

MISSION THROUGH THE RCIA

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FOR ABOUT FIVE years I have been leading the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) in a city-centre parish. In 2018 one candidate was received into full communion in June and a catechumen was baptized and confirmed in November. (Candidates are those who have already been baptized in another Church; catechumens are those who are not baptized at all.) Three adults who had been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church were confirmed at the Easter Vigil. As in January 2019 there were no enquirers, it seemed a good time to reflect on the process and how it is being run in our parish, before a restart after Easter. We now have three men who started the course in May 2019.

There are many different ways of leading the RCIA, and each group is individual in its development. The challenge is to be flexible, to impart the knowledge of Catholicism that is necessary and, above all, to develop the individual's relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit—which is what it is really all about. This faith is then incorporated and nourished within the Church, through the sacraments and teaching. These are simply reflections on my own personal experience of leading such groups in a city-centre church.

Because it is the main point of outreach to the world outside the church, advertising is an important consideration. A notice in the parish weekly bulletin will only reach existing church congregations. So we have tried printing leaflets to be passed to friends, local cafés and other public places. As far as I know, there has been no response to any of this. What enquiries there have been come either from casual explorers in the church—which is open every day, with Mass at 12.15 every weekday—or through the parish website. Our group has been widened to include lapsed Catholics as well as adults who have missed out on confirmation for a number of reasons: moving house, moving school, and so on. A good proportion of any such group consists of non-Catholics who have Catholic partners.

Challenges

The opening session of any series is, of course, given over to introducing ourselves to each other and hearing people's different reasons for coming to the group, if they do not mind sharing them. This is the first chance of learning about any existing Christian background, and immediately raises at least two challenges (let's not call them problems). There are vast differences in background knowledge.

Some enquirers are practising Anglicans, who may be discontented or confused with the Church of England or with some of its doctrines or practices. At least two catechumens I have had were Chinese. One was studying at the university but had only basic English. The other had come to the UK some years previously to study, and was working full-time as an electrical engineer. Both had Catholic partners and are now married. Neither had anything more than a very basic and idiosyncratic knowledge of the Catholic Church. Of two potential confirmands, one wanted to be married at her family church in Goa, where confirmation was required, and the other was to be godfather to his brother's child in Poland and, again, confirmation was required. He was just seventeen and there was no tradition of his family in Poland attending a church; he was living with his mother and her boyfriend in England. Sometimes over the years a group has included highly intellectual individuals, together with others who had only very basic education. How do you address all these different needs while keeping the attention of all?

The second challenge is that the people in any group do not necessarily all start at the same time. If we start in September but have an enquiry in May, I do not feel it is right to leave the May enquirer four months before replying to his or her questions. In fact, I usually carry on meeting right through the year, although I try and start the formal agenda in September. If someone joins the group a few sessions into the programme, do we go back to the beginning or just expect him or her to catch up somehow?

Then there is the question of the agenda: the programme itself. There are numerous guides, plans and suggestions for this. I have found the choice bewildering. No one programme seems to be suitable for everyone. Although one year we had six catechumens and candidates, it is more usual to have three, two or even just one. That makes for a very small group. Others do come just to join in: occasionally we have a rough sleeper who likes the warmth, the tea and the company—who am I to turn him or her away? Some previous members seem to like coming back, but this usually dies away within months.

Each member of the group needs a sponsor to support him or her through the process. Qualified people in the parish who might be able to help are not easy to find, and coming down to the city centre on a dark evening is not the most attractive of activities. We hold the class in the early evening to make it easy for city workers to come and also so that people can fulfil other engagements if they need to later on. I strongly believe that a group session should ideally be supplemented with one-to-one chats wherever possible. This, maybe, is a task for the sponsor, who should be involved from the beginning. Where a person has a Catholic partner, this is usually no problem. If someone has come from 'nowhere', as it seems, then maybe the group leader should either do extra follow-up him- or herself, or introduce the person carefully to a suitable potential sponsor. When we resumed this year after Easter, we hoped to have assembled a team of people who were also prepared to do one-to-one sessions where needed and appropriate. We are still working on this.

What are we trying to impart to enquirers? Some obvious topics for the beginning of the course, depending on their background, are:

- a knowledge of who Christ is and an idea of the Trinity; we start with their existing idea of God (some people do not seem to have one);
- basic prayers (the Our Father, Hail Mary), practices and beliefs (the creed) of the Catholic Church;
- an experience of God in prayer;
- how to behave in a Catholic church: the sign of the cross, genuflection, holy water and so on;
- an introduction to the Bible;
- salvation history, as found and recorded in the Bible;
- the significance of Mary;
- the sacramental life of the Church; Church as sacrament.

Later on, we move in more detail to the sacraments, the various seasons and teachings related to the liturgical year, and considerations of morality and social justice. The list of topics is vast and never exhausted.

