

# MyRCIA: The Meaning of Adult Initiation in Post-Vatican II America

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The search for God is the most intimate quest of our lives. Ultimately each person makes this pursuit alone, while naturally reaching out for support. To accompany another person on his or her search is a privileged journey. When we witness another person's awakening in faith, it draws us closer together, it reaffirms our own belief, and it fills us with awe.

Christian initiation is one of the most exciting ministries in the Church. Marked by liturgical rites, supported by meaningful catechesis, initiation celebrates the discovery of a person's relationship with God. Preparing for that day, sponsors, catechists, indeed the whole Christian community enter deep conversations with people asking the most important questions of life. This heady experience of intimate exploration is practically addictive; it accounts for our commitment to this ministry and adds to the joy of Easter.

The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* has spread this mutual experience of faith throughout Catholic parishes all over the world. In circumstances as broad as the Sunday eucharist and as private as conversations with a sponsor, the RCIA has opened doors of faith that have excited and energized Catholics. It is one of the greatest accomplishments of the post-Vatican II liturgical renewal, and its concept has been adopted and adapted by other Christian communities as well. The RCIA encapsulates the two great movements of the renewal, the return to the sources and the updating of the liturgy (*resourcement* and *aggiornamento*).

I've been asked to give a theological response to "Pastoral Practice in Light of the National Statutes on the Catechumenate," a report from Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. First let me thank CARA for its fine work, as well as the USCCB and the FDLC for commissioning the research. On the whole, the results affirm what we already surmised. The number of responding parishes - 800 of them - shows the enthusiasm that people share for this pastoral work. As you'll see, I think that some respondents misunderstood some questions because of the fluidity of some concepts such as mystagogy, the call to continuing conversion, and the very acronym RCIA.

The survey included only one question I thought was seriously flawed: "Since Confirmation will immediately follow Baptism, does your parish eliminate the Anointing with the Oil of Catechumens at the Easter Vigil?" This is one of the greatest non sequiturs in the history of confirmation, and let me tell you that bar is set pretty high. The oil of catechumens has nothing to do with confirmation. Particular law in the United States forbids using the oil of catechumens in your parish either in the preparation rites of Holy Saturday or during the adult

baptisms of the Easter Vigil. (You find that in RCIA 33 §7. Also National Statutes 16. I hope our bishops will review that decision too.) That's particular law, not parish law. By universal law, the confirmation of newly baptized adults at the Easter Vigil supersedes the postbaptismal anointing with chrism, not the prebaptismal anointing with the oil of catechumens. (I wish that decision could also be reviewed, but that belongs to the Vatican, not to the conferences of bishops.)

Thankfully the rest of CARA's survey is much better than that question. However, by design the entire survey is based only on the National Statutes, which passed in 1986, two years before the final English translation of the RCIA was published. The total picture is bigger than what a focus on the statutes will allow. Hence, in my remarks I will focus on the survey and the statutes, but I will occasionally refer to the rest of the RCIA and other supportive documents.

As Ron Lewinski told me earlier this month, it's hard to give a pastoral response without being theological, and it's hard to give a theological response without being pastoral. So to focus my remarks, I propose six theological principles: Adaptation strengthens worship. Catechetical formation accompanies liturgical practice. Ministries are diversified. The sequence of the initiation rites reveals the paschal mystery. Uncatechized Catholic adults need appropriate pastoral care. Other Christian assemblies share a valid baptism with Roman Catholicism. This exploration will reveal that something beautiful has been happening in the lives of individuals, ministers, parish communities, and the church at large: God's self-revelation leads to Christian faith.

Something else has happened: The implementation of the RCIA has not been uniform. There are many reasons for this. One is that even in Latin the *editio typica* permits various ways of implementing the rite. The 1988 English translation allows further adaptations. The book is so large and complex that many priests and parish ministers get lost in its pages. The acronym RCIA is so removed from theological language that people use it to mean a variety of things from apologetics to liturgy, from private instruction to faith sharing, from lectionary catechesis to conditional baptisms. Many people hailed the General Directory for Catechesis when it quoted the 1977 Synod of Bishops: "The model for all catechesis is the baptismal catechumenate" (59), but this may have further obscured its meaning. After all, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which was not supposed to add anything new to teaching, said "By its very nature infant Baptism requires a post-baptismal catechumenate" (1231). Excuse me, but post-baptismal is exactly what a catechumenate is not. Like computer files entitled MyDocuments, MyPhotos, and MyTickets, or web sites like myusccb.org, we've developed a culture of MyRCIA. Many parish leaders and publishers of educational materials make the acronym fit what they believe should be done, and what they are equipped to do. It isn't all bad - after all, God is revealed in manifold ways, and the Church better respond in manifold ways. But we should also cling to theological principles that cement into place this cornerstone of the liturgical renewal.

