

It was not easy being a Christian in the Roman Empire during the first 300 years of the Church. While periods of active persecution were sporadic, Christians were usually under suspicion. Christians were set apart from many of the values of the surrounding society. They did not participate in the drunken festivities celebrating the local gods. Many men would not serve in the military as so as not to take an oath to the Roman Emperor as a god. They were conspicuously absent from gladiatorial games. They prayed in their own communities and outsiders were not welcome to participate.

Yet many people were attracted to Christian life. They could not help to notice that Christian families were different. Christian men lived faithfully with their wives. Christians were honest in business, and readily helped others in time of famine and need. Adult inquirers who knew Christians wondered what the source of peace was in Christian families and communities.

When adult inquirers wanted to explore more of what it meant to be Christian, they would approach a Christian friend for information. If the inquirers were honest, the Christians would take them to a meeting of Christians for further information. If the inquirers were serious, they became catechumens and entered a long process of initiation, one that could be up to three years.

In the three year period, the catechumens would meet regularly for instruction and prayer with the community. Their way of life would be examined. They would attend Mass, but leave after the readings and the homily as they were not yet introduced into the full celebration of the Eucharist. They would not yet learn the Lord's Prayer. In the Roman world the emperor was seen as a god, and it was considered a subversive to pray that God is our Father as Jesus taught us.

Eventually the catechumens were examined to determine if they were ready for Baptism. Their sponsors would be witnesses to their fidelity to Christian teaching and vouch that they were charitable towards the poor. Those who were ready celebrated the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation (the bishop's anointing) and the Eucharist during the Easter Vigil.

DECLINE OF THE CATECHUMENATE

After Christianity became legal in the Roman Empire, the catechumenate as a period of preparation for Christian life went into decline. The practice of baptism of infants became common, especially in the light of St Augustine's teaching on original sin. With the high mortality rate of infants, the practice of early baptism became more of the norm for the sake of the infant's salvation. During the early Middle Ages barbarian tribes would be baptized all together with no period of pre-baptismal instruction or initiation. Christian formation in the faith would follow Baptism. In the West there was also the separation of Baptism and Confirmation, with Confirmation delayed to later years.

Before the Second Vatican Council the process of becoming a convert to the Catholic faith was a very individual affair. The inquirer might receive individual instruction from a priest or attend an inquiry class that taught the fundamentals of the faith. Baptism took place when the priest thought the inquirer was ready.

SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

During the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 1965) the bishops called for the restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) as modeled in the process of initiation in the early Church. This call found in The Constitution on the Liturgy was followed up by the work of the Vatican Congregation of Worship that published a provisional Latin text for the RCIA. In 1974 English translation of the Rite was approved for use in the United States. In 1986 the bishops of the United States formally approved the Rite of Christian of Adults for the entire American Church.

Participation in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults is usually about a year long process for unbaptized adults who want to become Catholics. Inquirers who have been baptized in another Christian community are also invited to join in the process of exploring what it means to be a Catholic and formed in the faith. The baptized Christian completes the reception into the Catholic Church by receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, making a Profession of Faith and celebrating Confirmation and the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil.

THE PROCESS

The process for unbaptized adults who are seeking a close relationship with Jesus Christ and attracted to the Catholic Church in a time called a Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate. The length of this period may vary. When their search leads them to discuss the possibility of becoming Catholic, they have a conversation with a parish priest, or RCIA director. Under the guidance of the priest or director they may become an “Inquirer,” and look to be accepted into the Order of Catechumens. This is done through the Rite of Acceptance. This Rite takes place in the midst of the parish community where the “inquirers” states their desire to become a baptized member of the Catholic Church. The parish assembly welcomes them and the inquirers become “catechumens.”

The period of the catechumenate may vary depending on how God is leading the catechumen on the journey. During this period the catechumen learns the meaning of the sacraments, and reflects on what God is asking of them in the Scriptures. They will also learn the fundamentals of the Catholic faith and the responsibilities they will take on as believers. When the priest and the RCIA team working together agree that the catechumen is ready to make a commitment to the Catholic Church, the catechumen will make their request for Baptism at the celebration of the Rite of Election.

The Rite of Election is usually celebrated at the cathedral with the diocesan bishop presiding. The catechumens gather with their sponsors and families and publicly state their desire to enter the Catholic Church. Their names are recorded in The Book of the Elect, and they are now “the elect.”

The two final stages of the RCIA, purification and enlightenment, take place during Lent in preparation for Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation during the Ester Vigil. For the elect this is a period of prayer, further study, and spiritual direction.

Finally, at the Easter Vigil the Sacraments of Initiation, Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist are received and the elect becomes a fully initiated member of the Catholic Church.

MYSTAGOGY

The newly initiated Catholics next enter a period of “mystagogy,” a period of prayer and further reflection which continues at least until Pentecost. During mystagogy new Catholics have time to reflect on their experiences of the Easter Vigil, learn more about the Scriptures, the Sacraments and the teachings of the Catholic Church. This is also a period in which they can learn what it means to be an active member of the parish community. As a member, they will also have the opportunity to participate in the Church’s mission and serving others.

CONCLUSION

It is undoubtedly no accident that the Church introduced Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults modeled after the initiation rites practiced by the early Church. In the early Church’s experience, the process of initiation gave both the inquirer and the community the opportunity to assess the seriousness of the inquirer’s commitment and the responsibilities they would be accepting in a dangerous world.

Today the Church is more and more aware what it means to be a minority religion in a world pluralistic world. Becoming Catholic is not simply an individual decision. Rather the inquirer is entering a community of faith and learning both the joys and responsibilities as members of the Church. As they move forward they realize that they are not alone on this journey.