Notes from Fr. Nick

Christian Initiation

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) may be the most far-reaching change that came from the Second Vatican Council. Until after the Vatican II Council, the Catholic Church commonly referred to new members as “converts.” Very often people wanting to join the Church approached a priest who gave them individual lessons after which they would be privately baptized and assumed their place among the ranks of the faithful. The process of conversion was seen as intensely personal, and there was little attempt to integrate new members into the larger community.

The liturgical renewal that preceded Vatican II revealed that the ancient Church had a much more extensive and public process for membership. Inquirers were gathered in classes where they shared their personal journey, were introduced to Christ’s teachings and life in the Church.

If inquirers committed themselves to becoming Christians, they entered a preparatory state called the Catechumenate (Greek for learner) and participated in the Liturgy of the Word with the larger community. Before the Eucharist began, catechumens would be dismissed for prayer and reflection on the scriptures. Although they had not yet been baptized, Catechumens were (and are) considered members of the Church. If they died before baptism, they would be given Christian burial rites.

After a period that often lasted for years, catechumens could petition to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. If the bishop and the community agreed that they were living worthy lives, they would be elected for baptism. The Elect underwent three Scrutinies to purify themselves from their past lives and a Lent of intense prayer and reflection.

During the Easter Vigil, the Elect were baptized, confirmed, and joined the faithful at Eucharist for the first time. Referred to as Neophytes, the newly baptized learned the meaning of the initiation rituals during a period called Mystagogia, which lasted from Easter to Pentecost.

Vatican II saw many parallels between our world and the world of the early Church. The Council believed that reviving this ancient process of receiving new members would serve the Church’s needs better than private conversions. Therefore the RCIA program was developed and mandated. Although the original program was initially intended only the non-baptized, a parallel process has since been introduced for Christians baptized in other faiths who wish to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church.

Perhaps the RCIA’s most profound effect on the Church was an unintended one: lifelong Catholics have come to appreciate the importance of their own baptisms. By working on the RCIA team, sponsoring catechumens, and witnessing the public initiation of new members, ‘cradle Catholics’ have come to better see the value of their own faith commitment, and to live their Catholic faith more actively.