

Is your RCIA open all year-round? A New Year's Resolution



With the new year upon us, often our thoughts turn to the past year and the excitement of the new year to come. For many it's a chance to make a fresh start on a personal goal. A time of New Year's resolutions – resolving to break a bad habit or do something better for the coming year. This isn't just a chance to make personal resolutions, but also a chance to make a resolution to improve your initiation process.

I've been writing a lot about the steps an initiation team could take to move their process to a year-round model. And I will admit, some of these steps can be challenging and not all of them can be accomplished overnight. So I've been giving a lot of thought to a question I often get from other catechists: "What's one thing that we can do right now to start moving to a year-round model?" After a lot of prayer and thought, I came up with an answer.

Think of this as your New Year's resolution: Stop treating the initiation process as a group process.

The RCIA was never meant to be a group process

Once we start looking at our seekers, our catechumens and our candidates as individuals instead of a collective group, it begins to open so many more possibilities for your initiation process.

Consider first that the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults was never meant to be a group process, nor was it ever meant to be a "catch-all" for all the other adult faith formation needs of the parish. When we as ministers were handed this task years ago, we fell back on those tried and true tools we use for all our other training and formation: Do it all as a group so we can get them all in and get them all out so we can move on to the next.

The trouble with this kind of process is that it can cause us to lose focus on the individual. We miss what their experiences are, what brought them to us, and what are

they really looking for. A group oriented process tends to focus on the number of people getting baptized whereas an individual oriented process is more likely to gain true disciples for Christ.

I don't want to boil this down to a "quantity vs. quality" argument because that would have us missing the key point: The RCIA, by its very nature, is an individual process. That is because there is no common point of entry. Every person comes to us, driven by the Holy Spirit, to seek Christ for themselves. But when they come to us, or what they need to accomplish to achieve this conversion to Christ, is going to be different for every adult.

Our seekers come with all the variety and diversity they bring with them. Blindly putting them into a classroom with a cohort of others to follow a particular curriculum is not what they need. What they need is a mentor and a friend. Someone who can guide them on this new apprenticeship with your parish community.

How you can make this happen

By now you're probably thinking that this is going to be some monumental task for which you will need to change everything you've planned for the rest of the year through Easter. I assure you, it's not. In fact, there's only one thing you need to change right now: your perspective. Start looking at everyone in your group as an individual. From your seekers to your catechumens to your candidates and even your initiation team. Start seeing them as the unique souls they are and start listening to their stories.

I know, this sounds nice, but how do I get started? How can I accomplish this?

Simple. Make some time to meet with all your seekers, catechumens, and candidates individually. I'm not talking about a 10-minute interview in your office. I'm talking about spending an hour or more over coffee in an informal setting getting to know them and the story of their journey. It doesn't matter that they've already started your process, or that they may already be on a particular path toward initiation. But make time to sit with each one of them and help them to discern their progress up to this point and talk about the road ahead, toward initiation and beyond.

And most importantly, make sure they understand that while they've been on this journey with the rest of the group, that their journey is in fact an individual one, separate and unique, just as their relationship with Christ is separate and unique.

Resolving to make changes in your initiation process seems like a big challenge, but if you take it in small manageable bites, you will make progress and start to see the Holy Spirit working. I'm not just talking about theory or best practices, I'm giving you my own experiences over the years at my own parish in the hopes that you can learn from my successes and failures. Starting with these discernment interviews was how we got started on the road to a year-round process, so I hope it can help you make that first necessary step and the rest will come as we continue to journey together.