**Adaptation strengthens worship. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy expressed the principle this way: “Within the limits set by the typical editions of the liturgical books, it shall be for the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority mentioned in Art. 22, 2, to specify adaptations, especially in the case of the administration of the sacraments, the sacramentals, processions, liturgical language, sacred music, and the arts, but according to the fundamental norms laid down in this Constitution” (39). In a classic Catholic “both/and” statement, the constitution favors the freedom of adaptations along with the restraint of authority.**

**The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* is an outstanding example of a liturgical text that made room for adaptation. The *Rite of Marriage* and the *Order of Christian Funerals* also had to account for a wide variety of customs in countries and cultures around the world. The RCIA says this: “Endorsed by the ancient practice of the Church, a catechumenate that would be suited to contemporary missionary activity in all regions was so widely requested that the Second Vatican Council decreed its restoration, revision, and adaptation to local traditions” (2). Dozens of times throughout the book you will find words such as “adapt”, “pastoral” and “insofar as possible.” This call for flexibility shows up even in Latin when the RCIA treats the reception of inquirers (39/2), the times for celebrating the various rites (8, 21, 26, 126, 146), the form of deliberation before the rite of election (122), the freedoms entrusted to episcopal conferences (32ff) and ministers (35), exceptional circumstances (II/2), danger of death (II/3), and the preparation of uncatechized Catholics (II/4), children of catechetical age (II/1), or validly baptized Christians (II/5, 477). The Vatican handed the RCIA to episcopal conferences like a batch of dough to be shaped and baked. This they did with tremendous success. The English translation for the United States increased this flexibility especially through the inclusion of newly-composed rites adapted for those previously baptized in other Christian congregations.**

**The North American Forum on the Catechumenate endorsed this spirit of adaptation. Founded by James Dunning and fortified by a relationship with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Forum helped countless dioceses implement the RCIA, enrich its catechesis, and enliven its liturgies. I served as a team member on Forum institutes, and I can still hear Jim Dunning thundering his foundational advice to participants: “Adapt, adapt, adapt.” The flagship institute, *Beginnings and Beyond*, adapted several of the rites for the prayerful engagement of its participants, and certain aspects of these rituals found their way into parish celebrations: the use of the processional cross and the book of the gospels in the rite of acceptance, and the litany of conversions that accompanied the scrutiny, for example. All this created a sense of freedom with the rites, which the Forum critiqued for sound theology. For example, one adaptation that the Forum abandoned formerly started the rite of acceptance. Inquirers stood outside the church door and knocked, hoping to gain admission. This practice supported the passive idea that the way Catholics get new Catholics is to sit in church and wait. Far more expressive is to bring the faithful outdoors to seek out and reassure those who are answering the call of God.**

Varieties of liturgical practice existed in the early church. For example, the anointing that we commonly associate with confirmation after baptism appeared before baptism in Syria (*Ages of Initiation*, Chapter Two:3). Eventually postbaptismal anointing with chrism became more uniform, but at the beginning the alternate sequences didn't bother anyone. The diversity seemed to carry no more theological weight than the question, "Do you wash your hands with soap and water or with water and soap?" A variety of sound practices can coexist.

Looking at the CARA report, if anything, one could argue that there is insufficient adaptation in the scheduling of certain liturgies. For example, 76% of responding parishes offer the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens only once a year, and 56% celebrate it during Advent. RCIA 18 §3 says "Two dates in the year, or three if necessary, are to be fixed as the usual times for carrying out this rite." The Rite of Acceptance is to be done when catechumens begin their formation. There is absolutely no recommendation that it take place during Advent, but many parishes put it there presumably because the Rite of Election takes place during Lent. Not much theology there. All it accomplishes is purple symmetry. On the other hand, 95% of parishes offer the Rite of Acceptance during Sunday mass, and believe it or not, this is an adaptation. The RCIA permits it, but the Roman Missal has never heard of it; it provides no mass texts for the Rite of Acceptance, which it thinks is happening at a liturgy of the word. But the ceremony is so expressive to congregations, that it has found a welcome home at Sunday mass. Perhaps our statutes could affirm this practice. Adaptation strengthens worship.

