

The Order of Christian Initiation of Adults: The Journey Continues

Donna M. Eschenauer

The Order of Christian Initiation described below is designed for adults who, upon hearing the proclamation of the mystery of Christ as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts, consciously and freely seek the living God and undertake the journey of faith and conversion.

—OCIA, 1

“I like the idea of faith as a journey,” said a fellow initiation team member during my first experience with initiation ministry in 1987. This language (gleaned from our ministry to catechumens) was new to those of us baptized as infants. Through our ministry with catechumens, we—together with the whole parish—started to see Catholic faith in a deeper way. With every period and ritual step of the process, a profound enthusiasm infused the people. Since that time, my personal love for the catechumenate has never wavered. Now, the journey continues with the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults*. As parishes prepare for this revised ritual text, we are invited to revitalize the vision of initiation as a journey and recommit to its full implementation in the parish.

WHY A REVISED EDITION

Pope John Paul II approved the third edition of *The Roman Missal* in the year 2000. With this papal authorization, a process of translation using a new instruction (*Liturgiam authenticam*) began. From this point forward, revised translations of liturgical rites would be more formal and a more exact translation of the original Latin. On the First Sunday of Advent in 2011, the Church in the United States began to experience the celebration of the Eucharist with the prayers from the third edition of *The Roman Missal*. The implementation of this new translation of the missal prompted a nationwide effort toward better liturgical catechesis.

In turn, the revised translation of *The Roman Missal* would lead to the revision of all liturgical texts. In recent years we have seen the revisions of the *Order of Confirmation* (2016), the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* (2016), the *Order of Baptism of Children* (2020), and the *Order of Penance* (2023). In 2021, the United States bishops approved a revised edition of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* before sending it to the Vatican for final approval. In April 2024, the announcement was made that the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* (OCIA) was approved by the Vatican and would be promulgated for use beginning December 1, 2024. This revision reflects the same guidelines expressed in *Liturgiam authenticam*.

For over thirty years many have been implementing the RCIA with enthusiasm. However, during the process of revision, the United States bishops recognized that although the ritual text has served the Church well, at times there have been problems in its implementation. Hopefully, the revised *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* will spark better understanding of the ritual process and spur implementation of best practices in both liturgy and catechesis.

WHAT IS THE SAME

For those who have been serving in initiation ministry, it is important to realize that the vision of the rite remains the same. Keeping in mind that the OCIA is both a ritual and a way of learning how to live the Christian life, there has always been a concerted effort to recognize that the RCIA (now OCIA) is not a catechetical program. The integration of liturgy and catechesis continues to be a hallmark of this ritual text. The OCIA aims to lead adults to conversion to Christ—that is, “not only to a suitable knowledge of dogmas and precepts, but also to an intimate knowledge of the mystery of salvation” (OCIA, 75.1).

Structurally, it is important to point out that the paragraph numbers remain the same as in the RCIA text; only some of the arrangement and titles have been changed. The text is still arranged in two parts: part I, “Christian Initiation of Adults”



Photo © John Zeh

The *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* strengthens the Church’s understanding of the Christian life as a journey of ongoing conversion.

and part II, “Rites for Particular Circumstances.” Appendix I, “Combined Rites,” and appendix II, “Acclamations, Hymns, and Chants,” remain.

WHAT IS NEW

The best place to see what is new is with the index, previously titled “Contents.” Here you will see the following: a foreword to the revised edition; various decrees; “*Christian Initiation: General Introduction*”; the *National Statutes for the Christian Initiation of Adults* (which have been moved to the front of the text); “The Order of Christian Initiation of Adults, Introduction” (OCIA, 1–35). Then, “Part I—Christian Initiation of Adults,” under which you will see that chapter I is an addition. Chapter I includes: “Order of the Catechumenate Arranged in Steps”; “Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate” (OCIA, 36–40); “1. First Step: Rite for Entrance into the Catechumenate” (OCIA, 41–74); “Period of the Catechumenate” (OCIA, 75–80); followed by “Celebrations of the Word of God,” “Minor Exorcisms,” “Blessings of the Catechumens,” “Anointing of the Catechumens,” “Optional Rites during the Period of the Catechumenate,” and the “Rite of Sending the Catechumens for Election” (OCIA, 81–117); “2. Second Step: Rite of Election or Enrollment of Names” (OCIA, 118–137); “Period of Purification and Enlightenment” (OCIA, 138–205), which includes “First Scrutiny,” “Handing On of the Creed,” “Second Scrutiny,” “Third Scrutiny,” “Handing On of the Lord’s Prayer,” and “Rites of Immediate Preparation”; “3. Third Step: Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation” (OCIA, 206–243); “Period of Mystagogy” (OCIA, 244–251). Notice in the index that numbers have been added before each ritual step.

