Christian Initiation, A Matter of Life and Death

by Jaime Bernardo Ávila-Borunda

We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For, if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection.

As much as these words may sound to the modern Christian as allegorical and even hyperbolic, these words encapsulate the essence, not only of Christian initiation but also of Christian life in general. Christian life is a constant journey marked by processes of dying and rising. As the title of this essay indicates, Christian initiation is a matter of life and death. Our lives even at the most secular level are lived constantly moving along a path of evolution with many milestones. We process along a path of yearly events to come to the birthday milestone, along the path of education to come to graduation, along the path of courtship to come to marriage, and along the path of life to come to death. We are constantly engaged in a series of processions and stations because a liturgical inclination is part of human nature. “This anthropology is deeply embodied in the actual physicality of human personhood and embedded in the social context of human relatedness,” Strawn and Yoon observe.

When we talk about education, and particularly when we address faith formation, this anthropology plays a crucial role. If one approaches formation as a simple intellectual task, it will hardly succeed. In the words of James K. A. Smith,

On this account, educational strategies that traffic only with ideas often fail actually to educate; that is, they fail to form people. ...we are, ultimately, liturgical animals because we are fundamentally desiring creatures. We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primes, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends, so we are not primarily homo rationale or homo faber or homo economicus; we are not even generically homo religiosis. We are more concretely homo liturgicus; humans are those animals that are religious animals not because we are primarily believing animals, but because we are liturgical animals—embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate.

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Precisely “not because we are liturgical animals—embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate,” these very characteristics, i.e. embodiment, practice, and love/desire for something ultimate must be at the core of our Christian formation. In the context of Christian life such formation leads us to a process of dying and rising, a process all Christians are called to embody, live and pass on to the future generations. Thus, inspired by the calling to pass on to others what has been handed on to us, this essay intends to address the liturgical flow of processions and stations, dying and rising, in the context of formation as part of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and will explore some of the implications this motion poses to pastoral ministry through an analysis of some of the models of formation currently used in the United States.

**Formation**

The liturgical path of Christian life is one of constant conversion. When we talk about processions and stations in life, often we are not talking about going through the journey without any changes. There would be no point of celebrating a birthday if there were no growth, learning, or maturing at some level. Similarly, in Christian life, there is a necessity for an ongoing growth, learning, and maturing. This process is one of constantly dying to the old self, in order to embrace a new form of being. We could say that being a Christian demands a constant commitment to metamorphosis, “a process of initiation by death, in which the past is forsaken in order to live something new,” in the language of the New Testament, “μετάνοια” (metanoia).

In the process of Christian initiation, this metanoia is vital to a good outcome, as pointed out by Santiago Cañardo Ramírez:

> El itinerario que se recorre en el bautismo de adultos es un proceso de muerte iniciática, en el que se abandona lo anterior para vivir algo nuevo: un nuevo nacimiento, por el que se acepta en la fe una vida y un sentido nuevo, dado por el descubrimiento de un Dios real, que en Cristo nos salva, nos hace salir de la muerte a la vida, y nos incorpora a la Iglesia como comunidad de redimidos, de hombres nuevos, que viven el mandamiento del amor.

In addition, he reminds us that this process is not only a didactic matter, but also an existential immersion, that is, a gradual process, as indicated by the sacred rites that accompany the process. “El rito de entrada, la elección y los escrutinios, el rito bautismal y la mistagogia posterior significan y realizan la adhesión y vinculación afectiva y efectiva a Cristo, la conversión y el cambio real del corazón y la vida, la inmersión vivencial en el misterio de Cristo y la introducción plena en la comunidad eclesial.”

**Metάνοια**

Since this “process of initiation by death, in which the past is forsaken in order to live something new” is crucial to Christian life, here I make a brief departure from the subject of formation to talk about the word metanoia,

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5 Smith, Desiring the Kingdom, 40.
6 1 Corinthians 15:3-11.
7 Santiago Cañardo Ramírez, “Nueva experiencia de evangelización: La preparación de adultos para el bautismo,” *Scripta Theologica* 44, no. 3 (December 1, 2012): 723. All translations from Spanish are mine.
8 Ibid., 723. (The journey through which one goes toward adult baptism is a process of initiation by death, in which the past is forsaken in order to live something new: a new birth by which new life and new meaning are accepted in faith, which happened by the discovery of a real God, who saves us in Christ, rouses us from death into life, and makes us members of the church as community of redeemed people, of new people, who live out the commandment of love.)
9 Ramirez, “Nueva experiencia de evangelización,” 723-724. (The rite of acceptance, the [rite of] election, and the scrutinies, the baptismal rite and subsequent mystagogy signify and make real the affective and effective bond and link to Christ, the conversion and true change of heart and life, the existential immersion in the mystery of Christ, and the fullness of insertion in the ecclesial community).
10 Ramirez, “Nueva experiencia de evangelización,” 723.
which comes from the Greek μετά (metá—beyond) + νοῦς/νόος (noús/nóos—mind, perception, understanding). In the New Testament, this word appears 56 times in its different forms. Though sometimes this term is translated as “repentance,” metanoia is much more than repentance. As James Glentworth Butler indicates, metanoia is “one of the most significant and vital words of Inspiration” in the New Testament, adding that in its true meaning metanoia has

