

# The Parish as a Generative Community Both of New Members and as a Way of Life

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## Overview

After the first couple of World Series games last fall a friend asked me, “Who are you pulling for? Boston or St. Louis?” I said, “The American League. That is how I was brought up. Kansas City is an American League city, and St. Louis is just another city in the State of Missouri. When it comes to baseball, allegiance to the League is more important than allegiance to the State. I’m pulling for Boston.” My friend said, “Oh, no. In my family, we had Cardinals fans. For us allegiance to the State is more important than allegiance to the League.” We are still friends, but efforts to change the other’s point of view will prove hopeless. There was one value that we both shared: family. The way you grew up is the way that you live.

We frequently speak of Catholic parishes as families. At a baptism, for example, we might announce, “We have a new member of the parish family.” The metaphor works because members share the same values and because we pass them on from one generation to the next. There will always be some variance of dearly held beliefs, but unless something really goes wrong, which can happen, Catholics like being Catholic, and they like identifying with a parish. Even many of those who are not very active in church life will still come around on Christmas and Easter, baptisms and funerals, and the annual parish festival. For a wedding they often choose a particular church that means something to them. Those who infrequently participate at a parish cannot do even that much unless the rest of us are there, worshiping from week to week, striving to live our faith in palpable ways, and sharing it with the next generation.

One of the deepest hurts any faithful Catholic feels is the decision of a son or a daughter to disassociate from active church life. The household and ecclesial families are enmeshed in the Catholic conscience, and it is hard for parents who love the church and love their children to find that the children do not so love the church. It’s hard to think about the parish without thinking of generativity. A sign of one’s faith is that one has shared it successfully with the people one loves the most. Conflicting beliefs within one family can cause stress, but many other Catholics have the joy of sharing faith whenever the family’s generations gather.

Although the link between parish life and generativity has always existed, the most profound reflection on it came after the Second Vatican Council with the

publication of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Through a sequence of periods and rites, people become members of the Christian family. The RCIA is an order of initiation, a liturgical document, not a complete catechetical plan. Yet it does provide rich reflection on the whole process of generating new members and sustaining them in the community.

There was a rite of adult baptism prior to the publication of the RCIA, but it was a complex and ponderous liturgy which had collapsed the traditional stages of the catechumenate into one event. By the mid-twentieth century missionaries in places like Africa and Asia were begging Rome for a catechumenate in stages, similar to the initiation rites they saw in non-Christian communities.<sup>1</sup> They knew the Catholic Church had a fertile history of a staged catechumenate, and they thought it would fit their contemporary circumstances. In 1962 before the council opened, the Vatican's Sacred Congregation of Rites published a catechumenate in stages, rearranging the elements of the rite for adult baptism into a more practical form for the benefit of missionaries.<sup>2</sup> Later that year the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy called for the restoration of the catechumenate: "The catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps, is to be restored and to be taken into use at the discretion of the local ordinary. By this, means the time of the catechumenate, which is intended as a period of suitable instruction, may be sanctified by sacred rites to be celebrated at successive intervals of time."<sup>3</sup>

This paper will dwell on three distinct moments in the catechumenate process. The main treatment is devoted to paragraph 75 (19 in the Latin *editio typica*), which describes four ways in which the catechesis is to be carried out. Remarks about evangelization and mystagogy will precede and follow the central part of the paper. This will show that the RCIA does not distinguish between the two different concepts of the generative community in the title of this paper. Rather, it creates new members, and it sustains them in a way of life. One goes with the other. If new members have not sufficiently followed Christ, they will be disinclined to encourage others to do so. As with Catholic parents, the proof of one's commitment to Christ is not the successful recruitment of new members, but the act of sharing faith. The invitation to others is an expression of one's own way of life. Having been generated anew, one invites others to new life as well. A person may not convince anyone to change his or her allegiance from church, synagogue, mosque, days off, or baseball teams, but the hope is a sign of the commitment.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Turner, *The Hallelujah Highway: A History of the Catechumenate* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000), pp. 144-155.