Catechetical formation accompanies liturgical practice. This principle is interesting for what it does not say. The RCIA ascribes broad goals to catechetical formation, but it offers little specific content or methods. For example, the prerequisite for the Rite of Acceptance, it says, is that "the beginnings of the spiritual life and the fundamentals of Christian teaching have taken root in the candidates." It looks for their "first faith," "initial conversion and intention to change their lives and to enter into a relationship with God in Christ." It also seeks "the first stirrings of repentance, a start to the practice of calling upon God in prayer, a sense of the Church, and some experience of the company and spirit of Christians.... The candidate should also be instructed about the celebration of the liturgical rite of acceptance" (42).

Then later, "Before the rite of election is celebrated, the catechumens are expected to have undergone a conversion in mind and in action and to have developed a sufficient acquaintance with Christian teaching as well as a spirit of faith and charity. With deliberate will and an enlightened faith they must have the intention to receive the sacrament of the Church, a resolve they will express publicly in the actual celebration of the rite" (120).

As helpful as these descriptions are, they do not offer a lesson plan to catechists. And they shouldn't. The RCIA is a liturgical book. The Rite of Marriage doesn't describe marriage preparation sessions. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults doesn't describe baptismal preparation sessions. Into this void many a publisher has stepped. The vast array of materials available addresses the many

ways that people appropriate faith, as well as the many interpretations of the faith that writers and publishers think need to be appropriated. As with the liturgy, the catechetical effort has contributed to the culture of MyRCIA.

Some people responded to CARA's survey saying, "We don't have RCIA at our parish." What on earth does that mean? It's like saying, "We don't have the Rite of Penance at our parish." You do. If an adult is being baptized, then you do have RCIA - that's the only place you find the rite to baptize an adult. You may not have the RCIA to the fullest extent possible, but you can't not have it. People confuse the rite with a style of catechesis. If you ask people, "What is the RCIA?" they may answer something like, "It's the classes you take to become a Catholic." You're asking a liturgical question. But you may get a catechetical answer: "It's classes."

So strong is the interest in catechesis, that it has wrestled control of the RCIA timetable. Although the liturgical book envisions a celebration of the initiation rites at the Easter Vigil, it details no time of year for the start of preparation. In actual practice, however, formation normally begins in September, when the American mind has turned to school. According to CARA, 71% of parishes conduct their formation in "about nine months (i.e., September to Easter)" - even though that's closer to seven months. And even though National Statutes 6 says, "The period of catechumenate, beginning at acceptance into the order of catechumens and including both the catechumenate proper and the period of purification and enlightenment after election or enrollment of names, should extend for at least one year of formation, instruction, and probation. Ordinarily this period should go from at least the Easter season of one year until the next; preferably it should begin before Lent in one year and extend until Easter of the following year." In practice, most catechumens do not participate that long in formal catechetical sessions; however, many have absorbed catechesis from a variety of means before the formal start of their formation, especially through family, friends, worship and church-related activity. This may account for the low attrition rate among those who start their formation in the catechumenate; nearly all of them finish it. They've had some kind of formation before they begin their formation. When they bring this kind of experience, we do not demand a fourteen-month minimum. We silently - and in most cases I think rightly - adopt the position "Credits transfer."

From the early church, we don't know too much about the content and method of catechetical formation. Egeria tells us that in fourth-century Jerusalem, for example, those to be baptized received intense formation during the eight weeks before Easter. They started the day with an exorcism (I prefer coffee myself), and then the bishop spoke for three hours each day on the scriptures, starting with the Book of Genesis. (Incidentally, our weekday lectionary assigns readings from the opening chapters of Genesis to Year One of Ordinary Time, weeks 5 and 6, which often fall about eight weeks before Easter. Egeria's shadow still lingers.) After that, she writes, the catechumens received two more weeks of formation on the Creed. In time, this biblical and doctrinal formation waned. In thirteenth century Europe, for example, expectations for a child's first

communion preparation were quite minimal. The rudiments of catechesis consisted merely in learning the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Creed and the Sign of the Cross (*Ages of Initiation* Chapter Eight, 8).

