

# A VISION FOR CONVERSION



# A Vision for Conversion

Eight Steps to Radically Change Your RCIA Process

*Leisa Anslinger*



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## **Introduction**

# **Propelling People and the Parish toward Living Discipleship**

My first year as an RCIA coordinator was more than I could have imagined it might be and occasionally felt like more than I could manage. There always seemed to be something that needed my attention, from forming a team to responding to the people who expressed interest in participating. Discerning who would speak to various topics and do so from spiritual depth and a firm grasp of Catholic teaching was especially important in that first year, as was the development of a year-round process, which we had not previously attempted at our parish. I remember graced conversations with early participants and the sense of responsibility in ensuring that the process would form them as committed disciples of Jesus Christ. I recall specific RCIA sessions, ones where the process fell flat, and others that seemed particularly filled with the Holy Spirit. I especially recall the Easter Vigil, the flood of emotions, prayers for the newly initiated, and the hope that this was the beginning of a lifetime of faith for them and their families.

Throughout the year, I saw faith come to life among the participants and looked forward to Sunday dismissals and Thursday evening sessions. With all of the time and attention on the participants in that first year, I have to admit I was not quite prepared

for the impact of the process on myself and the RCIA team. Nor did I anticipate the ways in which the participants in the RCIA process (the inquirers, catechumens, and candidates) would touch the wider parish community. Beginning with the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens and regular dismissal from the Sunday assembly, our team heard how the presence of the catechumens among the community called people to examine their own commitment to Christ. I experienced firsthand the interaction of participants and parishioners that the RCIA describes:

The period of postbaptismal catechesis is of great significance for both the neophytes and the rest of the faithful. Through it the neophytes, with the help of their godparents, should experience a full and joyful welcome into the community and enter into closer ties with the other faithful. The faithful, in turn, should derive from it a renewal of inspiration and of outlook. (246)

The RCIA propelled participants, the team, and the whole parish toward an encounter with Christ and to living discipleship.

## **It Is All about Change**

It took many years for me to grasp that the RCIA, and all of the Christian life, is ultimately about change—following Jesus Christ is the work of a lifetime, and ongoing conversion necessarily requires change of mind, heart, life, and action. We are never finished products in the faith. Discipleship calls us to continual discernment, spiritually assessing how we might be called to live, grow, learn, serve, and love more deeply as Christ's Body in the world.

As people who accompany others toward initiation, we must guide them to embrace and manage change. The ways in which we carry out the RCIA process will have great bearing on how the participants navigate the various stages of the journey toward initiation and the Christian life. Not only this, as the RCIA team and participants embrace a life of ongoing conversion in Christ, we become catalysts for change within the parish toward the formation of a community that is committed to living discipleship.



## Who Should Read This Book

Chances are, if you are perusing this book, it is for you! *A Vision for Conversion* is for all who are involved in RCIA ministry and in shaping parish life: pastors, RCIA coordinators and team members, staff members, pastoral councils, faith formation committees, and parish leadership teams. While you might read this book on your own, it would be especially appropriate to read it with others. The book is intended to equip you with the knowledge and skills necessary to be attentive to the dynamics of change and to lead for it—spiritual change as people embrace a life of conversion to Christ and change within the parish as a community that is committed to lead people to living discipleship. Questions for reflection and discussion are included at the end of each chapter to guide conversation and to help you discern future action.

*A Vision for Conversion* is written with the conviction that we are all servant leaders. Each of us—as members of Christ’s body—is called to lead one another to Christ or more deeply to Christ. Each is called to serve; each is given particular gifts and talents with which to do so. The Holy Spirit enlivens, empowers, and strengthens us to carry out Christ’s mission on earth. Those who have accepted an invitation to serve as an RCIA coordinator or team member, those who serve on the pastoral council or faith formation committee, all who serve in ministry within the parish and beyond it—each is a leader and has a role to play in contributing to the mission of Christ and the church.

## Why You Should Read This Book

Accompanying people on the spiritual journey, especially RCIA participants, is a sacred responsibility. Pope Francis points to this in *The Joy of the Gospel*: “In our world, ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious, and laity—into this ‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other” (169). Understanding the call of conversion

as a process of change will help us to be prepared to stand on this sacred ground. For many, change is not easy. In fact, it can be frightening. It entails risk as we step into the unknown. While this is true in all facets of life, it is especially so in the spiritual life. Establishing an environment in which people are encouraged to embrace change as part of the journey of discipleship will give the RCIA team and participants the security needed to be open to conversion.

