

“In this fresh take on whole-parish involvement in the RCIA process, Diana Macalintal draws upon her pastoral ministry in a variety of settings and her life experience, inviting us to consider whether RCIA takes place ‘in front of’ or ‘within’ our parish community. Diana provides ample material for theological reflection, but also concrete suggestions to enrich any parish’s initiation ministry. Appropriate for the seasoned veteran or the ‘neophyte’ to Christian Initiation, *Your Parish Is the Curriculum* will be a valued text for all who accompany new Christians on their faith journey.”

—Jeremy Helmes, Author of *Three Great Days*; Board of Directors, National Association of Pastoral Musicians; Pastoral Associate for Worship & Sacraments, St. Maximilian Kolbe Parish, Cincinnati, Ohio

“Often forgotten in discussions of evangelization is the role of the parish in forming a new way of life. Diana Macalintal’s description of the parish as the curriculum for the RCIA serves as a medicine against this amnesia about the parish. Readers will discover in this book not simply an introduction to the role of the parish in the RCIA. They’ll also learn a deeper appreciation for the way that the parish is the curriculum for formation in mature Christianity. Macalintal’s book is an important contribution for those involved in adult formation, catechesis, and evangelization.”

—Timothy P. O’Malley, Academic Director,
Notre Dame Center for Liturgy

“Have you felt daunted at fully implementing the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in your parish? When you finish Diana Macalintal’s book, you’ll wonder why you worried. *Your Parish Is the Curriculum* is a readable, concise, realistic, invigorating view of the entire formation and celebration of the RCIA. Whether you are new or experienced in this ministry, you will find fresh ideas and gain total confidence in the joyful task of helping interested adults join the Catholic family.”

—Fr. Paul Turner
Pastor, Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception,
Kansas City, Missouri
Director, Office of Divine Worship,
Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph
Author of various theological and pastoral resources

“In *Your Parish Is the Curriculum: RCIA In the Midst of the Community* Diana Macalintal offers a practical and engaging vision for parishes as communities of discipleship that accompany people at all stages of their faith journey through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. In an accessible and down-to-earth manner she outlines principles, suggestions, and ideas to help parishes—both those who are new to the RCIA process and those who are veterans—to facilitate and foster conversion.”

—Julianne Stanz
Director of New Evangelization
Diocese of Green Bay

Your Parish *Is* the Curriculum

RCIA in the Midst of the Community

Diana Macalintal



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For Nick, who taught me to ask, "What if?"

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Introduction

Rocio

I didn't know everything would change for our community the moment the doorbell rang. The receptionist was on vacation that week, and it was my turn to sit at her desk at the Catholic Newman Center where I worked. The university's January term had just begun, and I expected to see yet another wayward student looking for Mass or confession.

"Hi. Is this a church?" she asked when I answered the door.

Her voice sounded tiny and apprehensive, like many college freshmen sound when they come to church for the first time on their own. But she didn't look like most of the young students we encountered. Her lips were ruby red, but everything else about her was clothed in black. Her jet-black hair matched the thick line of midnight-black eyeliner that defined her eyes. Black nail polish and leather bands marked her fingers and wrists. (We'd later learn that the bands were there to hide the scars.) Chunky black boots, jeans, and a black T-shirt finished the ensemble. She was the perfect model for those who saw the world as dark and their place in it as outcast.

"Yes! This is the Catholic Center," I answered, hoping I sounded reassuring. "Do you want to come in?" I asked, opening the door wider.

She peeked behind me into the dim vestibule before she replied in a shaky voice, "Yeah. I think I want to get baptized."

That was the beginning of our community's journey with Rocio. But it hadn't been the beginning of her journey of faith. She had already traveled a long and unhappy road to get there. Bad friendships had led to abusive relationships, and people she thought would have her back had abandoned her. Those who stayed taught her to doubt herself and her own worth, which made it easier for her to accept the abuse. No wonder she clothed herself in darkness; it was all she knew.

Yet, something else also led her to that door. As people of faith, we would call it God's grace. Rocio knew it as an ache for something better, something more. Thank God, she believed this was the place to find it. As she stepped into the entryway, I sensed it was an act of hope—for her and for us—to say yes to this new relationship.

God at Work

Rocio joined us every Sunday for Mass. She was painfully shy at first, so we put together a small group of people who took turns sitting with her each Sunday and hanging out with her after Mass during coffee and donuts. At Mass she enjoyed the singing, but she couldn't quite figure out the standing and sitting and kneeling or the responses. We told her just to do what we did, and she'd be fine. With the help of her new companions, she began meeting a few other community members. Most of them were students like her, but there were also a lot of other people from the neighborhood and alumni who had never left.

Slowly, she began to open up and started asking lots of questions: What does it mean when you put your hand in that water and touch your forehead? Why do you change all the colors in the church every few weeks? Where do those readings come from? How do you know all the responses? How do you become a reader? Who are these statues? We'd all answer her questions as best as we could.

As she became more comfortable with us, we began to ask her a few questions of our own: What made you decide to come here?

