

## FROM THE OFFICE OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION

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I believe these articles posted on the TeamRCIA website by Rita Burns-Senseman and Nick Wagner can give you a deeper appreciation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Part II: Special Circumstances for Children of Catechetical Age*. Hopefully the readings can help everyone to understand more fully what the Catholic Church is asking and directing us to do regarding our younger members of the Catholic Family.

Jeanne Thompson, Coordinator of Christian Initiation,

### ARTICLE 1: The key to adapting the RCIA for children (Nick Wagner)

The key to **catechizing** children in the RCIA is this: The process of initiation [of child catechumens] thus must be *adapted* both to their spiritual progress...and to the catechetical instruction they receive. (RCIA 253, emphasis added)

We can't stress enough that **the spiritual progress and instruction required for each child is unique**. We must constantly be **adapting the initiation process** for each child. So how do we know what to adapt?

#### The goal of adapting the RCIA for children

To know what to adapt, we need to be diligent in asking the right question. Often, we get stuck on the wrong question: What do they need to know? **The right question is: Who do they need to know?** I don't know about you, but I get stuck on the wrong question because it is the question that helped me grow in my faith.

By the time I could read and write, I was learning *what* I needed to know to be a better Catholic. I already knew *who* I needed to know. I was raised in a faithful Catholic home. By the time I started school, I knew how to make the Sign of the Cross, say the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, and had a basic understanding of the Trinity. I started school *catechized*. I didn't need to be introduced to Christ. I needed an ongoing catechesis for my continuing conversion.

#### RCIA catechesis is initiatory catechesis

**Ongoing catechesis is way different than initiatory catechesis** (see *National Directory of Catechesis*, 57-59). Initiatory catechesis is a comprehensive and systematic formation in the faith [that]...includes more than instruction: it is an apprenticeship of the entire Christian life, it is a "complete Christian initiation," which promotes an authentic following of Christ, focused on his Person; it implies education in knowledge of the faith and in the life of faith, in such a manner that the entire person, at his deepest levels, feels enriched by the word of God. (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 67)

So the adaptations we are striving for in initiatory catechesis are those that are focused on the Person of Christ and following that Person. It is a catechesis that provides a basic and essential

formation, centered on what constitutes the nucleus of Christian experience, the most fundamental certainties of the faith. (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 67)

**The purpose of this initiatory catechesis is to lay a foundation** that will enable the child catechumens to later engage fully in Christian life—which includes a more comprehensive, complex, ongoing, lifelong catechesis. By focusing on the wrong question—what they need to know—we run the risk of not attending fully enough to the most important question—who they need to know. **The key to adapting the RCIA for children is this: first *who*, then *what*.**

## ARTICLE 2: Initiating and receiving children of various ages



**I have approximately ten children of various ages that have either been baptized only or have not been baptized. What is your recommendation on the process for initiating them and receiving them into full communion? Right now I put them in the appropriate grade and then work with them. How often should we meet and for how long?**



The children who are not baptized and are older than age seven would definitely be fully initiated according to the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (see nos. 252, 253, 304, 305, National Statute 18). Their formation should also following the general pattern of the catechumenate, which means they should participate in the RCIA as adapted for children.

The children who have been baptized may or may not participate in the RCIA, depending upon their previous religious formation. Take time to discern whether or not these children really need a complete catechumenal process. If they “did not receive further catechetical formation” after baptism, then according to no. 400 of the RCIA, they should participate in the RCIA. If however, they were baptized (especially if they were baptized Catholic), but just missed religious education along the way, they may do well to be put in your religious education program. Then, you can just work with them to prepare them for the sacraments they need.

However, if all or most of these ten children need some form of catechumenal formation, I suggest you follow no. 255 of the RCIA and “form a group of children who are in the same situation.” A children’s catechumenate group such as this must distinguish that some of the children are baptized. In addition to forming a children’s catechumenate group, you may find that some of the children want or need to be with their peers in the regular religious education program.

One more point to consider is the diversity in ages of the children. It sounds like you may have a wide variety of ages in your catechumenate group. A family-centered approach to children’s catechumenate is a great approach to initiation ministry and it helps to diminish the difference in ages among the catechumens. Also, the RCIA tell us that the children’s initiation “depends” on their parents (nos. 252, 254). Thus, when you do family-centered catechumenal ministry, you are following the guidelines of the RCIA and addressing the issue of age diversity among the candidates.

## Summary

Although you will need to discern what is best for the children in each particular circumstance, here is a brief summary of what I'd recommend:

1. Discern what type of formation each child needs.
2. Form a children's catechumenate group for those who need full initiation and a full catechumenal process. These children and their families would participate in the various periods of the RCIA: pre-catechumenate, catechumenate (including dismissal from Sunday liturgy), purification and enlightenment, and mystagogy.
3. Do family-centered initiation ministry.
4. The children may or may not attend your regular religious education program, depending upon their catechetical needs.
5. The unbaptized children would be fully initiated at the Easter Vigil, though it may not be the Easter Vigil this year! It may take a longer period of time. The baptized children would probably receive the sacraments at a time other than the Easter Vigil, although that depends on the pastoral situation and their family circumstances.

For more guidance on this topic, read Chapter 1 in Part II of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*.

## ARTICLE THREE: Six skills every children's RCIA catechist must have

A catechist named "Joan" is Rita's model throughout the article.

