

“The challenging task of evangelization is one that belongs to every baptized member of the Body of Christ. In order to be sensitive to the needs of every generation, an evangelizing church must continually assess and renew the way it forms disciples. Anne Koester’s exploration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as adapted for young children and teens does just that. Koester demonstrates with great expertise and ministerial backbone how the work of initiation is a process of apprenticeship, helping young people to experience real conversion by practicing the Christian life and assisting the already baptized in their role as companions on the journey. This resource is a must-read for pastors and religious educators who struggle with how to best incorporate young people into the one catechumenate of the local parish.”

—Stephen S. Wilbricht, CSC, Associate Professor of Theology,  
Stonehill College

“Anne Koester has filled a vital need in the literature on the initiation of children of catechumenal age. She rightly insists that their formation must be catechetical, liturgical, communal, and apostolic; that we must take their conversion seriously; and that we focus on their experience of engaging the faith in action. All ministers of initiation will be well served in this straightforward review of the RCIA process for this age group.”

—Catherine Vincie, RSHM, PhD

“A must-read for those involved in implementing the catechumenate adapted for children and youth. Attention to critical pastoral questions inspires a return to the ritual text for Christian initiation that informs pastoral decisions about authentic adaptation that leads to discipleship. It will be required reading in my course on the catechumenate for pastoral ministers.”

—Diana Dudoit Raiche, University of Dallas

“Among Catholics, the presence of unbaptized children and youth used to be a rarity. Now any parish may encounter a member of this group any day. Not every parish is ready. Anne Koester’s book shares her experience ministering to young inquirers and their families. It teems with accurate knowledge of the RCIA, a vision of intergenerational parish life, a catechist’s ability to inform and inspire, and an uncanny sense of what your next question will be. Even if you are familiar with the RCIA adapted for children, this book will guide you to fuller ministry.”

—Father Paul Turner, Pastor

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Kansas City, Missouri

Author of *When Other Christians Become Catholic*

“This book offers solid insights into the process of Christian initiation for adults and children, accompanied by a wealth of practical questions and suggestions to help parish RCIA teams guide children and teens on the path to conversion and faith. Anyone working with young people seeking to join the Catholic Church and celebrate the sacraments of initiation will find this book quite helpful.”

—Fr. Lawrence E. Mick, author *RCIA: How Are We Doing?*,

is a priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati

# Children and Youth in the Catechumenate

Forming Young Disciples for Mission

*Anne Y. Koester*



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# PART ONE

## Chapter 1

### Critical Questions

I can still remember the weekend in the fall of 1988 when I was recruited to make a post-Communion announcement during Mass about the newly mandated *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA). Although I was new on the catechumenate team, the RCIA process had been in place for several years at the parish; some parishioners might have wondered what the big deal was.

At the same time, however, I distinctly remember noting that the catechumenate was also available to children “of catechetical age, around age seven.” I announced it as though it were something new, not realizing that the 1972 *Ordo* included a section on the initiation of children of catechetical age who were not baptized. I recall that the conversations among parish staff about the implementation strategy for the catechumenate adapted for children<sup>1</sup> quickly gained momentum. Although the parish liturgy director

1. The formal title for part II, chapter 1 of the RCIA is “Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age.” It is commonly known as the “RCIA adapted for children.”

had oversight responsibilities for the RCIA—as a liturgical order of the church—responsibilities for the RCIA process adapted for children fell to the director of religious education.

At the time, the parish had to feel its way with what to do about the faith formation of the children seeking baptism, as well as those who were already baptized and seeking full communion with the Catholic Church. Would their formation be with the children in the religious education program? Would we include the “RCIA children” in the rituals celebrated with the adults? Admittedly, it involved some trial and error, as it no doubt did for many parishes. As I think about the children who participated in the process in the 1980s, it is sobering to realize that they would be in their forties now. I pray that they are committed and active Christian disciples who are engaged in the life of the church and its mission.

A generation later, where are we with the catechumenate adapted for children? While much has been learned in the decades since parishes began to implement the RCIA process adapted for children, we need to continue to probe the depths of the rite, reflect on its vision, educate and involve our parish communities, and imagine anew effective ways of forming children and youth as Christian disciples. The continuous nature of this work respects the fact that conversion is a dynamic and unpredictable process and that we live in an ever-changing world that presents both challenges and opportunities for people of faith from all generations.

I suggest that we keep before us what I see as several enduring and critical questions about our implementation of the catechumenate adapted for children:

- First, what does *Christian conversion* look like for children and youth? The catechumenate, after all, is a conversion process, which may strike us as a very adult experience. And yet, the RCIA process adapted for children is likewise at its core a conversion process. How do we speak about conversion for children and youth, and how do we help them name experiences of conversion? Further, how do we impress upon them that in the Catholic imagination conversion is a way of life?

