



Sorting Fish: A Task at the Beginning

Ronald A. Oakham

(Editor's note: This article first appeared in the May 1989 issue of Catechumenate: A Journal of Christian Initiation.)

In recent months some comments and written materials have come to my attention that have led me to believe that some clarifications are needed about the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* (OCIA).

I hear about parishes forcing everyone seeking welcome in the Roman Catholic Church—unbaptized adults, baptized uncatechized adults, baptized catechized adults, returning Catholics, and the catechetical-age children of any of these—to go through all the rites and periods of the order. At the other end of the spectrum, one archbishop, in a communiqué to priests, indicated that “pastors may have to make a pastoral judgment in individual cases whether everyone coming into the church has to be part of the OCIA.” In both cases, there are misunderstandings about the wording and requirements of the OCIA.

Most people in the United States use the term OCIA to refer to the rites and periods of the entire catechumenal journey as presented in the first part of the ritual document, “Part I: Christian Initiation of Adults” (36–251). It is true that not everyone who seeks welcome into the Church must go through part I. However, that does not mean that an individual may not be a candidate for another series of rites and periods, as outlined within the same document. Conscious of particular circumstances, the Church has designed various series of rites and periods for adults and for children of catechetical age. The OCIA provides “Part II: Rites for Particular Circumstances” (252–504). They are as follows:

1. Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age (252–330)
2. Simpler Order of Adult Initiation (331–369)

3. Shorter Order of Adult Initiation to Be Used in Near Danger or at the Point of Death (370–399)
4. Preparing Adults for Confirmation and the Eucharist Who Were Baptized as Infants and Did Not Receive Catechesis (400–472)
5. Order of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church of Those Already Validly Baptized (473–504)

All of these rites detailed in parts I and II compose the Church's *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults*. According to canon law (canons 851 1° and 852 §1), anyone who is seven years old or older and has the use of reason is to be initiated into the Church through one or the other of these series of rites and periods.

With that understanding, it is correct to say that all adults and all children of catechetical age who are being welcomed into the Church must pass through one of the orders of rites and periods of the OCIA. However, it is not correct to say that pastors have the right to judge whether a person coming to the Church has to pass through the OCIA. The pastoral judgment is: Which of the various orders of rites and periods of the OCIA is appropriate in a given case?

In this article, I will look at the various paths (orders of rites and periods) that are possible for those whom the Lord leads to us. The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus' parable about the reign of heaven being "like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind" (13:47). I suggest that a parish evangelizing outreach is like a net that may collect "fish" of every kind: unbaptized adults and children of catechetical age, baptized uncatechized Christians, baptized catechized Christians, baptized Catholics needing confirmation and Eucharist, baptized Catholics needing only confirmation, fully initiated Catholics who have been alienated from the Church and seek to return, and Catholics seeking an update. Unlike Jesus' parable in which those who have hauled the net ashore put the good fish into buckets and throw away the bad fish, the parish ministers' sorting task is not so much to throw away any "fish" as it is to discern the path each will take.

To explore this, I will set up a hypothetical beginning group and look at each case in light of the pertinent documents: canon law, the OCIA, and the *National Statutes for the Christian Initiation of Adults* (NS).

During the seasons of Lent and Easter, St. Barnabas Parish made a concerted effort to reach out and welcome people who were interested in the Catholic Church. Seven people responded. By the end of May, these seven began meeting with parish sponsors and the catechumenate team. Through personal interviews, sponsors' informal meetings, and the first few group sessions, catechumenate leaders could piece together the needs and options of each respondent: the questions to be discerned.

Returning Catholics

Anna is a fully initiated Catholic who has been away from the Church for almost thirty years. She left the Church when she married. As she prepared for marriage, her pastor told her that because of her fiancé's previous marriage, she could not participate in the sacraments if she married him. She went ahead with the wedding and discontinued participating in church activities. Now she has been widowed for almost two years and she wants to return.

Since the catechumenate is intended for persons who have not been baptized or fully initiated, it is easy to see that it is not the path for Anna. If Anna passes through the rites and periods of the catechumenal process as a way to "update," it would be frustrating because neither the rites or periods apply to her. She could easily lose interest. The more appropriate path for her would be to participate in a returning Catholics experience (for example, Landings (Paulist Press) or a Re-Membering Church Community).

Unbaptized Adults

There are two unbaptized adults in the group, Ben and Charlene, both of whom are interested in becoming Catholic Christians. Ben was raised in the Middle East with no religious affiliation. Only since his move to the United States has he come into contact with Christians. It is through the influence of his neighbor that he came to St. Barnabas inquiring about Catholic Christianity.

Charlene is the wife of one of the parishioners. She has been participating in the parish because she and her husband have been raising their two children in the Catholic faith. The children are both enrolled in the parish school. Charlene's involvement with their education is her primary source of contact with the parish.

It is obvious that the catechumenal process is designed for both Ben and Charlene. The *Code of Canon Law* states:

An adult who intends to receive baptism is to be admitted to the catechumenate and, to the extent possible, be led through the several stages to sacramental initiation, in accord with the order of initiation adapted by the conference of bishops and the special norms published by it. (canon 851 1°)

Consequently, their initiation will be according to the OCIA. The *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* offers many paths for those who seek to become a member of the Catholic Church. There are three possible orders of initiation within the OCIA to consider as we discern which is the best path for Ben and Charlene: the usual form (36–251), the form for exceptional circumstances (331–369), or the form for people in danger of death (370–399). Neither is in danger of death, so that path is inappropriate for both.

