

Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum:

The Transformation to Catholicism:

An Analysis of the Rituals, Symbols, and Tension

Accompanying the Renewal of a Catholic Community

On January 6, 1972, Pope Paul VI promulgated a document that was to change the face of the Roman Catholic Church – at least for some people. Known as the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, the ritual, or more accurately this set of rituals, provided a restoration of the rite of passage used in the early Christian church whereby the Catholic Church welcomes non-Christian adults in a sacramental process of transformation and conversion. The RCIA, like other *rites de passage*, and rituals in general, is “pregnant with meaning” from the symbols which are used, manipulated, and made to affect change both by those who partake in and those who observe the RCIA.

The RCIA is broken down into four distinct periods, each separated by a rite of transformation. The first period is known as the precatechumenate, when those who are interested in becoming Catholic make inquiries into the Catholic faith, attend Mass, talk with members of the community and so forth. The members of the community, in doing their part in the precatechumenate, engage in a time of evangelization – proclaiming good news and bearing glad tidings. It is not a time of proselytizing or moralizing, but rather a time when the members of the community show their Catholic faith, honestly and openly answer questions, and most importantly bear witness to impact of Christ in their own lives. This period of the precatechumenate ends with the Rite of Acceptance. At this rite the candidates to the RCIA make a public declaration, with others of the same intent, to become Catholic. The Bishop of the Diocese receives the candidates and marks them with the sign of the cross. Henceforth the candidates are known as Catechumens, sometimes also referred to as the initiates or neophytes.

The Catechumenate, the second period, is a clear example of a liminal period, as Victor Turner describes it. The Catechumen is neither a non-Christian, nor fully a member of the Catholic Church; neither completely dead to their old selves, nor completely reborn. During this period, the Catechumens are encouraged by the

community to develop their faith. This faith is developed in both the communication of *sacra*, as well as in a deepening of the subjective belief in the communicated *sacra*. The communication of the *sacra* follows the threefold classification mentioned in Victor Turner's "Betwixt and Between:" exhibitions, actions, and instructions.

The Catechumenate period of the RCIA includes many liturgies designed to "little by little strengthen the [Catechumens] with God's blessing."¹ Among these suitable liturgical rites is the Mass – or at least part of it. The Catechumens are invited to attend the Mass, which is regarded as the highest form of prayer and worship in the Catholic faith, but they do not remain for the most crucial part of the Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist. Sunday after Sunday the priest says to the Catechumens, "My dear friends, this community now sends you forth to reflect more deeply upon the word of God which you have shared with us today. Be assured of our loving support and prayers for you. We look forward to the day when you will share fully in the Lord's Table."² The Catechumens leave the church to go and study, in depth, the meanings of the scripture, while the remainder of the community celebrates the very Eucharist that makes them Catholic. This action serves to both distinguish between those who are Catholic and those are not yet Catholic. It also serves as an example of what it means for the Catechumens to be in a liminal state where they are the "transitional beings," of the kind that Mary Douglas speaks, individuals who "are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor the other."³ This negative aspect of the dismissal of the Catechumens from the Eucharist is not acknowledged by either the official meanings of the RCIA, nor openly by the Catechumens themselves. It does seem to me, as the anthropologist, that the exhibitions, or liturgies, of the Catechumenate serve not only to strengthen God's blessing on the Catechumens, but also to distinguish them from the community. This in part assures that one does not confuse the Catholics from those who are not yet Catholics. Additionally, I feel that the dismissal is such that the Catechumens may be welcomed as part of the community on that day they "will fully share in the Lord's Table" in a grand way and such that makes a clear demarcation between the initiate and fully Catholic states. * In much the same manner, the crucial *sacra* object, and the dominant

¹ International Commission on English in the Liturgy and Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults: Study Edition*, Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 1988, §75.

² RCIA, §67.

³ Turner, Victor W., "Betwixt and Between," *Reader in Comparative Religion: Fourth Edition*, New York, Harper Collins, 1979, pg. 236.