<sup>2</sup> "Additiones et variationes in Rituali Romano circa ordinem baptismi adultorum." *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 54:310-338.

<sup>3</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 64, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html). Accessed 26 October 2013.

## Evangelization

“The initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized.”<sup>4</sup> All those who enjoy the privilege of baptism share the duty of proclaiming Christ to others. This point opens the RCIA’s treatment of ministries and offices. Many of the liturgical books include such a section in its introductory material, and whether it is the Rite of Confirmation or the Roman Missal, the first group of ministers to be mentioned is the entire Church, not specifically the hierarchy. The duties of bishops, priests, and deacons will be detailed, but not before the introduction considers the responsibilities of all the People of God. This practice put into the liturgical books the teaching of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, which opened its treatment on membership with a glance at the entire People of God before explaining the different groups it includes.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, it is not surprising that the RCIA opens its treatment of initiation with the whole People of God before exploring the responsibilities of its component parts.

The responsibility of the entire People of God is also stressed in Christian Initiation: General Introduction, the foreword that precedes both the RCIA and the Rite of Baptism for Children. While the Second Vatican Council was still in session, Pope Paul VI had established a Consilium to carry out the wishes of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. This group of liturgical experts created dozens of smaller groups charged with the responsibility of developing the rites that the Council desired. Study group XXII reworked the rites of initiation. It began with the catechumenate, and after sending it out in draft form to about 50 different pastoral centers with a request for feedback, it turned its attention to the Rite of Baptism for Children. All the while, study group XXII was developing a general overview to Christian Initiation, which now appears as the General Introduction to both books - one for the baptism of adults and the other for the baptism of infants.<sup>6</sup> This general introduction states the case in this way: “The preparation for baptism and Christian instruction are both of vital concern to God’s people, the Church, which hands on and nourishes the faith received from the apostles.... Catechists and other laypersons should work with priests and deacons in the preparation for baptism.”<sup>7</sup>

In general, Catholics want to help once people have expressed interest in joining the Church, but they do not so actively invite people to follow Christ. “All the followers of Christ have the obligation of spreading the faith according to

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<sup>4</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* 9, (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Chapter II: “On the People of God.” [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html). Accessed on 26 October 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Consilium ad exsequendam constitutionem de sacra liturgia, schemata n. 311, De Rituali, n. 30, 25 septembris 1968, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Initiation, General Introduction 7.

their abilities.”<sup>8</sup> However, we think of evangelization as something that evangelical Christians do. We don’t go door to door to promote our faith and recruit new members. We take a more passive approach - waiting for someone to contact us. The RCIA has challenged this notion and encouraged Catholics to shoulder the responsibility for sharing their faith with others. We expect couples who marry in the Catholic Church to share their faith with their children, so the instinct is already there. We also tell youth preparing for confirmation that they will receive gifts of the Spirit, just as the apostles did on the first Pentecost. They proclaimed Jesus Christ to the world; the same is expected of everyone who is confirmed. The Church also asks for a broader participation in the ministry of evangelization - sharing the faith not just with children, but with neighbors, coworkers and strangers. As will be shown, the very same behavior is expected of catechumens - long before they are confirmed, and whether or not they are parents.

Pope Benedict sounded the theme when establishing the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization: “The mission of evangelization, a continuation of the work desired by the Lord Jesus, is necessary for the Church: it cannot be overlooked; it is an expression of her very nature.”<sup>9</sup>

## Catechesis

RCIA 75 is the *locus classicus* for describing methods of catechesis in the period of the catechumenate. Again, the RCIA is a liturgical book, not a catechetical text. A catechist does not look inside the Rite of Marriage for a lesson plan on marriage preparation. Nor should one expect to find a thorough treatment of catechetical sessions in the RCIA. However, in any liturgical book one finds the prayers that articulate the hopes of the celebration. From these can be deduced a fitting catechetical plan.