Where have you been in your life? Are you happy? What do you hope for? What do you long for? Rocio told us that no one had ever asked her those kinds of questions before, and she was eager to discover the answers for herself.

Soon enough, little by little, we started noticing a bit of a change in Rocio. She wasn't as shy as she used to be and began to open up a bit more. She even volunteered to distribute the worship aids before Mass and greet people at the door. She didn't say much to them, but with those big ruby-red lips she smiled at every person.

Later that summer, she joined our annual student trip to Tijuana to an orphanage the students visit. They help the staff make repairs to the building and cook the meals. Mostly they play soccer with the kids or take turns giving piggyback rides in the dusty yard. It was here that we saw a completely different Rocio. She was vivacious and outgoing with the older kids, attentive and tender with the younger ones. She told the funniest jokes that made both the kids and adults topple over in laughter. Each evening, when we would sing and pray with the children, she made sure the littlest ones made the sign of the cross over themselves.

When she came back to school that fall, we noticed an even greater change in her. The heavy darkness that had once clothed her had given way to a budding joy, and there was a calmness to her spirit. She told us that her week with the kids at the orphanage had given her immense happiness. She wanted to change her life and help others like her be happy too. We knew she was ready to take that first public step toward what she had first asked for.

She became a catechumen a few weeks later and immersed herself into everything the Newman Center community was doing. There was a Tuesday night Bible study, and she and her sponsor—a friend she had made at the Newman Center—spent many hours in prayer and discussion with that group. Her many questions challenged everyone there to be more prepared. Some Fridays, they joined a group of students who rented movies to watch on the community TV. Each month, we served meals at a local women's shelter, and Rocio was always one of the first to sign up to serve. There was a rosary group that met in the dorm where Rocio lived,

and she grew to love the rhythm of the prayers and the sincerity of those who prayed it. And Rocio never missed an opportunity to go back to Tijuana and be with those kids who had unlocked something in her that first summer. All the while, she and her sponsor were at Sunday Mass together, and we would meet with them and other catechumens for catechesis and fellowship.

Over the next few years, we saw wonderful changes in Rocio, but we also noticed changes in us. Having lived a difficult life with not-so-trustworthy friends, Rocio was never quick to accept everything she heard right away without some serious thought. So her questions for us became more and more discerning. Instead of just, "What does this mean?" she would ask, "Do you *really* believe that, and why?" Instead of "Who is Jesus?" or "Who is this saint?" she wanted to know, "Who is Jesus *for you*, and why does he matter *to you*?" These were questions with answers we wouldn't find in any book.

Rocio had once hidden behind the armor of her clothing. We realized that in some ways we, too, had been hiding behind the safety of our lesson plans, our catechisms, and our academically grounded notion that good research can find the answers to anything.

Rocio's presence and desire for living a true and honest Christian faith was gradually changing us into a community of people who had to be more intentional about what we believed and why. She wanted a community whose faith came not only from our head but more importantly from our heart. If we were to do that for Rocio, we needed to trust more in the slow and surprising work of the Holy Spirit than in our own sense of control. We had to listen more to the many places in our daily lives where God was speaking and not only to the experts among us who had prepared that week's presentation. Sometimes, we had no simple answers to her deepening questions because living out faith authentically isn't always so simple. Sometimes the only genuine answers we could give her were to pray more fervently, search for the truth together more humbly, and treat one another more compassionately.

Perhaps it was God's plan all along, but even as we tried to help Rocio grow in her own faith, it was she who helped us grow deeper in ours.

The Heart of Faith

After several years, all of us knew it was time for Rocio to receive what she had asked for that first day. That year's Easter Vigil was a cool, springtime evening. We had no formal chapel that could accommodate the entire community, so we held our Easter Vigil outside in the Newman Center backyard. We had built a makeshift font out of a horse trough and blue plastic tarp, with an army of lilies surrounding it. That afternoon, we filled the font with cold water from the garden hose. That night, under a recently full moon, Rocio stood alone in that font, with her godparent to her right and our pastor to her left. Their hands rested gently on her shoulders.

Into that dark night, our pastor asked Rocio, "Do you believe in God, the Father?" In a tiny voice that reminded me of our first conversation, Rocio whispered, "I do."

"Rocio, do you believe in Jesus, his only Son?" In a stronger voice came her reply, "I do."

Finally, he asked her, "Rocio, do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" Without prompting, she cried out in a voice I had never heard before, "I do with all my heart!" None of us were ready for it, that moment when all our hearts broke open to God's mysterious grace coming from this young woman.

Our pastor and Rocio's godparent gently lowered her down into that cold water and leaned her back a bit. Though his voice cracked with the love all of us were feeling, our pastor's voice resounded: "Rocio, I baptize you in the name of the Father . . ." They lowered her further into the water until her face was almost completely covered, then lifted her up. ". . . And of the Son . . ." Again, they submerged her lower still. As they brought her up again, I saw Rocio's face glistening and radiant. ". . . And of the Holy Spirit!" Down again they plunged her, and all of us held our

breath with her. She came up the last time, dripping wet and crying, and we were crying too.