* I feel that this is much the same way that restraining oneself from fully giving oneself to your future spouse before marriage makes the event, in marriage, all the meaningful, by marking a clear distinction between the prior to marriage and after marriage states.

symbol of the RCIA, baptismal water, is retained until the end of the formal RCIA process, when the initiate becomes a full member of the Roman Catholic Church.

Not only do the liturgies, or exhibitions, on the part of the Church in the Catechumenate period of RCIA illustrate how the *sacra* are communicated to the Catechumens, but the actions of the community as a whole as well as the actions of the Catechumens themselves, also communicate *sacra*. The Catechumens are encouraged to participate in service activities, to join in prayer with members of the community, and continue more deeply the conversion to Catholicism that they began in the pre-catechumenate. “This transition brings with it a progressive change of outlook and conduct, it should become manifest by means of its social consequences and it should develop gradually during the period of the Catechumenate.”⁴ These actions of service by both the Catechumens and the community serve as a way of communicating the *sacra* of the community for both the Catechumens and the community of which they are soon to be a part. This underscores one of the key elements of the RCIA. It is a process of rebirth, both for the Catechumen as they are reborn into the Catholic Church, and for the community itself, as it renews itself in its mission of the Church. This, in itself, is one of the key *sacra* communicated by all and for all.

These actions which communicate the *sacra* of the Church community often prove to be the most important and effective means of transmitting what the community consists in to the Catechumenate, but they are not exhaustive. Instructions, which are likewise in no way exhaustive of what it means to be Catholic, are given to the initiate in the process of the Catechumenate. Within the whole period of the Catechumenate, catechesis is provided by priests, catechists, and others, teaching not only dogma and precepts, but instilling in the Catechumens the desire to participate fully in the Christian life. Diverse aspects of scripture, Catholic theology, Church history, and social justice are explained to the Catechumens. Discussion is common, both among the Catechumens and in the whole group of Catechumens, priests, catechists, and sponsors. One factor which I feel is often overlooked in the instructions which are given to the Catechumens during this period is the fact that the range of topics which are addressed are often greater than one might find in a discussion of only Catholics. This is due, I feel, to the need for an open environment, where no question is supposed to left unasked and few assume that others know without asking. This is not the case in many discussions outside the RCIA process, where assumptions are generally made of one's

⁴ RCIA, §75.2.

knowledge of background information. This is also a profoundly powerful and possibly polluting aspect of the Catechumens. In the course of their discussions they are very vulnerable to untrue, or misguided teaching and great care must be taken that they understand the *sacra* of the Church. In their very presence, however, and due, in part, to the unique and manifold backgrounds that the Catechumens bring to the RCIA, they are capable of transforming the Church. Unlike the *sacra* mentioned in Victor Turner's article, however, the teachings, or instructions, of the Catholic Church are not meant to be kept secret. The faithful, both Catechumen and Catholic alike, are supposed to live and express their faith.

The Catechumenate period comes to a close with the Rite of Election. The Rite of Election, sometimes referred to as the Enrollment of Names, is presided over by the Bishop, or a delegate of the Bishop. In the Diocese of San Diego, all of those residing within the diocese that are to receive the sacraments of initiation and thus become full adult members of the Roman Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil Mass are gathered together on the same day with their sponsors and godparents. A Mass is held and following the Liturgy of the Word, the celebrant calls forward all the Catechumens and their godparents. The godparents answer in the affirmative each question that the Bishop poses to them on behalf of their godchildren. The Bishop asks whether the Catechumens, during their period of the Catechumenate, have listened to the scriptures, responded to these scriptures by beginning "to walk in God's presence,"⁵ and been an active part of the community in both prayer and service. The Bishop now turns his address to the Catechumen and asks them if they "wish to enter fully into the life of the Church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist." With their consent, the Bishop admits each Catechumen to be a member of the Elect. With this, each one comes forward to the Bishop and writes their name in the book of the elect. Having been vouched for by their godparents, having offered their own intent to become Catholic, and finally having received the affirmation of the Bishop, the Elect are seen as chosen by God to be members of God's Church. This status of election, of having been chosen by God, is reflected in the Psalm that is sung while the Elect inscribe their names, "Happy the people the Lord has chosen to be His own."⁶ Following the enrollment of names, the Bishop offers prayers of intercession on behalf of the Elect, their godparents, their families, and community. A special prayer is then offered to guide

⁵ RCIA, §131B.

