

1 PASCHAL MYSTERY & INITIATION I: THE CATECHUMENATE

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3 One of the great tenets of faith that spurs Christians on to live life in Christ are the words
4 of Paul to Timothy: “This saying is trustworthy: ‘If we have died with him, we shall also live
5 with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him.’” (II Tm 2: 11-12) The Paschal
6 Mystery – the Passion, death, and resurrection, as well as his ascension into glory and his gift of
7 the Holy Spirit are what allow us to live and reign with Christ. In the Roman Catholic tradition,
8 the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is the ordinary means by which those seeking new life
9 in Christ not only learn how to live in him, but also “grow into” this life in Christ and to
10 persevere in it. One does not need to be Karl Rahner to realize there is an intrinsic connection
11 between the RCIA and the Paschal Mystery to which Paul refers in writing to Timothy. Yet,
12 sometimes what is most obvious is what is most often taken for granted. This column is an
13 attempt to reflect upon the genius of the RCIA in order to see where the less obvious, yet
14 nonetheless profound implications of the Paschal Mystery lie in the RCIA.

15 The RCIA begins with the basic presupposition that the Church is engaged in its
16 missionary mandate, which is announcing the Gospel to the world and drawing to the Lord new
17 members of the Church.

18 The rite of Christian initiation presented here is designed for adults who, after
19 hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed, consciously and freely seek the living
20 God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit opens their
21 hearts. (RCIA 1)

22
23 While this presupposition is rooted in common sense – an initiation rite needs new members
24 for initiation – it is also rooted in much more: in the experience of the crucified and risen Christ
25 which impels the Church to proclaim the Gospel to nonbelievers. Peter’s homily in the second
26 chapter of the Acts of the Apostles serves as a paradigm for the mission of the Church.

1 “You who are Israelites, listen to what I have to say . . . Jesus the Nazorean was a
2 man whom God sent to you with miracles, wonders, and signs as his credentials.
3 These God worked through him in your midst, as you well know. He was
4 delivered up by a set purpose and plan of God; you even made use of pagans to
5 crucify and kill him. God freed him from death’s bitter pangs, however, and
6 raised him up again, for it was impossible that death should keep its hold on him. .
7 . This is the Jesus God has raised up, and we are his witnesses. Exalted at God’s
8 right hand, he first received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father, then poured
9 this Spirit on us. This is what you now see and hear... Therefore, let the whole
10 house of Israel know beyond that God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus
11 whom you crucified. When they heard his, they were deeply shaken. They asked
12 Peter and the other apostles, “What are we to do, brothers?” Peter answered: You
13 must reform and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that
14 your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was
15 to you and your children that the promise was made, and to those still far off
16 whom the Lord our God calls. (Acts 2: 14, 22-24, 32-33, 36-39)
17

18 The principle content in this inaugural sermon of the Church is clearly the Paschal
19 Mystery. It is the foundation on which all else that the apostles and the Church in succeeding
20 generations will build the content of faith. While evangelization is much more complex than the
21 first preaching of the Gospel, ultimately, to be true to the will of Christ, his death and
22 resurrection must be the core truth proclaimed in every age, in every land, to every people. This
23 is evident in Paul’s statement to the Corinthians, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to
24 preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, *so that the cross of Christ*
25 *might not be emptied of its meaning.* (I Cor 1: 17; emphasis added) Recognizing that the
26 Paschal Mystery is the foundation for all Christian kerygma does not imply that it must
27 necessarily be an overt proclamation, at least in the beginning. It is common knowledge that
28 effective persuasion does not begin with the speaker’s agenda, but with the hearer’s agenda. We
29 find this evident in Acts 2, where Peter’s preaching begins not with the announcement that Christ
30 has died and is risen, but rather with the explanation of the questions on the minds of the
31 witnesses of this most extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit: What does all this mean? (v. 12)
32 and “They have been drinking too much new wine.” It is in light of these questions that Peter –

1 via Joel’s prophecy of the messianic age and the relationship of David to Christ –brings these
2 first “evangelizees” to the heart of the matter: Jesus, whom you cruc ified, has been raised up.

3 The ability to make this proclamation comes from the Spirit given by the risen Lord on
4 Easter Sunday (John 20:22) and on Pentecost (Acts 2). Paul is explicit about this when he states,
5 “...no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the holy Spirit. (I Cor 12:3) (The title “Lord” is
6 clearly associated with his death and resurrection, as we hear in the kenotic hymn in Philippians
7 2: 6-11, where the title “Lord” is professed by every tongue precisely because Jesus emptied
8 himself and has been exalted by his Father.)