Additionally, the RCIA process is evangelizing. Studies of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) demonstrate that those who participate in the RCIA are more likely to actively participate in Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation than those who were baptized as infants (see Mark M. Gray, ed., “How Many Catholic Converts Stay?”). Most pastors, staff members, and involved parishioners recognize those who have participated in the RCIA among their most active members. Their commitment to Christ and to discipleship is inspiring! As parishioners experience the enthusiasm of the RCIA participants and team, they are led to peer deeply into their own lives, experience, and commitment to Jesus Christ and to embrace conversion themselves. As people who are charged with leadership in the RCIA as coordinator or team members, or in shaping parish life as a pastor, staff person, or parishioner leader, it is imperative that we direct the RCIA for the greatest possible impact on participants and team members and enable the parish to be influenced and inspired by this vital process.

## **Eight Steps to Change**

While change is not always easy, it is possible to guide people and the parish to not only manage it but to welcome it as a key aspect of the life of discipleship. Each chapter of *A Vision for Conversion* draws on one of eight steps of change that have been identified and explored in the work of Dr. John Kotter, professor emeritus of Harvard Business School and recognized authority on the dynamics and process of change. Kotter’s work has previously been applied to the life of businesses, schools, and nonprofit groups

with great benefit to these organizations. It may not immediately be apparent how a model that was developed for businesses and organizations would apply to the spiritual life of individuals or the parish. There is much that is applicable, however, and I am convinced that Kotter's eight steps, detailed and explored in *Leading Change*, are a helpful framework for ministry.

We will be going into all the details of how you can take each of these steps to make your RCIA process into a powerful conversion journey for your seekers, your RCIA team, and your whole parish. As a quick preview, these are the eight steps:

1. Establish a vision.
2. Create a vision team.
3. Make your vision a reality.
4. Share your vision.
5. Remove barriers to your vision.
6. Celebrate progress toward your vision.
7. Keep your vision alive.
8. Make your vision last.

With these steps in mind, we will be agents of change toward a dynamic, genuine life of ongoing conversion in Christ. "This is crucial: we must be converted—and we must continue to be converted! We must let the Holy Spirit change our lives! We must respond to Jesus Christ" (USCCB, *Go and Make Disciples*, 14).

## **Our Process**

Each chapter begins with an exploration of the RCIA and the way the RCIA may influence the spiritual life of the parish. We will lay theological, spiritual, and pastoral foundations from which we will establish a compelling vision for the future. Particularly in the first three chapters, we will establish a vision and capture the need for change.

Following the section on the RCIA and the parish in each chapter, I will invite you to examine your own experience in relationship to the steps of change leadership toward a fuller and more faith-filled life for seekers, team members, and parishioners. Chapter 3 concludes with a process to help you identify and articulate what will be necessary in order to effect this change in the parish, including initial strategies to move toward the vision in the immediate future. In chapters 4 through 8, we will enhance the vision and outline the steps necessary to begin to enact the changes you have discerned.

We will use the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) method to create a simple and doable plan, initially at the end of chapter 3 and again at the end of the book. I will give you discussion questions to help you apply the steps of change leadership to implement the changes you discern within the spiritual lives of individuals, the RCIA process, and in the life of the parish.

Appreciative Inquiry provides a process through which you may consider your current practices and experience in relationship to your vision, mission, and goals, identifying areas in need of change. Throughout this book you will learn steps to bring about the changes you identify, and you will develop strategies to lead for that change. There are four steps of Appreciative Inquiry:

1. **Discover:** What is your current experience or practice? What is already working? What positively contributes to the dimension under consideration? What stories come to mind that capture this experience or practice?
2. **Dream:** What is your vision? What are your hopes, dreams, and goals for this dimension?
3. **Discern:** What should be? What needs to change in order to move from your current practice toward your vision?
4. **Do:** What will you do to bring about the change you have discerned?

# Step 1

## Establish a Vision

### The Vision: Answering Christ's Call

The RCIA is an evangelizing process drawing people deeply to the love of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. In the RCIA, we accompany seekers through distinct periods of conversion. We help them to answer the Lord's call. As participants and team members respond to God's grace and give witness to the power of faith in their lives, the entire community is inspired to do the same. "Jesus' call is urgent. He does not tell people to follow him at some time in the future but here and now—at *this* moment, in *these* circumstances. There can be no delay. 'Go and proclaim the kingdom of God . . . No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God' (Luke 9:60, 62)" (USCCB, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 14). This urgent call of Christ is the reason, goal, and meaning of our ministry; in fact, it is the purpose of our entire life. Discerning how we will respond to the call of Christ at this moment, in these circumstances, personally, within the RCIA team, among participants, and in the parish, determines what takes priority; where we will spend energy; what needs to change, and why.

