

## ***Module 5: Look for the road signs of faith***

### **Session 1: Follow the signs to your ultimate destination**

*Objective: See the road signs of our journey as symbols of our faith.*

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The children's journey of initiation and conversion is taking shape. By now you can imagine the road that leads the children to new life in Christ. The children journey along the road to Christ accompanied by

- their parents
- their companions
- and the entire Christian community

And, along the way, there are road signs. The signs are very important because they point the children ahead to their destination—life in union with Christ. The signs also tell us something of the Holy One. In this session we will examine these road signs of our faith.

#### ***Signs of love***

Signs point us to something beyond the immediate. Lunches packed and waiting on the kitchen counter are a sign of a mother's love. Dad sitting in the bleachers through endless hours of ice skating practice is a sign of a father's love. A shoulder bump with a quick glance from a friend in the crowded school hallway is a sign of his support.

Signs speak to us in a way that mere words cannot. The lunches packed and sitting on the counter say more than just, "Here is food." You know what those nutritious lunches say. And they say it with even more richness and depth than the words, "I love you." Signs symbolize a deeper reality.

#### ***The church's signs and symbols***

The church uses sacramental signs to speak of God and God's saving love. The various sacramental signs of the church symbolize the deep, indescribable, multi-faceted dimensions of God's life and love. Like the everyday signs mentioned above, the symbols of the church point to a reality that is beyond the spoken word. Although the church doesn't use lunches, bleachers, and bumping, she does use simple, ordinary symbols and gestures like bread, water, and the laying on of hands to signify God's magnificent love.

#### ***Sacraments are sacred signs***

It's important to clarify that there are very unique and sacred signs in the church that we call sacraments. The sacraments are not only signs that point to a deeper reality; sacraments are signs of God's actual presence. God is present in the sacramental sign. For example, the consecrated bread and wine are not just

a sign of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is truly present in the bread that has become the Body of Christ and the wine that has become the Blood of Christ.

However, not all the signs and symbols in the church are sacraments. Some of the signs and symbols of the church simply point to the presence of God. For example, a lighted candle reminds us of the light of Christ. But a lighted candle is not Christ. It is not a sacrament.

## ***Reading the signs***

Our job as catechists is to help children read the signs of the church. We help children tune into the signs of God's love that are all around them. Then, we help the children see the connection between the sign and God's presence. Eventually, we lead them to see not only the signs of God's presence, but the real presence of God in the sacraments. **When we help children read the church's signs, we call it liturgical catechesis.**

We call this "reading" of the church's signs and symbols *liturgical catechesis* because it is primarily the signs, symbols, prayers, and readings of the *liturgy* that we are leading children to interpret. And, particularly in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, we are leading children to the liturgical celebration of the sacraments. Thus, liturgical catechesis is not only an effective catechetical method for children; it's constitutive to their journey of initiation. These signs along their road to Christ are the liturgical rites of the RCIA.

## ***The rites along the road***

We've already mentioned the rites of the RCIA many times. The signs and symbols of these rites point the way to Christ. Furthermore, by using the ritual language of sign and symbol, the rites tell us of the mystery of God's love. This is particularly effective for children because we are *showing* the children, through tangible symbols, the life of God. We show the children the goodness of God through the rites that are along the way.

Take, for example, signing children with the sign of the cross, one of the ritual gestures in the Rite of Acceptance into the order of catechumens. As part of the rite, the parents, companions, and sponsors mark the child's shoulder with the sign of the cross while the priest says, "We mark your shoulders with the sign of the cross: be strong with the strength of Christ" (RCIA, no. 268). What better way to teach a child that Christ will be their strength than to actually *put* the sign of strength on their shoulders?

However, in order for this ritual gesture to make sense to the child, she or he has to have a good idea of who Jesus Christ is and a good idea of what the cross means. This is where liturgical catechesis comes in, and this is what we'll talk about in the next two sessions. For now, please turn to Exercise 1 to review the importance of sign and symbol.

## Module 5: Look for the road signs of faith

### Session 2: Spot and read the road signs of faith

*Objective: Identify the signs on the journey and learn how the children (and you) are to read the signs.*

We begin this session by identifying the road signs, the liturgical rites that the children will encounter on this journey of faith. After we name the signs, we'll talk about how you help the children read and understand the signs.