The North American Forum on the Catechumenate promoted liturgically informed catechesis. Karen Hinman Powell's books *Breaking Open the Word of God* successfully added a metaphor to catechetical parlance. The Forum promoted lectionary-based catechesis, primarily because RCIA 75 §1 said that catechesis should be "accommodated to the liturgical year." In truth, the liturgical year embraces elements in addition to the lectionary; for example, the calendar, presidential prayers, the Office of Readings, and seasonal devotions. But the popularity of the lectionary overtook catechumenal catechesis along with many other aspects of parish life from the selection of music at mass to bulletin artwork. In the past, Sundays were sometimes known by the first word of their entrance antiphon, such as *Gaudete* and *Lætare*; now they are better known by the lectionary. Lectionary-based catechesis is not the only way to interpret paragraph 75 §1, but it does provide an excellent way to present the teachings of the Church within the rich context of the paschal mystery; furthermore, it prepares catechumens to participate meaningfully in Sunday worship throughout the liturgical year for the rest of their lives.

"Mystagogy" like the acronym RCIA has received a variety of interpretations - for the same reason: its meaning is not patently clear. Yesterday when I entered the word on an electronic device, the spell checker replaced "mystagogy" with "my staggering." The North American Forum repositioned the word "mystagogy" to mean a spiritual and catechetical reflection on any liturgical rite. The history of the catechumenate and the RCIA itself use the term more narrowly: mystagogy is the formation that follows initiation, never one that precedes it. It has a shelf-life; there's a point when mystagogy stops and lifelong faith-formation begins. Historically, the setting for mystagogy was always the homily at the eucharist, never a separate session. RCIA 247 says that the "main setting" for mystagogy "is the so-called Masses for neophytes, that is the Sunday Masses of the Easter season." All the RCIA's references to mystagogy imply that the faithful are there as well. Logically, then, mystagogy is nothing more than homilies about the sacraments preached at parish masses during Easter Time.

However, the National Statutes seem to misunderstand this nuance when they make statements such as this: "After the immediate mystagogy or postbaptismal catechesis during the Easter season, the program for the neophytes should extend until the anniversary of Christian initiation, with at least monthly assemblies of the neophytes for their deeper Christian formation and incorporation into the full life of the Christian community" (24). The questions in CARA's survey about the statutes assume that the word "mystagogy" means special sessions for the newly baptized. If you read these results with the RCIA's view that mystagogy is the Sunday homily, it makes no sense that the number of parishes that offer mystagogy weekly stands at 39%, or that 66% of parishes do not have masses for neophytes and their sponsors. If their parish has any masses on the Sundays after Easter, they have masses for neophytes and

sponsors. It is hard to evaluate mystagogy with such a discrepancy over what it is.

The content and methods of all phases of initiatory catechesis are quite varied, but the purpose of this catechesis is clear. Or is it? The purpose is stated at the beginning of “*Christian Initiation, General Introduction*,” the prologue that governs both the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and the Rite of Baptism for Children. It opens with a nod to Vatican II’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes*: “In the sacraments of Christian initiation we are freed from the power of darkness and joined to Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. We receive the Spirit of filial adoption and are part of the entire people of God in the celebration of the Lord’s death and resurrection.”

However, none of us is surprised to read in CARA’s report that the top reasons that are “very” or “somewhat” common for entering the catechumenate are the desire to be Catholic (97%) or one’s marriage to a Catholic (92%). 88% say they desire to unite their family in one faith. Other reasons are submitted, but virtually no one says their reason for entering the catechumenate is they’d like to be freed from the power of darkness and joined to Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, and we’d probably worry about them if they did. People enter the catechumenate because they have been impressed with Catholics or because they would like to unify their family’s faith. Often these initial reasons then lead more deeply to an intimate discovery of God. That prepares the way for fitting liturgical rites. Catechetical formation accompanies liturgical practice.