**Reflection attributed to Pedro Arrupe, SJ**

Nothing is more practical than  
finding God, than  
falling in Love  
in a quite absolute, final way.  
What you are in love with,  
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.  
It will decide  
what will get you out of bed in the morning,  
what you do with your evenings,  
how you spend your weekends,  
what you read, whom you know,  
what breaks your heart,  
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.  
Fall in Love, stay in love,  
and it will decide everything.

**Change: Why?**

Why explore and apply principles of change to the ways in which we accompany RCIA participants through the initiation process? Why consider the relationship between the RCIA and the life of the parish? These questions are fundamental to our approach throughout this book and the process we will explore here. It is not enough to say that change is important. We must accept that change is necessary. More than this. We must be convinced that change is desirable—our end goal that is never fully accomplished. We must be ready to be catalysts of change if people and the parish are to be transformed.

The question of why change is such a vital dimension of our pastoral life is simultaneously theological, spiritual, and practical:

- **Theological:** Our mission is to form disciples. We who have accepted Christ's call to evangelize and to serve recognize our role in leading others to the fullness of life in Christ,

which, as we have already noted, is essentially a life of ongoing conversion. This clear sense of mission is essential in the lives of individuals and the life (and sustainability) of the parish. We will explore this in greater depth throughout this book.

- **Spiritual:** The RCIA is aimed primarily at spiritual formation.

The rite of Christian initiation presented here is designed for adults who, after hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed, consciously and freely seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts. By God's help they will be strengthened spiritually during their preparation and at the proper time will receive the sacraments fruitfully. (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 1)

We who are responsible for the RCIA and those who shape parish life will do well to be attentive to the spiritual life of participants and team members as well as the wider parish community. This, too, will receive our further attention.

- **Practical:** There are many practical concerns that make this a particularly crucial and timely topic. These practical things have spiritual implications, and the spiritual lives of people and the parish impact the practical factors below:
  - *Declining numbers of adults who are baptized or received into full communion:* The RCIA process is essential in forming those who are preparing for initiation, and those who are initiated as adults are much more likely to actively live their faith through participation in Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation. Yet, the number of adults who are baptized or received into full communion is steadily declining, as are the number of people receiving first Holy Communion, confirmation, and the sacrament of marriage (CARA).
  - *Increase in the number of former adult Catholics:* While the number of Catholics in the United States increases most

years, the addition of people is largely due to immigration. “As the largest religion in the U.S., Catholicism has the largest number of former members (some later return as reverts)” (CARA, “Frequently Requested Church Statistics”). Catholicism is not alone in such a decline. In fact, identification with most religions is steadily declining. And while “Catholicism has a higher retention rate than most other religions in the U.S. (including all Protestant denominations)” (CARA), there is much cause for concern, as the impact of declining affiliation influences every aspect of the life of the parish and the church. We will explore this reality throughout this book as we consider the influence of the RCIA on the parish and the need for broader initiatives toward discipleship and ongoing conversion among all in the faith community.

- *The unaffiliated*: Related to the increase in the number of former Catholics is the recognition that many who were raised Catholic are no longer a member of any religious denomination. The fastest-growing religious “group” in the United States is the unaffiliated (“Faith in Flux,” Pew Research Center), nicknamed the “nones” by sociologists because they answer “none” to survey questions regarding religious affiliation.
- *Declining participation in Mass*: Those who do remain Catholic participate in Sunday Mass less frequently than in previous decades. Current data indicates that about 22 percent of Catholics regularly attend Sunday Mass (CARA).

Fewer people are participating in Mass. Declining numbers of people are becoming Catholic. Larger numbers of people, especially younger adults, are leaving the practice of the faith. Why is change necessary? Do we even need to ask? All of these point to the need for individuals and communities that are alive and fervent in faith and are ready to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.



Think about your personal commitment as a disciple and about the life of your parish. Do you, does your parish, have a strong sense of mission? Can you capture that mission clearly and succinctly? How well are you and your parish fulfilling that mission at this point in time?

You may be experiencing some or all of the factors detailed above in your parish. Perhaps you have fewer RCIA participants each year, or you are concerned that Mass attendance is decreasing little by little. Each national statistic is made up of the experience of people and parishes just like yours. If your parish is not in decline, it is important to be attentive to what is contributing to the life and faith that you are experiencing. Build on that. Every parish and process has strengths upon which to build, as well as areas that need to be addressed. It is not enough to note the influence of the surrounding culture and the trends toward declining religiosity in the Western world. We are not good stewards of our faith by resigning ourselves to a gradual state of decline, nor are we responsible as people of ministry when we maintain the status quo even when we know that change is necessary and beneficial. Growth is always possible. The alternative is stagnation, decline, and failure to fulfill our mission as servant leaders and disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We do not consider change for change's sake nor for the goal of increasing numbers. Rather, we lead for and manage change in order to fulfill the mission of Christ and the church. The church exists to evangelize, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, leading people to become more fully committed disciples who love and serve as followers of Jesus Christ.