I remember watching Joan talk with a group of middle schoolers who were just beginning the RCIA process. All the kids seemed to be smiling and engaged. Afterwards, I said to her, "You are a master!" She very casually replied, "Nah. I just love kids and I love Jesus." This simple encounter got me thinking about what it takes to be a good children's RCIA catechist.

### A children's RCIA catechist must:

#### Have the skill to work with kids:

Joan truly enjoyed being with those kids. And, in turn you could tell the kids enjoyed being with her. It used to make me really mad when an RCIA minister would say, "I don't do kids," as if they were "above" working with children. But, let's be honest; not everyone is good with kids. Sometimes in our desperation for help in the RCIA, we settle for a person who has knowledge and a deep relationship with Jesus, but little aptitude for working with children.

A children's RCIA catechist with a love for children mirrors the love of Jesus and has the skill to relate to children at their level. Children sense Jesus' love in someone like Joan. They respond more readily to Jesus' invitation to discipleship. Children in the RCIA are usually new to Church, so it's important for them to feel comfortable and at home in RCIA. A catechist with good "kid skills" helps them feel at home.

## **Be a good listener:**

A good children's RCIA catechist needs to be able to really listen to the needs of the children and their families. Children in RCIA, like all children, come to the Church with a story. Often their families have been away from Church or they are new to Church, so the catechist needs to listen to the family's story and adapt the process accordingly. One of the first steps in the RCIA process is for the catechist or coordinator to meet with the child and family and hear their story. A good catechist listens to the questions, concerns, and issues of the children and their parents and addresses them along the way.

## **Know how to teach prayer:**

Mostly, you teach prayer by praying with the children in the RCIA. Modeling is the best teacher. But, I noticed Joan didn't just pray with the kids, she taught them how to pray. She'd say something like, "Now we are going to open our hearts to Jesus by being quiet and inviting him to into our hearts." She'd give little clues and tips on how to pray. She also taught them how to pray with a Scripture passage, how to enter into mediation, and of course, how to reverently pray our traditional Catholic prayers. She would also send suggestions home so children and parents could pray together at home.

## **Be a good story-teller:**

Many catechists are good story-tellers. Telling stories from the Scriptures is an especially important part of being a good catechist. But, story-telling is particularly important for children's RCIA catechists. Often children in the RCIA have not heard many of our Christian stories.

Many children need evangelization and many of the parents need re-evangelization. Not only do RCIA catechists tell Scripture stories, but they are able to tell stories from our tradition. They can tell the stories of the parish, stories of saints and sinners, and stories of "growing up Catholic," or of being a new Catholic. Joan has a great story about being in eighth grade and crowning Mary, "Queen of Heaven and Earth." And, then she goes on to explain why Catholics describe Mary as "Queen of Heaven and Earth." Joan's humor and story-telling ability bring life and meaning to the Church's teaching on Mary.

## **Have liturgical catechesis skills:**

You don't have to be a liturgist but must love the rites of the RCIA. A children's RCIA catechist must have a sense of how the rites fit within and "drive" the initiation process. The rites are foundational to the process of initiation. A catechist needs to have a sense of how each period of initiation leads to and culminates in a liturgical rite. In most instances the catechist will have a role in preparing the children for the liturgical rites; the Rite of Acceptance, the Rite of Election, the Scrutinies and Presentations, and the Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil.

This understanding of the liturgies of the RCIA is a "skill" that must be taught. With help from the RCIA team and the RCIA coordinator, Joan learned how the signs and symbols of each ritual helped lead children to the celebration. She also learned how to "unpack" the meaning of the ritual after the celebration. By studying the Rite and by learning from the RCIA team, Joan developed her love and skill for the liturgy.

## RCIA Directors active with Children should also:

**Include “Active Creativity.”** The sacraments are visible signs of invisible spiritual realities. Our whole faith, the liturgy, the actions, the words, etc., are a means to enter into relationship with God.

A teaching creative activity example would be such as using magnets to demonstrate sin (when we turn away from God we “push away” from Him, when we repent and turn back, we reconnect). It is challenging but these activities stimulate conversation, help the kids go deeper, and often they have a “take home.”

Children are also wired for music. They love to sing stories together and add percussion instruments and movement.

**Have skills for service:** Before she was ever a children’s RCIA catechist, Joan was a disciple of Jesus Christ. She got the RCIA kids and their families involved in serving the Thanksgiving dinner that her own family did as an annual activity. She was a volunteer for the Good Cheer Club (an organization that helps the blind). The children and families in the RCIA learned “how to work actively with others to spread the Gospel” (RCIA, no. 75.4) by witnessing Joan’s life of service.

**Article 1 by Nick Wagner and Articles 2 and 3 by Rita Burns-Senseman, were recently posted on the TeamRCIA website. Originally developed as an on-line resource for RCIA Directors and Coordinators by Nick, and cofounder Diana Macalintal, TeamRCIA is a free resource site with a monthly Newsletter and additional low-cost webinars and a multitude of Catechumenate training topics.**

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**Nick Wagner** With more than 35 years of experience in ministry and in Catholic publishing, Nick uses his gift for translating theological principles into simple and clear language to inspire joy, commitment, and passion for faith in parish teams. Nick holds a master’s degree from Saint John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota, and is the author of many publications including *Seek the Living God: Five RCIA Inquiry Questions for Making Disciples*; the award-winning book *The Way of Faith*(2008); *A Field Guide for the RCIA Process*; and *Field Hospital Catechesis The Core Content for RCIA Formation* (2018).