

Understanding the RCIA Process with Children and Youth

by Gael Gensler, OSF

What is the RCIA Process?

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, is the normative process for initiating adults in the Roman Catholic Church. The *Code of Canon Law* states: “*What is prescribed in the canons on the baptism of an adult is applicable to all who are no longer infants but have attained the use of reason.*” Thus we find in the ritual text for the RCIA, Part II, Chapter One: “Christian Initiation of Children who have reached Catechetical Age.”

So what does this mean?

First and foremost, it means that children who have reached catechetical age are no longer baptized using the *Rite of Infant Baptism*. Such children are to be treated as adults using the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as it has been adapted for them (see RCIA 252 – 330).

Children of catechetical age are described in RCIA 252 as those children who are “capable of receiving and nurturing a personal faith and of recognizing an obligation in conscience”. Thus they are able to develop and grow in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (faith) and to know right from wrong.

Second, such children are to celebrate all of the rites belonging to the initiation process for adults: Rite of Acceptance, Election, three Scrutinies, Minor Blessings, Exorcisms, Anointing with the Oil of Catechumens, Rite of Sending, Presentation of the Creed and the Our Father, and the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist (all three) at the Easter Vigil (see RCIA 253, 256, 258, 304 and National Statutes 18 and 19).

Therefore these children, who are of the age of reason, are treated differently than children who were baptized as infants and - at the age of 5 or 6 - enter Catholic school or the parish religious education programs. The RCIA adapted for Children of Catechetical Age presents a way to walk with these children (and their parents) that is aimed at training them in the Christian way of life (see RCIA 75). It may be a process for two or more years that prepares them for their full initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) at the Easter Vigil. After their full initiation, they continue their mystagogical process by joining their peers at the appropriate grade or age level.

Anyone directing the RCIA process adapted for children of catechetical age needs to have a working knowledge of the adult rite (see RCIA 1 – 251).

What are some challenges to working with the RCIA adapted for children of catechetical age?

1. Parish ministers, catechists, and parents need to recognize that there are two pastoral practices for initiation in the parish.

Practice A:

- Baptism for infants
- First Eucharist around age 7
- Confirmation after Eucharist

Practice B:

- Full initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, in that order, for children at or above the age of reason.

Young Apprentices

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According to the RCIA ritual text and the National Statutes, a pastor must confirm the children of catechetical age before Eucharist (see National Statutes 11 and 13, and *Code of Canon Law* §866, 883, 884, 885)

2. The RCIA adapted for children of catechetical age envisions a process integrated with the adult rite. The various rites might be celebrated with the adults who are also preparing for full initiation. The rite presumes that the parents and the whole community are involved in the process for the children.
3. In many parishes there are adults who were baptized Catholic and are preparing to complete their initiation with Confirmation and Eucharist and/or adults who were baptized in a separate ecclesial community and are now preparing to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church.

So, too, there are children who were baptized as infants and are now of catechetical age and their parents are asking for First Eucharist for them and/or children who were baptized in a separate ecclesial community and they are now asking to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church.

These children, according to the *Code of Canon Law* §252, are to be treated as adults, that is, prepared using Part II, Chapters 4 & 5 of the RCIA, but adapted for their age. These children should not be placed in a “catch-up” group or in the grade level with their peers. They are to be initiated following the process, rites, and national statutes found the RCIA ritual text.

4. The parents of children of catechetical age might be in need of some formation to understand the process through which their children will be initiated. The parents might also desire to understand the proper sequence of the initiation Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.
5. The children will also have parish sponsors who will accompany them (the family) as they journey to the Sacraments. Finding sponsors is often a challenge for the parish.

Even in the midst of these challenges, the RCIA adapted for children of catechetical age provides the framework, the support, and encouragement to walk with children, their families, and peers, as they experience conversion and come to initial faith.