Right then, I knew that the person who had come up out of that water was not the same person I had met at that front door. The darkness that had made up so much of the old Rocio had been left behind in that font. The new Rocio standing before us, drenched with life and gleaming with light, was a completely brand-new creation.

There was something more. I realized that we who surrounded her that night were not the same community either. We had become more faithful and more true as Christians. The Gospel that for some of us had become rote and routine had come to life because of Rocio. No longer were we content with easy answers once we had learned to struggle together with Rocio's honest questions. Through it all, her sincere desire helped us never lose hope in Christ, in his church, or in one another. We had become more attentive to the Spirit's work and more obedient to the Spirit's movement at work in us and in the people who came to us seeking Christ. Everyone Rocio had touched—the Bible study group, the rosary group, the volunteers at the women's shelter and the orphanage, even the Friday night movie crowd—had grown deeper in their love for one another and in their faith in Christ because of Rocio's presence and participation in the life of the community. All of us had become more aware of how God was shaping our faith in our daily life together in study and prayer, in play and in service, and in joyful witness to the world. In that font, we, too, with Rocio, had been recreated into a more visible and merciful face of Christ.

What Really Happened

I want to tell you that *that* was exactly how it happened in that Newman Center almost thirty years ago. Mostly it was. But it wasn't because we planned it that way.

Our newly formed RCIA team was dead set on implementing our meticulously crafted and highly detailed catechetical forma-

tion calendar. The codirector and I had laid out the syllabus for the entire year. It was, of course, a September to May calendar because that's when the university was in session, even though the Newman Center had Sunday Mass and activities every week of the year.

We had assigned each of the thirty-two topics to the most theologically educated ones among our staff and team. They were to prepare their presentations, videos, and handouts for their assigned Wednesday night RCIA meeting. Each of those presentations were precisely timed to the gospels of each Sunday, and we double-checked the conversion schedule for when Rocio and all the other catechumens that year were supposed to be ready in order to be baptized that coming spring.

Poor Rocio and her sponsor! We required that both of them attend the Wednesday RCIA meeting every week, and if they didn't, we would do "make up" classes with them on Sunday. Because, really, if she didn't go to RCIA, when else would she learn about being Catholic?

Thank God that Rocio and the Holy Spirit weren't going to follow our schedule! The friends that Rocio made at the Newman Center, especially her sponsor, wanted her to be part of the community and do all the things the community did because it was simply what you did with your friends. It wasn't the RCIA team that encouraged her to go to Bible study. It was her sponsor because she was also a part of that group and thought Rocio would enjoy it too. In fact, the RCIA team was a bit annoyed with the Bible study group because Rocio would always come back from it excited with comments and questions about what she learned in Bible study, and her insights weren't fitting in with our topic that week. That first summer, while our RCIA team had been busy preparing the upcoming year's lesson plans, Rocio had gone to the orphanage in Tijuana because one of her new friends at the Newman Center was also going. Rocio found the rosary group herself because she saw a sign posted on the elevator at her dorm and was curious.

Now I'm sure that our weekly Wednesday night RCIA sessions were indeed forming Rocio in Catholic teaching, and she and her

sponsor seemed to enjoy those gatherings. Moreover, that RCIA group of catechumens, candidates, and sponsors formed a tight-knit community, and we all came to know one another very deeply. Yet it was interesting to see that the year Rocio was initiated, only Rocio had stayed connected to the community after baptism. The other neophytes seemed to slowly disappear during that Easter season. We'd see them every so often on campus or at Sunday Mass. But only Rocio was consistently embedded (a good description for a neophyte, or "new plant") into the ongoing life of the community because she had planted roots within the community beyond our RCIA group. When we told the neophytes that they should go and be part of the wider community now that they were baptized and they didn't have to come to Wednesday night RCIA anymore, everyone protested, saying they would miss their RCIA gatherings. Only Rocio seemed unflustered. She was already making plans to start up a Wednesday night rosary group at her friend's dorm and had asked several other Newman Center folks to help out.

Neither Rocio nor the Holy Spirit was going to wait for the RCIA team to get her connected to the rest of the Body of Christ. To Rocio, the RCIA group was not the church; the entire Newman Center community was. And that community went beyond the walls of that building, all the way to the dormitories and the campus and the neighborhood. All the way to Tijuana. For Rocio, that Wednesday night RCIA gathering and everything she learned there only supplemented and enhanced the deeper learning of the Christian way of life that she was already living daily with her friends within the Christian community.

Have We Actually Tried the RCIA?

I've heard many RCIA team members confess to me how they felt they failed because a catechumen just never "got it." I've felt this too with other catechumens who didn't turn out to be as committed to discipleship as I hoped. I've shared war stories with pastors and RCIA directors about the "post-Easter drop-off," when many newly initiated slowly disappear. I've also heard from

diocesan leaders and even some bishops the much-repeated lament that “RCIA just doesn’t work” and the solution is to make it a more rigorous catechetical program.

