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A Strong Start in the Faith:

The Catholic RCIA Stages

Thinking of joining the Roman Catholic Church? The Catholic RCIA stages are a good model of basic faith development. This article provides some detailed guidance for that process.

So, you're developing your faith. Great! Is it a little **overwhelming**?

- Where to start?
- Why so many stages? of initiation?
- What should I be doing in each stage?
- How will I know when I am ready to move forward?

This article is your best starting point to answer these questions, and more. It'll provide you with some fundamentals – centered in Christ – for beginning and developing your life of faith in the Roman Catholic Church.

Everything else builds on these fundamentals!

But...

Where do you begin?

Well, you just begin from where you are **now**!

Many adults entering the Catholic Church, or those just thinking about it, follow a process known as the **RCIA** – the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. *Immaculate Conception offers informal inquiry classes on Thursday evenings at 7 pm. Formal R.C.I.A. classes are held on Sunday mornings after the 8:00 am Mass. Call the church office for more information.*

The RCIA process has several distinct stages. These Catholic RCIA stages are a **good model** of faith development itself, so this article will fit you whether or not you're actually in the RCIA process.

- **Inquiry:** the initial period before you decide to enter the Catholic Church. You're asking questions and checking it out, but aren't yet ready to commit. Immaculate Conception holds inquiry classes on Thursday evenings. Call the church office for more information.
- **Catechumenate:** those who decide to enter the Church and are being trained for a life in Christ are called *catechumens*, an ancient name from the early Church. In this stage, you are developing your faith and are being "catechized" – learning catechism, or the basic points about Catholic faith and life. Immaculate Conception holds formal classes on Sunday mornings. Call the church office for more information.
- **Purification and preparation:** The Church will help you focus and intensify your faith as you prepare you to commit your life to Christ and be received into the Church at Easter. If you're following the RCIA process, you'll go through a beautiful series of Gospel-based meditations during Lent, which is the time frame of this period.

- **Initiation** itself, the culmination of the whole process! You're received into the Church during the Easter Vigil Mass, where you'll receive the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. (If you've already been baptized, you won't be baptized again.)
- **Mystagogy:** after reception into the Church at Easter, this period lets you reflect and learn more about the mysteries of the Mass and the Sacraments that you now participate in fully. Below is a discussion of each of these Catholic RCIA stages. But first, some basics...

Laying a strong foundation

Faith will be the foundation of your life.

Make that foundation solid!

Go slowly, make sure you've developed the basics well. That will help you avoid discouragement and frustration, two big enemies of faith development.

Also be aware of the importance of orthodoxy in the information you receive. ("Orthodoxy" here means "accurate and faithful" teaching.)

Make sure that you're satisfied with your own faith development in each of the Catholic RCIA stages before moving on to the next. Don't let pressure from anyone else make you move on. Also watch out for calendar-based pressure – don't say things like, "If I don't start catechesis now, I won't be done this Easter!" That's the wrong basis for making a decision about your faith and your life!

I know, sometimes it seems like it takes a long time to work through all of the Catholic RCIA stages.

But...

Don't rush it!

RCIA stage 1: Just Looking

In the **inquiry** stage, you're just finding out about Jesus, Christianity, and the Catholic Church.

Your main task here is to explore and develop your faith enough so you can make an informed *initial* decision about entering the Catholic Church. The final decision won't come for a long time, when you actually enter the Church at Easter and receive the sacraments of initiation.

The RCIA inquiry stage page at www.beginningcatholic.com has lots of detailed guidance for you during this stage.

Even if you're past the inquirer stage, you should **still read** that section to make sure you've covered the right ground. You'll need to rely on that foundation later!

RCIA stage 2: Learning about the Faith

In the catechumenate, your faith has begun to develop. Now you need to learn and grow more.

You focus on **catechesis** in this stage: learning about the faith, how to live as a Christian, and developing your interior life.

Your job now is to come into closer contact with the Living God and learn more about the Catholic Faith.

RCIA stage 3: Getting ready for rebirth!

This period of **purification and enlightenment is the** final stage before receiving the Easter sacraments of initiation into the Church: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. (Those already baptized with a valid baptism in another Christian church aren't baptized again.)

This stage of intense reflection calls you to deeper **conversion** in preparation for your renewal at Easter. This is what the season of Lent is for, but it has a special intensity for you this year as you're entering the Church and receiving the sacraments of initiation.

The Church uses three profound and beautiful passages from the Gospel of John to focus this preparation effort.

RCIA stage 4: Reflecting on the mysteries of the Mass

This stage of **mystagogy** during Easter is for continued reflection on the sacraments you have received at Easter, especially the Eucharist.

Specific catechesis on the Mass, the Sacraments, and especially the Eucharist are the focus of this stage.

The Mass and the Eucharist are the source and summit” of the Christian life in the Catholic Church, and this period is designed to help you understand, appreciate, and live more deeply this center of Catholicism.

That's a good overview of the Catholic RCIA stages, with more than enough supplemental information to think about for a while!

Remember that the Catholic RCIA stages are a good model of basic faith development, so you can learn a lot from them even if you're not in the RCIA process.

The Essentials: Basic Catholic Prayers

These are the basic Catholic prayers. We use some of these at Mass (the Catholic liturgy). A lot of other prayers also include one or more of these.

The sign of the cross

The simplest, most basic Catholic prayer.

Catholics begin their day and many activities with the sign of the cross. It is a *sacramental*, a practice that helps us open ourselves to receiving God's grace more effectively.

While saying this prayer, bless yourself by making the sign of the cross with one hand: touch your fingers to your forehead at the word "Father", to your heart at the word 'Son,' to your left shoulder at "Holy", and right shoulder at "Spirit".

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Father

Also called The Lord's Prayer, since Jesus taught it to his disciples (see Matthew 6:9-13).

The Our Father is the foundation of Christian prayer (*Catechism*, 2759). Most people learn it before all other basic Catholic prayers.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Hail Mary

The Hail Mary is well-loved and beautiful basic Catholic prayer. It combines two lines from Scripture (Lk 1:28 and Lk 1:42) with a humble request for Mary to pray for us.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Glory Be

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also has many wonderful pages about the Our Father, which comes first before all other basic Catholic prayers.