...no trace of sorrow or regret, no single element contained in the word Repentance. Hence its translation by that word has been, from the first until now, an utter mistranslation... Literally, the word signifies Change of Mind, a change in the trend and action of the whole inner nature, intellectual, affecional and moral, of the man, a reversal of his controlling estimates and judgments, desires and affections, choices and pursuits, involving a radical revolution in his supreme life aims, purposes and objects. Trench says: “Metanoia expresses that mighty change in mind, heart and life wrought by the Spirit of God.” De Quincey: “Metanoia concealed a most profound meaning... which bore no allusion to any ideas whatever of repentance. ... It expresses a revolution of thought, a great intellectual change in the accepting a new center for all moral truth from Christ...

This Metanoia, or radical reversal of life-controlling thoughts, affections, choices and pursuits, the great theme of New Testament preaching, the high call and imperative demand of God. (Note that this demand, like all others, has behind it God’s pledge of help and assurance of success.)

Consequently, it should not come as a surprise that preaching and, more so, living a life of metanoia, is the calling of all Christians. However, as one can infer from the statistics with regard to the models of formation implemented in the United States, formation programs often relegate this important matter to a much lesser level of importance. 13

This raises important questions: is this because of a lack of awareness of its importance or because of a lack of practical approaches to form people along a path of conversion? Can conversion be taught? Perhaps we will never fully understand the reasons why many RCIA “programs” do not consider metanoia to be a fundamental element. However, it is necessary to explore ways for metanoia to have more of an active role in the formation process within the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

The Journey to Christian Initiation

From the first article of the praenotanda and through its different sections, the RCIA makes explicit three key points of which Christians should be aware with respect to the process of Christian initiation.

First, the Christian community has a key duty of keryagma (proclamation or preaching) not their own word, but the word of God. “Indeed the primordial mission of the Church is to proclaim God and to be his witness before the world. This involves making known the true face of God and his loving plan of salvation for man, as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ.” 14 As the Epistle to the Romans says, “’everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?” 15 Thus, sympathizers

11 James Glentworth Butler, Topical Analysis of the Bible: A Re-Statement of Its Moral and Spiritual Truths, Drawn Directly from the Inspired Text : Also Containing a Subject-Index to “The Bible Work” (New York: Butler Bible Work Company, 1897), 344.
12 Butler, Topical Analysis, 443-444.
(inquirers), come “after hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed.”\textsuperscript{16} Also, Acts of the Apostles (8:26-39) exemplifies this proclamation action as part of a process of coming to know Christ. In this pericope, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch reading the Hebrew Scriptures. When Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading, he answers, “How can I, unless someone instructs me? ... Then Philip opened his mouth and, beginning with this scripture passage, he proclaimed Jesus to him. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water... Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water, and he baptized him.”\textsuperscript{17}

Second, it is God, not the sympathizers, who initiates the process of the journey of initiation and the work of metanoia. The sympathizers “consciously and freely seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion [i.e. metanoia] as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts.”\textsuperscript{18} In other words, this reiterates, “metanoëiv and metánoia... became the fixed and recognize words to express that mighty change in mind, heart, and life wrought by the Spirit of God.”\textsuperscript{19} It is clear that God is in charge of starting the process. Finally, “By God’s help they will be strengthened spiritually during their preparation and at the proper time will receive the sacraments fruitfully.”\textsuperscript{20} This implies that God not only initiates the process, through the ministry of the church, and starts the process of metanoia, but God is also the one who continues the process, and eventually gives God’s grace (through the ministry of the church) to the individual being initiated.