After over twenty-five years of working in catechumenate ministry, there are two things I want to say when I think of these conversations. First, to those who feel they have failed, I say be gentle with yourself. This entire process is not up to us but is truly the Holy Spirit’s work. It is not our job to guarantee conversion. Our proper role is to make our own lives of faith and conversion so visible and attractive to the seeker that they will want to enter into that way of faith and conversion in Christ themselves. To that end, let’s remember that the only person we *can* change is us.

Second, to those who lament that the RCIA isn’t working, I say that perhaps we simply have not done the RCIA as it was really intended. To borrow from G. K. Chesterton, the RCIA “has not been tried and found wanting.” Perhaps, rather, “it has been found difficult; and left untried.”

Shortly after the Latin text of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* was presented to the bishops of the world for translation into their various languages, Aidan Kavanagh, OSB, wrote a report to liturgical scholars and theologians outlining some of the major changes and challenges this new ritual would present to parishes around the world. He summarized the challenges of this new rite:

Most clergy regard its implementation as problematic if not impossible. They are right. For what the Roman documents contain are not merely specific changes in liturgical rubrics, but a restored and unified vision of the Church. One might describe it as a concentric ecclesiology locked together by the sacramental discipline of faith shared on all levels . . .

One may turn an altar around and leave *reform* at that. But one cannot set an adult catechumenate in motion without becoming necessarily involved with *renewal* in the ways a local church lives its faith from top to bottom. For members of an adult catechumenate must be secured through evangelization; they must be formed to maturity in ecclesial faith through catechesis both prior to baptism and after it; and there must be something to initiate them

into that will be correlative to the expectations built up in them through their whole initiatory process. This last means a community of lively faith in Jesus Christ dead, risen, and present actually among his People. In this area, when one change occurs, all changes. (“Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar Catholicism,” 7–8)

The Vision

If we approach the RCIA as yet one more program to implement and we delegate the implementation of that program to a small group of leaders, then we will have failed even before we begin. What Kavanagh pointed out back in 1977 was that the adult catechumenate changes everything. It is a paradigm shift that flows from the radical insight recovered from Vatican II that *baptism matters*. If that’s true, then *your* baptism matters. It matters most of all to the people who are seeking what baptism gives you: an intimate relationship with the living Christ active in the world. Where we find that living Christ and that relationship is in the community of Christians.

Unfortunately, that community is messy. It is imperfect, made up of imperfect people. It would be much easier, cleaner, and quicker to just leave RCIA to a small group of highly qualified Christians who meet once a week to transmit the teaching of the church to a receptive, albeit passive, group of seekers. Or maybe we could ensure that the catechumens meet only the best of Catholics among us or attend only the best of our liturgies.

Yet the Body of Christ doesn’t work that way. Only through intimate relationship with the members of Christ’s Body will one touch and hear and see Christ at work in the world. So if you want your seekers to learn how to be the Body of Christ, they must be trained by those who are the Body of Christ: the entire Christian community.

The Reality

However, what happens most often in our parishes is that we make the RCIA an activity among many other parish activities. It

is a small faith-sharing group among many other similar groups. To go through the RCIA essentially means to be part of this group. Operationally, we initiate people not into Christ, not even into the church, but into *this group* called RCIA.

Every so often, this RCIA group, like many of the other parish groups, will request to do some kind of ritual at Sunday Mass. And so we schedule it on the parish calendar along with the capital campaign announcement, the Mother's Day blessing, and the commissioning of new Communion ministers. Parishioners who would rather not be bothered will avoid the "RCIA Mass," and the unwitting ones who didn't read the bulletin will grumble that those RCIA people keep making the Mass longer.

Then for those who are "going through the RCIA," most of them have one goal in mind, and it's usually not lifelong discipleship. It's "graduation" when they will be done with RCIA classes and get their sacraments and their certificate. Then they can move on to whatever their real goal was, which was something like marrying their Catholic girlfriend, pleasing their grandmother, or getting the Catholic discount at the Catholic grade school. It's not really their fault they think this way because we told them that RCIA lasts from September to May and they only need to attend so many meetings with the RCIA group before their sacraments.

This is not the "unified vision of the Church" Kavanagh said changes everything. It's adult education for people who want to learn more about Catholicism. That kind of program is easy to implement, but it rarely changes the hearts of the catechumens, candidates, or parishioners. And if it does, it's because you had a special person like Rocio who took your program into her own hands.

Now there are indeed communities where the RCIA is thriving and the parishioners can't wait to celebrate the RCIA rites. Perhaps your community is one of these. I was lucky enough to be part of a community like this, and I thought we were doing what the RCIA called for. Yet, quite often in this community I heard a few longtime baptized Catholics say something that made my heart sink.

They saw the power of the catechumenate process. They felt their own hearts and lives change along with the catechumens. Then they lamented that they wish they had never been baptized as children so they could “go through the RCIA” as adults. This was the most distressing sign that what we were doing still was not what the RCIA envisioned.