Ministries are diversified. CARA reports that half the parishes with an RCIA team have one paid staff and two volunteers. It also reports great diversity in presiding for the rites - bishop, priest, deacon and lay leaders all take a role. One in five parishes say that the pastor has the main responsibility, which is a pretty good ratio. It means that the leadership is broadly shared throughout the country.

Once in a while the report raises more questions than it answers. For example, when asked, “Does the Pastor (or other Priest) celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation with those newly received?” 96% say yes. Well, canon law obliges the priest to confirm those whom he receives, so why is that not 100%? There are people who think that those confirmed as Episcopalians or Lutherans, for example, do not need a Catholic confirmation; but they do. The Catholic sacrament of confirmation has to be administered by a Catholic bishop or priest. The only exceptions are people received from Eastern Orthodoxy; our Church recognizes the validity of their chrismation / confirmation. Similarly, when asked if unbaptized children of catechetical age receive all three sacraments in the same mass, 47% say yes. Again, canon law obliges the priest to confirm these children. Why are we tolerating 53% noncompliance? The diversification of ministries permits some laity to participate in ways that only clergy did in the past, and it permits and even obliges priests to participate in some ways that only bishops did in the past. We have made some progress, to be sure, but more can be done. Ministries are diversified.

The sequence of the initiation rites reveals the paschal mystery. Perhaps the best expression of this principle is in RCIA 215: “In accord with the ancient practice followed in the Roman liturgy, adults are not to be baptized without receiving confirmation immediately afterward, unless some serious reason stands in the way. The conjunction of the two celebrations signifies the unity of the paschal mystery, the close link between the mission of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the connection between the two sacraments through which the Son and the Holy Spirit come with the Father to those who are baptized.” Baptism has a meaning; confirmation has a meaning; and the joint celebration of these sacraments also has a meaning. CARA reports that 99% of responding parishes answer yes to this question: “Do the Elect receive all three Sacraments of Initiation at the same Mass?” But we know that figure is greatly exaggerated when we consider children of catechetical age.

You may think that the celebration of the three initiation sacraments together would force a rethinking of the meaning and age of confirmation for those baptized Catholic as infants. However, the reverse has happened. The rising age of confirmation has forced a rethinking of celebrating the three initiation sacraments together for children of catechetical age. This has called into question the integrity of the sacraments that are meant to exemplify the unity of the paschal mystery.

When the RCIA was being fashioned in the late 1960s, the group working on the adaptation for children did not foresee that the age of confirmation would rise. Instead, they envisioned that unbaptized children of catechetical age would be preparing for confirmation and first communion at the same time that their Catholic peers were - around catechetical age. Paragraph 254 §1: “Since the children to be initiated often belong to a group of children of the same age who are already baptized and are preparing for confirmation and eucharist, their initiation progresses gradually and within the supportive setting of this group of companions.” Paragraph 293: “Along with the children, their godparents and their baptized companions from the catechetical group participate in the celebration of these penitential rites [(scrutinies)].... In particular, these penitential rites are a proper occasion for baptized children of the catechetical group to celebrate the sacrament of penance for the first time.” Paragraph 256: “The [children in the catechumenate] should, if possible, come to the sacraments of initiation at the time that their baptized companions are to receive confirmation or eucharist.” Paragraph 308: “Baptized children of the catechetical group may be completing their Christian initiation in the sacraments of confirmation and the eucharist at this same celebration. When the bishop himself will not be the celebrant, he should grant the faculty to confirm such children to the priest who will be the celebrant.” Paragraph 329: “The celebrant should also pay special attention to any previously baptized children of the catechetical group who at this celebration are to receive communion for the first time.”

The framers of the post-Vatican II RCIA thought that the age of confirmation for those baptized as infants would remain young, but instead those baptized at catechetical age are not being confirmed. National Statutes 19 says, “Some



elements of the ordinary catechetical instruction of baptized children before their reception of the sacraments of confirmation and eucharist may be appropriately shared with catechumens of catechetical age. Their condition and status as catechumens, however, should not be compromised or confused, nor should they receive the sacraments of initiation in any sequence other than that determined in the ritual of Christian initiation.” The sequence of the initiation rites reveals the paschal mystery.