What are the problems? There needs to be plenty of time for discussion and to pursue individual lines of thought. Jesus was born into a context. A whole people had been brought into being by God's direct intervention and taught over centuries about what God was like, what God wanted and what God was going to do: namely, send a Messiah, a chosen one. When

Jesus came, there were ways of recognising him, through reference to scripture. So do we start with the Old Testament and move on from there? Where is the context for Christ in the secular world which is, say, 95 per cent of the mindset of many of those starting instruction in the faith?

If I start with creation, it is often some weeks before we get on to what some people regard as the essentials of the faith. Meanwhile, these poor confused people are trying to go to Mass and understand their way around it. So, we break off to go through the form of the Mass. Sometimes I feel as though we are embarking on university before taking GCSEs! Some people consider that we should start off with simply sharing what we believe as Catholics, until a mindset begins to develop within which things begin to make sense. Obviously this is a reasonable line to take. But, to me, it separates people's existing life and experience from the new teaching. I would prefer to take them from where they are, answer their questions as well as I can, and gently try to move them along. They may suddenly make a great bound forward and begin to put things together for themselves. If they have a partner, this makes things much easier as they can discuss it together 'out of hours'.

With the seventeen-year-old Polish boy who needed to be confirmed in order to be a godparent, and who claimed to have no knowledge of Christianity, I eventually realised that the problem was that he was learning the faith in English. It was making little connection with what he had somehow absorbed for most of his life in Polish. Today, we cannot take for granted any more a basic knowledge of Christian stories. You cannot rely on school religious education to have given any knowledge at



all. How do you sort out confusion of Jesus with the baby in the bulrushes rescued by the Egyptian princess? Especially when someone has barely heard of Moses—unless he or she has seen a film. I have two wonderful charts from 1983 published by *Éditions de l'École* which show salvation history from Abraham up to the birth of Christ and then from then up to the present. They show what was going on in the contemporary world at the time of biblical events. The Christian one shows when the Church was taken to each country—of particular interest to the Chinese!

I am beginning to realise that, for some, at least two years of instruction are preferable. But for others—for example a discontented Anglican—six months seems a long time to wait. As in all mission ventures, flexibility seems to be the key word, along with a week-by-week discernment of what is needed.

- Do we start with where they *are*, or do we start with building a new mindset within which Jesus can be found?
- How much time is needed? This obviously varies with the individual. Some become very anxious to be able to receive the sacraments. Some need to be received into the Church because of dates already set, such as a wedding.
- Many of the doctrines that we hold can only begin to be understood with the help of the sacramental grace received through baptism, the eucharist, the giving of the Holy Spirit. How do we expect people to understand without these helps?

So—discernment is a key issue here. We need to discern fairly early on the best way of leading each particular enquirer. Is a group the best method for him or her? Is it a practical possibility? Would the person cope better with a one-to-one experience?

Suggested Solutions

A combination of many methods seems to me to work best. The agenda for an hour-long session might look like this:

- welcome and discussion (15 minutes);
- short presentation on an aspect of faith with discussion, together with handout for home consideration (30 minutes);
- meditation and prayer, maybe with a verse from scripture (15 minutes).

There may be extra time at an agreed point for individuals, as required, possibly with the sponsor or another appropriate person.

**Developing
their own
relationship
with God
through prayer**

In addition to the various topics to be discussed, I try to emphasize the vital importance of people developing their own relationship with God through prayer. I might use an Ignatian-style meditation on John 1:38: ‘What are you looking for?’ or ‘What do you want?’ Another subject for meditation which goes down very well later in the course is the Prodigal Son.¹ It leads to discussion with which everyone can join in. Ignatian imaginative contemplation is a very helpful method of prayer in this context, partly because it takes seriously where the members of the group are at the moment, and the actual circumstances of their lives. I find I draw heavily on my own experience of the Spiritual Exercises. I also make sure the group members are aware of internet resources for daily prayer, and other activities in the parish where they can meet for prayer and get to know more people.

In all this I have to bear in mind constantly that many people have no Christian background and no previous knowledge of the Bible. So when considering creation and the fall, for example, I tend to focus on the general state of the world and instances (which abound!) of sinful attitudes in the secular world: lack of consideration at work, exploitation of workers, injustice, destructive anger, revenge and so on. Everyone contributes to this. If personal sin is raised, then I follow the questions and train of thought, but say that this will be dealt with more fully later in the course. Until people have experienced love, honesty, integrity and even holiness, talk of ‘sin’ tends to become just a question of breaking rules, which is not especially helpful to the discussion.