The index continues with “Part II—Rites for Particular Circumstances.” This is the same as in the RCIA contents. What we see changed here is the arrangement of the chapters. In the RCIA the sections were arranged chapters 1 through 5. In the OCIA, part II, the chapters are arranged II through VI. For example, chapter II, “Order of Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age”; “1. First Step: Rite for Entrance into the Catechumenate”; “Rite of Election or Enrollment of Names”; “2. Second Step: Scrutinies or Penitential Rites”; “3. Third Step: Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation,” “Period of Mystagogy.” Chapter III, “Simpler Order of Adult Initiation” (OCIA, 331–369) replaces RCIA 2, “Christian Initiation of Adults in Exceptional Circumstances”; chapter IV, “Shorter Order of Adult Initiation to Be Used in Near Danger of Death or at the Point of Death” (OCIA, 370–399) replaces RCIA 3, “Christian Initiation of a Person in Danger of Death” (RCIA, 370–399). Chapter V, “Preparing Adults for Confirmation and the Eucharist Who Were Baptized as Infants and Did Not

Receive Catechesis” (OCIA, 400–472) replaces RCIA 4, “Preparation of Uncatechized Adults for Confirmation and Eucharist” (RCIA, 400–472). Chapter VI, “Order of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church of Those Already Validly Baptized” (OCIA, 473–504) replaces RCIA 5, “Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church” (RCIA 473–504).

After the general introduction, we find the *National Statutes for the Christian Initiation of Adults*. In the RCIA the statutes were included as appendix III, consisting of thirty-seven paragraphs. The OCIA places them prominently in the front of the text, 18 “norms” that are more concise and less repetitious.

In part I, “First Step: Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens” (RCIA, 41–74) is now “1. First Step: Rite for Entrance into the Catechumenate” (OCIA, 41–74). Additionally, under “Period of Purification and Enlightenment,” what the RCIA called the “Presentation of the Creed” and “Presentation of the Lord’s Prayer” is now called “Handing On the Creed” and “Handing On the Lord’s Prayer.” This is a meaningful change because the presentations are actually our handing on, or “traditioning,” of the ancient treasures of Catholic faith. In part II we see similar revisions. These changes in the titles give greater clarity to their meaning.

Especially noteworthy is the OCIA’s more precise use of language for the various participants. The text refrains from using the term *candidate* in a broad sense and only uses it for those who are already baptized. In addition, the text is much more intentional about referring to *inquirer*, *catechumen*, *elect*, and *neophyte*.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CATECHESIS

The promulgation of the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* will be an opportunity to continue and even enhance our support for the full implementation of the vision contained in these rites. To accomplish this, many dioceses will offer ongoing formation for initiation ministers. Intentional efforts to understand and implement the vision of the OCIA will enrich catechesis in the wider Church. As the *Directory for Catechesis* (2020) reminds us:

Precisely because of its missionary character, the catechumenate can also inspire the catechesis directed toward those who, although they have already received the gift of baptismal grace, do not actually taste its richness: in this sense, one speaks of catechesis inspired by the catechumenate model or a post-baptismal catechumenate or a catechesis of initiation into the Christian life.¹



The newly approved *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* may be used beginning December 1, 2024.

In his apostolic letter *Desiderio desideravi*, Pope Francis encourages the ongoing liturgical formation of all the people of God. Consequently, the promulgation of the OCIA provides a tremendous occasion to enhance liturgical catechesis and embrace the transformative power of liturgy and its innate ability to catechize. Regarding appropriate catechesis, paragraph 75.3 of the OCIA is clear:

They are assisted on their journey by Mother Church with suitable liturgical rites and by them they are now gradually cleansed and sustained with divine blessing. It is appropriate to promote Celebrations of the Word for them to attend, and indeed they themselves can already come to the Liturgy of the Word with the faithful to prepare themselves better for their future participation in the Eucharist.