⁶ Psalms 33:12. *New American Bible*, New York, Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1970, pg. 623..

and strengthen the Elect so that they may be built into the kingdom of Christ.⁷ The Elect are then dismissed from the Mass, as the Bishop continues with the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Rite of Election corresponds with the beginning of the Liturgical season of Lent and ushers the Elect from the period of the Catechumenate, where the focus was on learning the ways of the Catholic Church, into a period of purification and enlightenment, in keeping with the spirit of the season.

Until this point, little has been said about the timing of the actual rites undergone by the initiate, Catechumen, and Elect during the RCIA. There is, however, a general pattern observed across the world for the RCIA. The actual sacraments of initiation – baptism, confirmation and reception of the Eucharist – are to be received at the Easter Vigil Mass, that is the Mass that occurs on the eve of Easter, announcing Christ’s resurrection. The period prior to the receiving of the sacraments, which is a time of purification and enlightenment for the Elect, is also a time of purification for the Church and her members, the community. Known as Lent, this season commemorates the forty-day period that Jesus of Nazareth spent in prayer and reflection, tested by the devil, and awaiting his death on the cross. So too the Church spends this time in prayer and reflection, its members making sacrifices in order to purify themselves. For the Elect, the time reflects deeply the fact that their old selves will die and they will be born again, into the Church, into the eternal life of Christ, through the water of baptism. Victor Turner noted that “*rites de passage* are found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound up with biological and metaphorical rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations.”⁸ This appears to be the case with the RCIA and its relation to the Church seasons. Most RCIA communities, and indeed all of those that I have been involved with, have been quite small. All of the members of the initiate, catechumenate and electorate, as well as the priests, catechists, and sponsors know one another in a face-to-face relationship. The emphasis of the Church community, while hard to maintain in being part of a modern technologically oriented world, is on the repeating patterns and rhythms of the Church season. Advent begins the Church year, which is followed by Christmastime, then Ordinary Time, which gives way to Lent, in preparing the Church for the Easter Season that follows. These seasons metaphorically

⁷ RCIA, §139B.

⁸ Turner, pg. 234.

mirror the life of Jesus – preparing for his birth, his birth and youthful joy, his ministry, his time in preparation for crucifixion, and his rising from the dead. By placing the RCIA firmly in this cycle of the Church, the Elect are brought into the rhythm of the life of Jesus and his Church.

The season of Lent, which focuses on the upcoming death of Jesus and his resurrection to follow, calls to mind the process of death and rebirth. It calls to mind the transformation from darkness into light. This corresponds with the theme of baptism, and the Lenten focus on repentance, for in baptism the Elect will die to their old selves, be forgiven of their sins, and be born again into the light of Christ. Many minor rites, known as the scrutinies and presentations, serve to guide the Elect on their path of repentance, purification and preparation for initiation.

The scrutinies “are meant to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective or sinful in the hearts of the Elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good.”⁹ The focus of the scrutinies, both in the *sacra* presented, the acts carried out, and the instruction given through the Liturgy of the Word, serve to instruct the Elect about sin and the redemption from sin through Christ. The scrutinies take place on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays in Lent, during Mass. These Sundays correspond respectively to the Gospel messages of the Samaritan woman, which calls to mind the water of life, the Gospel of the man born blind, which reminds the Elect and the community of the light that Christ brings into the world, and the raising of Lazarus, which foreshadows the resurrection of Christ himself, as well as the upcoming baptism of the Elect. During the scrutinies, prayers of intercession are offered on behalf of the Elect and their continued purification towards Christ. Furthermore, prayers of exorcism are offered to protect the Elect from sin and the power of evil. These scrutinies, in taking seriously the reality of evil, move toward an understanding of life, freedom and love that the Catholic Church holds as coming only from God.