In my limited experience, few come to the group because of a sense of sin. It is also quite difficult to talk about without appearing to be intrusive. If participants want to share aspects of their personal life, that usually comes later. At the beginning, they are feeling their way, testing the water, and I think it is important to keep discussion fairly light and general. I make it plain that if anyone is worried, he or she is free to see a priest to talk about personal issues. General questions about what is sinful can be raised, if anyone wants to.

I feel that the new enquirers should be allowed to develop a general sense of personal goodness and, in consequence, personal sin, over weeks and months. This can come through their experiences in prayer, by mixing with some of the more holy people in the church, by extending

¹ See Eric Jensen, ‘Hell and the Image of God in the Spiritual Exercises’, *The Way*, 57/3 (July 2018), 91–102, especially 92–97.

their reading to include devotional books and, of course, the Bible. I think it is important to stress the new life to which they are called, the joy and peace which can be given, the whole new perspective on ordinary life which true Christianity brings, rather than getting tied up with the breaking of rules and regulations. To appreciate the gravity of sin, we need a strong sense of the good, the holy and the upright.

There are plenty of opportunities to return to the subject of sin: when we consider advent and lent; when we approach the passion and cross; and when participants are prepared for their first confession. For those who are to be baptized, I am told that confession is not strictly necessary since baptism wipes out all their sins. In spite of this, I feel that omitting it may be a procedural mistake! People need to express in words to another person (the priest) what has damaged them, whether it comes from inside themselves or from the actions of other people.

There are many encouraging moments along the way. One of the most moving was when we were talking about the rosary. We went round the group, with each person saying one Hail Mary in a different language. We had Mandarin, Spanish, Polish, a Goan dialect, English and Latin. At the end we all felt a palpable sense of peace and unity.

Intellectual discussion is inevitably a part of any RCIA group—and also important—but it can be a bit of a distraction. I allow so much, and then tend to recommend relevant books, pointing out that there will be years to discuss and learn about the intricacies of the faith in the future. This is partly because I have found that any such discussion only engages a few of the group and the others may get a bit lost. It is also because it takes away from the equally essential task of awakening their relational side. They need to experience silent prayer and meditation, to get to know that Jesus is real. I try and encourage them to pray at home and certainly to come to Mass. I make a few suggestions and give practical information. It helps if the church also has prayer groups or social groups which they might like to join.

People come to the RCIA for many different reasons and I find the Parable of the Sower often seems very relevant. There are those who start off well but we rarely see them after a few weeks once they have been baptized. Others drop out of the course after one meeting. Have they found another course at a more convenient time? Have they decided it is not for them? Have other activities cropped up or their circumstances changed and they feel it is not the right time for such a major commitment? We just do not know. But, thank God, there are always one or two who



embrace the teaching wholeheartedly and become devout and active members of the congregation—at our church or another.

I am finding one or two examples of people enquiring about the Catholic Church because their interest has been aroused by reading or studying history. Because Christianity—especially Catholic Christianity—is very much less familiar than it was a few decades ago, could it be that this ignorance is in fact inspiring people to rediscover what it might be all about? Practically every other subject under the sun is the focus of someone's interest; could it be that Catholicism might actually benefit from being unfamiliar? One thing I do know: without the movement of the Spirit and the gradual growth that this brings about, there is no chance of getting very far. As with someone making the Spiritual Exercises, the RCIA leader's task is to discern where and how the Spirit is working in this particular person, and to try to nourish and feed that in every way possible.

Further Thoughts on Ignatian Spirituality and the RCIA

As I reflect on the experience of these five years, I realise the particular value of my own background in Ignatian spirituality. Our church was staffed by Jesuits when I first came to it, and I was instructed and received as a Roman Catholic by the Jesuit parish priest in 1969. He introduced me to St Beuno's spirituality centre, and I returned there regularly to make an eight-day retreat and also spent time in the summer helping out with the garden. At Christmas for several years I helped with the administration of the New Year conferences. This was in the 1970s and 1980s, when St Beuno's was beginning to open up the house to laypeople. I also did

one of the training courses for giving the Spiritual Exercises. Michael Ivens became my spiritual director. As a leader of the RCIA, I believe it is important not only to impart knowledge about the Catholic Church, but also to share my own faith, as and when appropriate, according to the maxim that faith is caught not taught. It is not surprising if this comes over with an Ignatian flavour!

A major feature of the majority of those who have come for instruction is that they are all either students or are working full-time in business or industry. The students are generally also working towards a position in the business world: one was studying business management to work in his father's company in Costa Rica; the Chinese lady is currently doing a PhD in communications. There was only one who I would say was 'academic'. So, with their dominant interests in the world around them, it seemed highly appropriate to start with considering creation and our role in it. The Spiritual Exercises, too, seems to begin and end with creation, from the Principle and Foundation at the beginning to the Contemplation to Attain Love at the end. Even pretending to be God looking down at the world and working out a solution to its problems provokes fruitful discussion, as well as material for private prayer. The consideration of sin and of misplaced desires and aims, which sets the scene for a right discernment and a sound election, concerns real and actual choices in the factual situations where we find ourselves. Thinking about God as the source, the author and originator of all our gifts, abilities and talents, widens the group's image of God enormously. Everything which is good stems from God—we are collaborators with God.