9 Not only is the Paschal Mystery the content of the Church’s preaching; it is intrinsically
10 tied to the mandate to proclaim the gospel of redemption. In almost all resurrection appearances,
11 Christ either directs the witnesses of his risen presence to go and tell others of this encounter (the
12 women at the tomb in Matthew and Mark, Mary Magdalene in John) or the witnesses on their
13 own go and proclaim the risen Christ, as do the holy women and the two disciples on the road to
14 Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke. In the Pentecost event the Spirit overwhelms a frightened but
15 prayerful community and drives them outside to proclaim the crucified and risen Lord.

16 This connection cannot afford to be lost on the Church’s leadership or the people.
17 Evangelization is not simply one of many things the Church has to do; it is at the heart of why the
18 Church exists. No where do we find Jesus directing his followers to simply preserve the faith for
19 themselves; it is always something oriented outward: “You are the salt of the earth.” (Mt 5:13)
20 “Your light must shine before others...” (Mt 5: 16) “Go and tell your people the marvels God
21 has done for you.” (Lk 8:39) In other words, the Church accepts Christ’s salvation giving it
22 away, just as Jesus embraced the fullness of life through death.

23 One may ask why all this time is being spent on a matter that is not a part of the RCIA.

1 As was stated above, the RCIA *presupposes* evangelization is taking place. *Christian Initiation*,
2 *General Introduction*, the umbrella preamble for the initiation of adults and infants, contains no
3 specific reference to the ministry of evangelization. The introduction to the RCIA makes
4 reference to the missionary activity of the Church only in the context of assuming evangelization
5 is occurring(#2). Without evangelization, one cannot come to the more immediate (albeit
6 properly amorphous) Period of the Evangelization and Pre-Catechumenate, in which a person
7 seeks to determine if Christ is the One to follow. Unless the Gospel has been preached, a seeker
8 cannot know that Christ is the One he seeks.

9 If RCIA is to be faithful to the missionary mandate of Christ and serve to bring people to
10 life in Christ, the Church must understand the centrality of its evangelistic mission. In this area,
11 it seems the Church is feeling its way in the dark much of the time. How much does the average
12 pastor or Catholic parish give priority to making Christ's presence known to those who are not in
13 some way already in contact with the parish for other reasons (e.g., spouse of a parishioner, or
14 through the parochial school)? Catholic parishes in America seem to have caught on to the idea
15 of (re-)evangelizing those already members of the Church, as evident in programs such as Christ
16 Renews His Parish, and RENEW. But have we come to grips with evangelizing those outside
17 the Church? If you took a survey of Catholics asking what the purpose of the Church is, how
18 many people would give high priority to spreading the faith to non-believers? The Catholic
19 Church is clearly stronger in foreign missionary activity. Yet, that, for the most part, is
20 accomplished by a relatively small percentage of members of the Church, even when one
21 includes the "behind the scenes" supporters of the missions in parishes and dioceses. At least in
22 areas where the Church appears to be well established institutionally, evangelization of non-
23 believers is still a head-scratching issue. Pragmatically, what does it mean to evangelize? Street

1 preaching? Media preaching ala Oral Roberts? Celebrating the liturgy well so that non-believers
2 who are present might be moved to faith? Should the Church's social ministry have a more
3 explicit evangelizing component to it? What does it mean to proclaim the good news to the
4 poor? Is it more than providing material needs? There are not easy answers to these questions,
5 but the Church must struggle with them if we are to truly rooted in the Paschal Mystery. To
6 engage in the ministry of the RCIA without struggling to develop a fuller sense of the importance
7 of evangelization and methods that will speak to specific cultures can too easily mask the
8 intention of Christ to draw all people to himself.

9 All that has been said is in no way intended to undermine the implicit evangelization that
10 occurs through the example of Christian living that draws people to seek initiation into the
11 Church. In fact, the example that Christians set when they struggle to live the Gospel faithfully
12 in everyday living is a prerequisite for more overt forms of evangelization, especially in
13 American culture where credibility is determined by the consistency of behavior to belief. In
14 reality, the evangelizing value of Christian witness is intrinsically rooted in the Paschal Mystery,
15 for the struggle to live a Christian life is one of dying to oneself – what is sinful in oneself as
16 well as what may be good in oneself for the sake of a greater good for others. We can only
17 engage in this endeavor because we have received the Holy Spirit, the gift of the risen Lord.

18 As the Church struggles to determine more overt or systematic approaches to
19 evangelization, we must guard against canonizing one method of evangelization over others.
20 Because evangelization is part of the Paschal Mystery, it is ultimately under the guidance of the
21 Spirit of God, who is not controlled by human agenda, no matter how noble the agenda may be.