Third, “The initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful.”\textsuperscript{21} A good analogy for this process is that of a meal. If the meal were to consist of fast food, one could go to a drive-through service in a restaurant, order burgers, and be out of there in a couple of minutes. On the other hand, a banquet, prepared from scratch with fresh ingredients and in a careful way, will require time and effort. One needs to prepare the ingredients, marinate the meats, cook the food for the proper amount of time, mix things at the right moment, and sometimes set them to rest before serving them. What makes Christian formation unique is that in the Christian banquet we always partake of the same meal: the body and blood of Christ.\textsuperscript{22} Those who are coming to the banquet are not only asking to participate in the banquet, but to become themselves the main course. Thus, it takes time to prepare. That transformation, metamorphosis, metanoia, will take time to happen, even if God is the one preparing the banquet. Several scholars emphasize the gradual process of RCIA. As Jeffrey M. Kemper indicates, “The insistence of certain scholars that the RCIA be referred to as a ‘process’ is not without merit. The term ‘process’ recognizes the necessity of certain dynamics for conversion, but also recognizes that these dynamics are not uniform in appearance, duration, or actualization.”\textsuperscript{23}

This first step in the process is an initial act of faith. Faith is what allows the sympathizers to “consciously and freely seek the living God,”\textsuperscript{24} for “Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us.”\textsuperscript{25} To live in faith implies a deep conversion, because “Faith involves a change of life, a ‘metanoia’; that is a profound transformation of mind and heart; it causes the believer to live that conversion.”\textsuperscript{26} We can say that developing faith implies metanoia, because in this initial encounter, one dies to

\textsuperscript{16} Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), no. 1. When section number of the numbering in the text approved by the USCCB for use in the dioceses of the United States of America differs from the Editio Typica, the number of the latter will be indicated in parenthesis.
\textsuperscript{17} Acts 8:31, 8;35, 8: 36, 8: 38.
\textsuperscript{18} RCIA, no. 1. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{20} RCIA, no. 1. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{21} RCIA, no. 4. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{22} John 6.
\textsuperscript{24} RCIA, no. 1.
\textsuperscript{25} Catechism of the Catholic Church (New York: Doubleday, 1995), no. 1814.
\textsuperscript{26} DGC, no. 55.
disbelief in order to become a person of faith. Yet, the process of *metanoia* continues as the Spirit opens the heart of the sympathizer, who eventually is able to show visible signs of conversion. These signs of conversion open the door to discernment about becoming a catechumen.

From the pre-catechumenate onward, the church community has a great responsibility. The initial *kerygma* has transformed as the sympathizers are being transformed. Thus, the initial *kerygma* is to evolve to a ministry of *didskaïa* (teaching), since “Catechesis is an essentially ecclesial act. The Church which, continuing the mission of Jesus the Master and, therefore, animated by the Holy Spirit, is sent to be the teacher of the faith.”

The church teaches as a mother, first by sharing the faith, which the church is living, and secondly, in an active reciprocal way. Here, the church nourishes its members with the profession of faith (*traditio*), and the catechumens enrich the church by giving back (*redditio*) the faith that was planted in them after it has germinated and grown in a personal and inculturated way. Above all, we must keep into account that, as a church, our catechesis must always be “- *éducation de la liberté plutôt qu’imposition autoritaire de la vérité ... [parce que] L’apôtre s’adresse à l’âme, c’est l’âme qu’il change, sachant que tout le reste viendra par surcroît... C’est là ce qu’ont fait les apôtres... Ils ont cherché à changer les cœurs, et une fois les cœurs changés, ils ont renouvelé le monde.”

The idea of Catechesis as a labor of the whole community is not something new. Since the patristic times, the church has worked as one body, not only when there were works of mercy to do, but also on Sunday celebrations. “Rather, the Sunday eucharist [sic] and work among the poor and others were seen as the inevitable results of living in a communion of faith shared under the judgment of God’s word and in Jesus’s Spirit.” Thus, the whole community was concerned with forming the new members. Their methodology was no other than catechesis and initiation. But catechesis had a different focus than what comes to mind when we talk about catechesis nowadays.

Catechesis was understood to be not about education but about conversion. Conversion was perceived to be not about doctrinal formulations but about faith as a way of living together in Jesus Christ become a people. Initiation was known to be a whole sacramental sequence possessing its own logic that was about membership — that is, full, active and conscious participation...In this view the final cause of catechesis is not merely instruction: it is conversion therapy for membership.

If one carries out catechesis properly, those formed by Christ for a longer time serve as a model for those who have just come to an encounter with Christ. We learn Christian faith very much in the way in which we learn any other human behavior, by a process of imitation of example. It is only in the context of being with the church, body of Christ, that the catechumens can truly become body of Christ. This is to what Jeffrey M. Kemper was referring by stating, “Through catechesis, theological reflection, and living in the midst of the Christian community—coming to know Catholic Christians, praying with them, acting with them—catechumens surrender to the will of Christ that they be drawn into and conform to his paschal mystery.”

