



HOW LONG DOES RCIA TAKE?

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Human beings are bad at making estimates. How long will it take to shop for groceries? How long will the meeting last? I'll just check Facebook for a minute or two. We are just plain awful at giving accurate answers about time.

So when someone asks us, "How long does RCIA take?" what should we say?

The worst option is to give the same answer to everyone. I see this on parish websites all the time. Many sites say that RCIA "begins in early September and meets weekly until Pentecost Sunday." Some say "one year." A few say "two years."

Sometimes I think we treat questions about the length of preparation for becoming a Catholic as though people were asking how long it takes to become an electrician. Well, no, that's not accurate. I looked up how long it takes to become an electrician, and the short answer is, "it depends." There is no set timeframe.

I understand why we want to predetermine the preparation period for becoming Catholic. We do it because it's easy. It's easy for us, and it's easy for the seeker. But imagine we are actually training electricians.

You are the only electronics expert in town, so anyone who wants to become an electrician has to come to you. One woman shows up who grew up in her dad's workshop. She was soldering circuits when she was five. And then, a guy who got bored studying law and wants to make a career change also shows up. The only thing he knows about electricity is that the light goes on when you flip the switch. So you tell them both that it takes "nine months" to become an electrician, and you put them both in the same training process.

The woman is noticeably bored throughout the training. You suspect that she knows some aspects of electronics better than you do. And the guy clearly does not have the requisite skills at the end of nine months. But you certify him anyway, praying that he doesn't electrocute himself on his first job.

Don't we do the same thing with our seekers? Shouldn't we try accommodate their training in Christian life to their needs? Of course we should. But how?

I don't have a blanket answer that will solve every situation, but I do think most of us can do a little better. Here are some suggestions.

REFRAME THE QUESTION

If someone asks how long RCIA takes, try answering in a way that helps them get out of a program mindset. Say something like:

We don't think of completing RCIA as the goal. The goal is to live as a Catholic. And there are ways you can start living as a Catholic today. To learn ***everything*** there is to learn about living as a Catholic takes a lifetime. I'm still learning myself. For a beginner, however, there are a series of steps, and I can go over those with you.

PRECATECHUMENATE

Some people have a date in mind by which they want to become Catholic — usually because they are marrying a Catholic, and they want to be Catholic for the wedding. Most other seekers don't have a date in mind. I try to say something like:



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The first step toward becoming Catholic is getting to know each other and learning more about why you want to become Catholic. I'd like to meet with you three times, and from there we can make a plan.

CATECHUMENATE

If during those three meetings, you find out you are dealing with a biblical scholar who has been living as a faithful Lutheran for 40 years, the training process can be very brief. If you are dealing with someone who is truly unchristian and has little spiritual background, you can talk about the next stage. For that person, I might say:

As Catholics, we base our life on the teachings of Jesus. And, as I said, that is a lifelong learning experience. The place where we learn best about Jesus and what he teaches is at Sunday Mass. Every Sunday is part of an annual cycle, during which the full story and meaning of Jesus is revealed to us. To live fully as a Catholic, you will need to be at a full cycle (one year) of Sunday Masses. There are other things we will do together during that year, but that's the core of your training process. Toward the end of that year, you will decide if you are ready to take on all the responsibilities of Catholic life.

If the person you are dealing with is a Christian but has not had a very strong formation, adapt the above, and leave out the part about the process taking a full year. Instead, tell them the two of you will have monthly check-ins to decide if the seeker is ready to take on all the responsibilities of Catholic life.

PURIFICATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Early in the catechumenate (within the first four weeks), I'd suggest a check-in meeting with the unbaptized folks. Your goal is to find out what is going well and what is challenging for the seeker. Also, this early meeting is a good time to talk about the next stage of the process. Something like:

Remember I told you that toward the end of your training year, you will decide if you are ready to take on all the responsibilities of Catholic life. If you decide you are, then there is a final spiritual preparation that takes place during the 40 days of Lent. In a way, this is the most important part of your preparation. So I want to give you some dates to block off in your calendar in case you decide later on that you want to enter that final preparation stage. If, at the time, you decide you are not ready, no worries. We can continue on as we are doing now until you are ready.

Then give your seeker the dates for the Rite of Election, the three scrutinies, the two presentations, and the Triduum. Ask them to hold those days as "sacred" and not schedule anything else at those times.

MYSTAGOGY

Finally, when you start to see signs of progress in each of the four areas of Christian life described in RCIA 75, schedule another check-in meeting. During this meeting, you will describe the period of mystagogy:

I wanted to meet to tell you I am really excited about how I see your life changing. I see you living as a Catholic more and more each day. [Give a couple of examples.] As we have talked about before, all of us are always learning more and more about how to live a life of faith. So far, you have been learning about what it takes to **start** living that life. Today, I want to tell you how I and all Catholics **continue** to learn how to live a life of faith.



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At the Easter Vigil, you will celebrate three sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. That celebration will be the formal start to your life as a sacramental person. What that means is, from that day on, you will be completely one with Jesus.

I can tell you what being one with Jesus means for me, but it's a lot like falling in love. Each person has to experience it for him or herself to fully understand it. The church has a very important process for helping you understand your new experience of the sacraments. It won't surprise you that that process is rooted in Sunday Mass.

After your baptism, we are going to focus on you and the rest of the newly-baptized for eight Sundays — from Easter to Pentecost. Think of it like an extended honeymoon. These eight Sunday Masses are called Masses for the Neophytes. These eight Masses are very significant for our parish. They remind all of us what it means to live as people of faith. And, during these eight Masses, you will learn how to live as a sacramental person.

I want you to plan to be at each of them so you can learn how to be one with Jesus —and be one with all of us — in your new, sacramental life.

SET EXPECTATIONS EARLY

The key to helping seekers understand how long RCIA takes is setting their expectations at the very beginning of your relationship. To help with that, keep these key principles in mind.

- The training process for living a Christian life is not about learning a series of doctrines. It is an apprenticeship in living the way of faith.
- The catechumenate is not for everybody. It is for the unbaptized and for those Christians who have no Christian formation.
- There is no set period of training to become Catholic. For some, the timeframe is very short. For others, it might be more than a year — in some cases, several years.
- The training process is a series of stages with regular check-ins (discernment) to assess readiness for the next stage.
- The primary place of formation is the Sunday liturgy because that is where Christ is most fully present to us.

The next time a seeker comes to you and asks how long RCIA takes, try some of these techniques. See if presenting the training process in this way helps you tailor your formation process to the individual needs of each of your seekers. I'm betting it will.