Today, if I could speak to these adults who regretted being baptized as infants and to anyone who has said the same thing to you, I would say that you *are* going through the RCIA as adults. If you have adults preparing for baptism in your parish, you are doing RCIA, because the RCIA can’t happen without you, the baptized community. The RCIA doesn’t happen at a Wednesday night gathering, and it’s not done by the RCIA team or the pastor. *All the baptized* are responsible for *doing* the RCIA because the catechumens in your parish are watching and imitating and learning from what *you* are doing as Christians each day, week after week. *That’s* how they learn to become Catholic. You are their teachers; you are their models. So you are doing RCIA whether you know it or not.

Turning RCIA Upside Down

This book is an attempt to turn the way we do RCIA upside down, especially in how the community participates in this parish-changing, life-altering endeavor. If it’s true that the entire community of the baptized is responsible for the initiation of adults, then we have to stop trying to get the community *involved in the RCIA* and instead get what we’ve been calling the RCIA *involved in the community*.

Instead of trying to help you convince parishioners to go to one more meeting or volunteer on another committee, I want to relieve you of that impossible task. Instead I want to give you practical ways to get your catechumens, candidates, and sponsors to be more involved in the life of the community where they will encounter the Body of Christ. And rather than show you how to create a curriculum for formation that you will have to implement,

I want to help you see the curriculum that is already within your community just waiting to be tapped that will move a seeker's heart closer to Christ. These shifts in thinking will make all the difference for seekers, your RCIA team, and your parish.

Now you might think doing this will require more of you. It will certainly require more of your commitment, patience, creativity, and vision. But it won't take more of your time or personal resources. In fact, it will be easier and less stressful because it won't depend all on you or on what your team alone can provide. You will find that you actually have way more time and resources than you originally thought. That's because you will be using what your parish is *already doing*, things that other people are already organizing, and tapping into those aspects of parish life to train catechumens and candidates in the Christian way of life.

By doing RCIA *this way*, you will not only be forming your catechumens and candidates. You will also be deepening the faith of your parishioners. You will be calling your community members to step up and take their rightful place as the baptized, "fully prepared in the pursuit of its apostolic vocation to give help to those who are searching for Christ" (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 9).

Outline of the Book

In chapter 1, we'll lay the foundation for why your parish is the curriculum. That foundation is the church's understanding of the dignity and purpose of baptism. Then in chapter 2, we'll look at the community of the baptized and how they make up your RCIA team. We'll also describe some of the specific roles found in this great big team that is now made up of your entire parish. Chapter 3 will explore what your parishioners should be doing at various stages throughout the initiation process.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are the heart of the book, going deep into what an upside-down RCIA looks like. Chapter 4 surveys the comprehensive curriculum, already embedded in your parish, that the church gives for making disciples. Chapter 5 lays out the

syllabus of the RCIA that your parish is already doing. We'll also analyze real-life parishes in the United States, of varying sizes and demographics, to see how their weekly activities can be used for discipleship formation. Next, in chapter 6, we answer the question everyone asks: When do you get to the *real* teaching? Here we show you *how* to teach your parish's RCIA syllabus more effectively using mystagogical catechesis.

We shift a bit in chapter 7 and examine the many different kinds of people in the RCIA, what syllabus is best for each of them, and how to know if the catechumens and candidates are "getting it." Finally, the conclusion is a reflection on what would happen if we transformed our initiation processes this way.

You're Not Alone

Sometimes, the hardest thing about doing RCIA ministry is feeling like you're on your own. I hope that after reading this book, you'll know that you're not. First, you'll have your entire parish community to lean upon and take some of the burden off of your shoulders.

Second, connecting people who do RCIA ministry with others who are passionate about the catechumenate is the very reason my husband, Nick, and I started TeamRCIA.com. There is so much I wanted to include in this book that just couldn't fit. So I hope you'll find your way there for more resources, to ask your own questions and find some answers, and to connect with other RCIA team members all around the world who share your love for the catechumens and candidates.

So let's get started on seeing our entire parish as the curriculum for making disciples.

Chapter 1

RCIA Isn't Just for Catechumens

Baptism Matters

Ask most ordinary Catholics what Vatican II did, and they might say it changed the Mass from Latin to the vernacular or it turned the priest around to face the people. These were certainly significant, but they are only outcomes of the real shifts that were so much bigger.

In the first document of Vatican II, the bishops expressed a foundational theological and ecclesial principle that, to some extent, had been forgotten over the centuries: Baptism matters.

The church has always taught this. But the shift in focus that Vatican II emphasized was to *why* baptism matters. Baptism matters because it changes us and gives us rights *and* duties:

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people" (1 Pet. 2:9, 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism. (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 14)

For many Catholics in general, what had mattered most about baptism had been membership in the church because membership granted salvation. Heaven was opened to you because baptism washed away all sin. This is still the teaching of the church, but it is only part of our understanding of baptism.