We must be honest with ourselves and admit that there are many aspects of the life of the parish, including the RCIA, that would benefit from prayerful, pastoral examination. Such careful appraisal is sure to surface areas that are in need of change in order

to carry out our mission, to more faithfully and fully lead people to a dynamic life of faith. “There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining, and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s ‘fidelity to her own calling,’ any new structure will soon prove ineffective” (Joy of the Gospel, 26).

## **Change: Who?**

Throughout *A Vision for Conversion*, we will explore three focus points, or subjects, of change:

### *People: The RCIA Participants and Team*

Those who are spiritually committed are rooted in a life of prayer and participation in the faith community, responsive to God’s grace, and continually discern their vocation—who they are called to be, and what they are called to do. RCIA coordinators, team members, and participants share a spiritual journey together. Not only do coordinators and team members accompany participants as they journey toward initiation, they support one another as they strive to live and grow as committed disciples. It is, therefore, beneficial to be aware of the dynamics of change and to lead toward a life of ongoing conversion among the RCIA team and participants.

### *Process: The RCIA Process as It Is Enacted in the Parish*

The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* is a process of spiritual and faith formation marked by specific liturgical rites at various stages of the journey toward initiation. The RCIA is carried out in local parish communities under the guidance of the local bishop and the pastor of the parish. There are many factors that contribute to the ways in which we respond to seekers, guide their spiritual and faith formation, and enact the liturgical rites. Examining the

manner in which the RCIA is implemented in the parish is essential to its success in initiation ministry and in positively contributing to the spiritual life of the parish.

*Parish: The Parish as a Faith Community of Disciples*

The RCIA has the potential to evangelize the wider parish community. The more we lead parishioners to an encounter with our Lord and to respond to God's grace as disciples of Jesus Christ, the greater the possibility that the parish will grow as an "evangelizing community" (Joy of the Gospel, 24). The RCIA as a process of conversion inspires parishioners to be open and responsive to God's love, and that leads them to share their experience and enthusiasm with others in the daily circumstances of their lives.

These three groups, the people, the process, and the parish, are interrelated. When one remains static, the others are less likely to embrace conversion; when one is transformed, the others will be more likely to be led to renewal of faith and life.

## **Change: What and Why**

What needs to change? Just as each person will experience and respond to the call to conversion in the daily circumstances of his or her life, each community would do well to discern the areas of parish life that are in need of change. Throughout this book, you will be encouraged to consider what needs to change and to intentionally lead for that change.

## **Leading for Change, Step 1: Establish Urgency**

The first step of Kotter's change leadership framework is to establish a sense of urgency (37–52). In other words, why is change necessary? It may feel as though much of what we have explored up to this point in this book is preamble. It is actually part of step 1. Throughout all that has been stated up to now, we have been

establishing our why. Why change is necessary. Why this topic has theological, spiritual, and practical implications with real-life impact for you, your RCIA participants, and your parish. Why it is imperative that we learn to lead for and manage change, and why it is up to you to be a catalyst for change.

Kotter points to complacency as the greatest obstacle to the process of change, particularly in this first step of establishing urgency. It is very easy for us to discount the need for change, saying aloud or thinking to ourselves, “it really isn’t that bad,” or “but the RCIA participants love the process as it is now,” or “we just don’t have time to deal with this right now. Things will be fine for a while longer.” It is not until we are convinced that change is necessary that we will be committed to the process. Others will not embrace change without our leadership. Without a strong, clear sense of urgency, we will fall back into old patterns in the first moment of challenge or uncertainty.

Think about this from your own personal experience. I know how often I have told myself that something in my life needs to change. I need to pray more regularly or more attentively; my family needs more of my presence or attention; I need to eat healthier or exercise more. . . . You get the picture. I must admit, there have been times when I have resolved to change, whether at New Year’s or the start of Lent. Much of the time, I begin the new practice and then slide back into old patterns. I tell myself I do not have the time, or I don’t see the results I had hoped for, or I just lose steam. Sometimes, however, the change has become rooted in my life in such a way that it becomes habit. One year, our teenage daughter told me she had decided to eat a salad a day for the season of Lent. I decided to join her in the resolution. By the end of the forty days, salad had become part of my daily routine, from which I rarely stray, now over ten years later. My urgency for keeping the initial resolution was twofold: I wanted to support my daughter in her commitment, and my own health needed serious attention. In fact, looking back, my strong suspicion is that our daughter told me of her resolution in the hope that I would accompany her for my own good as well as hers!

