

SALT *and* LIGHT

Candidates and catechumenates preparing for full reception into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil participate in the Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA) during the Lenten weeks leading up to Easter. You may witness some of these rites within the context of Mass during the Sundays of Lent.

An Internal Path Toward Becoming a Catholic

by Dan S. Mulhall

The story goes like this: Following Mass one Sunday, a parishioner asks the pastor, “When did the church start spying for the US government?”

The pastor, surprised by the comment, asked, “What do you mean?”

The man replied, “Well, several times during Mass today you spoke about the importance of our CIA. I figured that it had something to do with spying.”

In response, the pastor burst into laughter but managed to say, “The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, RCIA.” Re-establishing the RCIA (also known as the catechumenate in the early days of the Church) as the official path for adults who wished to become Catholics was one of the great gifts of the Second Vatican Council. By approving this rite, the Church made new again an important practice.

Since its reintroduction more than forty years ago as the RCIA, it has changed the process of adult initiation for newcomers and become the model for all catechesis for children and adults.

Its title proclaims that it is concerned with initiation, the gradual process by which one becomes a part of a group or organization. In some ways, the man confused by the concept of “our CIA” has it exactly right: Just as one country spies on another to understand it and its intentions most fully, so, too, do people seeking to enter the Catholic Church spy on all that the Church does, believes, and practices, until they become one with the Church and know how to act as Catholics.

Unlike spying, however, there is no intent to deceive or mislead.

The purpose of the catechumenate is to form the attitudes, beliefs, practices, and values of seekers, so that they become part of the fabric of the Catholic culture. They learn Catholic attitudes about God and neighbor, about prayer and sacraments. They learn what the Church believes and they make these beliefs their own through daily living, gradually, little by little.

They learn to dip their fingers into holy water and make the Sign of the Cross, when they enter a Catholic church, and they learn why Catholics make this sacramental gesture. They learn why Catholics value life from conception until natural death and why Catholics support the sanctity of marriage.

As you can see, the RCIA is much more than a classroom course of study, much more than the simple memorization of facts or information about the Church as found in a textbook or catechism. In some ways, it is similar to what takes place when someone joins the military.

Over the course of a number of intense weeks of training, the recruit learns how to live as a member of the military. One doesn’t just learn about the Army or the Marines; one becomes a soldier or a leatherneck. A similar transition takes place during the catechumenate. Seekers don’t simply learn about the Catholic Church; they are transformed by their experience into Catholics.

That is why the period known as the catechumenate can last for months or in some cases even years: such a transition takes however long it takes for conversion to occur.

(continued on next page)

When this is achieved, the RCIA leads them fully into the Catholic Church with a series of public events that include the reception of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil.

It is important to remember, however, that these sacraments don't themselves initiate a would-be Catholic. Rather, their celebration signifies the initiation that has taken place in people's lives during the process.

Thus, in Baptism, when the catechumens are plunged under the water, they willingly "die" to their old ways of living in order to be raised by Christ Jesus and into a new way of life. They are then slathered in oil through the Sacrament of Confirmation to strengthen them for what lies ahead. Then, they are nourished by the bread of life, the Eucharist, to show that they are part of the Body of Christ and united with the Catholic Church.

There are some adult Christians who have been part of a different faith tradition but now wish to enter the Catholic Church. They go through a

similar process of formation so that they, too, learn the attitudes, beliefs, practices, and values of the Roman Catholic Church.

However, they are not baptized again (if they were already baptized Christians in another faith tradition). Conditional baptism is permissible if no record of a valid baptism can be found, or reconfirmed, assuming a previous valid confirmation. While the rite differs for the baptized, the focus remains on initiation, preparing these seekers to live fully, consciously, and actively as Catholics.

"Our CIA" comes to an end following the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil. There is then a brief period called "mystagogy." During this period, the new member of the Church explores the mysteries of the faith.

While the period lasts only a month, it serves as a sign of what lies ahead. Our growth in faith begins with the Sacraments of Initiation but continues throughout life.

Mulhall is a freelance writer and a catechist for adults. He lives in Laurel, Md.

*This article was originally posted in the February 20, 2014 edition of CNS's **Faith Alive!***