Uncatechized Catholic adults need appropriate pastoral care. Prior to the post-Vatican II RCIA, no liturgical document had addressed this group of Catholics baptized as infants, who then received no further formation and no celebration of the sacraments of confirmation and first communion. The RCIA should be applauded for taking up this huge pastoral problem for the first time. Basically, the *editio typica* envisions that these Catholics will experience formation similar to what catechumens receive, adapted to their condition. It also recommends that they receive the sacraments of confirmation and communion at the Easter Vigil (409). The National Statutes 26 says that this “is not generally recommended.” I like the spirit of that statute, but it does have our bishops stick their neck out beyond what the typical edition says.

There is a more substantial problem. The English translation in the US gathered up those baptized in other Christian communities and placed them within paragraph 400, which in Latin deals exclusively with uncatechized adult Catholics. Paragraph 409 then appears to want the Rite of Reception for members of other Christian communities at the Easter Vigil, but the *editio typica* never makes that recommendation. It associates the Easter Vigil only with the unbaptized and with uncatechized Catholics, not with other validly baptized Christians. The recommendation for uncatechized Catholics is identical to the one in the adaptation for children: perhaps the Catholics in the catechetical group preparing for confirmation and first communion could receive those sacraments at the same time as their peers, namely, at the Easter Vigil. In retrospect, one wonders if the Vatican’s committee that first made these recommendations would still do so today. The theology of baptism links quite naturally to the Easter mystery because of biblical passages such as the one we hear each year at the Vigil from Romans 6. But the celebration of other sacraments for those who are already baptized has a looser connection.

In CARA’s report, there are some curious findings. For example, when asked “Do you allow adult Catholics (baptized, but uncatechized candidates for Confirmation) to participate in the same formation process as catechumens and candidates?” 87% said no. I think CARA meant to ask about uncatechized adults not even receiving communion, but people read it to mean adult communicants who had never been confirmed. In hispanic parishes, for example, this can represent a sizable number of people, many of whom participate in a diocesan Call to Continuing Conversion. Still, when asked, “When do baptized, but uncatechized Catholic adults receive Confirmation and Eucharist?” 59% answered “At the Easter Vigil.”

Now, the law gives priests the faculty to confirm adults and children of catechetical age whom they baptize or receive into the full communion of the Catholic Church. But only the bishop can give the priest the faculty to confirm someone baptized a Catholic as an infant. I wonder what we would have learned had CARA asked the pastors of those 59% whether they had obtained permission from the bishop to confirm. It would also be interesting to know who is confirming the other 41%, when, and where. In any event, the desire to provide for this group is praiseworthy. Uncatechized Catholic adults need appropriate pastoral care.

Other Christian assemblies share a valid baptism with Roman Catholicism. At recent gatherings of *Societas Liturgica* and the North American Academy of Liturgy, plenum session presenters such as David Holeton, Paul Bradshaw, Ed Foley, and Maxwell Johnson have complained about the faltering ecumenical climate, focusing especially upon the revised English translation of the Order of Mass. Their tone has run the gamut from respectful bewilderment to outright excoriation. Although I do some work for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, I have joined the chorus of those who express disappointment that the revised translation of dialogues and congregational parts that various Christian bodies hold in common did not involve participation from those whom it would affect. It is easy to find vocal opposition to this example of ecumenical disintegration, but it is hard to find the same pointed comments leveled against parish RCIA teams for blurring the distinctions between validly baptized Christians and unbaptized catechumens. Yet from a theological perspective, this practice is potentially much more volatile and incomparably easier to fix.

Canon 869 §2 says, “Those baptized in a non-Catholic ecclesial community must not be baptized conditionally unless, after an examination of the matter and the form of the words used in the conferral of baptism and a consideration of the intention of the baptized adult and the minister of the baptism, a serious reason exists to doubt the validity of the baptism.” The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity 1993) after reviewing these points says, “the rite of conditional baptism is to be carried out in private and not in public” (99d). RCIA 393 echoes the same theme. National Statutes 37 says, “If conditional baptism then seems necessary, this must be celebrated privately rather than at a public liturgical assembly of the community and with only those limited rites which the diocesan bishop determines. The reception into full communion should take place later at the Sunday Eucharist of the community.”