The RCIA offers different strategies for catechesis throughout the formation of new Christians. For example, prior to the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, when dealing with inquirers, the RCIA describes the catechesis in this way: “faithfully and constantly the living God is proclaimed and Jesus Christ whom he has sent for the salvation of all.”<sup>10</sup> From this comes “initial conversion”<sup>11</sup> and the opportunity for a “suitable explanation of the Gospel.”<sup>12</sup> This language is highly evangelical, and it presupposes that those with whom the catechist is dealing have a limited experience of God, Christ, the gospel, prayer,

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<sup>8</sup> RCIA 9, citing *Lumen gentium* 17.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, “Apostolic Letter in the form of *Motu Proprio*, *Ubicumque et semper*,” (21 September 2010), [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20100921\\_ubicumque-et-semper\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html), Accessed on 29 October 2013.

<sup>10</sup> RCIA 36.

<sup>11</sup> RCIA 37.

<sup>12</sup> RCIA 38.

and the Christian community. Hence, this initial stage calls for a catechesis that is less detailed and more proclamatory. It announces who God is, and what Christ has done for us. Once this basic message has been sent, the inquirers are invited to follow Christ. Some parish RCIA gatherings fail to accomplish this first task. They move immediately to an explanation of what makes the Catholic Church unique. However, this is not the Rite of Catholic Initiation of Adults. It is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. The catechist should not move too quickly, but should establish first of all the inquirer's fundamental beliefs about the spiritual life. That will open the door to the more elaborate catechesis envisioned by RCIA 75.

When that catechesis is complete, the Rite of Election begins the period of purification and enlightenment. "This is a period of more intense spiritual preparation, consisting more in interior reflection than in catechetical instruction, and is intended to purify the minds and hearts of the elect as they search their own consciences and do penance."<sup>13</sup> This final period before baptism is not the time to supply all the information that was overlooked in the preceding period of preparation. It is a retreat. It strengthens what is good and repels what is false.

Between the period of evangelization and the period of purification and enlightenment is the period more properly called the catechumenate. It is the heart of initiatory catechesis, and RCIA 75 establishes its catechetical plan. This paragraph has four goals in mind: "a suitable catechesis," familiarity with "the Christian way of life," "suitable liturgical rites," and education for the responsibility "to spread the Gospel." A parish relies on these methods to become a generative community of new members. In reality, the parish already employs these methods as the expression of its own way of life.

The first part of RCIA 75 calls for suitable catechesis, "planned to be gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the word." Catechumens should have both an acquaintance with dogmas and precepts as well as "a profound sense of the mystery of salvation."<sup>14</sup>

When many people think of "catechesis", what they imagine is only this first of the four parts of RCIA 75. It is the teaching of material similar to the contents of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Some people exaggerate this aim as if it were the exclusive goal of catechesis. However, the appropriation of head knowledge is insufficient without the heart and the hands. For this reason, the first part of RCIA 75 wisely reminds catechists that inquirers need not just dogmas and precepts, but a sense of mystery as well.

Catechists owe it to catechumens to give them a complete coverage of the faith - or at least as complete as can be given according to their level of understanding. There are many ways of accomplishing this. Some prefer catechesis based on the Sunday lectionary, hence "accommodated to the

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<sup>13</sup> RCIA 139.

<sup>14</sup> RCIA 75/1.

liturgical year,” but others prefer a more orderly unfolding of the basic doctrines of the faith. In any event, this is only partly the goal of the period of the catechumenate. It should not be overlooked or compromised, nor should it become the only method by which Christians share their faith.

In a Catholic parish, this first goal of RCIA 75 intimidates many people and impedes them from volunteering as a catechist. They feel that they do not sufficiently understand the faith in order to share it with others. They fear that catechumens will ask questions that they themselves cannot answer. A good Catholic has a healthy sense of the mystery of God and the impossibility of answering all the queries that arise. Still, the instruction offered to catechumens, while intended to be comprehensive, is also called “suitable.” The RCIA takes a realistic approach - not everyone will be able to understand everything, but a sufficient amount should be shared.