Ben will probably need the complete experience, with the second period (technically called the catechumenate period) being a truly extended period of time. The *National Statutes for the Christian Initiation of Adults* offers the following guidance for determining the length of the catechumenate.

Ordinarily, a person who has entered the catechumenate is to remain in it from at least the Easter Time of one year until the beginning of the Easter Time of the next year; preferably it should begin before Lent in one year and extend until Easter the following year. (NS, norm 4)

Charlene, on the other hand, has various possibilities. Because of her involvement in the parish community and in the school community, she may already have begun a bonding process with the Church. Similarly, she may already have begun her own catechetical formation through participation in her children's sacramental formation. Consequently, it is feasible that, though she may pass through essentially the same rites and periods as Ben in the OCIA, the length of the journey may be shorter. Her circumstances are not really exceptional (see OCIA, 331), but an abbreviated catechumenal path may be understandable because of the depth of Charlene's Christian conversion and her degree of religious maturity. That possibility must be discerned carefully.

From my pastoral experience in circumstances similar to Charlene's, I am inclined to favor the position that further pastoral formation would be needed and beneficial. I would not rush into an abbreviated form.

In light of this, I would anticipate that Charlene would participate in the complete rite, although the catechumenate period will probably be shorter than twelve months. It is likely (but not promised) that she will be ready to celebrate the initiatory sacraments at the next Easter Vigil.

Baptized Christians

Debbie and Ernest are both baptized Christians. Debbie is a young professional, single, and searching for "something more" in her life. Although baptized in the Methodist church as an infant, her family was not active in any church. She has had no formal religious training. Because of some conversations with a Roman Catholic colleague, she is interested in Catholicism.



Parish staff need to spend time with people inquiring about becoming Catholic to see which path is most appropriate for them.

Ernest was baptized in the Lutheran tradition. He and his family were very active in their church. After he married a Catholic, he began attending her parish, because, as he said, he did not see a lot of differences. He and his wife raised their three children as Catholics. Through those years, Ernest approached the pastor about his reception into full communion.

Debbie is clearly uncatechized. Thus, the path outlined in OCIA 400–472 for uncatechized adults is the path for her. Although baptized, Debbie could be less catechized than Charlene. Thus, one can anticipate that Debbie’s journey into full communion will probably take more time. The parish may need to provide her with rites along the way (see OCIA, 411–472). What has applied to Debbie’s situation does not apply to Ernest. He is a baptized catechized adult. Thus the order for his reception should be such that, “no further burden is imposed than what is necessary to restore communion and unity” (OCIA, 473; see also 474–504).

Baptized Catholics

Frank is the father of two children (in second and fourth grade). Their mother died when they were very young. Frank remarried within a year of his wife’s death, but this marriage lasted only a short time. Now he is dating an active Catholic, and they are moving toward marriage. Frank has no religious upbringing but has now become interested in the Church for himself and his children. He has already spoken with a priest in the parish about his past marriages and the possible approaching one. Through the initial investigation for an annulment, Frank discovered that his grandmother had him baptized as an infant.

Gloria is in her midthirties. Her father was in the military. As a result she lived in many places throughout her childhood. She was baptized as a Catholic and received first Communion in second grade. Although she continued to participate in catechetical programs, she missed confirmation due to the family’s moving patterns and various age requirements of parishes. She regularly participated in parish life. Recently, because of a retreat she made, and the social justice ministry in which she is involved, she decided to be confirmed.

Except for the church in which they were baptized, Frank’s situation is similar to Debbie’s (baptized uncatechized adults), and Gloria’s is similar to Ernest’s (baptized catechized adults). In Frank’s case, the path to initiation will probably be an extended journey with adapted rites celebrated along the way. One particular issue is Frank’s eventual celebration of confirmation. The priest in his parish does not have the faculty to confirm a baptized Catholic. In such situations, the *Code of Canon Law* states that

“the diocesan bishop is to administer confirmation personally or is to take care that another bishop administers it. If necessity requires it, he can grant the faculty to one or more specific presbyters, who are to administer this sacrament. (canon 844 1°)

Finally, there is Gloria's case. Like Ernest, she is a catechized baptized adult. She shares in Communion as a Catholic. However, to approach her confirmation as merely a matter of clearing up some "red tape" (she missed one of the initiation sacraments) would be a disservice to her maturing in faith. Thus, I would be inclined to have her follow a path similar to Ernest's. In that way they could journey together, on a less extensive path, giving witness to the parish of adult faith commitment. If they are ready at the same time (which will likely be the case), I would celebrate the rites together. However, the same caution that was expressed in Frank's case applies in Gloria's. Specific delegation of the faculty for her will be needed from the bishop. It is not needed for Ernest, because this faculty is given by virtue of the law itself (canon 883 2°).

Conclusion

"Messy" is what OCIA ministers say about working with initiation processes that are respectful of people's different places on the many paths of faith. This hypothetical beginning group reflects the "mess" that many parishes have. However, for the sake of brevity I tidied up some of the cases. Nevertheless, I hope that this discussion provides further insight into the variations within the OCIA. Not everyone who responds to our welcome will take the same path. But for all adults and all children of catechetical age, the OCIA is the way.

REV. RONALD A. OAKHAM, OCARM, has served in parish ministry and as the diocesan director of the catechumenate for the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey. He is the author of *The Reception of Baptized Christians: Pastoral and Practical Approaches* (LTP, 2020) and *A Guide to the Period of Purification and Enlightenment* (LTP, 2024).