

# STORYTELLING IN THE RCIA PROCESS

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**T**HE RITE of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) currently has more than a fifteen year pastoral history of experimental implementation. Almost universally its proponents and participants alike are enthusiastic about its results. Integral to several stages and specific activities in the process of catechizing and incorporating new members into the Catholic ecclesial community is a reliance on the power, immediacy and intimacy of storytelling. Much of the effectiveness of the RCIA process in fostering conversion in the catechumens and renewal in members of the RCIA community is a result of the variety of ways storytelling is employed. Further, an understanding of the uses of narrative and its predictable effects on those who participate in telling their stories and sharing those of others could help people involved in the RCIA maximize those benefits in the programme. Finally, this appreciation of the storytelling process has implications for developing ways in which pastoral workers could honour and elicit the stories of faith journeys within the larger community of faith.

## *Uses of story*

The RCIA has clearly been implemented as an organic process rather than as a purely instructional programme. It seeks to foster conversion to an adult Christian life through several interrelated aspects of the programme. In every one of these aspects, storytelling is employed in a significant way.

Pre-catechumens enter the process by telling the story of the movements of grace that attracted them to investigate Catholic Christianity more closely. Initially, they tell this story in an interview with the director of the RCIA and again in some detail to the other pre-catechumens and the support staff. In this initial phase of the process, the recounting of these life-stories fosters the development of a community of searching companions. Staff members tell their stories, too, implying that Christian life is itself a journey of continuous conversion. At this stage, story is used as

a way for people in the group to get to know one another in a personal way and become comfortable with one another.

Personal narratives are the most direct and immediate way others can share another's experiences that may be quite different from one's own. A sense of another's lifestory tends to foster acceptance of differences and reverences for the other on the basis of the understanding that results from the concreteness and affective immediacy of narrative. Within the programme, the stories narrated have something to do with the deeper desires of the participants' hearts—the call to Christian life. The entire programme helps articulate and shape the growing awareness of the Spirit of Jesus moving within each participant and the community.

The role of the sponsor is potentially a powerful model for relationships in the Christian community. The pre-catechumen is ideally presented by a sponsor, a Catholic, already known and admired for personal witness. The sponsor's role is to be the primary faith companion of the catechumen throughout the process and after full incorporation into the Church, if also the godparent. The sponsor is present for all the major rites and as many of the catechetical sessions as possible. The sponsor is the one who shares the evolving journey of the catechumen most intimately and regularly. This peer relationship is envisioned as fully mutual. Both share their faith journeys and experiences with one another. This relationship is one of the primary contexts for personal storytelling in the programme.

Consultation with several RCIA directors revealed that this relationship in actual practice is the least dependable and most varied of all other components of the programme.<sup>1</sup> Many catechumens present themselves for the catechumenate. In this case, the director assigns a person willing to serve as a sponsor, and time is needed for a relationship to develop. Frequently, former catechumens are anxious to play this role as a way of continuing their own growth as well as participating in evangelization. Others who want to be renewed in their faith are themselves being re-catechized as they journey with another. And sometimes the Catholic spouse sponsors the non-Catholic partner often to the spiritual benefit of the marriage but perhaps to the detriment of making a connection to the parish community.

Some programmes rely on the sharing that goes on between catechumen and sponsor as the primary one-on-one relationship of the candidate with a member of the community. Others also

recommend spiritual directors to the catechumens as a much more focused arena for expressing and exploring the movements of grace and personal change occurring in the process.<sup>2</sup> Depending on the number of catechumens, the RCIA director may serve as an informal spiritual director in the process of conducting the required interviews and in responding individually to catechumens before or after formal sessions.

The interpersonal skills of sponsors are the key to this part of the process. The sponsor needs to be able to articulate his or her own faith story without imposing it as the only available model. Several other renewal programmes help develop these skills such as Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, Renew and, of course, the Twelve Step Programme of Alcoholics Anonymous. However, many Catholics who grew up in the pre-Vatican II Church are unaccustomed to such self-disclosure. Within the English-speaking world, there are also major cultural differences which inhibit such self-disclosure. As a result, sponsors vary in their ability to share their faith journeys appropriately.

Secondly, the ability to listen is a rare and precious gift. Even more important for the catechumen than receiving the sponsor's story is the patient listening into speech of delicate, surprising and even strange experiences as the catechumen seeks to notice what is happening and to integrate these changes into his or her identity. Storytelling is a primary way people construct and reconstruct their identities throughout life.<sup>3</sup> The opportunity to tell this story encourages the meaning-making process and the integration of new experience. Although the quality of the catechumen/sponsor interaction may vary considerably from parish to parish and from individual to individual, it is not the only locus of narrative activities. The pre-catechumens and catechumens are also receiving their introduction to Catholicism in a narrative fashion. Many of the formal topical presentations include a form of personalized witness narrative. These more personal stories are interwoven with the stories of God's people in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and the story of the Church and parish.

