

Catholic Church

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Joining The Catholic Church

Each Holy Saturday, the Catholic Church in the United States receives tens of thousands of men and women in the Church. Parishes welcome these new members through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and a ceremony bringing men and women into full communion with the Catholic Church. Listed here are some questions and answers related to these events.

What is the RCIA?

The RCIA, which stands for Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, is a process through which non-baptized men and women enter the Catholic Church. It includes several stages marked by study, prayer and rites at Mass. Participants in the RCIA are known as catechumens. They undergo a process of conversion as they study the Gospel, profess faith in Jesus and the Catholic Church, and receive the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Holy Eucharist. The RCIA process follows the ancient practice of the Church and was restored by the Second Vatican Council as the normal way adults prepare for baptism. In 1974 the Rite for Christian Initiation for Adults was formally approved for use in the United States.

What are the steps of the RCIA?

Prior to formally beginning the RCIA process, an individual comes to some knowledge of Jesus Christ, considers his or her relationship with Jesus Christ and is usually attracted in some way to the Catholic Church. This time period is known as the Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate. For some people, this process involves a long period of searching; for others, it is a shorter time. Often, some contact with people of faith and a personal faith experience leads people to inquire about membership in the Catholic Church.

After conversation with an advisor or spiritual guide, the person, known as an "inquirer," may decide to continue the process and seek acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. The inquirer stands in the midst of the parish community and states that he or she wants to continue the process and become a baptized member of the Catholic Church. The local parish assembly affirms his or her wish and the inquirer then becomes a "catechumen."

The period of the catechumenate can last for as long as several years or for a much shorter time. It depends on how the person is growing in faith, what questions and obstacles they encounter along the way, and how God leads them on this faith journey. During this time the catechumens consider what God is saying to them in the Scriptures, what changes in their life they want to make to respond to God's inspiration, and what membership in the Catholic Church involves. Catechumens have a special connection to the Church and even though they are not yet baptized, they also have certain rights in the Church.

When a catechumen and the parish team working with him or her believes the person is ready to make a faith commitment to Jesus in the Catholic Church, the next step is the request for baptism and the celebration of the Rite of Election. This rite includes the official enrollment of names of all those seeking baptism at the coming Easter Vigil. On the first Sunday of Lent, the catechumens and their sponsors and families and members of the parish gather at the cathedral church and the catechumens publicly request baptism. Their names are then recorded in a special book and they are then no longer called catechumens, but "the elect." The days of Lent are the final period of purification and enlightenment leading up to the celebration of initiation at the Easter Vigil. This Lenten season is a period of intense preparation marked by prayer, study, and spiritual direction for the elect, and special prayers for them by the parish communities.

The third formal step is the Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation, which takes place during the Easter Vigil Liturgy on Holy Saturday night when the catechumen receives the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Holy Eucharist. Now the person is a fully initiated member of the Catholic Church and will continue to live out his or her response to God as a member of this faith community.