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27 DGC no. 78.
28 DGC, no. 78.
29 Abel Pasquier, “Lavigerie et le renouveau du catéchuménat (Lavigerie and The Renewal of the Catechumenate),” *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 95, no. 1 (January 1994): 97. ([An] education out of freedom rather than [an] authoritarian imposition of the truth... [because] The Apostle speaks to the soul, it is the soul that changes, knowing that everything will come besides... This is what the apostles did... They sought to change hearts, and once the hearts [were] changed, they renewed the world. (Translation mine.)
31 Kavanagh, “Norm of Baptism,” 151.
32 Kavanagh, “Norm of Baptism,” 151.
33 Kemper, “Paschal Mystery,” 165.
Therefore, as the catechetical process continues, the community shapes catechumens to live a life of conversion, because the community is indeed living such a life. Accordingly, when the community and the candidate discern that the time is proper, that is after the first judgment, the sympathizers go through the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. The Rite of Acceptance marks the process of *metanoia* that began taking place, i.e. the conversion from being a child of the world to becoming a child of the church. This is the first main station in the process. It is the moment to choose a full engagement in the process of being truly shaped by the community. Allegorically, we can compare it to a process where parents have a foster child while the process of adoption comes to completion. Even if the child is not yet a son or daughter, the child is open to the process of formation of the family, and the family is open to form the child. Similarly, a catechumen is not yet a son or daughter of the church in full membership, but the catechumen is already part of the family, and both, the catechumen is open to the process of formation, and the community is open to form the catechumen.\(^{35}\)

This is a moment of deep growth and conversion, the greatest period of transformation. Redemption is present because catechumens accept Christ in their lives. However, Peter Fink notes:

> Redemption exercise is then not only a transformation of consciousness, the gradual overcoming of all other images by the images revealed by Christ. It is likewise, and more importantly, a transformation of affections and behavior. It takes time. It takes frequent doing (“exercise”). It takes openness and a deep vulnerability to the doing. And the transformation can be measured, guided, and observed. ‘In the liturgy human sanctification is manifested by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which is proper to each of these signs’ (CSL, 7).\(^{36}\)

Thus during the time of catechumenate the liturgies are an essential part of the process of formation. Although liturgies of the word are primary and the blessing of Catechumens normally happens in the context of those liturgies, “other rites may be celebrated to mark the passage of the catechumens from one level of catechesis to another.”\(^{37}\) In this way, the liturgies not only become part of the journey of formation, but they are also the stations or milestones that mark different stages in the process.

The liturgies are in themselves a process of formation and transformation. Peter Fink makes mention of the adage from the scholastic era, *“sacramenta significando efficiunt,* that sacraments achieve their effect by signifying.”\(^{38}\) What I would like to suggest here is that we extend this notion to the liturgical rites of the RCIA, since as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* reminds us, “Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations.”\(^{39}\) Thus, we may also apply to the liturgies of the catechumenate the remarks Fink makes with respect to sacraments:

> They place an image in our consciousness which takes its place alongside of other images, sometimes even conflicting images, of the same reality. It may be an image of who we are before God, or in ourselves, or with each other. The images which... [liturgies] introduce to our consciousness are privileged images, for they are rooted in the revelation of Jesus Christ. By our partaking of our...
[liturgies], we allow those images to be planted in our consciousness in the deep hope that they will become the only, or at least the primary, operational images for our life.... The planting is the beginning of conversion, a seeding for the transformation which God wishes to work in us.

However, this great process of transformation should by no means be limited to those preparing to be Christians. God calls us to live the Paschal mystery in our lives day after day, for there is always one more step to take in the path of conversion. The mysteries we celebrate are not only the death and resurrection of Christ as a historical event disconnected from us. “For humanity the paschal mystery is a conversion: a passing over from sin to grace, from alienation to reconciliation, from being ‘no people’ to being God’s people. With these points in mind, we can examine the relationship of the paschal mystery to the sacraments of initiation.” Therefore, in the great vigil, when the catechumens come to be submerged in the waters of the death of Christ, we renew too our own dying and rising. Consequently, together we can say, “We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.”

Perhaps at this point the question is “and then what?” The answer is very simple: Now the catechumens become neophytes, and go through further catechesis (mystagogy), according to the RCIA, for the 50 days of Easter. After a person finishes initial mystagogy, the person is not a neophyte anymore. From that point on, typically one understands the person to be a fully developed Christian. However, I want to propose a different perspective: After initial mystagogy, as a neophyte, the person becomes a Christian initiate. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an initiate as “A person who has been initiated... Hence, A beginner, a novice.” Therefore, as initiates, Christians have the challenge of engaging in a constant path of conversion, i.e. metanoia. The new Christian and hopefully all Christians are moving along this path of conversion, all as beginners and newcomers, as initiates. When does one become a full-fledged Christian? That is simple; it happens when the formation is completed. The culmination happens when the heart and mind of that person have gone through so much change, that their hearts and minds are identical to the heart and mind of Christ. Undeniably, that is the goal of every true Christian: to think as free and without judgment as Christ thinks, to learn to love as limitlessly as Christ loves. However, for that to happen, one must go through an intense metanoia that might last more years than those for which one can account.