Christian faith is contextualized in a rich narrative tradition.<sup>4</sup> Jesus relied on the symbolic power and imaginative force of the parabolic form to entice his hearers first of all to imagine a world in which God's *basileia* holds sway, to imagine how things would change, and then to embrace that reality which Jesus was making present in their midst. This experience was so dynamic that the

New Testament writers developed a new narrative form—gospel—which linguistically represents the story of Jesus and the amazing things that happened to the people who encountered him.

Conversion takes place in the world of the imagination before changes are embodied in outer life. To repent is literally to change one's mind, to change the way one thinks and envisions reality. Some stories subvert the world of our ordinary expectations. This is the very nature of parable. Other stories create world. They reassure us that all is ultimately right with our dominant vision of life despite disturbing evidence to the contrary. Such stories are technically named myth.<sup>5</sup>

The gospel narratives contain both kinds of story. Parable draws us into the future, into the hidden yet real activity of God in our midst. The parables of the kingdom help us imagine the way things ought to be and already are when we cooperate with God's reign in us. The Jesus story provides us with a myth in which the disciples experienced God's presence in their midst in the person of Jesus. This myth shows us how people could not be unhappy in Jesus's presence, how people were energized to believe, to be healed, to love one another, to assume their identities as beloved of God, despite oppressive social, political and religious structures and personal sin. And this story asserts the ultimate victory of life over death, good over evil, justice over injustice, peace over violence, and compassion over hatred in the crucified yet risen Jesus whom we encounter in this story and in this community.

The catechumens are constantly invited to find themselves and their story in the story of Jesus and his followers. And as these stories interact, subtle and not so subtle changes begin to take place. Some people experience an increasing consonance between their story and the Jesus story. They discover they already have been implicitly living in harmony with it, but did not know it. Others discover that they are perhaps living a story which is significantly in conflict with the Jesus story and are faced with the choice of relinquishing that which can not be harmonized with the Jesus story.<sup>6</sup>

A careful reading of the scriptural texts chosen for the successive rituals of the catechumenate reveal that they are among the most powerful pericopes embodying the dynamics of call, conversion, forgiveness and coming to belief in Jesus. They also reveal the confusion, doubt and resistance the disciples experienced as well as the mystery of unbelief—those who did not choose to follow Jesus.

The catechumens not only hear these gospel proclamations in liturgy, but find themselves ritually enacting them especially during the Purification/Illumination phase. The liturgy of the Word during the weeks of Lent further intensifies their reflection on these texts. And they are encouraged to meditate on them through the week. The structure of the catechumenate sessions usually provides some time for sharing the faith experiences of the week. And most directors provide some kind of structured reflection questions to aid in the assimilation of the presentations.

Thus, narrative forms and processes are employed to catechize, to share personal experiences, to provoke conversion, to supply a story in which to live, as a tool for awakening consciousness and encouraging appropriation of experiences of grace, and as the basis for developing personal relationships within the community of believers. The catechumen quite literally finds he or she is ritually enacting the story offered for reflection, above all in the celebration of the Paschal mystery and the culminating sacraments of initiation.

#### *Importance of storytelling*

The pervasiveness of storytelling in every phase of the RCIA process is clearly apparent. Why is this reliance on storytelling so effective? The results have a great deal to do with the nature of narrative itself. Narrative is the linguistic form which most adequately accounts for the temporal quality of human experience.<sup>7</sup> People quite literally maintain a sense of meaning and continuity of the self over time by constructing identity narratives. Most of the time this activity is unnoticed and almost unconscious. We organize our memories around a few key events which symbolize for us who we are and who we are becoming. This is the story frame into which we incorporate new experiences. If new experiences contest this basic sense of who we are, we must either reject the new experience or revise our identity narratives in such a way that the new experience redefines important aspects of the story.

Such a transformation of identity is fundamental to any conversion process. Conversion narratives tend to be organized around a temporal before and after theme. As the song, 'Amazing grace' puts it, 'I once was lost, but now am found/ Was blind but now I see'. People assimilating a change in self-understanding tend to emphasize the contrast between the former condition and the present one. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the contrast between the two experiences until gradually the person articulates

the past out of the present reality. *The confessions of St Augustine* give us a literary version of a process that often remains somewhat incoherent unless a narrative occasion encourages the telling.<sup>8</sup> Augustine, ten years after his conversion, reinterprets his pre-conversion life as well as his post-conversion one as the faithful working of God's grace. He recounts the story of his sinfulness in order to discover even there that God was with him and gradually leading him to full conversion and awareness of God's activity in his life. The result is a unified story creating continuity out of seeming discontinuity.

