechesis! More on this in a later session.

A peek at the peak of the journey

Having completed the lenten retreat and the final spiritual preparation of Lent, the children and their families are led through the celebrations of Holy Week and to the sacred Triduum, which culminates at the Easter Vigil. It is at the Vigil that children experience the wonder of the paschal mystery.

- They are incorporated into the life of Christ by being created anew in baptism.
- They are anointed with sacred chrism and made to be more like Christ in confirmation.
- Then they are fully incorporated into Christ's body through the Eucharist.

The celebration of the sacraments of initiation is the peak of the children's RCIA journey. Through the sacraments they have become one with Christ and the Church. Their journey, however, continues onward as now they are disciples of Jesus Christ initiated for the life of world.



From sacraments onward to mission

In the next period, we help the children to better understand the sacraments and their mission as young disciples. But, before moving on to the fourth and final period of children's RCIA, let's take a moment to review how the period of purification and enlightenment leads the children to the sacraments. Please go to Exercise 4 for further reflection on purification and enlightenment with children.



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Session 5: Unpack the gifts of faith with your children

Objective: Discover how to help the neophytes (new Christians) make the most of their gifts.

I recently returned from a “50th Birthday Girlfriend Trip” to Lake Michigan. A gift to myself. A group of us, who went to Catholic grade school and high school together, turned 50 this year. About a week after we returned, three of us got together and reviewed the entire trip, laugh by laugh and tear by tear. We looked at pictures of the four-day trip and recalled each story of the vacation. We reflected upon the gift we had been given.

Mystagogy is much the same. After the celebration of the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil, we look back and reflect upon the gifts received. We look back at the *experience* of the sacraments, and we ask the newly baptized children, “So, what was it like?” and “What does it mean?”

Reflecting on the great, holy mystery

The reason we reflect upon the Easter Vigil is that it deepens our understanding of the celebration. In the Easter Vigil we celebrate Christ’s passage from death to life—the paschal mystery. But, we’re not just “celebrating” or “remembering;” we are actually *participating* in the paschal mystery. And the children being initiated are *participating* in the paschal mystery for the first time! Through baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, they are being incorporated into that great, holy mystery.

Being incorporated into the life of Christ is a lot to grasp, for children and for adults. So, mystagogy helps us to deepen our “grasp of the paschal mystery” (RCIA, no. 244). We do this in much the same way that I reflected with my girlfriends. We get together afterward, remember what happened, and talk about what it means. This process is called mystagogy (or mystagogical reflection). Mystagogy means “reflecting upon the mystery.”

So, what difference does it make?

There’s another part of mystagogy that is just as important. This part of mystagogy is about mission. During the ongoing, lifelong period of mystagogy, we live out our mission as baptized disciples of Jesus Christ.

Not to be confusing, but there are really two ways to look at the period of mystagogy.

1. The first is that lifelong mystagogy I mentioned above.
2. The second way to look at mystagogy is the “Period of Postbaptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy” that begins at Easter and ends on Pentecost Sunday.

Throughout this 50-day period, we reflect upon the meaning of the sacraments of initiation, and we also reflect upon the Easter Gospels to help the children understand their role in mission of the church. We help our newest young disciples figure out how it is they live out the mission of Christ as second, fifth, or tenth graders.

Consider, for example, nine-year-old Tony. He was nothing short of a genius. In our Easter season discussions on discipleship, he concluded that his mission was to help kids in his class. Tony's words were something like, "Instead of working on independent math by myself all the time, on some days I could help the kids like Ben. Sometimes he cries because he just doesn't get it."

Surely, Tony understood the mission of Jesus Christ. This is the type of real-life connection we help kids to make. Although the foundation for mission is set during the earlier periods of the RCIA, it's *the experience* of the sacraments that makes this period different. Once the children have actually been united with Christ in the sacraments, we help them to answer the question, "So, what difference does it make?" It made a difference for Ben.

Lifetime of mystagogy

Mystagogy lasts a lifetime. Aren't we, the baptized, still trying to better understand what it means to live a life united with Christ? Aren't we all trying to better understand our mission as disciples? It takes way more than 50 days to understand the paschal mystery. It takes a lifetime.

Let's spend a little more time reflecting on the paschal mystery. The final session in this module will be devoted to the paschal mystery. But, before you move to the last lesson, take a few minutes to wrap up this session on mystagogy by doing Exercise 5.

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Session 6: The road trip reaches its ultimate destination—Christ

Objective: Break down the phrase “paschal mystery” into language that is meaningful for children.