Now that we have ascertained the central role of metanoia in the process of formation for Christian initiation and its relationship to the liturgical celebrations, we can turn to look at the process as a whole. Though parish communities may take different approaches, it is important to keep in mind that, regardless of the model that one uses to implement the process of formation, metanoia must be at its core.

Models and Approaches

As an introduction to considering different models of the RCIA process, let us look at the important remarks Cañardo Ramírez makes with respect to the RCIA process, which speak to the significance of three elements highlighted in nearly every model: tradition, progressiveness of the process, and liturgies.

• “Sigue la estructura del catecumenado de los primeros siglos (It follows the structure of the cathecumenate of the first centuries).”

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41 Kemper, “Paschal Mystery,” 164.
42 Romans 6:4.
• “Propon[е] para los adultos que desean recibir el bautismo un itinerario progresivo (It intends, for adults who wish to receive baptism, a progressive journey).”

• “Los ritos que les acompañan, procedentes también de la iglesia primitiva, los sostienen interiormente en su camino hacia el bautismo, mediante la gracia de Dios que reciben en estas celebraciones (The rites that accompany them, also originating from the early church, innerly support them in their route toward baptism, through the grace of God which they receive in these celebrations)”.

Models Based on Qualitative Characteristics

As we look at the models of RCIA formation, we can differentiate between two different approaches. One of these is an approach that seeks certain qualitative characteristics in the process. James Dunning describes one of these models of RCIA formation. In his perspective, the four periods in the RCIA provide a proper space not only for those in formation for initiation but also for all members of the community. In his approach, he interprets the four periods as a set of alternating movements, going inward toward introspection and meditation, and outward toward the community:

The process begins with autobiography, sharing our personal pilgrimage... This leads to... a search for the meaning and significance of our lives. Second, that prompts reflection upon the biographies and faith of the Christian community to discern whether or not the Good News of Jesus' story and the journeys of his followers bring depth and help people interpret their own pilgrimage. Third, each person asks the question, “Is the Good News truly Good News for me?” This is the moment of personal faith and turning to the Lord... Fourth, if I discern God's presence in my journey... that leads to Eucharist... and also to sharing the Good News with others by Christian witness and ministry.

James Dunning suggests that, from these four stages of RCIA, we take seven imperatives, which will foster an environment in which “all Christians may enter more deeply into the life of the Lord and ‘build a new life.’”

1. Let there be storytelling.— The dynamic of telling and listening allows for the building of relationships, both among individuals and between individuals and the church. (Autobiography/sharing of personal pilgrimage plays a special role in this imperative.)

2. Let there be questioning.—Questions are primordial in engaging processes of inquiry, discernment, and search for meaning.

3. Let there be communities of faith.—Means of support, formation, and encouragement at many levels.

4. Let there be tradition.—To ground us and give stability to the journey.

5. Let there be conversion.—Which, as addressed above, is primordial to Christian life.

6. Let there be celebration.—To discover and rejoice in the gifts received from God.

7. Let there be ministries.—To strengthen the bonds of charity and service among the members of the community and share the received from God.

46 Ramírez, “Nueva experiencia de evangelización,” 143. Emphasis mine, added to highlight the inner and outer movements.
47 Ramírez, “Nueva experiencia de evangelización,” 144. These seven imperatives appear throughout Dunning (144-156) with extensive explanations.
Though at a theoretical level it is easy to identify how all of these elements are present in the process of formation of the RCIA, when it comes to the practice of implementation, things differ significantly; thus, we have very different models of formation in the RCIA process.

Comparably, John J. O’Brien proposes a different way of looking at the RCIA process. In “Hearts Prepared and Renewed: Conversion in the Community of the Church,” O’Brien makes an analysis of different models that communities who implement RCIA formation use. He relates the diversity of models to different forms of baptismal spirituality, identifying seven main types:

1. **Conversional-eschatological**—baptism considered as a sign of eschatological renewal after an evident conversion.

2. **Celebrational**—celebrates the victory of Christ in the baptized; “passionate in its poetry of exultation and its sense of victory.”

3. **Moralistic**—emphasizes a strong moral instruction and meticulous scrutiny prior to baptism.

4. **Juridical**—“derives its strength from the seriousness with which it takes the church. Baptism... is a function of a community”

5. **Mystical-Metaphysical**—baptism as the zenith of the journey of unification of the human heart, mystery, and grace. The baptized share the light and glory of Christ.

6. **Relational**—expresses a personal relationship with Christ.

7. **Social**—“Baptism incorporates ‘converts’ into the Christian community.”