22
23 A second area of reflection on the RCIA in the context of the Paschal Mystery concerns
24 the purpose of the RCIA, which is to draw a person into the life of Jesus Christ. This statement,

1 seemingly so simple and clear, in reality has complex quality to it. To live in Jesus Christ does
2 not mean that one simply has Jesus as teacher, companion, or friend. It does not simply mean
3 that one acknowledges Jesus as personal Savior or even Savior of the world. To live in Christ
4 means to hand over one's whole being: mind, heart, and identity and destiny to Christ. It means
5 that we no longer live for ourselves, but Christ lives in us.(cf. Gal 2:20) The context in which
6 Christ lives is the Paschal Mystery. That the RCIA is oriented towards the goal of life in Christ
7 in and through his Paschal is evident in the first and final rites of Christian initiation. In the Rite
8 of Acceptance onto the Order of Catechumens the words of the celebrant make explicit the
9 relationship of the candidates to the Paschal Mystery in the signing of the candidates with the
10 cross: "Come forward now with your sponsors to receive the sign of your new way of life as
11 catechumens." (RCIA 55-A) The signings with the cross of (in effect) the whole body reveal
12 that a catechumen is to grow in the Paschal Mystery in every aspect of life. (For Christians, the
13 cross is never simply a reminder of Christ's death, but also of his resurrection. While there may
14 be emphasis at time given to the death over the resurrection or vice versa, the fact is that the
15 cross is Christian shorthand for the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.) The same
16 understanding of the goal of the RCIA is revealed in the Rite of Baptism at the Easter Vigil.
17 Baptism is understood in light of the epistle reading that evening:

18 Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into
19 his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that
20 just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might
21 live in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4)
22

23 This is all the more reinforced by the preferred mode of baptism, immersion, "which is a
24 more suitable as a symbol of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ." (CIGI, 22)

25 There are a number of challenges that the Church faces regarding the implementation of
26 the RCIA which a deeper understanding of the Paschal Mystery may serve to alleviate.

1 The Paschal Mystery can be seen from a number of perspectives. It can be seen as a
2 phenomenon of nature, in which the cycle of life involved living, dying, and rising to something
3 “better” or different (e.g., the cocoon which “rises” as a butterfly; the seed which dies to become
4 a flower). It can be seen as a historical event which occurred to a specific person, Jesus Christ,
5 who suffered, died, rise form the dead, ascended to glory, and bestowed the Holy Spirit. It can
6 be seen as a trans-historical event in which what Jesus inaugurated by his historical experience
7 has come to be a dynamic experience of all who follow Christ the Lord. In this context the
8 Paschal Mystery is a pervasive paradigm of Christian existence. It serves to illumine the pattern
9 of belief – ignorance (death) gives way to knowledge (life); morality – sin gives way to grace;
10 personhood – from no people to God’s chosen people and from being cut off from others to
11 being united to others (cf. Gal 3: 28), and existence – spiritually dead to life in Christ and
12 physical death as a gateway to eternal life. Each of these perspectives is intrinsic to the Paschal
13 Mystery. They are what make it the redemptive act of all ages. Equally intrinsic to the Paschal
14 Mystery are the sacramental actions which bring one into the realm or arena of the Paschal
15 Mystery. Ultimately, though, the RCIA must be understood as having its foundation the person
16 of Jesus Christ. The Paschal Mystery, while clearly a pattern of earthly and eternal reality, is
17 salvific not in the dynamic of life and death in and of itself, but because Jesus Christ, God made
18 human, determined it to be the pattern for salvation. Theological knowledge, moral growth,
19 awareness of whom we can become cannot effect what the person of Jesus Christ accomplishes,
20 even though each of those dynamics are part of the Paschal Mystery. What makes paschal
21 mystery “Paschal Mystery” is the person of Jesus Christ. With these perspectives in mind,
22 several challenges of the RCIA can be addressed.