In an RCIA class there is obviously not time to go into any of this in depth. It is a question of imparting a vision, creating a context in which questions can be asked and a perspective through which to understand the confusing world around us. I tackle the problem of miracles: I cannot ignore the miracles of the Gospels, nor do I wish to banish awkward discussions of the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus, which may sound like fairy stories to those encountering them for the first time. Yes, I believe in them, but I take seriously how they sound in today's context.

So I use an image of two jigsaw puzzles. The one we are used to is the normal jigsaw of everyday life, which somehow fits together, and in which there are always many loose pieces not yet in the pattern. But then I say there is a greater jigsaw. Sometimes we come across one of the pieces, which is simply too large to fit into our normal jigsaw. This might be a special feeling at a sunset; a view from the top of a mountain; a

moment when we sense something of the beyond; the birth of a son or daughter—or a miracle. In time, if we treasure and store these moments, they begin to fit together into this greater jigsaw—the one that can accommodate miracles. I can start from this image to introduce the concept of the sacraments: moments when the ordinary is transformed into something greater. Finally, I can introduce a little eschatology: the concept of the new heaven and the new earth which awaits us at the End.

For the beginners, those without any Christian background, I rely heavily on working from what they do know and understand, and Ignatian spirituality gives me the confidence to do this. As the members of the group develop, it is possible to perceive the possible direction of their future spirituality, which is not always Ignatian. One girl was drawn to Carmelite spirituality; I could see that two other members of the classes over the years might be happier within a Dominican atmosphere. That is not really my business. If I find they are exploring other ways, I try and recommend appropriate books or groups or websites. I am open about my own background, but stress that there are many ways to pray: we have at least one session specifically talking about all the different ways even just to start to pray. But I still find the material of the Exercises an appropriate beginning for everyone. I certainly draw attention to the Ignatian colloquy. I also often refer to the different ways of saying the Lord's prayer in the Spiritual Exercises: they seem to respond to this.²

We can have interesting discussion regarding the discernment of spirits—and even talk about what these spirits are anyway. Where do thoughts come from? Is there a personal element to evil or is it just 'negative forces'? I can say that people use different language to describe these types of experiences, but then affirm that I personally believe (as does the Church) in personal, planned and directed evil in certain circumstances—without getting too hung up on it. I may find that members of the group want to talk about some of the horror films that abound. It is helpful that I have seen some of them—though not always from my own choice! This also gives us a chance to speak about angels, which discussion is usually received well.

It is easy simply to quote church teaching on these matters and I do use the Catechism and encyclicals where relevant. In fact, that is always the next step after discussion on any topic. But to my mind, nothing is as effective for beginners as engaging with someone who actually believes

² See the Three Methods of Praying, Exx 238–260.

the various doctrines heart and soul, and not just because they are taught. Believing because they are taught is of course valuable, but fairly easy for a questioner to break down. If you have been through what I once heard Avery Dulles refer to as ‘the searing experience of radical doubt’, and have reached a profound level of belief which includes your reason and intellect—even though it does not answer all the questions—then your words are more likely to be heeded and taken seriously. You can even move from that position to saying that the Church’s doctrine has been developed through the centuries by holy people who have done just that: reasoned, and prayed, and been inspired by the scripture and the Holy Spirit. The teaching was not simply worked out as if the writers were at university preparing a thesis.

I am reminded of Newman’s ‘real’ and ‘notional’ assent (or, at least, my own interpretation of these terms, once read years ago).³ Sharing a personal ‘real assent’ and being authentic in oneself are powerful influences in the instruction. People who come for instruction are often seeking for answers—for meaning in their ordinary lives. Ignatian spirituality takes seriously their genuine worldly concerns and offers a bridge between the truths of Christian faith and the lives they are leading. It gives value to all the world, including their own work, their efforts and their own selves, but also sees injustice, poverty, evil in all its forms and seeks to remedy them. It points surely to the deeper mysteries, a deeper asceticism, which bring also the freedom to enjoy all things.

Other spiritualities may undoubtedly offer similar riches, but I can only write and share what I have myself experienced. Without the wide and deep experience of a lifetime of help from the Exercises I would in no way be able to face contentious and doubt-inducing issues head-on. But the group already knows the issues. This is what they want to talk about. And I think they are entitled to as much truth as I am able to share, even when this includes saying: ‘I simply don’t know the answer to that’.

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³ See John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns and Oates, 1874).