O’Brien points out that, consciously or unconsciously, Christian communities embrace one or more of these types of baptismal spirituality to envision, to understand, and to give meaning to their image of community and baptism. We must ask, however, if any particular community can say to have a full sense of what baptism is and a sense of integral catechetical formation without having a wholesome balance of the seven types. After all, it is evident by the information discussed above, that a true process of *metanoia* will elicit revolution in all of those areas.

Conversely, Jeffery M. Kemper presents a model that poses what he considers the six elements of RCIA that permit the person to enter into a participation of the paschal mystery as a reality in which to become incorporated. The last of the six elements that he presents have two different components: a connection to a larger spiritual tradition, and a connection to a larger participation in the ministry of Christ. Therefore, this study lists the last of these as two distinctive elements, even if closely related. In Kemper’s assessment, these are the main distinctive elements of the RCIA:

1. **It is holistic**—intends to foster a *metanoia* of mind, heart and will to the saving work of Jesus Christ, not as an intellectual labor, but involving the entire self.

2. **Effects and manifests the work of Christ through his Church**—one enters the paschal mystery being drawn by Christ and through his body, the Church.

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50 Kemper, “Paschal Mystery,” 165.
3. Recognizes metanoia into the Paschal mystery as a process—“a mysterious and complex action of God and the individual,” taking into account personal freedom in context of life.

4. Employs ritual elements—“to acknowledge growth and development and to spur the catechumen on to the goal of life in Christ.”

5. Keeps the focus of formation on the paschal mystery—by celebrating initiations in the context of the Easter Vigil with all its symbols and preferably doing baptism by immersion.

6. Insisting on the unity of the Rite of Initiation—manifests the full spectrum of the paschal mystery from the Passion to Pentecost.

7. Illumines our experience in light of the Pascal mystery—in the waters of baptism, the neophytes become united forever to the life of Christ in the context of the sacramental and existential life of the Church and its individual members.\(^{51}\)

Kemper concludes his analysis of elements by pointing out that “neophytes are gifted with the Holy Spirit for the purpose of living the received mystery. By their own efforts alone this would be impossible, but through a new and irrevocable relationship with the Spirit this is quite achievable, since ‘with God, all things are possible,’”\(^{52}\) which is highly important for all Christians. As mentioned before, God initiates, the process of metanoia continues working with those who chose to open themselves to such conversion, and God bestows the ability to live the received mysteries as well. This perception makes evident that Christians can only partake of the Eucharistic prayer, in which, by giving praise and thanks, they celebrate their calling, duty, and grace to be in the journey of metanoia, if they do so “Through him [Christ], and with him, and in him.”\(^{53}\) Understandably, in this context, the only proper response of a Christian to that prayer is a “Great Amen.”

**Comparison of the Models Based of Qualitative Characteristics**

When set next to one another and rearranged according to characteristics of each subdivision presented by these authors, we notice that, even if the focus of each is very different, they all touch on some of the same basic aspects of Christian formation. Whether the model came from the paradigm of the imperatives in Genesis, from study of different baptismal spiritualties, or a dismantling of the RICA, these models bring in the key elements of metanoia, emphasis on community, introspection, inquiry/search for meaning, celebration/acknowledgement of relevant moments, connection to spiritual tradition, and service.

\(^{51}\) Kemper, “Paschal Mystery,” 165-166.

\(^{52}\) Kemper, “Paschal Mystery,” 166.

Rather than addressing these elements as characteristics that one uses to explain or develop a particular spirituality or emphasis in formation, as suggested by O’Brian, a better approach would be for RCIA formation communities to strive to develop all of them. Likewise, rather than seeing them as characteristics that could be present or not, we should treat them as an organic body composed of those members. Thus, if there is deficiency in one or more of them, the rest will suffer, too. On the other hand, being strong on one of them will also help strengthen the others. The same rationale applies to changes in any of them. It would be difficult to think that a community that has grown significantly in celebration/acknowledgement of relevant moments, for example, would be a community deficient in the other areas. If that were the case, there would be no reason to celebrate. All seven elements work as a unit.