The reticent reaction of potential volunteer catechists reveals a deeper frustration that many parishes feel: the failure to provide adequate faith formation for adult Catholics. Parishes generally have more success providing religious education for children. They may promote adult faith formation, but attendance is typically small. People are busy. They think that they have an adequate understanding of the faith. They perhaps regard faith formation as something that children do. The questions that they hold inside or that others pose to them have not motivated some Catholics to pursue sessions or courses in faith formation that would enhance their participation in the Christian life.

Ironically, the first part of RCIA 75 has become the engine of the process that prepares adults for baptism, yet it represents a part of Christianity that many baptized adults have neglected. If a community expects to generate new members who are knowledgeable about the faith, it would help if the community itself were growing in knowledge. Some members do, but not nearly enough.

The second area of catechetical formation in RCIA 75 is familiarity with the Christian way of life. Through the example and support of other Christians, catechumens learn to pray, bear witness to the faith, keep their hopes set on Christ, follow supernatural inspiration in their deeds, and love their neighbor.<sup>15</sup> In this pursuit, catechumens may meet opposition from those who hold other beliefs, but they will find support from the community of Christians.

This section of RCIA 75 focuses more on deeds - where the first section focused more on the mind. Christians have a certain way of behaving, and catechumens need to learn it. The best way, naturally, is through contact with other Christians. Some parishioners who feel that they may be inadequate volunteers to fulfill the expectations of the first section may feel right at home with this one. If they know how to pray, if they tell others about their belief, if they expect Christ to come again, if they seek direction from God, and if they practice love of neighbor, then they make excellent catechists of the second type. When

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<sup>15</sup> RCIA 75/2.

Christians come in contact with catechumens, they foster growth in the Christian way of life.

Catechumens receive the assistance of a sponsor during this time. That person represents the entire Catholic community and guides the catechumen especially in this second area of formation. Catholics who take on the role of sponsor generally find it an immensely rewarding experience. Some have never shared faith so deeply with another person, nor have they assisted someone's journey of faith. Sponsors generally find that their own faith increases as they share it and see it flourish in another.

This second section of RCIA 75 acknowledges the sad situation that sometimes the growing adherence to Christ and the Christian community creates opposition - a break with other associations and a sense of loss. On balance, most new Christians will accept this potential division because they experience so much life in Christ. In some parts of the world, the persecution of Christians is rampant, and new disciples realize that their faith may come at tremendous personal cost. Their decision to adopt the Christian way of life is especially powerful, and it should inspire other Christians when they reflect on the consequences of generating new members.

In general, members of a Catholic parish excel at putting the second section of RCIA 75 into practice. Those who number other members of the parish among their best friends especially live the vision articulated here. This kind of activity is one part of the catechesis that forms new Christians. It does not focus on dogmas, but it does show how belief is practiced in everyday life. Commerce among Christians is catechetical and formational. It is not unusual to hear catechumens say that their coworkers and family members have noticed a difference in how they act. Their remark demonstrates that a lively contact with the Christian community is accomplishing catechesis.

Many parishes offer time and talent surveys to foster participation in the Catholic way of life. This aggressive effort keeps generativity alive among parishioners. Many Catholics want to share their gifts with the community, but have never taken the opportunity to do so, or were never personally asked to help. A survey of needs and gifts can unleash new support - as long as the proper followup takes place. Without it, Catholics feel that their gifts are not needed or welcome. Surveys are not the only way - sometimes people respond to a need posted in the bulletin; more commonly they respond to a request from the pastor or a parish employee. People who do not want to volunteer one year may do so the next. Changes in their lives bring changes in priorities, and they may rethink what they wish to do with their time and skills. As long as they are giving back, the gifts of the Spirit remain alive, and new life is born into the community.