Within RCIA processes, I suspect significant differences occur between first world and third world cultural contexts in the way storytelling supports the conversion process of the catechumen. Many people in first world countries suffer from a sense of meaninglessness and incoherence. Life appears to be without form, without direction and without relationship to a Divine other. A sense of isolation, lack of commitment beyond self-interest and a loss of a sense of community are almost pervasive.

In this context, if people are encouraged to recount their life stories in the presence of someone who is responsive to questions of meaning and who lives some form of personal faith, they discover that in fact they do have story, and life has more coherence than at first appeared. The process of actually telling their story begins to reveal its features to themselves. In this first world context, pre-catechumens are likely to discover continuity between who they felt themselves to be before the process and how they understand themselves in the process. For them, the before and after theme may be less dominant than the integration of seemingly unrelated subplots into a now dominant plot of Christian identity. For all of us the activity of telling creates meanings through the process of constructing the narrative.<sup>9</sup>

In third world contexts which are predominately non-Christian, the need to tell and re-tell the before and after story within the community of faith may have an even greater urgency. For these new Christians, embracing Christianity means not only a radical change in personal identity, but the loss of a whole way of life and relationships within an extended family or tribe. Because these cultures are also predominately oral, story-telling serves multiple functions in the absence of universal literacy. In this instance, the new Christians are confronted with the task of reconstructing their personal identities through strong identification with the Christian

community. The new identity has to be constructed in the face of strong social pressures outside the community which contest it. The new identity is defended by frequent repetition of their stories personally and communally.

One of my students from Ghana frequently rehearses his story. He is the only Christian in an extended Muslim family. He encountered Christianity through a soccer player who invited him home and to his church. The Christian had to offer assurance of food and hospitality should the Muslim's mother literally refuse to feed him were he to become a Christian. In this type of culture to become a Christian is to risk the most fundamental affectional bonds and material support in a communal system. The Christian community must offer an equally strong communal identity to its new members. This it does by continuously telling the story of who we are and offering an alternative social system to the one relinquished through conversion.

Support for constructing, changing and developing adequate identity narratives does not exhaust the function of narrative activity within communities of faith. In the context of RCIA or spiritual direction, individuals are encouraged to relate stories of religious significance. The religious significance of an experience is, of course, a matter of judgement. In the process of RCIA or other occasions which elicit stories that touch on the depth dimension of human experience, people often discover the Divine Mystery at work in their lives in unsuspected ways. By their nature these experiences are subtle, elusive and complex.

In order to do justice to the meaning inherent in such experiences, several attempts to tell the story are often required before the narrator is satisfied with his or her own realization of its significance and implications. The narrative rendering of this kind of experience also tends to establish the person's attitude toward God and others. The story embodies a feeling tone and attitude toward the event which is reinforced in the process of telling and fixed in memory. The person often adopts this same attitude toward subsequent experiences of religious significance.<sup>10</sup>

The opportunity to tell such faith stories also has the effect of encouraging a person to notice and respond to God's on-going activity. Taking the time to recount the experience gives it a sense of reality, represents the experience to both the narrator and the auditors, and intensifies the need to respond. People who do not relate their religious experiences or record them in a journal tend

to 'forget' or 'ignore' their implications. The pressing events of daily life by their sheer quantity and ordinary social reinforcement often crowd out the memory of even quite powerful religious experiences. The opportunity to relive the experience in its narrative presentation becomes sacramental. God's activity often becomes present again in the telling for both the narrator and audience. For the narrator, this reconnection with the divine activity may precipitate moral struggle. One is presented with a choice—to put one's life in harmony with this experience or to repress it and its implications. For the privileged audience to these stories, another's religious experience may evoke fresh response to one's own God experience. The gospel—the Good News of the Christ life enfleshed in this person's story—addresses the sponsor, spiritual director or catechumen and nurtures faith in a reciprocal way.

Within the RCIA it is obvious that the continual opportunity to talk about what is happening in small groups, with the sponsor, RCIA director or spiritual director, helps maintain and support the conversion experience. Since this is the case, it is important to explore how the ministers surrounding the catechumen might maximize the inherent benefits of narrative through their responses.

#### *Responding to religiously significant narratives*

Probably the weakest area in the use of storytelling in the RCIA, as well as in other forms of grassroots theological reflection processes, is the response given to participants' stories. As is clear from the above description, quite a lot occurs for people simply through the creation of narrative opportunities which invite and encourage them to articulate their spiritual identities and on-going religious experiences. This the RCIA does exceedingly well as does individual spiritual direction. What seems to be less focused is a process of co-interpretation of the presented narratives in relationship to the Christian tradition. And for the RCIA this is an important facet. How do the ministers of the RCIA help the catechumen make connections between his or her story and the Jesus Story or the Church's story at an explicit level?