### Models Based on Quantitative Characteristics

Another approach to the study of RCIA models of formation is by quantitative characteristics. As an example, the work of Dolly Sokol presents a set of different models based on timing. Although she does include qualitative aspects of the models that she examines, she differentiates the models mainly by the duration of the formation process. The following synoptic table will allow us to compare side by side the different models that Sokol represents in “Parish Models of the RCIA.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Models Based on Quantitative Characteristics</th>
<th>Dunning’s Imperatives Model</th>
<th>O’Brien’s Baptismal Spirituality Model</th>
<th>Kemper’s RCIA Elements Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metanoia</td>
<td>5. Conversion</td>
<td>1. Conversional-eschatological</td>
<td>1. Is holistic (metanoia of mind, heart and will)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on Community</td>
<td>3. Communities of Faith</td>
<td>4. Juridical</td>
<td>2. Effects and manifests the work of Christ through his Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introspective: Focus on the relationship between the individual and God</td>
<td>1. Storytelling</td>
<td>6. Relational</td>
<td>3. Recognizes metanoia into the Paschal mystery as a process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry/search for meaning</td>
<td>2. Questioning</td>
<td>3. Moralistic</td>
<td>5. Keeps the focus of formation on the paschal mystery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>7. Ministries</td>
<td>7. Social</td>
<td>7. Illumines our experience in light of the Paschal mystery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Lectionary-based</th>
<th>Year-round</th>
<th>Apprenticeship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Primary model of RCIA in the United States</td>
<td>• Prevalent in the United States</td>
<td>• Ongoing process of initiation</td>
<td>• Primarily deals with formation during the period of the catechumenate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• 9-month process</td>
<td>• Based on lectionary</td>
<td>• Catechumenate plus purification-enlightenment lasts for at least one full year</td>
<td>• The apprentice is mentored by the community of believers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Inquiry—late August or September</td>
<td>• Flows from Church’s understanding of role of sacred Scripture</td>
<td>• Practitioners of this model would be especially careful in discerning the spiritual formation needs of those who inquire as not to assume that all need to begin at the same place.</td>
<td>• The apprentice is with them doing what they do, asking questions, reflecting with them on why they do this or that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Initiation on Easter</td>
<td>• Catechesis after the Sunday dismissal of catechumens; may include another session in the week</td>
<td>• Ongoing process of inquiry, growth, and conversion</td>
<td>• Ongoing relationship of the catechumen, not just with the RCIA team, not just with their parish sponsor, but with the whole community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sessions are clearly seen as ongoing religious education for adults</td>
<td>• The focus of both sessions is Sunday Scriptures</td>
<td>• Stages of the catechumenal process are not specifically defined</td>
<td>• Catechists lead people to become believers, community members, prayers, and kingdom builders by having them do all of those during their formation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Catechumens reflect on God’s word, and search out images, thoughts or feelings they evoke</td>
<td>• May reflect on an aspect of Catholic teaching manifest in the Scriptures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May reflect on an aspect of Catholic teaching manifest in the Scriptures</td>
<td>• Stages of the catechumenal process are not specifically defined</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Stages of the catechumenal process are not specifically defined</td>
<td>• May follow the “school” model—entire process done in 6-9 months</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May follow the “school” model—entire process done in 6-9 months</td>
<td>• May follow a fuller model of RCIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>• Intellectual learning</td>
<td>• Dialogical method</td>
<td>• Transforming inquirers into leader-disciples in its understanding and utilization of appropriate lectionary-based catechesis</td>
<td>Based on:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Open-ended questioning is a primary tool</td>
<td>• Committed to developing all four pillars of the catechumenate (RCIA, 75)</td>
<td>• Ad Gentes no. 14: “... not… expounding of doctrines and precepts, but a training... For...Christian life… during which disciples are joined to Christ their teacher”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Question in the rite of election: “have they given evidence of their conversion by the example of their lives?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Advantages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Lectionary-based</th>
<th>Year-round</th>
<th>Apprenticeship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Efficient to manage, quick to get through, and tries to inflict as little pain as possible | • Offers adults opportunity to participate in their spiritual growth and learning  
• Values their history and experience and gives them a chance to put them into dialogue with the Scripture  
• Can give ongoing experiences of theological reflection that may lead to conversion and apostolic activity | • Parish has in place the system and structures to support and sustain the faith journeys of inquirers, catechumens, and neophytes in a continuous uninterrupted manner | • Catechumens learn to connect the teachings of the Scriptures and the Church with the lived experience  
• Experience can be a strong conversation partner in the process of Christian formation |

### Disadvantages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Lectionary-based</th>
<th>Year-round</th>
<th>Apprenticeship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Seldom encompasses nine months  
• Little opportunity for the catechumens to discern if they are ready for initiation  
• Sessions are not lectionary-based  
• Untimely inquirers have to wait until “program” restarts  
• Falls short of expectations of the RCIA (1-8) and Christian vision of discipleship. | • May become a Scripture-sharing session  
• Everyone says what they think or feel about the Scriptures  
• Insights shared from catechumen’s understanding of Scripture may differ from Catholic beliefs or teachings, but in the interest of acceptance, their understanding is not transformed by Catholic theological and scriptural teaching.  
• Facilitators may be trained in listening and relationship-building skills, but not sufficiently trained catechesis | • It can be a bit messy, with people starting all year long (messiness is foreseen in the RCIA “nothing, therefore, can be settled a priori” – no. 76 (20))  
• During Lent has three groups running simultaneously: inquiry, catechumenate, and purification and enlightenment | • If catechumens take involvement without mentoring and think of it as social service, it becomes an adult high school confirmation project |