#### The first major road sign

- Community, cross, word

#### Smaller signs along the road

- Word, hands, oil

#### The second major road sign

- Community's testimony, signing the book, election

#### Smaller signs along the road

- Laying on of hands, exorcisms, presentations

#### The culminating sign

- Water, oil, bread, and wine



## ***Identifying the signs***

Once the journey has progressed a bit and the child has begun to develop a personal faith, the time will come when she or he, along with you and the parents, see the sign that it's time to move along. The time has come to take a noteworthy step on the road to full initiation. And the first major road sign is there to mark this important point in the journey.

### ***The first major road sign***

This first sign is the Rite of Acceptance into the order of catechumens (RCIA, nos. 41-74, 260-276). In order to read this sign, let's look at the ritual symbols that we find in this liturgy and see what they tell us.

#### **The community**

The children are welcomed and "officially" accepted by the church "as persons who intend to become its members" (RCIA, no. 41; Canada no. 41). As a sign that they are being welcomed into the "household of Christ" (no. 47; Canada no. 47), the rite begins outside the church and the candidates move into the church.

#### **The cross**

The cross is prominently featured in this rite. In fact, the candidates are covered in the cross as a sign of their new way of life as catechumens (no. 55; Canada no. 55).

#### **The word**

Received by the community, the candidates are invited to share at the "table of God's word" (no. 60; Canada no. 60). They may even receive a book of the gospels or a Bible. The word of God will guide them throughout their time of formation and throughout their lives.

After celebrating this first Rite of Acceptance and thereby passing through this first sign, the candidates for initiation enter the period of the catechumenate. During this period of thorough catechesis (no. 7; Canada no. 7), the child catechumens will encounter some other road signs.

### ***Smaller road signs along the way***

#### **The word**

They see the word of God frequently along the way! It's so important for their formation that there are special celebrations of the word, just for them (nos. 75.1, 81-89).

#### **Hands laid in prayer**

There are many signs of blessing and strengthening for the children where priests, deacons, catechists, parents, and companions lay hands on the candidates in prayer (nos. 95-97, see also 90-94).

#### **Oil**

The catechumens are anointed with the oil of catechumens as a sign of "their need for God's help and strength" (no. 99; Canada n/a).

The passage through the period of the catechumenate may take quite a while. Indeed, the church says that it should take at least one year (National Statutes, no. 6). As their conversion deepens and their time of

## **Session 3: How to connect children in RCIA with other kids in the parish, Part 1**

*Objective: Explore how to pair companions from religious education and companions from the Catholic school with your catechumens.*

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We've established that the initiation for children in the RCIA must include other kids from the parish. The children of the parish are part of the community of faith into which the RCIA candidates are being initiated. Remember, that initiation takes place "within the community of the faithful" (RCIA, no. 4). So, let's talk about "how to" connect children in RCIA with their fellow parishioners.

### ***Religious education and youth ministry***

Remember the story of Tony with his companions Max and Sam? They were the three that all played Little League together. For them, I would propose the following model.

- Tony begins RCIA precatechumenate sessions with his parent(s). Once he moves into the period of the catechumenate, he will also participate in Sunday Mass and participate in dismissal sessions each week.
- Tony also attends some (or all) regular religious education classes with Max and Sam.
  - This works because Tony is friends with Max and Sam, and he *wants* to go with his buddies.
  - This will not always work because attending RCIA sessions *and* religious education is too much for most families.
  - Also, parish religious education is most often a textbook series program that is designed for baptized Catholic children. Most parish religious education is not designed for an unbaptized, uncatechized child.
- Max and Sam come to some of Tony's RCIA sessions, particularly when Tony is preparing for the rites in which Max and Sam may also participate as his companions.
- You, the RCIA catechist, and Tony's religious education catechist work closely together. You talk regularly about Tony's faith development. You decide if some weeks it's more important for Tony to attend RCIA or some special event in religious education. Don't get hung up on the idea that Tony has to "learn" everything. He has a lifetime to learn!

formation comes to culmination on the First Sunday of Lent, they will encounter another major sign: the Rite of Election.

### ***The second major road sign***

The second major sign in the roadway is the Rite of Election (nos. 118-137; Canada nos.105-124 / nos. 277-290; Canada n/a). This rite is celebrated once the community has discerned the child is ready for the sacraments of initiation.

### **The community's testimony**

The testimony of godparents, parents, catechists, and companions is a sign that the children have experienced true conversion.