According to CARA’s research, 61% of responding parishes performed conditional baptisms last year, and nearly half of them, 29%, did it at the Easter Vigil, another 2% at Sunday mass - meaning over half of the large number of conditional baptisms being performed are done in public, telegraphing doubt on the fact or validity of baptisms already performed.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, when a Protestant wanted to become a Catholic, the priest commonly performed a conditional baptism. The practice was

offensive to other Christians, and the ecumenical movement strove to bring it to a stop. Apparently, this has failed. That's not all.

Prior to the Council, instead of a conditional baptism, the priest could use a rite in force since the 13th century, which Durandus called "The Reconciliation of Apostates, Schismatics and Heretics." It presumed that every Christian baptized outside the Catholic fold fell into one of those categories, had committed sin by being so baptized - even in infancy, and needed reconciliation.

The Rite of Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church was created as a simplified and ecumenically sensitive way of welcoming other Christians to the Catholic eucharistic table. It was created in the ecumenical fervor swelling at the same time as the liturgical renewal. It intended to affirm the baptisms of other Christians and to embrace them as brothers and sisters. While this rite was under development in 1967, Frederick R. McManus from the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy wrote a letter to Balthasar Fischer, whose commission was developing the RCIA. McManus challenged the idea of celebrating the reception of validly baptized Christians at the Easter Vigil. He wrote, "In the past this reception into communion has been treated as a 'conversion' with its own kind of catechumenate." Any elements of the rite "that would cast doubt upon the baptism of other Christians which has been properly celebrated, or upon the religious life they have been leading prior to their reception into communion" must be avoided (cf. Turner, *When Other Christians Become Catholic*, p. 57). Fischer's group eventually composed the rite of reception to be celebrated at an ordinary Sunday mass when one baptized Christian was ready to be received into the Catholic Church. That is what was published in the 1972 Latin *editio typica* of the RCIA.

As the English translation was underway, news that the American edition wanted to include a combined rite of baptism and reception at the Easter Vigil reached the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Its members sent a letter to the Congregation for Divine Worship, saying, "The insertion of this rite into the Easter Vigil gives such importance to the event that it may cause surprise and even pain to our fellow Christians and give rise to new difficulties." Citing examples from the careful revision of both the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and the Rite of Reception, the Congregation continued, "It follows then that there can be no change in our decision of 20 June 1986, which stated that the rite of reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church could not be celebrated during the Easter Vigil" (Turner, p. 80).

Yet because parishes were already combining the rites, the Congregation for Divine Worship went against the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and detailed how the combination could be done. The Vatican approved the combined rites on condition that when the RCIA was published in English, they be placed in an appendix (p. 81). This has made no difference. Parishes in the United States celebrate the combined rites with abandon. Ask CARA. Is the Rite of Welcoming baptized candidates combined with the Rite of Acceptance of unbaptized catechumens? 77% of responding parishes say yes. Do adult candidates for reception participate in the same formation process as catechumens? 77% say

yes, all sessions. When does your parish celebrate the Rite of Reception? 76% answer “At the Easter Vigil.”

**National Statutes 30:** “Those who have already been baptized in another Church or ecclesial community should not be treated as catechumens or so designated. Their doctrinal and spiritual preparation for reception into full Catholic communion should be determined according to the individual case, that is, it should depend on the extent to which the baptized person has led a Christian life within a community of faith and been appropriately catechized to deepen his or her inner adherence to the Church.”

**National Statutes 31:** “Those baptized persons who have lived as Christians and need only instruction in the Catholic tradition and a degree of probation within the Catholic community should not be asked to undergo a full program parallel to the catechumenate.”

**National Statutes 32:** “The reception of candidates into the communion of the Catholic Church should ordinarily take place at the Sunday Eucharist of the parish community.”

**National Statutes 33:** “It is preferable that reception into full communion not take place at the Easter Vigil lest there be any confusion of such baptized Christians with the candidates for baptism, possible misunderstanding of or even reflection upon the sacrament of baptism celebrated in another Church or ecclesial community, or any perceived triumphalism in the liturgical welcome into the Catholic eucharistic community.”

In an attempt at ecumenical sensitivity, National Statutes 2 says, “the term ‘convert’ should be reserved strictly for those converted from unbelief to Christian belief and never used of those baptized Christians who are received into the full communion of the Catholic Church.” The statute never told us what to call that group, so people were left with an incomplete directive. I don’t know what they should be called, but if you can think of something, the national statutes would be a great place to put that word. People in this group are still called “converts”, even by the very Christians who have become Catholic.