23 The diverse perspectives contained in the Paschal Mystery indicate that the RCIA, to be

1 faithful to the Paschal Mystery, must see formation as not simply a one dimensional event. That
2 is, the RCIA is not simply meant to be a process that incorporates a person into a community of
3 faith, or simply process that educates a person in the faith. The RCIA is meant to immerse a
4 person into life in Christ with all its components (thus the signing from head to toe). This is
5 accomplished in a number of ways, all of which are. The following seem to be essential to
6 forming people in a relationship with Christ and the pattern of his life:

7 1. *A vibrant community of faith.* As mentioned above, like the great state of Missouri, our
8 whole culture demands “show me” before accepting a tenet as true. If we are going to proclaim
9 Jesus as Lord, we have to be able to show that he is Lord in concrete ways of living. A
10 community of faith that exhibits a sense of hope and empowerment by Christ shows the inquirer
11 that God is alive and well. The commitment of the individuals of the community to common
12 prayer (singing, listening, arriving on time and staying until the end), a sense of concern and
13 support for members of the community (through parish-based structures that enable care, and the
14 members’ sense that they have a responsibility to interdependence), evidence that the parish has
15 a sense of responsibility to those outside it (care of the marginalized, the poor) and a sense of
16 knowledge of the faith as relevant (through educational and faith-sharing) give a credibility to
17 the proclamation that Jesus is Lord. Seekers see that people are willing to gamble their material
18 resources, time, and energy on this belief. They also see the fruit, albeit not unblemished, that
19 falls from the tree of the cross is worth eating. In addition, a dedicated community of faith
20 assists by example in forming individual Christians as witnesses to the Gospel in the living of
21 ordinary life. Thus, the Church reveals itself as the Body of Christ, the context in which Christ
22 works in the world today. The particular faith community forms the catechumen by drawing
23 him/her into a way of living that is rooted in the person of the crucified and risen Lord.

1 2. *Solid theological formation.* The RCIA is not a theology course; it is a formational
2 process. Yet, intrinsic to this formation is knowledge of the faith, knowledge of the Lord and
3 divine reality: who God is, who we are, how God acts, what God calls us to do and to be. The
4 philosopher Heidegger maintained that knowledge is access to power. Unless one knows, one
5 cannot act. This is true of faith. As Paul states, “But how can they call on him in whom they
6 have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can
7 they hear without someone to preach?” (Rom 10:14) Knowledge of the content of faith enables a
8 person to see the world from the perspective of Christ, and therefore come to ground their stance
9 in life and their actions more firmly in Christ because they know his vision, his values, and his
10 will. This is accomplished not only through familiarity with Scripture, but also with an
11 understanding of the teaching of the Church, which interprets and develops the truths of
12 Scripture. A lack of knowledge of non-scriptural theology lends itself to fundamentalism and
13 literalism, as well as individualistic interpretation of Scripture. The proclamation of the content
14 of faith in the context of the RCIA must be evangelizing. In other words, it must constantly
15 show that the message of Christ is good news. At times it may be hard news, unpopular news,
16 challenging news, but it must always be presented as the only news that offers eternal life.
17 Because of this, the theology presented must be relevant to the hearers. It must relate to
18 situations of the members of the RCIA. To achieve this, various modes of “proclaiming” the
19 good news must be employed. Simply giving information is not sufficient. Means of assisting
20 the participants in interiorizing the message must accompany the content. In this way the
21 catechumen begins to see old ways of understanding reality die as new ways of seeing the world
22 come to birth as the gospel for the second scrutiny, the story of the man born blind, reveals: “One
23 thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see.” (John 9: 25)

1 3. *Solid moral formation.* Morality can certainly be seen a discipline under the more
2 general area of theology. Yet, moral formation is more than simply an awareness of moral
3 edicts, whether divine or human. Moral formation involves reflection upon one's life and
4 particular actions in light of the will of Christ as found in the Scriptures and the teachings of the
5 Church. Moral formation, while clearly demanding a knowledge of the morality of specific acts,
6 also demands an understanding of why acts are moral or immoral. In other words, morality
7 demands a vision of reality and a set of priorities in order for it to be interiorized. Once
8 interiorized, moral actions flow from an internal responsibility, not from external onuses.
9 Another aspect of moral formation is that interiorization comes from doing and not simply from
10 knowing the facts. Virtue has often been described as good habits. Action is one of the greatest
11 learning devises. While there are clearly areas in which the ministers of the RCIA cannot
12 directly facilitate personal moral choices, in the area of social morality there are things that can
13 be done; participation in care of the needy and in the prayer life of the Church are ways that
14 people grow into the habits of moral life. Moral formation is the means by which the old person
15 died to the newness of life in Christ.

16 Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch
17 as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.
18 Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and
19 wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:7-8)

20
21 Equally important to the concept of moral formation is that a moral life is not simply our
22 efforts to respond to Christ; rather it is our allowing Christ to act in and through us. Christian
23 morality is possible only through the work of Christ, as evident in Christ's response to the
24 disciple's question as to how anyone can enter the kingdom of God: "What is impossible for
25 human beings is possible for God." (Luke 18: 25) In the RCIA the dependence upon God for
26 living a moral life is evident in the minor exorcisms and blessing, as well as the scrutinizes,

1 where we pray “that they may remain faithful to [God] and boldly give witness ...” (RCIA 167)
2 and that the grace of the sacraments “conform them to Christ in his passion and resurrection and
3 enable them to triumph over the bitter enemy of death.” (RCIA 174).

