

A different approach to RCIA Catechesis?

By Stewart Bazzica

I have been involved with RCIA teams since 1998 and I have always relied upon Lectionary Based Catechesis¹ for the RCIA process. This means regular meetings, lesson preparation and preparing a welcoming environment for those on the journey.

Over the years this method has been very successful for a number of candidates and catechumens with whom I journeyed and mostly these seekers have remained in the Church. So why would I want to look at a different approach?

Well I am sure we have all experienced the feeling of dread each year when the new seekers become known to your team. The thought of week in and week out RCIA can be very daunting. And I know many catechists that I have worked with have fallen away from RCIA because it is demanding, and it requires significant commitment to run and maintain an effective team.

I had the pleasure of reading Diana Macalintal's latest book, "The Parish is the Curriculum". The Network News reviewed this book so I will not review the book per se, but rather examine the ideas contained.

In this book Diana has postulated that the RCIA process could be seen as an apprenticeship in the Parish rather than formal Catechesis. In other words, seekers would travel on a journey of experiencing parish life and parish groups to gain the experience of being a Catholic. The candidates and catechumens would still have a sponsor whose role is to support, guide and aid them. In addition, the sponsor could break open the word with them, preferably when they are dismissed from the Mass after the Homily. The RCIA team would still meet with the seekers, possibly monthly to undertake a review of their experience over the previous month. Diana suggest that if there is a need for specific catechesis or clarification it can be undertaken at this monthly meeting.

So what support is there for this approach? Well the rite says that "the Initiation of the Catechumens (and Candidates) is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful" (RCIA 4). I cannot find any reference to the need for RCIA teams which has been the core of the process over many years, nor is there any reference of Lectionary Based Catechesis which is so widely used in Australia. So, I don't see any reason to exclude this model and it may be less demanding on time for the RCIA team.

So, how could this model be implemented? It is still very important to establish all the basic information about those on the journey;

- Where are they on their faith journey;
- marital status and any impediments;
- baptismal status and other core issues.

¹ Lectionary Based Catechesis is the breaking open of the Gospel in a small group exploring how it is relevant to our daily lives today

Where the model differs is in the area of Catechesis.

For many of us the catechesis occurs at the weekly meeting with those on the journey. A normal meeting would normally break open the Word and relate the readings to our life today. We would also include catechesis on becoming a Catholic. Under the model Diana has suggested, the catechesis is naturally built into the experience of being embedded in the various parish groups and ministries that make up the life of the parish.

various parish teams. So, each seeker spends approximately a month with various teams such as Choirs, prayer groups, St Vincent de Paul etc

In this case the catechesis is experiential and is undertaken by the parish communities not by the RCIA teams. The benefit of this model is those becoming a Catholic get experience in a variety of parish groups, and are widely introduced into parish life, potentially engaging them into parish service even before they are in full communion with the Church.

Is experiential apprenticeship sufficient catechesis? Well in this model the Word is still broken open weekly, but this time by the sponsors. The monthly review with the RCIA team is an opportunity for Sharing and asking about their experience. In addition, specific catechesis can be undertaken at these meetings.

In Nick Wagner's book, "*Seek the Living God*" he suggests that because all on the journey are at different places in their God experience, the catechesis 'plan' needs to take this into account. I suggest that if we have a catechesis plan then the monthly review is an ideal time to not only review the past months experience, but also review the progress against the catechesis plan.

Nick recommends building this plan during the initial meeting, primarily by asking 5 core questions:

1. Where have you been? Explore the seekers background, faith experience and catechetical knowledge.
2. Where are you now? Who are the role models for the seekers?, are they in a good space now etc
3. Where do you want to get to? Goals and ambition on this journey.
4. How are you going to get to where you want to go?
5. How will you know when you have arrived? Define key markers for measurement of progress.

Armed with answers to these questions a customised catechesis plan can be developed. This knowledge ensures key areas are covered, and time is not wasted on covering material that is already known.

Can these models work in the parish setting? On the surface it would seem so, but I am not sure of how effective the process will be. I will reserve my judgement until after there is some practical experience.