### **Signing the book**

The catechumens sign their names in the Book of the Elect as a “pledge of fidelity” by those who have been chosen for the sacraments (no. 119, Canada no. 106).

### **Act of election**

The church makes its “election” as a sign of the catechumens’ election by God (no. 119, Canada no. 106).

The Rite of Election also begins the final period of intense spiritual preparation before the celebration of the sacraments of initiation. And, yes, there are road signs in this third part of the pathway, too!

### ***Smaller road signs along the third part of the way***

#### **Laying on of hands and prayer of exorcism**

This beautiful and intense sign symbolizes the healing and strengthening of the elect as their conversion before initiation is made complete (no. 141; Canada no. 128). The elect encounter this sign three times during the period of purification and enlightenment.

#### **Presenting of the Creed and Lord's Prayer**

These ancient texts are presented as a sign of enlightenment for the elect (no. 147; Canada no. 134).

The rites of this third period are the final preparation for the sacraments of initiation celebrated at the Easter Vigil. At the Vigil, the children encounter the sacred sacramental signs which culminate the entire process.

### ***The culminating signs***

Although the Easter Vigil is filled with immense ritual symbolism, the main symbols of the sacraments of initiation are water, oil, bread, and wine. You’ve encountered these symbols many times throughout your life as a Catholic Christian. Try your hand at interpreting these liturgical symbols by turning to Exercise 2.

## ***Module 5: Look for the road signs of faith***

### **Session 3: Learn to read the signs like an expert traveler**

*Objective: Discover how to teach your child catechumens and their families how they can read the signs on the road.*

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Having named the road signs that the children will encounter throughout their journey, it's important that we enable them to read the signs. Likewise, it's important that they be able to understand the meaning of the signs they read.

#### ***Liturgical catechesis***

Liturgical catechesis enables children to read and understand the liturgical signs along the way. Liturgical catechesis is employed throughout the entire journey of initiation. Here is a brief three step description of the method you can use to help your candidates to recognize the holiness in the signs they meet.

#### ***The three steps of liturgical catechesis help you read the signs***

- Prepare for the rite
- Celebrate the rite
- Reflect back on the rite (mystagogical reflection)

#### **Step one: prepare for the rite**

In order for the children to be able to read a sign, they have to know the language. Thus, part of preparation for a liturgical rite is to teach children the ritual language of the church. In other words, we need to help them “tune in” to the meaning of a ritual sign. We help them to interpret the symbolism of the sign.

#### **Fun Fact**

This same three-step process can be used when preparing for other liturgies, like first Communion or confirmation. Reflect upon the liturgical symbols of Eucharist and confirmation as part of preparation for the sacraments.

Let's take the cross as an example. It's one of the first ritual signs the children will encounter. For us, we quickly associate the cross with Jesus. But remember that many of these children do not really know Jesus, and they certainly don't grasp the depth of meaning in the cross.

Thus, to prepare for the Rite of Acceptance, we need to help children become familiar with the symbol of the cross. We do this in a long-view, remote sort of way. And we do a more immediate reflection on the cross. We'll look at both remote preparation for a rite and immediate preparation for a rite.

### ***Remote preparation for the rite***

You can't teach the full meaning of the cross in a lesson or two. It follows then that you need to spend an extended period of time "teaching" about the cross. What this really means is that you need to teach the children about Jesus. For in order to understand the power of the cross, the children need to understand Jesus.

Indeed, in children's RCIA, we spend the entire first period of the precatechumenate getting to know Jesus. Once the children get to know Jesus, then we introduce the cross and ultimately the story of resurrection, forgiveness of sin, and our salvation. Now the symbol of the cross has more meaning.

### ***Immediate preparation for the rite***

Then, when we get closer to celebrating the Rite of Acceptance, we prepare more specifically with the symbol of the cross. We talk about what it means for a nine-year-old girl to accept a cross. It might mean that you need to sit by the girl on the bus who smells bad and whom nobody wants to sit with. We lead the children to see that if they want to follow Jesus as disciples then that means embracing Jesus' cross, too, whether you are seven or seventeen or seventy.

### **Step two: celebrate the rite**

The second step in liturgical catechesis is the actual celebration of the rite itself. What's important here is that the rite is celebrated well. Preparation is the key, and as the catechist, do all *you* can to be sure that everyone is prepared: liturgist, presider, musician, catechumenate families, sponsors, and the assembly. Even though we may not be responsible for the actual choreography and execution of the rite, it helps if we are comfortable with it. That helps kids, parents, companions, and sponsors relax and enter fully into the experience.