The scrutinies are accompanied by the presentations, in which the Elect are presented *sacra* objects of the Church. These presentations “are often referred to as the *traditio symboli*, the handing on of the symbolic faith.”¹⁰ Following the first scrutiny the Elect are presented with the Nicene Creed, the Creed recited every Sunday of the year during the Liturgy of the Eucharist that spells out the beliefs of the Catholic Church. Until now, the Elect have not been present to hear the Nicene Creed recited by the

⁹ RCIA, §141.

¹⁰ Morris, Thomas H., *The RCIA: A Resource for Pastoral Implementation*, New York, Paulist Press, 1997, pg. 177.

community. Now, on this day, the Elect remain for the recitation of the Nicene Creed and are presented with a copy of the Creed, rolled in a scroll. Again, the Elect are dismissed from the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Two Sundays later, following the third and final scrutiny, the Elect are presented with the Lord's Prayer. These two *sacra*, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, are the core prayers of the Catholic faithful. Each week the members of the community recite these prayers and share the meanings contained in them. During the Lord's Prayer, as a sign of solidarity with one another through the "prayer that Christ taught us," the Catholic faithful take hold of one another's hands to recite the Lord's Prayer. The presenting of the Elect with these two prayers is the semiotic passing of the Catholic faith to these chosen ones of God. The period of purification of enlightenment continues during Holy Week, with the commemoration of the Last Supper, which is regarded as the first Liturgy of the Eucharist, taking place on Holy Thursday, and the crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday, then culminating in the celebration of the Easter Vigil on the evening of Holy Thursday. These events mirror the transformation of the Elect as they die and rise again through the waters of baptism.

At the Easter Vigil Mass, the Elect become full members of the Roman Catholic Church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and receiving the Eucharist. The Easter Vigil Mass is not only the highpoint in the initiation of the Elect and the RCIA, but it also is the highpoint of the Catholic liturgical year. The Mass celebrates the resurrection of Christ, and his conquering of sin and death. It also recalls that, as Christians baptized in Christ, we too will conquer sin and death through Christ. The structure of the Mass, which is altered from its normal course, clearly indicates the importance tied to this celebration.

The Mass, which is typically a one-hour event, becomes a three-hour celebration. The readings, which normally number three and a psalm, are expanded to include nine readings and seven psalms. These nine readings run through the whole of the history of the relation between God and God's people beginning with the story of creation and culminating in Paul's reminder that through being baptized in Christ, we are likewise baptized into Christ's death and finally Christ's rising from the dead. In the pageantry of the liturgy, lights are kept off and only candles are used to dimly light the worship space until the very moment is announced that Christ is risen from the dead. This tripling of the readings leads the community and the Elect alike to experience the fullness of God's love through God's self-revelation in scripture. Not all enjoy the lengthy readings,

however; a quick glance around will reveal many who would prefer there to only be three quick readings.

Not only is the structure of the Liturgy of the Word manipulated so as to make the Elect and the faithful Catholic alike “vividly and rapidly aware of what may be called the ‘factors’ of their culture,¹¹” but other elements of the Mass are altered for this same effect. The Nicene Creed, which I have already pointed out as an important *sacra* of the Church, is inverted from its normal statement form, into an interrogative form, where the celebrant asks the Elect and the community a question, such as, “Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?” to which all respond in the affirmative. This same process is also done at the baptism of infants, where the godparents answer on behalf of the infant to be baptized. This calls to mind not only the Creed, and thus the beliefs of the Church, but also the baptism through which all the Catholic faithful have been bound to the Body of Christ.

