

RCIA to OCIA: Changes to Christian initiation in Church

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the program used to help people enter the Church, was changed on Ash Wednesday, March 5, to the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults.

But the change was not in name only — several structural changes have been made to welcome candidates and catechumens onto their faith formation journey year-round, spiritually and socially.



Bishop Anthony B. Taylor shakes hands with a little girl during the Rite of Election at Christ the King Church in Little Rock March 9. More than 600 people were in attendance. (Katie Zakrzewski)

Jeff Hines, director of the Office of Faith Formation, said the change began when the Vatican began translating the Latin text of the program to more correct translations.

“The underlying Latin stayed the same, but the language over time changes, evolves,” he said. “The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops took this opportunity — ‘If we’re going to publish a new book, let’s re-look at the national statute,’” outlining the details of the process for Christian initiation of adults. The process is for catechumens, or unbaptized people, and candidates,

people who have been baptized in another Christian faith or who did not complete Catholic faith formation.

Hines said the USCCB streamlined the number of statutes — called norms — to “simplify and clarify” the process. The bishops made a clear distinction between the path of an unbaptized person seeking to join the Church and somebody who is already Christian.

The traditional RCIA classes for nine months for those who are unbaptized are no longer recommended.

“They’re trying to get us away from the old school model, which started in September and ended in May or April,” Hines said. “What they’re saying is that a person needs to stay in at least one full liturgical year.”

If they are already baptized in another Christian denomination, the initiation period will vary from weeks to months, depending on where each person is in his or her faith journey.

Deacon Tim Costello, who leads OCIA with his wife, Sandy, at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in North Little Rock (Marche), said he is excited about increased accessibility to joining the Church year-round.

“I think it’s great because we are now able to bring people into the Church throughout the year,” he said. “... I’ve had some inquirers that want to start OCIA that are baptized into the Christian faith, but they want to be in full communion with the Church. Before I would have to tell them to come back to me in August. But this has eliminated that. As long as they feel like they’re ready, and we, the pastor and the director, feel that they’re ready, we can begin to bring them into the Church.”

Costello said that he’s had several people in the OCIA process getting involved with parish organizations and groups, even leading talks. Additionally, Costello said that the OCIA changes allow directors to meet participants where they are at in their faith journey, personalizing lessons and each person’s timeline for joining the Church.

Terry Baker, OCIA director at Sacred Heart of Mary Church in Barling, said the changes have brought the Vietnamese and Anglo communities in her parish closer together.

“For us in Barling, it’s very different because we’re not isolating our OCIA people off by themselves away from the rest of the Church,” she said. “... The parishioners who have been coming every week and hearing the speakers are a lot more supportive of the process and will hopefully spread that among the other parishioners as well. We’ve had different members of the parish each week present topics ... We have a large Vietnamese population at our church, and typically, they were separated, and so we’re very blessed that they’ve been coming as well, and they participate in the beginning of each session. ... There’s more interaction between our two groups, which I think is amazing. To me, it feels warmer.”

Carrie Montemayor, adult faith formation coordinator at St. Joseph Church in Fayetteville, said the changes align more closely with the intent of the text.

“There is a great opportunity in changing the way we implement (OCIA) to align more with the intent of the text. As Jeff Hines has encouraged us to do, and (former diocesan faith formation director) Bishop (Erik) Pohlmeier before him, we must bring the Kerygma, the heart of the

Gospel, into our catechesis and into every encounter with our candidates and catechumen,” she said.

“I first heard about the upcoming change in 2022 when I became RCIA coordinator here at St. Joseph in Conway,” said Deacon David French. “From what I heard initially, I had the impression that it was just the change of a few words — like from ‘Rite’ to ‘Order’ — but once the OCIA book was released and I looked it over, I discovered that there was more to it.”

“One result of this new translation of the Church document on Christian initiation was that it provided an opportunity to rethink the name of this ministry. I know many parishes around the country are just changing from ‘RCIA’ to ‘OCIA.’ I really don’t like using abbreviations, especially when communicating with people who aren’t Catholic and aren’t familiar with Catholic jargon. I talked it over with my pastor, Father John Connell, and we decided to change it to adult Christian initiation. It’s a little harder to say out loud, but I think it communicates the mission better.”

Peggy Brandebura, OCIA coordinator for Immaculate Conception Church in Fort Smith, believes the changes are “well thought-out and an improvement.”

“Through these changes, I feel the unbaptized will have more time to become involved in the Church community and begin to feel a sense of belonging,” she said. “They will have more time to discern if this is what God is calling them to do.”

Stages of initiation

Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate: Calls for a holistic evangelization and to discern the extent of their faith journey so far.

Period of the Catechumenate: This lasts “at least the Easter Time of one year until the beginning of the Easter Time of the next year,” according to diocesan faith formation director Jeff Hines.

Catechumens — unbaptized people — learn about Church liturgy, sacred Scripture and the catechism as well as works of service and charity. If they are in irregular marriages, they are allowed to enter the catechumenate. Catechumens are called to participate in the Liturgy of the Word and to “continually purify their motivation for baptism.” They may also take advantage of the opportunities “given to Catholic parents in the parish or region concerning the enrollment for their children in Catholic schools.”

“They want us from the beginning to realize these people are part of the parish before they even receive their sacraments,” Hines said. “We’re pulling you in in a special way — the celebration of the lost sheep that has been found happens at the beginning, not at the end.”

Period of Purification and Enlightenment: Calls the Elect and those who participate in the celebration of the Easter Vigil “to keep and extend the paschal fast of Good Friday ... throughout the day of Holy Saturday” until the end of the Easter Vigil.

Period of Mystagogy: A time for periodic meetings as schedules allow for new Catholics to deepen Christian formation.

“Through all of this, a person understands that they are connected to the Church in a special

way,” Hines said. “It’s not, ‘I’m not part of the Church because I can’t receive Communion.’ That’s incorrect. It’s, ‘I’m not receiving Communion because I’m on a spiritual journey, but I’m still joined to the Church in a special way.’”