### **Step three: reflect back on the rite**

After the celebration of the rite, gather with the child catechumens, their parents, companions, and sponsors and reflect upon the celebration of the rite. This process of reflecting back is called "mystagogy." That just means reflecting on the *mystery* of faith that we just celebrated. The purpose of this step is to "read the sign," that is, to better understand the meaning of the ritual and what it teaches us about God, Christ, Spirit, and the church. Follow these steps for an effective mystagogical reflection on the rite:

- Begin with a guided recollection of the celebration. Call to mind some of the main elements of the rite.
- Ask the participants to share their response to the following:
  - What stands out for you from the rite? What do you most remember?
- Allow time for all to share.
- Then, ask deeper questions;
  - What did (whatever they named above) mean to you? (For example, "What did it mean for you that your dad signed your ears with the cross?")
  - What did it tell you about God? Christ? The church?
- Lastly, wrap up by asking for a response.
  - So what? How does this call you to act differently? What will you do?





We'll go into much more detail on mystagogical reflection in Module 10. You can also read this article for a little more background on mystagogical reflection: <http://teamrcia.com/?p=48>

And when you are ready, please go to Exercise 3.



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## ***Module 5: Look for the road signs of faith***

### **Session 4: Follow these step-by-step signs to life in Christ**

*Objective: Learn how the rites serve as thresholds or transitions from one period of faith formation to the next.*

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In the previous sessions we described how the road signs speak to us and to children in a way that is deeper than words alone. The signs point the children in RCIA toward their destination—life in Christ. Ritual signs speak to us of God’s life and love.

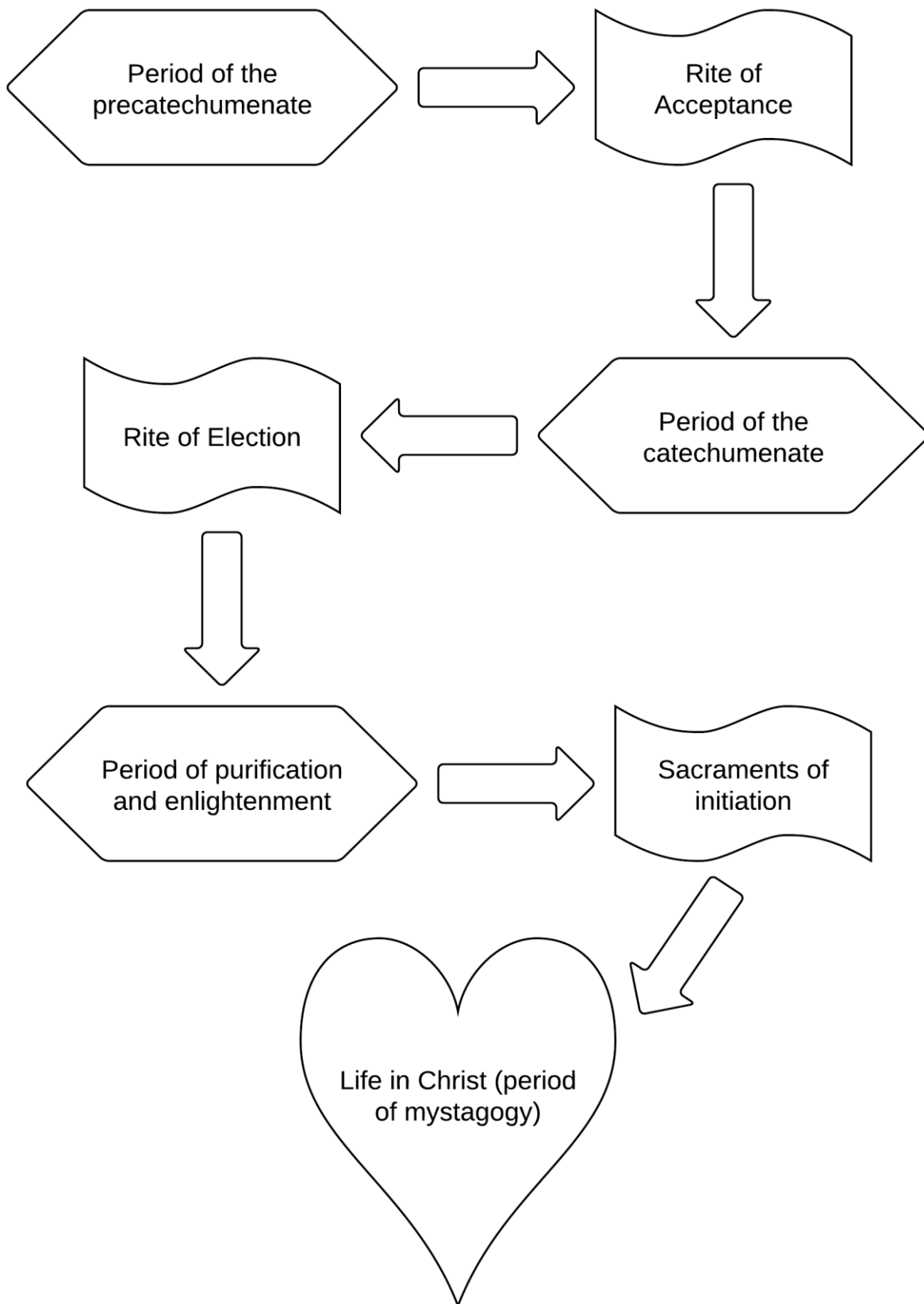
Yet that’s not all. Like any good symbol, ritual symbols have multiple layers of meaning. Think about the baptismal sign of water. It symbolizes cleansing and new life, but also death and destruction. In the RCIA, the road signs do more than speak of God; they are also doorways. They move the candidates from one place to the next.