This profession of faith is followed by the Baptism of the Elect. The sacrament of baptism makes one a Christian and is therefore the core of the RCIA. The Elect die to their old selves and arise again, drenched in water, to their new selves. The celebrant either pours water over the Elect three times, or as is becoming more popular, dunks the Elect three times in full-immersion, reminiscent of how Christ was baptized and likewise baptized others, each successive time in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The actual baptismal act may at times appear to disfigure the Elect. Having put great time into their clothing and their hair, the Elect are dunked in water, by a priest or deacon who seems almost to force them under as in an act of drowning. This negative aspect of the sacrament of baptism is rarely taken note of, although it merely serves to underscore the liminal position of the neophyte. The neophyte is in complete submission to the celebrant. The Baptized is then clothed in a baptismal garment, which signifies their transition to a new state. They have become Christians. As Victor Turner notes, liminal periods are often noted by a change in clothing. Most frequently, this baptismal garment is either white, as a symbol of purity, or red as a symbol of the fire of the Holy Spirit, anticipating the next step in the initiation.

Following the sacrament of baptism, the new Christians are fully initiated into the Catholic Church through the sacrament of confirmation. The actual act of the confirmation is, like baptism, quite simple. The celebrant holds his outstretched hands out over those to be confirmed and says the prayers of confirmation. Then each

¹¹ Turner, pg. 240.

candidate is anointed with the sacred oil, known as Chrism, in the sign of the cross, and the celebrant says, “Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.”¹² The oil has a very sweet scent, leaves a shiny cross on the forehead of those who have been confirmed and is a clear sign of their reception of the sacrament. In the words of liturgical theologians, the chrism leaves an indelible mark on those who have been confirmed. The oil thus forms a very important symbol in the RCIA. Confirmation is followed by the renewal of baptismal vows for the Catholic faithful. The community, having just witnessed the baptism and confirmation of new Catholics are poignantly asked to reaffirm their own commitment to the Catholic faith with the same questions that were asked to the Elect prior to their baptism. Following this, the community is sprinkled with the baptismal water. It has become quite popular in many settings for the newly baptized and confirmed to sprinkle the community, although in many communities the task is still reserved for the celebrant.

The newly baptized and confirmed are then, for the first time, not sent away as the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins. Rather, they are invited to stay and for the first time experience and share the fullness of the Lord’s Table. This marks the third and final stage of the *rite de passage* to which Victor Turner referred, that of aggregation. By having been invited to share in the Eucharist, the candidates have become full members of the Roman Catholic Church and the community into which they have now been aggregated. Often the newly initiated are asked to bring the gifts of bread and wine to the altar which will be transubstantiated in the to Body and Blood of Christ. This aggregation, however, does not end, but rather begins their journey as a Catholic. The period following initiation is referred to as the mystagogy. This period of postbaptismal catechesis introduces the newly initiated into “a fuller and more effective understanding of the mysteries through the Gospel message they have learned and above all through their experience of the sacraments they have received.”¹³ This period usually lasts until the end of the Easter season, with the celebration of Pentecost, which commemorates the gift of the Holy Spirit coming down upon the Apostles and the formation of the Catholic Church as Christ’s mission on earth. After this holy day, the liturgical year returns to Ordinary Time and the newly initiated begin their new lives as Christians, independent of any formal formation process.

¹² RCIA, §235.

¹³ RCIA, §245.