More than just membership

Baptism is God's most beautiful and magnificent gift. . . . We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called *gift* because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; *grace* since it is given even to the guilty; *Baptism* because sin is buried in the water; *anointing* for it is priestly and royal as are those who are anointed; *enlightenment* because it radiates light; *clothing* since it veils our shame; *bath* because it washes; and *seal* as it is our guard and the sign of God's Lordship. (Saint Gregory of Nazianzus)

Baptism changes *who* we are. It makes us sharers in Christ in whom we become priests, prophets, and kings. Because it changes *who* we are, it also changes *what* we do:

From the fact of their union with Christ the head flows the laymen's right and duty to be apostles. Inserted as they are in the Mystical Body of Christ by baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, it is by the Lord himself that they are assigned to the apostolate. If they are consecrated a kingly priesthood and a holy nation (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-10), it is in order that they may in all their actions offer spiritual sacrifices and bear witness to Christ all the world over. (Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, 3)

Thus, in all our actions as the baptized members of Christ, we offer our lives in thanksgiving to the Father and bear witness to Christ wherever we go. As royal priests, we lift up the needs of

the world and ask God to transform them into a clearer image of the kingdom. As a holy people set apart as God's own, we establish right relationships with one another, with creation, and with God who created us. And as apostles, we are sent by the Spirit to be prophets, bearing the message of the Gospel: Look! Heaven is open. God is here. Come.

The Purpose of Baptism Is Mission

Baptism gives us work to do! It gives us a mission, one that will be challenging and inspiring. It will demand everything of us, perhaps even our very lives, but it also will give us a joy and peace like no other. It's a mission that changes the world because it changes people's hearts—from hearts filled with despair and darkness to hearts radiating enduring hope and joy. Although each one of us who is baptized is responsible for this mission, we never do this mission alone. We do it as an entire household of disciples who have been given all the gifts we need to accomplish it. Those gifts are baptism, which makes us members of the Body of Christ; confirmation that shapes us into the image of Christ; and the Eucharist, nourishing us with Christ's own Body and Blood.

Thus the three sacraments of Christian initiation closely combine to bring us, the faithful of Christ, to his full stature and to enable us to carry out the mission of the entire people of God in the Church and in the world. (*Christian Initiation*, General Introduction, 2)

This is what we do when we prepare people like Rocio, whom we met in the introduction. We are training them for Christ's mission.

Once the focus of baptism shifts from membership in the church to mission in Christ, other things change too. We start to see baptism more like a verb than a noun. To be baptized is to respond by faith to God's initiative, for baptism is "above all, the sacrament of that faith by which, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we respond to the Gospel of Christ" (*Christian Initiation*, General

Introduction, 3). We go from what could be a passive, defensive, or fearful way of living our faith (since our membership could lapse or be taken away) to one that is an active, joyful, and hopeful response to God's gracious gift.

If we see baptism this way, our life of faith becomes an ongoing, personal, and communal *becoming-into-baptism* as we grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. Baptism isn't the end of a process; it's just the beginning!

Living the Christian way of faith requires, then, a daily discernment of how God is calling us to respond by faith to our baptism. How am I responding to God's gift and living out the mission this gift gives me? How can we strengthen our faith as a response to God's call? And how do we teach others to respond by faith and take on the mission of Christ in the world?

We Learn by Doing, Especially by Praying

Vatican II gave us a way for learning how to live and deepen our faith so that we may respond as Christ did to his mission:

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else, *for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 14, emphasis added)

Not a textbook or a program but rather our full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy of the church is the primary and essential way we learn what it means to live as Christians. This is vitally important for RCIA teams. We should always remember that the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* is just that—a *rite*. It's a liturgical process, not a catechetical program. Rather than being merely significant moments within a catechetical process, the rites themselves in the RCIA are the very means of forming new Christians. There are two implications to this key point.

Liturgy Draws Us into Life with God in Christ

First, liturgy is the principal place of formation because what we are introducing people to is not a doctrine but a person, the Person of Christ. Pope Francis emphasized this very point in his first encyclical, *Light of Faith*:

Faith, in fact, needs a setting in which it can be witnessed to and communicated, a means which is suitable and proportionate to what is communicated. For transmitting a purely doctrinal content, an idea might suffice, or perhaps a book, or the repetition of a spoken message. But what is communicated in the Church, what is handed down in her living Tradition, is the new light born of an encounter with the true God, a light which touches us at the core of our being and engages our minds, wills and emotions, opening us to relationships lived in communion. (40)

Furthermore, this encounter with God in the liturgy goes beyond intellectual assent to touch our entire being—mind and heart, body and soul, human need, hope, memory, and feeling—so that we can have an intimate relationship with the living God:

There is a special means for passing down this fullness, a means capable of engaging the entire person, body and spirit, interior life and relationships with others. It is the sacraments, celebrated in the Church's liturgy. The sacraments communicate an incarnate memory, linked to the times and places of our lives, linked to all our senses; in them the whole person is engaged as a member of a living subject and part of a network of communitarian relationships. (ibid.)

This new relationship gives us eyes of faith to see the world as God sees it, drawing us to live in the world with hope, joy, and profound love for everything and everyone God has created:

While the sacraments are indeed sacraments of faith, it can also be said that faith itself possesses a sacramental structure. The awakening of faith is linked to the dawning of a new sacramental

sense in our lives as human beings and as Christians, in which visible and material realities are seen to point beyond themselves to the mystery of the eternal. (ibid.)