#### ***Road signs are doorways***

As the children come across one of the signs, it not only gives them a message; it moves them along the road. The RCIA says it beautifully;

This journey includes . . . steps marking the catechumens’ progress, as they pass, so to speak, through another doorway or ascend to the next level (no. 6; Canada no. 6).

As the children journey toward Jesus Christ, their conversion deepens. So we mark that deepening commitment to Jesus and move them along to the “next level” or to the next period in their formation. Here’s how it works:



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## ***Door swings both ways***

The doorway not only ushers the catechumen into a new period of formation, but the doorway “swings back” over the preceding period. In other words, each rite culminates the preceding period and points ahead to the next period.

We’ll stick with the Rite of Acceptance as an example, but this time we’ll look at word, instead of the symbol of the cross. In Session 2, we noted that the word was a primary symbol in the Rite of Acceptance. This symbol indicates two things (though not exclusively):

- 1) That the word of God led the child through the precatechumenate and up to this point
- 2) That the word of God will more directly lead the child through the next period

The second point is made quite evident when the children are led from the rite following their catechist and the word of God in procession as they are dismissed for reflection on the word. Furthermore, the child catechumens will gather every single week of the catechumenate to hear the Word proclaimed at the Liturgy of the Word, followed by a reflection in dismissal catechesis.

## ***The boy, the sign, the doorway***

Jake’s story will illustrate how the rites work. Jake and his mom, Staci, came to Sacred Heart when Jake was about six years old. Staci had been away from church for a long time. Jake was pretty unfamiliar with notions of God and the stories of Jesus. After a few months in the precatechumenate, Staci casually commented, “Jake is lovin’ this church stuff. He’s the one who gets me up on Sunday so we can come to Mass.” This was a sign that Jake was ready to deepen his commitment to Christ and move on to the period of the catechumenate. After a brief discernment process, we prepared Jake and the other candidates to be accepted into the order of catechumens.

## ***The power of the rites***

The rites are pretty powerful. Let’s summarize what we’ve said in Module 5 about the rites:

- Road signs
  - Point to and symbolize a deeper reality, a sacred reality
- The heart of liturgical catechesis
  - Preparation before and reflection after helps us read the rites
- Doorways
  - Rites culminate one period and usher catechumens into the next
- Central to the entire journey of initiation
  - Journey flows to and from the rites

In addition, the power of the liturgical rites is not limited to the RCIA. What we are saying about rites, symbol, and liturgical catechesis applies to all of parish life. The signs and symbols of every liturgy point us beyond. They point us to the Holy. Every liturgical ritual speaks to us of God and Christ and church in a way that words cannot.

Therefore, I urge you to be attentive to the signs and symbols of the liturgies in which you participate. Next time you’re at Mass, be aware of the signs. And after Mass ask yourself, “What did the sign mean? What did it say to me? How does it call me to respond?” Liturgical catechesis can work for anyone.



Continue the discussion on the road signs of faith by going to Exercise 4. You can also continue the discussion in the online forum.