Liturgical rites are the focus of the third section of RCIA 75. These "purify the catechumens little by little and strengthen them with God's blessing."<sup>16</sup> These rites are intended to take place in celebrations of the Word of God - whether as

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<sup>16</sup> RCIA 75/3.

part of the catechetical session, in place of it, or with the entire community during the first part of the Sunday eucharist. The RCIA recommends that catechumens be dismissed from the eucharist after the liturgy of the word, “for they must await their baptism, which will join them to God’s priestly people and empower them to participate in Christ’s new worship.”<sup>17</sup>

The focus of a catechumen’s liturgical prayer is the Word of God. All catechesis explained in the first section of RCIA 75 and all behavior expected in the second stem from the bible. Hence, the third aspect of catechetical formation centers on hearing the Word of God, which will inform the mind, warm the heart, and guide one’s actions.

This is “liturgical” prayer - that is, the Word of God is proclaimed within the assembled community as the people listen to it. This happens during a spiritual time in which people stop other activities in order to let God speak to the heart. By listening within the community, catechumens realize that others share their faith, and that God’s Word speaks to all individuals.

The purpose of this liturgical prayer is to purify and strengthen. Those familiar with the next stage of formation after the Rite of Election will recognize these characteristics. The scrutinies cleanse what is evil and strengthen what is good. Already in the period of the catechuminate, the same dynamic acts through the liturgical celebrations. To conclude the celebrations of the Word the catechumens may receive either a minor exorcism or a blessing. These will begin the process that will be continued in the period of purification and enlightenment.

The dismissal of catechumens is not widely practiced, but it is encouraged. It takes place not just because catechumens are unable to receive communion. In the early days of the Church, catechumens were dismissed partly because the mystery of the eucharist was concealed from them and other non-Christians, out of fear that it would be misunderstood and ridiculed. Today, the teaching on the eucharist is quite accessible, but the practice of dismissal is recommended for a different reason: catechumens are not yet members of God’s priestly people. The entire liturgy of the eucharist at mass presumes that those taking part are among the baptized: they recite the creed, they offer the prayer of the faithful, they contribute sacrificial offerings as symbols of their own lives, they silently join the priest in offering the eucharistic prayer, they pray “Our Father” to the God who has adopted them as children in baptism, they share the sacred peace that exists among the baptized, and then they come to communion. Finally, they are dismissed together as the People of God, ready to live the message they have received. Those who are not yet baptized can be present at the liturgy of the eucharist, but they are spiritually unequipped to participate fully in it. They will do that after their baptism.

Throughout their experience of liturgical prayer, catechumens will learn to keep holy the Lord’s Day. This needs special attention because the newly baptized will continue their formation especially through participation at the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



**Sunday eucharist. Helping catechumens evaluate the way they spend their Sundays prepares them for faithful Christianity after baptism. In almost every parish some of the newly baptized who were very devoted to the catechumenate cease coming for Sunday mass shortly after their baptism. Although the rate of postbaptismal disinterest in the Church is discouraging, it is higher among those who were baptized as infants. Nonetheless the most effective period for developing the spiritual habits of Sunday is the period of the catechumenate, not the period of mystagogy. Part of formation is behavioral - liturgical prayer should foster a true love for Sundays and a desire to participate with the community in praise of God on the Lord's Day.**

**For the Christians to form new members in liturgical prayer, they need to be adept at it themselves. Many Catholics have a lively interest in the scriptural readings of the lectionary cycle. They are hearing a greater number of passages than ever before. They have weekly opportunities to let the Word of God shape their lives. However, not all prepare for this by praying over the readings on their own before sharing in the eucharist. The Sunday lectionary can assist family prayer to a greater extent than is commonly practiced. Furthermore, as often as Catholics like to have a prayer at a meal or a meeting, it is not often accompanied by a reading from the bible or even an allusion to one. The bible means a lot to Catholics, but a generative community will give it a more central place from which its members can invite others to hear and form their own lives on the Word of God.**