4 4. *Theological reflection.* The term may sound as if the activity would be reserved to
5 theologians, but theological reflection is simply the examination of life through the lens of faith.
6 It is a way of asking where God might be found in the events of life, of answering the question of
7 how the events of life are related to salvation. Spiritual direction (if more than counseling) and
8 examination of conscience are just two of many examples of theological reflection. How does
9 theological reflection relate to the Paschal Mystery and the RCIA? It was mentioned above that
10 from one perspective the Paschal Mystery is part of the nature cycle of life. Another way of
11 stating this is that the cross is not always something that is chosen; it is often something foisted
12 upon us. Illness, poverty, and difficulties in relationships are seldom realities that people choose.
13 They are part of what life dishes out. These crosses are not only sources of aggravation; they can
14 adversely affect a life of faith can offer great temptations towards sin. When people know how
15 to reflect upon the experiences of life in light of faith, they can be better equipped to see a
16 salvific dimension or opportunity for salvation in the crisis. Theological reflection is not
17 simply for times of crisis however. It is also valuable for seeing the hand of God in good times
18 and in the give-and-take of daily life. Theological reflection helps one to see that Christ is active
19 and with us, even in the ordinariness of life. In this, it bolsters faith and strengthens resolve to
20 bear the cross of Christ so as to share in his glory. When people are taught, especially through
21 experience, how to reflect on their experiences of life through the lens of the Paschal Mystery,
22 they are better able to draw strength from faith, grow in spiritual maturity, rejoice in blessings
23 and endure the cross. This is what the period of mystagogy is all about: reflecting on the

1 connection of the experience of the rites and our life situation. This is what is intended to occur
2 in the pastoral adaptation of the reflection on the Sunday readings following the dismissal, and in
3 fact through lectionary based catechesis (neither of which are in the official RCIA). In this way,
4 one comes to understand that what is lacking in the cross of Christ (cf. Col 1:24) is our
5 participation in the Paschal Mystery.

6 5. *A personal prayer life.* It is one thing to know about the Lord and about a life of faith. It
7 is another to know the Lord and to live a life of faith. The first is merely an intellectual exercise;
8 the second is a relationship which can be built only through dialogue. Prayer is that dialogue.
9 The modifier “personal” should not be confused to mean private. “Personal” in this context
10 means deep within the being of an individual. Thus, prayer is a dialogue which is meant to stem
11 from the depth of the individual and touch the core of his or her being. This demands the ability
12 to speak honestly – from the heart – about our hopes, our doubts, our triumphs and our defeats to
13 the Lord as we find the psalmists doing. It also demands an honest listening to what the Lord is
14 saying to us in the Scriptures, in the teaching of the Church, and in the encounters with Christ
15 through others. Personal prayer is both liturgical and non-liturgical and a Christian needs both to
16 live fully in Christ. Non-liturgical prayer allows for a spontaneous speaking from the heart, a
17 means of personal expression in which the preferred ways of praying can manifest themselves,
18 both in speaking and in listening to the Lord. It fosters an I-thou relationship with the Lord.
19 Liturgical prayer serves to form the Christian in a number of ways as well. It calls one out of
20 one’s own little world into a bigger world, a world in which one realizes that, while every person
21 needs a one-on-one relationship with the Lord, intrinsic to any relationship with God is a
22 relationship with a community of faith. Thus, the greatest commandment is ritualized: loving
23 God and loving neighbor. Through liturgical prayer, one is called outside of oneself to see that a

1 relationship with God is also relationship with people. Liturgical prayer serves to speak the
2 prophetic message of the Gospel which can all too easily be dismissed in private or non-liturgical
3 prayer. In liturgical prayer, the use of the most profound symbols serves to draw us more deeply
4 into the reality of Christ's saving activity. Finally, in liturgical prayer, we find the Body of
5 Christ gathered and manifesting Christ's presence in the world and to us. In short, the liturgy is
6 the source of the activity of the Church and it is the fount from which the Church's power flows.
7 All liturgical prayer in some manner expresses the Paschal Mystery and beckons the participants
8 to enter into the mystery of Christ as one People, one Body in and of Christ.

9 These reflections certainly do not exhaust the connection of the Paschal Mystery and the
10 RCIA, but hopefully they provide food for thought and challenges for ministers of the RCIA.

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