As has been shown the RCIA is most definitely a ritual, a *rite de passage*, that brings about transformation in those who are initiated, as well as those in the community in general, through the use and manipulation of symbols. The symbol of baptismal water has been shown to be the dominant symbol of the RCIA. As Victor Turner explains, the dominant symbol of a ritual is supposed to condense, unify, and polarize meaning.¹⁴ These functions are clearly exhibited by the dominant symbol of baptismal water in the RCIA. The symbol of the baptismal water condenses the actions of baptism and renewal. It condenses the actions of infant baptism, which was not discussed in this paper, and that of adult baptism. As discussed in this paper, baptismal waters are used to sprinkle the community as a reminder of baptismal vows. Baptismal water is also used to fill holy water dispensers at the entrances of Catholic spaces of worship. These holy water dispensers are used for the Catholic faithful to dip their fingers into, and make the sign of the cross over their bodies upon entry into the space of worship, thus reminding themselves of the disparate meanings of baptism. The disparate meanings that the baptismal water unifies have been discussed throughout the paper, but to recap on these meanings, baptismal waters signify both death and rebirth; they signify a cleansing and thus purification. They unify the ideas of dying to oneself to be born again, clean from sin and pure of heart. These meanings, as Turner has indicated are distinctly polarized, there are base sensory understandings of the baptismal waters, that of cleansing, while there are lofty ideological meanings, such as the theological concept of Christ's resurrection, overcoming death, just as baptism will bring the faithful to overcome death through Christ. The person being baptized feels wet, feels clean, and feels washed just as one feels after a bath. They may also feel cleansed of their sins. The full ideological understanding of the baptism, however, may not be so obvious. These "norms and values that guide and control persons as members of" the Catholic faith are not fully understood immediately, although they are quite explicit. Baptismal water is, however, not the only symbol in the RCIA.

The RCIA has as its second sacrament, the sacrament of confirmation. The sacrament of confirmation has its own symbols that are used. These are primarily the chrism, or sacred oil, which is used to anoint the confirmed as described. Additionally, the laying on of hands is also symbolic of the mission one is being given as an adult Catholic, the mission to bring the Good News of Christ to everyone that the confirmed

¹⁴ Turner, Victor, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," *The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1976, pg. 28.

encounters. The confirmed is commissioned to bear the light of Christ to all the ends of the earth. So, just the baptismal water unifies disparate meanings, the meanings of being set apart, being cleansed and anointed, being marked, and being commissioned are unified in the symbol of the sacred chrism. The meanings that oil bears are also polarized to the sensory and ideological poles, although they inform one another. Just as the oil leaves a residue on the skin that does not seem to go away easily, so too does the indelible mark or being set aside for Christ not come off at all. Additionally, as the sweet scent the oil bears gives one a pleasant feeling, so too does one have a pleasant feeling from knowing that you have been marked and set aside for Christ. This is one little way in which, as Turner noted, that the obligatory has become something the initiate can enjoy through ritual.

As indicated throughout much of the description of the RCIA, the Mass, or more specifically the Liturgy of the Eucharist, represents the highest form of prayer for the Catholic faithful and is an important symbol to the RCIA itself. This symbol, which like a dominant symbol condenses a variety of actions, some of which were discussed in the paper, although others such as perpetual adoration, retention in the tabernacle and much more could not be discussed in a paper of this length. In addition, like the dominant symbol of the baptismal water, the Eucharist polarizes the various disparate meanings by being both simple food, which nourishes the body, and the Body of Christ that puts Christ within the Catholic faithful and thus requires the person to be Christ for others and show Christ to them through their actions. It has also been noted that the Eucharist was withheld from the non-Catholic initiates during their process of initiation and was only given to the neophytes once they were truly and fully Catholic. In this way, the Eucharist is a powerful symbol of what it is to be Catholic. Thus, just as baptism, which makes use of the dominant symbol of the RCIA, baptismal water, has its own symbol, so too the Eucharist has and is its own symbol.

As discussed, the RCIA is a transforming ritual that brings new members in the Catholic Church, through the sacraments of initiation. Mentioned earlier in this paper, the power of the initiates and the initiation rite itself is quite great. The initiate has the power to change the Church. They come into the Church with different experience from many of those who have grown up in the Church their whole lives. Individuals who were raised Buddhist, Jewish, Lutheran, or without a faith tradition are all welcomed into the RCIA and, therefore can be seen as a threat to the structure of the Church. Much as the

cultural makeup of the Catholic Church in United States has changed over the years, not without its difficulties of, for example the modern tension that sometimes arise between the dominant culturally European Church being at odds with Latin American, Filipino and Vietnamese cultures, the wide range of experience that new initiates bring to the Church can be seen as a challenge. This challenge does not have only negative elements, as expressed throughout the majority of this paper, and can help the Church grow in the understanding of itself and others.