- Conversion assumes active discernment, a prayerful sorting out of the movements of the Spirit. What does discernment mean for a child or teen, and how do we support them in their discernment about initiation into the Christian way of life?
- How best do we help children and youth pray and foster a desire to be people of prayer as they grow? In what ways can we help them imagine their lives as prayer?
- Catholics see liturgy as the source and summit of church life. How do we instill in children and youth a love for the church's liturgy and an awareness of the liturgy of life? How might our celebrations of the catechumenate rituals and sacraments of initiation form lifelong active participants in the church's liturgy and in the liturgy of life?
- The community is central to Catholic identity. How do we impress upon children and youth the value of the community and encourage their ongoing engagement with parish life? Can we assist them with identifying their gifts and ways in which these gifts can be placed at the service of the parish community right now, regardless of their age? Early involvement in the parish community and its outreach to the local community and beyond might just mean future involvement as adults, not to mention, leaders.
- How do we prepare children and youth to live the Christian life in the Catholic tradition? What do we ourselves understand about what this means, and how do we lead children and youth to grasp the contours of the Catholic Christian life?
- As baptized persons, we are constantly *becoming* Christian disciples. Discipleship is something we never fully master; however, if we are truly committed to living out of our baptism, we are experienced enough to take on apprentices. The RCIA process is teeming with apprentices—adults at various stages in life and, yes, children and youth. In fact, it's what they sign up for—to begin and gradually embrace the process of becoming Christian disciples. Look at the very clear and

compelling description of the catechumenate in the Catholic Church's Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*): "The catechumenate . . . is not merely an exposition of dogmatic truths and norms of morality, but a period of formation in the entire christian life, an apprenticeship of suitable duration, during which the disciples will be joined to Christ their teacher" (14). Do we see the children and youth we work with as apprentices in the Christian life? How do we go about preparing them for the work of discipleship? What does this overall conviction mean for our approach to faith formation and catechesis? How do we root faith formation and catechesis in liturgy and in mission?

- What is the purpose of the rituals that punctuate the conversion process? Are these rituals celebrated with full and meaningful symbols and with the presence of the community? Do the rituals serve to deepen and express the experience of conversion and at the same time form the young disciples-in-training to further the church's mission in the world? In other words, are the rituals understood as an essential source of learning and formation in the school of discipleship?
- We will find a significant cast of participants in the catechumenate adapted for children. There are parents, guardians and extended families, godparents or sponsors, peer companions and the parish community. What are the roles of these various groups of people in the apprenticeship for the children and youth seeking Christian initiation?

*Whew!* That's a lot of questions! How do we get to what the rite envisions? First, we must keep in mind that this is God's work. We are along for the ride, trying to give the process of conversion and the making of disciples a little structure, and supporting the young apprentices on their journey of faith.

Second, we need a framework for the process of conversion and for the apprenticeship that will characterize it. We will want to turn first to RCIA 75, which provides an approach that is:

- catechetical
- communal
- liturgical
- and apostolic

In other words, it is an approach that immerses the catechumens/apprentices in the life of the community, the liturgy of the church, and the liturgy of life. These dimensions should be approached as a whole; we cannot isolate one from the other. It's one piece. Each dimension shapes and informs the others and each is integral to the experience of ongoing conversion and faith development.

Other texts of the Catholic Church, including *Ad Gentes* and the *Directory for Catechesis*, support this four-pronged approach. We need to sit with the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* and these other texts. And then sit with them again—and again. We need to read and reread them, share and discuss them with our catechists, pastoral staff, and parish at large.

Everyone is enrolled in this school of discipleship, and everyone needs to be committed to an approach to the catechumenate adapted for children that is grounded in the church's liturgy and apostolic mission. Our desire should be to contribute to the formation of these young apprentices' identity as the Body of Christ, the church—an identity that will order all aspects of their lives. We are forming them for mission, to live as "other Christs"<sup>2</sup> in the world.

In this volume, we will explore the RCIA process adapted for children, including: its history, albeit briefly; who the young apprentices are that the rite envisions and who, in fact, they are in our parishes; the roles of parents, guardians, families, godparents and sponsors, and the community, including the peers of the children and youth; how we might speak about conversion and coming

2. I am borrowing this phrase from Virgil Michel, OSB, pioneer of the modern liturgical movement in the United States, in his "Liturgy and the Catholic Life," unpublished MS, 78 and 136.

to faith; and a holistic approach to the process that is “aimed at training them in the Christian life” (RCIA 75).

My primary focus will be on children and youth who are seeking initiation into the Body of Christ. As we know from experience, these are not the only young apprentices who participate in the RCIA process adapted for children. There are also those who were baptized in the Catholic Church but who have received little or no formal faith formation and who have not participated in sacramental rituals beyond baptism. In addition, there are children and youth who were baptized in another ecclesial community and who are seeking to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church. While not the focus of this book, these groups of young apprentices will be discussed at times, because of the overlap—and sometimes confusion—with the apprentices in the catechumenate.