This same dynamic is true of people in their spiritual lives and in the lives of organizations, including the parish. Without a clear sense of what needs to change and why, complacency roots us in the way things have always been. We will consider how we will bring about the needed changes we identify in later chapters, but for now, let us focus on establishing this sense of urgency. What is your “why?”

*Establishing Urgency: Among People, in the RCIA Process, in the Parish*

**People:** Spiritual growth requires three things:

- continual attentiveness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit,
- the call of Christ to love and serve (especially the least among us),
- and the grace of God, which touches our minds, hearts, and spirits with life and goodness.

As we accompany seekers and others, our job is to help them:

- develop their attentiveness to the Holy Spirit
- listen to the call of Christ to serve others
- recognize God’s love and take it to heart

We guide those we accompany toward the truth that is Christ and that is expressed in Catholic teaching and tradition. We accompany them as they develop life that is rooted in faith.

Here is an astounding fact. Each of us is called to a life of holiness. Maybe that doesn’t sound astounding to you. Maybe it sounds a little “churchy.” But imagine what it means to live every day as a holy person. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council described it this way:

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker)

to each and every one of his disciples without distinction: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). For he sent the Holy Spirit to all to move them interiorly to love God with their whole heart, with their whole soul, with their whole understanding, and with their whole strength (cf. Mk. 12:30), and to love one another as Christ loved them (cf. Jn. 13:34; 15:12) . . . In order to reach this perfection the faithful should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ’s gift, so that, following in his footsteps and conformed to his image, doing the will of God in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor. Thus the holiness of the People of God will grow in fruitful abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the Church through the life of so many saints. (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 40)

We are called to be perfect just as our heavenly Father is perfect. We often tell ourselves that perfection is impossible; holiness is impossible for everyone but the saints. And yet Jesus preached holiness for every one of us “without distinction.” It is not only possible that we live a life of holiness, it is urgent that we do so. We keep the vision of holiness in our hearts and minds and continually discern who we are called to be and how we are called to live, applying Christ’s command to love God and neighbor to our daily lives. We consider how we are, or are not, living as God desires, and we discern how we need to change in order to more fully live as Christian people in the world. Whether we are reflecting on our own lives or the lives of the people we accompany, it is imperative to keep alive the call to conversion, change of mind, heart, and life, establishing urgency in order to grow as children of God and members of Christ’s body.

**Process:** How well does the RCIA, as it is currently enacted, serve in your parish? Think for a time about the aspects of the RCIA process in your parish. Talk with RCIA team members. Read and study the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Reconnect with previous participants. Examine the ways in which you offer spiritual

guidance, accompany seekers in each period of the process, teach the essence of our Catholic Christian faith, enact the liturgical rites, and encourage and support neophytes as they develop patterns of living as fully initiated members of the faith community. What contributes to the effectiveness of your current process? What needs to change?

Keep in mind that, like all aspects of our lives of faith, the ways in which you implement the RCIA will never be finished. Seekers bring varying personal experiences, questions, and spiritual maturity to their participation in the process. Your team members may change. Your pastor may change. The needs of your seekers or your parish may change. In all of these circumstances, it is important to hold on to what is positively contributing to the process as it is currently, while always striving to carry it out as well as possible. What most needs to be changed? Identify one or two aspects, and determine why these things are the most important. What would the positive impact be if the necessary changes are made? Making the change is the way you will fulfill your responsibility as a servant leader. The change in people's lives and the life of the parish is your reason for urgency.

**Parish:** How is the RCIA a catalyst for conversion within the parish? Are the rites of the RCIA celebrated at Sunday liturgy or, when appropriate, at weekday gatherings? Are catechumens dismissed from the Sunday assembly? How do these public rites influence the lives of parishioners? Are there opportunities for members of the community to meet and become acquainted with seekers and neophytes?

The RCIA serves as witness and call. Participants and the team give witness to the power of a deep and growing relationship with Jesus Christ through their lives in what they say and do. The presence of these people who clearly embrace a life of conversion in Christ inspire and call others to this life and encourage people to open their minds, hearts, and lives to the transforming love of God. In what ways does the RCIA serve as witness and call in your parish?

**Questions to Ask Yourself:  
Establishing an Urgent Vision**

What most stands out in your mind and heart as you think about the people involved in the RCIA (including yourself), the way the RCIA process is carried out, and your parish?

What changes are urgently needed, and why?

Who should you draw into thought and possible action with you?