RCIA directors seem to be theoretically vague when they talk about this function. Often this process of making the connections is assumed. Frequently, the directors themselves make these connections unself-consciously in a spontaneously intuitive fashion. The ability to respond to the theological content and scriptural paradigms of participants' stories requires in the minister theological



training which has been functionally internalized and skills in facilitation. This dual combination enables a facilitator to elicit aspects of an experience that have not reached narrative expression because of an intuitive feel for the God mystery underlying a partial narrative.

Inviting further elaboration of a story encourages the participant to notice and embrace elements in the experience either not understood or new. Thus, a facilitator may help the participant interpret the experience more accurately by eliciting the parts that did not fit the old frames of reference. Once greater elaboration occurs, a facilitator can then pose questions such as 'Could this experience of loss be anything like the way Mary Magdalen felt in the garden on Easter?' or 'The feelings you are describing about what being a Christian will mean sound like those recorded by the disciples in Mark's gospel. Do you see any connection?' or 'The way you talk about your approach to the people around you reminds me of Dorothy Day. Do you know her story?'

Interventions such as these further the catechumens' understanding of their stories in light of the larger tradition which they may not yet grasp sufficiently to do on their own. Thus, the ministers who receive such faith stories may further the catechumens' growth in the Christian life by inviting further elaboration, connecting them to the tradition and enlarging their interpretive frame of reference.

### *Conclusions*

The quality of relationships and the mutual encouragement in faith which result from the kind of storytelling described in this essay suggest that the large community of faith might benefit from incorporating some of these processes into its on-going life. As a formative process, the RCIA model is already influencing formation programmes for religious congregations. These congregations adopt similar narrative processes and interpersonal models of support. The diaconate formation programme in Oakland began with an extensive narrative theology unit which enabled the participants to articulate their own stories in interaction with each others' and the core theological content of the programme. Again, they were supported by spiritual direction and group processes which provided forums for narratively reflecting on their changing stories—discovering there both continuity and discontinuity as they progressed

through their programme. This tendency to use this model in all formation programmes is to be encouraged.

But what about the rest of us? Those who are able to take advantage of spiritual direction have an opportunity in which to relate religiously significant narratives in a confidential and intimate context. However, the spiritual direction relationship neither offers the mutuality of genuine peer-sharing nor does it fully embody the communitarian dimension of Christian life.

The fact that the sharing of stories occurs in the RCIA in an atmosphere and structure of mutuality and communality suggests that to do so has the effect of building up the community of faith through these interactions at a personal and meaningful level. As the Church continues to renew itself along the lines of Vatican II, the majority of its members need to be engaged in a process of re-articulating Christian life and faith in the light of these changes in our personal and communal identities. To create places in community where these stories of faith, challenge, change and new life can be told in a welcoming and receptive atmosphere could do much to further the mature faith development of the already baptized and greatly support the faith-filled lives of community members. Finally, we need to think of strategies that enable members of the Catholic ecclesial community to relate to one another out of the centrality of lived faith and less out of the more peripheral elements that used to define who belonged to this community, such as fish on Fridays. These strategies or occasions for faith-sharing need to be characterized by mutuality, and be as simple as one-on-one parish visiting and as complex as the RCIA which forms a microcosm of the entire parish community.

#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> See the author's *Uncovering stories of faith* (New York, 1989), for a treatment of the narrative aspects of spiritual direction.

<sup>3</sup> See Stroup, III, George W.: *The promise of narrative theology* (Atlanta, 1981), for an extensive discussion of the narrative construction of identity.

<sup>4</sup> It is this insight which gave rise to narrative theology which developed as part of biblical studies, ethics, and theology of experience.

<sup>5</sup> Crossan, John D.: *Dark interval: towards a theology of story* (Allen, Texas, 1975), demonstrates the way scriptural narratives interact with our view of life.

<sup>6</sup> Robert McAfee Brown in 'My story and "The Story"' emphasizes this point in an early piece of narrative theology. *Theology Today* 32 (July 1975), pp 166-173. John Navone and Thomas Cooper both in *Tellers of the Word*, (New York, 1981) and also in an essay for *Christian initiation resource*, 'Finding ourselves in the Jesus story' (New York, 1983), develop these themes.

<sup>7</sup> Crites, Stephen: 'The narrative quality of experience', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (September 1971), pp 291-311 persuasively argues for the correspondence between narrative form and the human experience of time.

<sup>8</sup> Roy Fairchild, in *Lifestory conversations*, (New York: 1977) elaborates briefly the psychological effect of an occasion for organizing one's story in this pamphlet designed to prepare volunteer evangelizers to elicit such pastoral conversations in the Presbyterian Church.

<sup>9</sup> See Ricoeur, Paul: 'The narrative function' in *Semeia* 13 (1978), pp 177-202.

<sup>10</sup> See Shea, John: chapter three of *An experience named Spirit*, (Chicago, 1983), for his compelling development of the specific role of storytelling in relationship to religiously significant experiences.