Those who are baptized participate Sunday after Sunday in the eucharistic liturgy to be taught and shaped again and again by Christ and to deepen their union with him through the breaking of the bread.

Although catechumens cannot yet share in the Eucharist until they are baptized, they are still called to participate fully, consciously, and actively in the liturgies of the church, especially the Liturgy of the Word in the Sunday gathering of the parish, for Christ is present there.

In the liturgy, little by little, over the course of the entire liturgical year, catechumens and candidates are being catechized by Christ, who is present not only in the Eucharist, but also wherever the faithful gather to sing and pray in his name. Christ is present at the liturgy in the Scriptures proclaimed in the assembly, especially in the gospels. And Christ is present in the ministry of the church, especially in the ministry of the priest (see *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 7).

Catechesis Is for Living the Christian Life

If the RCIA is a liturgical process and the rites themselves are the very means of forming new Christians, then what is the place of catechesis in the catechumenate?

Obviously, liturgy is not the only thing the church does. However, it is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10). This gives us our second implication regarding Christian formation.

The church’s ministries of evangelization and catechesis, its communal and spiritual life, and its works of charity and service all combine together to form a way of aiding and deepening the Christian spirit derived from the liturgy so that we may live out

Christ's mission in the world. Everything we do leading up to the liturgy, and everything we do flowing from the liturgy, should strive to strengthen that primary encounter with Christ in the worshipping assembly.

Pope Francis invited us all to see catechesis in this way, as something bigger than merely teaching about the Christian faith. For the pope, catechesis is helping believers open their hearts to encounter the living Christ active in the church:

The catechesis, as a component of the process of evangelization, needs to go beyond the simple realm of scholastics, in order to educate believers, beginning with children, *to encounter Christ, living and working in his Church*. It is the encounter with Him that gives rise to the desire to know him better and thus to follow Him to become his disciples. (plenary assembly address, May 29, 2015)

Therefore, evangelization to those who do not believe is meant to open their hearts to Christ, and catechesis for those who do believe prepares them to respond more faithfully to the Gospel of Christ, whom they encounter in the Christian assembly.

When Baptism Matters, the Parish Matters

The pope went on to ask this pointed question:

The challenge for the new evangelization and for the catechesis, therefore, is played out precisely on this fundamental point: *how to encounter Jesus*, where is the most consistent place to find him and to follow him? (ibid.)

The most basic answer to that question is the Christian community doing what Christians do. Where we see that most clearly is in our parishes. In the parish, we actively work together to evangelize and catechize. Our communal life binds us closer together as we learn to follow the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and to sacrifice ourselves for one another. Our life of prayer nourishes us with the

Word and sacraments and strengthens us with God's blessings. And our apostolic life shown by words and works of mercy to the world make us credible witnesses of the Gospel.

Just as we learn the true Christian spirit through full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy, we learn how to live and deepen that spirit by immersing ourselves into the whole of Christian life. We learn our faith by doing our faith with other Christians where they gather to pray, study, reflect, and serve.

In 1999, the US bishops wrote *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*. In a section titled "The Parish Is the Curriculum," they stated,

Parishioners' personal involvement in ministry is also formative. They learn as they prepare for ministry and as they engage in it; they learn from those with whom they serve and from those whom they serve; and by their witness, they show others the life-giving power of faith. (119)

Here the bishops emphasized the hands-on nature of catechesis. We learn by doing; we learn by teaching and serving; and we learn by being models of faith for others. This will be the very way that parishioners, along with the catechumens and candidates, will deepen their own conversion and discipleship.

However, the bishops also expressed a caution that comes with understanding catechesis in this way:

While this pastoral plan is concerned primarily with intentional adult faith formation programs, the success of such efforts rests very much on the quality and total fabric of parish life. This includes, for example, "the quality of the liturgies, the extent of shared decision making, the priorities in the parish budget, the degree of commitment to social justice, the quality of the other catechetical programs." (118, quoting *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*, 189)

Forming Christian adults isn't an isolated activity that can be fulfilled simply through a discrete program labeled "adult faith

formation" or "RCIA." The entire life of the parish influences and affects how adults are formed.

The RCIA process, like any other adult faith formation initiative, needs a parish of faithful disciples who make their parish a place of lively faith. Even the most amazing adult faith formation programs and processes, including the RCIA, will be ineffective if the rest of parish life falters. As RCIA teams, we cannot be concerned with only the catechumens and candidates. Our efforts in the RCIA involve not only them but the entire community of the faithful because it will be the parish that will help shape the faith of those seeking Christ.