As we begin the journey with children in the RCIA, let’s be sure we know where we are going. We are leading children into the paschal mystery—the mystery of Christ. When children in the RCIA are baptized, confirmed, and celebrate Eucharist, they are incorporated into the mystery of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. And, yes, they also become members of the Catholic Church.

In this session, we’ll explore what we really mean by the phrase “paschal mystery.” First, we’ll look at the theological meaning. Then we’ll talk about what paschal mystery means in the life of a child and why it’s important we keep the children headed down the right road with the goal in mind.

Jesus Christ and paschal mystery

We said in previous sessions that intimate communion with Jesus Christ is the goal of all catechesis. Very true. When a person has experienced a journey of conversion and been fully formed in faith, we celebrate this intimate communion with Jesus Christ in the sacraments of initiation. In the sacraments, the intimate communion is made real. We are actually united with Christ in baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist.

It’s through the celebration of the sacraments of initiation that we are united to Christ and his great pascha—his passage from death to life. The first great Passover was that historic event in salvation history when the Israelites “passed over” from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. The Book of Exodus (chapter 12) describes how the Lord instructed the Israelites to place the blood of a lamb on their doorposts as a sign. When the Lord saw the blood, he “passed over” the houses of the Israelites and did not strike down their first born. The meal of unleavened bread that the Israelites ate before they left Egypt was part of the Passover meal which is still celebrated by Jewish people today.

Fun Fact

The Latin word for *passover* is *pascha*. The word “paschal” is rooted in an ancient Greek word that means “passover.”

Beginning with the New Testament, Christians throughout history have referred to Jesus as the Paschal Lamb who was sacrificed for our sins. Yet, as we well know, the Lamb of God was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit and thus “passed over” from death to a glorious new life.

By the power of that same Holy Spirit, through our baptism we are united to Christ's death and resurrection and share in his eternal life. This is the great paschal mystery in which we participate. We share in the mystery and the promise of eternal life.

A child's-eye-view of the paschal mystery

Although most kids can understand "eternal life" (they see it as "heaven"), the mystery of Christ's triumph over death and the promise of resurrection and new life need to have meaning in their everyday life. In order for the paschal mystery to have meaning, they need to see the "dyings and risings" in their day-to-day lives. Through the children's catechumenate process, we gently and gradually unfold the mystery of Christ and lead them to the ultimate celebration of God's great promise of eternal life.

"The whole initiation must bear a markedly paschal character, since the initiation of Christians is the first sacramental sharing in Christ's dying and rising." (RCIA, no. 8)

Here are some of the examples of paschal mystery that I use with kids:

- You have to move to a new school. Leaving your friends hurts so badly it's like a "death." You feel alone and certain you'll never have such good friends again. After feeling depressed and "dead" for a while, you begin to "click" with some of the kids at your new school. Eventually, you make some new good friends. You are happy and loving your new school! It feels like a resurrection and new life!
- Your mom and dad are getting divorced. Everything changes. It's like the family you've always known and loved has died. After a while, you adjust and discover a new way of being family.
- You are crushed and humiliated when you don't make the basketball team. All your friends made the team, and you just want to run away and hide. After a couple weeks of feeling miserable, you decide to join the technology team instead. You love it! It's way better than you imagined. You have found new life!

When we talk about these kinds of dyings and risings, we help kids to see that Jesus Christ promises us that even though we die, we will always experience new life, if we follow him. We also help kids to make the connection between these everyday death and resurrection stories, and our final death and resurrection.

The ultimate celebration of paschal mystery

When the children and their families are ready, they celebrate their union with Christ through the sacraments of initiation. The church says that it is *all three* sacraments of initiation that make the union with Christ fullest and most complete.

- In baptism, we die with Christ as we are plunged into the water, and then we rise to new life with him as we emerge cleansed and made new.
- Then, in confirmation, the sacred oil of chrism seals our baptism and configures us to be more like Christ.
- Finally, in the Eucharist, we are most deeply united to Christ as we eat his body and drink his blood.

Thus, we are leading the children on the road, not just to "get the sacraments" but to be united with Christ in the great mystery of death and resurrection. And, as we've mentioned previously, the children do not



walk alone on the road to the celebration of the paschal mystery. Their parents or guardians walk with them. In the next session we'll talk about the role that parents play in this journey, as well as what happens when parents are not involved.

But, for now, turn your attention to your own journey and take a look at Exercise 6.