

# *Becoming A Catholic*

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Adults who are interested in exploring Catholic belief and practice are invited to participate in the **RCIA** (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults). This is a process of prayer, reflection and study spread over several months, during which the inquirer participates in Catholic life and worship. The focus of the process is Christian conversion – a change of heart in which the individual turns toward God and away from whatever is in the way of living a full Christian life.

Once one has decided to become a baptized Christian, the next question becomes, *‘Is the Catholic Church the faith tradition within which I can best live out my Christian life?’* The Christian faith is lived out in community, and so one must be part of a community of believers. There’s no such thing as a “generic Christian.” And so, Catholic belief and practice are explained, both in terms of what Catholics believe and the implications of accepting that belief. (For example, if a person accepts the teaching that all creation comes from God and all humanity is created in the image and likeness of God, then the implication of that belief is that one must reverence every life and afford every human being dignity and respect.)

The RCIA invites participants to journey through a process in which movement is marked by rites (the “R” in RCIA.), leading to reception of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. These are called the “sacraments of initiation”. Through them, a person initiates (begins) a new way of life in Christ. (There’s the “I” in RCIA).

The process begins with a period of **Inquiry**. Stories are shared, questions are asked, and the basics of Christianity are explored. The inquirer is invited to get to know the community and, hopefully, to see in that community an example of the Christian life. Each inquirer has a sponsor, a person from the parish who serves as a companion, a guide, an advocate. At the end of the inquiry period, the first Rite (there’s the R again!) takes place. In the **Rite of Welcome**, participants ask to be formally enrolled into the **Catechumenate**. (We Catholics love ancient terms, and this is another one. The word comes from a Greek term meaning *to teach by word of mouth*. Hence, it suggests instruction in the faith.)

During the Catechumenate phase, candidates for the sacraments attend Mass regularly with the community, share discussion on the Sunday scriptures and continue to learn

and reflect on Catholic belief. They participate in the parish's ministry and its social life.

On the first Sunday of lent, the Catechumenate ends, and the **Rite of Election** is celebrated. No, we don't vote on the worthiness of candidates! Election refers to choice and call. When we elect someone to office, we choose that person and call him or her to service of the community. Similarly, the Church calls the members of the Catechumenate to the Easter sacraments, affirming that God has called them to a deeper relationship which they will live out as Catholic Christians.

Lent, the forty days before Easter, is a special time in the Catholic Church. It focuses on nurturing our spirituality, our relationship with God and the community. We are called to examine our lives to see what is standing in the way of living a full Christian life. The Catholic tradition regards conversion as a lifetime process which begins at baptism and ends with death. Lent is a time for recommitting ourselves to conversion.

During the period of Lent, the candidates, now called the **Elect**, are led into a deeper prayer life and come to understand and experience the living out of the faith. A retreat, a time apart for prayer and reflection, is part of the shared experience. On the second, third and fourth Sundays of Lent, the Elect participate in rites called "**Scrutinies**". Just as the Rite of Election isn't a vote, so the Scrutinies are not a public examination of worthiness. Rather, the community prays for and with the candidates, asking that they honestly examine their lives, to determine where they are still in need of God's saving power. The already-baptized members of the community commit themselves anew to their own ongoing conversion.

Finally, at the **Easter Vigil**, the Church invites new members to enter the waters of baptism, from which they emerge as new creations, sharing the life of the Risen Christ. Confirmation empowers them in the Spirit, and they are nourished at the Table of the Lord as they take communion for the first time. Their new way of life has begun!

Post-Easter gatherings are held until Pentecost, fifty days after Easter. ("*Pente*" is a Greek root word for the number five.) The newly initiated reflect on the sacramental experience and discern their ministry in the parish community. The journey of the RCIA is now complete; the Christian journey of life is just beginning!