### Common Assumptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Year-round</th>
<th>Apprenticeship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • “Let’s not waste people’s time.”  
• “All they need to know is what makes Catholics different.”  
• “We don’t have many people to do this ministry, so let’s not burn them out.” | • “The Scriptures are the heart of our belief.”  
• “We must listen to people seeking to become Catholic, not challenge them.” | • “We must respect and respond to the inquirer when God’s grace moves them to approach us.”  
• “The journey of spiritual conversion is gradual and takes as long as it takes.”  
• “We need to be flexible so that we will not force people to take a step that they are not ready to take.” | • “People learn how to be Catholic by practicing what Catholics do.”  
• “We need to form disciples, not apologists.”  
• “Adults learn best when they are able to ‘do’ and not just ‘listen’.” |
A word on Models Based on Quantitative Characteristics

First, we must note that a process restricted by a margin of time stops being a process. To be more specific, a spiritual process that is working under a calendar, a clock, or even an hourglass, becomes a program and not a process. This directly affects the progress of conversion. Although, some people may say they like changes, in actuality, consciously or unconsciously, most people would fight against change. Change takes the person out of their comfort zone to places they do not want to go. If people avoid change in general, the will more so avoid metanoia.

It is difficult to tell what drives communities to take the shortest possible route when it comes to processes of spiritual formation. If, in any given parish, the main concern is making things the easiest possible and for that reason they use the School model, that means their “program” will have people in the “classroom” between 48 and 72 hours, supposing they meet for two hours every week for six to nine months. There is no doubt that they will cover a substantial amount of doctrinal material, and some of the people they have in the “program” may even get to learn most, if not all, of it. However, if the point of catechesis is to cover information, why not have them attend all day during the Saturdays of Lent, and baptize them at the Easter Vigil? Quick and easy! Very likely more people would attend that type of program; after all, they only have to sacrifice Saturdays for no more than six consecutive weeks.

There is only one reason to avoid this kind of approach: we have no control over conversion processes. We cannot decide when a person will be ready, and we cannot control a process of metanoia, mainly because the first thing that a metanoia demands is to let go of control and fully surrender to the will of God. Neither can we pretend to have control over God as to say, “Hey, God, it’s October. You better stop calling people to start in the Christian path because registrations will not open again until June.” Thus, we must continue asking: What is our main goal in the RCIA process? Is our main goal to teach doctrine? Is our main goal to provide a comfortable academic curriculum? Is our main goal to create the space for the possibility that a person will start a process of conversion and hope that after baptism the person will engage in a process of ongoing transformation? Is our main goal as a community to help participants to come and mature until they have a deep relationship with Christ that leads them to a true conversion of life?

Conclusion

As they embark in the process of Christian initiation welcoming newcomers to the faith, parish communities must be very careful in the way they bring to fruition this process. Though it may seem unimportant, the difference between a well-done RCIA formation process and a mediocrelly done program is a matter of life and death. While one offers a path to a full transformation by engaging in a process of death and rebirth at many levels, the other one offers the opportunity of participating in a set of liturgies that would have a spiritual impact, but for the most part would go unperceived at any other level. Thus, metanoia plays a crucial role that one must not disregard or hinder in any way, including restrictions in the time given to the process.

One can approach in many different ways the topic of the formation process for those journeying toward Christian Initiation. Nonetheless, the RCIA denotes that those who undertake the journey will engage and continue in a process of conversion that will reshape those who participate in it full-heartedly.

Among the different models to implement the process of the RCIA, some are more conductive to metanoia. One can evaluate the quality of these models by analyzing the degree in which the process incorporates the following elements that will foster a process of ongoing growth and awareness:
1. Recognizing the role and significance of metanoia in the process

2. Giving emphasis to community

3. Cultivating introspection/self awareness

4. Nurturing inquiry/search for meaning

5. Having an aptness to celebrate/acknowledge relevant moments

6. Cherishing the connection to spiritual tradition

7. Fostering a spirit of service to others

Finally, we should take into account that having a clear vision of the intention of the formation process is a very significant factor in its success and effectiveness. Thus, establishing priorities both at personal and community levels is very important. If teaching doctrine is a priority above metanoia, it is a good indication of the urgent need for metanoia in our own lives. After all, there are people in the world with doctoral degrees in Christian/Catholic studies who know everything there is to know about doctrine, yet they are not Christians. Without a full, conscious, and active participation in a process of conversion in the context of a community of faith, knowing all about doctrine will not make a person become a Christian any more than knowing all about gymnastics will make a person who never exercises become a gymnast.