In this passage, we are reminded to see the liturgy as a rich source of catechesis and as a place of true encounter with Christ. As Pope Francis writes, “The Liturgy guarantees for us the possibility of such an encounter.”²

The initiation team must be eager to embrace the revised rite, and it will be the coordinator’s role to help form them. Since the initiation team represents the parish community³ they have a particular obligation in this regard. As the team is formed to understand and appreciate the rite, they will be able to further support the wider parish’s ministry with those seeking Christian initiation.

As we prepare to use the revised ritual text it may be advantageous to refrain from using the acronym OCIA. Rather, make a transition to use, for example, *initiation ministry*, or *the catechumenate*. Using *OCIA* (which actually refers to the ritual text) leads to the temptation to use the phrase “OCIA Program,” which is not appropriate. The OCIA, like the RCIA, was promulgated as liturgy. The words we use give meaning to what we are doing. The *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* is a rite of the Church that engages catechesis and “is designed to tell the Christian story to those seeking Christ in and through the Roman Catholic Church.”⁴

Now is also a great time to foster understanding of the vision of catechesis contained within the rite. The rite makes it clear that we ought to avoid confining the catechumenate to a school-year model. Rather, it envisions a lengthy Catechumenate Period (*National Statutes*, norm 4) that is accommodated to the liturgical year. Additionally, the timeline of a person’s progression through the process requires discernment (for example, see OCIA, 43). It is specific to the individual and should not be rushed.

PREPARING THE PARISH FOR THE CHANGES

As previously mentioned, the OCIA echoes the RCIA in its vision. This is clearly stated in the introduction to the OCIA: “The initiation of catechumens takes place step by step in the midst of the community of the faithful, who together with the

catechumens reflecting upon the value of the Paschal Mystery and renewing their own conversion, lead them by their own example to obey the Holy Spirit more generously” (OCIA, 4). Moreover, paragraph 9 under section II, Ministries and Offices, states that the People of God, “represented by the local Church, should always realize and show that the initiation of adults is its own concern and a matter of all the baptized.” (OCIA, 9). Consider ways to strengthen the community’s awareness of the prominent role they play in the initiation rites. The community’s active participation in the catechumenate reflects a deep historical perspective. The early Christian community took their Christian lifestyle seriously. Catechumens learned about a Christian way of life by living within the community and seeing how others lived the Christian life. In the same way, inquirers, catechumens, candidates, and neophytes are formed, first and foremost, by the parish. Throughout the catechumenal journey, the parish community is never passive. The entire parish is called to offer hospitality and witness to the Gospel.

On a practical level it would be important to inform the parish about the revised edition of the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* through announcements, bulletin and media communication, and special information sessions. Use the material from this article to help your parish understand why we have a revision. Furthermore, consult your diocesan worship office for guidelines and opportunities for education.

CONCLUSION

Since 1974 the Church in the United States has been graced with the restoration of the catechumenate. Mandated for use in 1988, this ritual process has aided the Church in its own understanding of continuing conversion. It has renewed our understanding of our baptismal identity and has provided us with an appreciation for the sacraments of initiation in our own lives, a willingness to witness to our personal spiritual journey, an understanding for the art of accompaniment, and an understanding of liturgical catechesis. Most valuably, the OCIA has demonstrated that the whole People of God is in a constant state of mystagogy. And so—the journey continues! ♦

Notes

1. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), 61.
2. Pope Francis, *Desiderio desideravi*, 11.
3. See Donna M. Eschenauer, *Recruiting and Forming Your Parish Initiation Team* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2021), 45.
4. Eschenauer, *Recruiting and Forming Your Parish Initiation Team*, vii.

DONNA M. ESCHENAUER, PHD, has served in pastoral ministry for more than twenty-two years in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York. She is the assistant dean and associate professor of pastoral theology at St. Joseph’s Seminary and College in New York.