- If there is a lack of unity, charity, and welcome among the people who gather for Sunday Mass, how will catechumens and candidates learn how to show that love to others in the world?
- If the quality of the liturgies demonstrates a lack of care for either the ritual or the assembly, how will catechumens and candidates learn to be a eucharistic people in their daily lives?
- If the homilies are lacking in hope, nourishment, or a call to respond in thanksgiving, how will catechumens and candidates learn to speak a word that will rouse the weary heart to come to know Christ?
- If the parish is lacking in the way it operates in its work practices, in the way it spends its money, and in its visible and tangible care for those in need in its neighborhood, how will catechumens and candidates be emboldened to proclaim the justice of God in the world even in the face of persecution or indifference?

To paraphrase another US bishops' document, *Music in Catholic Worship*, faith grows when it is well expressed in the parish community. Good parish life fosters and nourishes faith. Poor parish life may weaken and destroy it.

The Parish Is the Curriculum

The bishops' final statement in this section from *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* summarizes well this turn to the baptized and the entire life of the parish as the focus and milieu for adult faith formation:

When these various elements of parish life are weak or lacking, formal programs for adults typically do not flourish; when they are vibrant and strong, they create an overall climate of active participation and living faith that can only benefit the parish's intentional formation efforts with adults. Thus, while the parish may *have* an adult faith formation program, it is no less true that the parish *is* an adult faith formation program. (121)

Because your parishioners have been washed, anointed, and clothed as priests, prophets, and kings, enlightened with the knowledge of Christ, endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and strengthened by the Eucharist to grow into the full stature of Christ for doing Christ's mission, they are the best teachers for your catechumens and candidates. Therefore, your parish is the best "classroom" for forming adults for living a life of discipleship in Christ.

Rethinking new evangelization

Sometimes an RCIA team member asks me how to get people who have fallen away from the church back. Often they aren't trying to solve a general ministry issue; they're praying that a loved one returns to faith.

When Pope John Paul II first wrote about new evangelization, he talked about "entire groups of the baptized [who] have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel" (On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate, 33).

As painful as it is to see our loved ones lose faith, he said that announcing the Gospel to those who have never heard it must always be “the first task of the Church” (34). That task can never be diluted, secondary, or forgotten because of our concern for those whose faith has grown cold.

This is why Pope Francis’s definition of “new evangelization” is important to remember:

How many men and women, on the existential peripheries created by a consumerist, atheistic society, wait for our closeness and our solidarity! The Gospel is the message of the love of God who, in Jesus Christ, calls us to participate in his life. Therefore, this is new evangelization: to become conscious of the merciful love of the Father in order that we may become pure instruments of salvation for our brothers. (plenary assembly address, May 29, 2015)

We cannot change others’ hearts; only the Holy Spirit can do that. We can only change ours. The best way we can persuade those who have left the church is to love them constantly but to love those who wait for our closeness even more. If, time and again, our absent loved ones see us working tirelessly to heal the wounds of those at the peripheries, that will be our greatest testimony that may, in the Spirit’s time, inspire our loved ones to come home.

The Urgency of Our Mission

Any initiatives of the church that strengthen parish life, catechize Christians, or rekindle the flame of faith in Christians who have left must never be ends to themselves; they must always serve the primary mission of announcing the Good News to those who have never heard it, those like Rocio. People like her who seek something more for their lives have never been given a sense of hope or meaning that transforms and transcends the daily sufferings they bear. No one has invited them into a mission that

changes their lives at their core and reveals the profound mystery that all human life is an image of the divine. There is no program, workshop, video, book, or course that will heal the wounds they bear. Only the living Body of Christ found in the Christian community, focused on the suffering of those at the peripheries, can do that.

Heal the wounds

The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. (Pope Francis, in Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," *America*)

Rocio and people like her are waiting for us, the baptized, to show them the hope that is found in the love of God in Christ Jesus. They are waiting to hear that message of love, proclaimed by both word and deed by the Christian community: Jesus Christ has saved you. This is what Pope Francis called the "first proclamation." He named it "first" because "it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment" (Joy of the Gospel, 164).

If we are to announce this message "at every level and moment," we cannot limit our method of proclaiming it and teaching it to just a weekly meeting in a classroom, no matter how excellent that gathering may be. The only way that those like Rocio can truly hear and learn this first proclamation so that both their minds and hearts are opened to Christ is through the Christian commu-

nity, living it out in their own daily lives, because that is where they will encounter Christ most fully:

- In the Christian community is where those who are first learning to respond to the Spirit's promptings practice hearing God's voice in the Scriptures and following the way of the Gospel.
- It is where they encounter Christ's abiding mercy in a community that regularly offers and asks for forgiveness of one another and joyfully sacrifices their own needs for the sake of the other.
- It is where they learn to readily turn to the Father in prayer and mark the daily moments of joy and grief with rituals that touch the heart.
- Most of all, it is where they learn to walk with those in need, offer their friendship, and give reason for their hope.

In turn, the best way for us, the Christian community, to deepen our own grasp of the fundamental teaching that Jesus Christ has saved us and to draw those who have lost their connection to that message is to go out and show that saving love to those who wait for the Gospel that liberates.

In the next chapter, we'll look at who makes up the Christian community that is the place of encounter with Christ, and we'll explore the specific roles of the parish assembly in their responsibility for training adults in Christ's mission.