It is hard to interpret the responses to CARA’s questions about the First Sunday of Lent. 83% of responding parishes say that the bishop presides for the Rite of Election, and 37% say the bishop presides for the Call to Continuing Conversion. Perhaps they mean a non-combined Call to Continuing Conversion at the cathedral. However, it’s quite common to have the bishop preside for the combined rite over the unbaptized and baptized alike. However he does it, the practice has set up several expectations: That combined rites are a good idea. That even the bishop expects priests to receive other Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil instead of Sundays throughout the year. And that in order for those Christians to become Catholic, instead of having one simple ceremony on a typical Sunday in their local Catholic parish, they are expected to travel to the cathedral at the beginning of the Church’s penitential season, stand next to catechumens, and present themselves to the bishop, who will declare the unbaptized to be numbered among the elect,

and call validly baptized Christians to continual conversion. This adapted rite was a creation of the Church in the United States; it was part of our rightful attempt as a conference to produce MyRCIA, and the Vatican's Congregation approved it. However, I think it would have horrified the ecumenically sensitive theologians who created the Rite of Reception in order to replace the Rite of Reconciling Apostates, Heretics and Schismatics, that Christians who were not to be called "converts" were still being called to conversion on the first Sunday of Lent by the local bishop from his cathedra.

I know that these adapted preliminary rites for baptized candidates have had a positive impact on many individuals. I know that many bishops, priests and directors of catechumenates would hate to see them lost in a revised translation of the RCIA. I'm confident that the people who worked on these rites in the 1980s including my dear friend Ron Lewinski did so with the right intentions to respond pastorally to a need of our local church when interest in initiation rites was abloom. But the time has come to examine these adapted rites again, especially in the light of the consummate disappointment of our partners in ecumenical dialogue. Could we please have another look at the original ecumenical vision of Vatican II?

Even now, without any further pronouncement from Rome, pastors have full authority to receive a validly baptized Christian into the full communion of the Catholic Church this Sunday. What on earth are they waiting for? Other Christian assemblies share a valid baptism with Roman Catholicism.

So these are some theological principles that come to mind: Adaptation strengthens worship. Catechetical formation accompanies liturgical practice. Ministries are diversified. The sequence of the initiation rites reveals the paschal mystery. Uncatechized Catholic adults need appropriate pastoral care. Other Christian assemblies share a valid baptism with Roman Catholicism. These have guided us. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has gained excited new members and the enlivened participation of old members. At the same time, given the proclivities of post-Vatican II America, we have been tempted to shape the RCIA into something we think better fits our own experience. Sometimes MyRCIA has succeeded; sometimes it has not.

The forthcoming revised English translation will give us another opportunity to review the theological principles upon which initiation is based, and to revise our national statutes. ICEL has begun the work of retranslating the *editio typica* into English. For those discouraged by the revised translation of the Roman Missal, the news about the RCIA sends shivers down their spine. The new translation rules will have ICEL translate the typical edition's paragraphs in numerical order. The first translation considerably rearranged the book. ICEL will not include the adapted rites in its work because those were composed in English, and there is nothing in the typical edition to translate. As I understand the process, if the USCCB wants to have those rites again, they may request them from the Vatican again. Unknown is whether or not our bishops want to do this, and whether or not the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments will approve such a request.

**With regard to the National Statutes, I find them prolix. Sometimes they repeat arguments that have already been made in the main body of the work, where they stand with plenty of universal authority. Sometimes when you rephrase something, you create a question about its meaning. My hope is that the revised national statutes will be brief. Pastoral and theological richness would again be welcome, but I do love brevity, a quality which this talk lacks.**

**However the work continues, I pray that it progresses with joy and hope. While we discuss matters such as the correct translation of words, the ceremonies proper to a cathedral, and the particularly American circumstances requiring statutes, may we never lose touch with something beautiful happening in a human heart: the search for God. Each person affected by this work is someone God has created in love and in whom God yearns to be known. When we come to respect the divine initiative behind human initiation, we who have already received the gift of faith will bring honor and glory to God.**