**The final section of RCIA 75 says in its entirety, "Since the Church's life is apostolic, catechumens should also learn how to work actively with others to spread the Gospel and build up the Church by the witness of their lives and by professing their faith."<sup>18</sup> Bearing witness to the faith is not reserved to those who are baptized, confirmed or married. It is expected even of catechumens, long before they are initiated into the Christian community. If they wish to follow Christ and imitate the behavior of Christians, they prepare themselves to spread the Gospel and profess the faith.**

**To be precise, RCIA 75 says that catechumens should "*learn* how to work actively with others" to achieve this goal. It does not expect them to accomplish it on their own. Nevertheless, it happens. Whether or not acquaintances have faith, they will be touched by the witness of the catechumens. When celebrating the Rite of Acceptance, the new catechumens will state publicly what they are asking of the Church and what this will bring them. Other participants at that ceremony will be struck by the catechumen's honesty and spiritual search. Outside the liturgy, those who have not practiced faith will also notice the comfort with which catechumens speak of Christ and their new Church.**

**Even though Catholics do not typically think of themselves as evangelical, they do proclaim Christ in many ways - even by decorating their homes for Christmas or wearing religious emblems. However, this is one area that Catholics could practice better. It lies at the heart of being a generative community.**

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<sup>18</sup> RCIA 75/4.

Catholics could easily be ready to pose this question to their acquaintances: “Do you have a church?” It might open an invitation to faith and worship. After all, people are comfortable asking if acquaintances like the movies, sporting events, or shops. It shouldn’t be that difficult to expand the question into a more meaningful category. When Catholics practice the fourth area of RCIA 75, they express the heart of a generative community - welcoming new members shows that generativity is a way of life.

## **Mystagogy**

Following initiation, the newly baptized enter the period of mystagogy. “This is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing the works of charity.” All in the community should give the newly baptized “friendly help.”<sup>19</sup>

Here the twin goals of a parish’s generativity meet again. New members have entered the community, and all the faithful become generative as a way of life. Although most people think of mystagogy as just another series of meetings for the former catechumens to attend, the RCIA has a different setting in mind: the eucharist. “Since the distinctive spirit and power of the period of postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy derive from the new, personal experience of the sacraments and of the community, its main setting is the so-called Masses for neophytes, that is, the Sunday Masses of the Easter season.”<sup>20</sup> Mystagogical catechesis is the sequence of Sunday homilies between Easter and Pentecost. There are challenges with this approach too, as any preacher can attest. It is hard to reflect on the sacraments of baptism and confirmation a month after the neophytes have celebrated them, and during a time when Mothers’ Day, graduations, and financial appeals often clamor for attention from the ambo.

Still, the overall goal is achievable: The newly baptized and indeed the entire community should meditate on the Gospel, share the eucharist, and do works of charity. These are the activities for which the period of generation has been preparing, and they will continue to foster growth in the Christian life.

## **Concluding Remarks**

A generative community works best when it naturally wishes to replenish its members through outreach and welcome, catechesis and challenge. In some organizations, when membership dwindles, panic increases. When the main topic of the agenda is, “What can we do to get more members?” the organization is in trouble. Its purpose may be exhausted. The question suggests that the membership has become more introspective than evangelical.

The drive for Christian generativity is not panic-driven by small numbers. It is gospel-driven by a large message. Jesus Christ has come as the Savior of the world, and he entrusted the message to his disciples. Those who have inherited

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<sup>19</sup> RCIA 244.

<sup>20</sup> RCIA 247.

**this message through baptism should recognize that the good news is not just a gift. It is a responsibility. Part of the faith we have received is a message that yearns to be told. We do not always get the response we want, but it should not stop us from telling the good news.**

**St. John says that what is born of the Spirit is spirit. When we generate new members to the Christian community, we are performing the work of the Spirit. The results of the work belong to the Spirit, not to us, but the exercise of the work is ours. When we invite others to find Jesus Christ in his Word and Sacrament, and in his body the Church, we are riding the wings of the Spirit, who speaks to every heart.**