Conflict can also arise in given communities as to what should be taught to initiates interested in becoming Catholic. Should they be given only the exact dogma of the Church, or should they be shown the internal disagreement that exists in the Church? Should they be steeped in the Marian adoration, or should this be only one element of their catechesis? How long should the Catechumenate period last? In some parishes, this period can be up to three years in duration. In other places, this can be as short as one year. How much is the initiate expected to know before becoming Catholic? Some Catholics that I have encountered, who have been Catholic all their lives, are sometimes annoyed by the fact that they have spent their entire lives becoming Catholic and could not be confirmed until they were sixteen, while RCIA candidates “did it all” in one year. Should the priests run the RCIA program, or should it be run by lay ministers, such a core RCIA team? All of these questions and many more can create difficulty and tension in initiating new Catholics into the community by way of RCIA.

One noted Catholic priest and Sociologist, Andrew Greeley, has criticized the RCIA on the grounds that in its attempt to revive a tradition from the past, it places upon people unnecessary and antiquated conditions, such as being sent out of the Mass before the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the requirement to have a sponsor, both of which stem from the early Church’s desire to protect itself from the Roman Empire. Furthermore, Greeley argues that the RCIA has a one-size-fits-all characteristic that “converts the sacramental experience into an obstacle course, a series of barriers to be surmounted, a list of tests to be passed.¹⁵” He claims that the RCIA, like other liturgical reforms that he chides liturgists for instituting, result in the creation of a simple a priori theory, accompanied by rigid formulae, which are imposed by an enthusiastic elite claiming to have all of the answers, no matter how superficial or unreflective they may

¹⁵ Greeley, Andrew M., “Against R.C.I.A.,” *America* Vol. 161, No. 10, Chicago, October 14, 1989, pg. 233.

be. In short, recalling Max Weber, Greeley charges the RCIA with a “routinization of the Charisma.”¹⁶

The tension that these possible conflicts bring about in the Church is not only felt by some members of the community, that may feel threatened by the presence of new initiates from unknown backgrounds, nor from some clergy who feel that the process does not respect the individuality of candidates seeking to become Catholic, but also many new initiates, in dying to their old selves, bring or find themselves in conflict. One particular young woman who went through the RCIA program was dismissed by her family, of Buddhist leanings, of just ‘going through a phase,’ or of being ‘pressured by her friends.’ She continued through the RCIA and does not regret one moment of it, and her family has grown to accept her decision. My father, likewise, was heavily discouraged by his father in his decision to become Catholic, which he did through the RCIA in 1982. As evidenced, the RCIA is not well received, by all, either the Catholic faithful, the clergy, or the initiates and their families. Through all of this conflict and tension, however, the RCIA remains the way in which adults who wish to become Catholic are gradually converted to, and reborn as, a Roman Catholic.

The RCIA effectively brings renewal to the Church, both in initiating new members, and in forcing the community to call to mind the meanings of being Catholic. The RCIA is a *rite de passage* that incorporates various actions, disparate and polarized meanings, and the manipulation of these meanings through symbol systems that creates an overall transforming process for the individual and the community. The RCIA is “a visionary gift of the Spirit to the church of our time, a remarkable instrument of individual and communal conversion, a clarion call to renewed ministry on the part of *all* the baptized, a striking blend of ritual and catechesis, pastoral care and spiritual formation at their best.”¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 234.

¹⁷ Duggan, Robert D., “A Response to Andrew M. Greeley,” *America* Vol. 161, No. 10, Chicago, October 14, 1989, pg. 237.