

ARE PARISHES READY, WILLING AND ABLE TO WELCOME PEOPLE INTO THE CATHOLIC FAITH?

A summary of a research report on the vitality of RCIA in Australian parishes (2017-2019)

SHARON BREWER

25 NOVEMBER 2020

My introduction to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was in our local parish in the late 1980s. Years later, when I was working as the parish sacramental co-ordinator, I administered the RCIA process and accompanied many people on their journey of faith. Then, as the diocesan RCIA coordinator for Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese I saw the various ways in which parishes offered the RCIA process. Over the last few years, a significant part of my work has been with the Catholic Enquiry Centre (CEC), a work of the Australian Catholic Bishops' National Centre for Evangelisation. A large focus of our ministry is helping enquirers navigate their journey into the Catholic Church.

For many years I have sensed that support for the RCIA process was waning. Maybe this was not surprising given the tragic things that have happened in our Church and a society that is highly secularised. It could easily be assumed that in this climate there would be little interest in the Catholic faith. And, if that were the case, what would the point be of implementing a RCIA process? However, in my work at the CEC, and from listening to members of the [Christian Initiation Australia Network](#) (CIAN), I am confident that there are people searching for God and who are interested in the Catholic faith. As well, there are people who want to return to the faith and others wishing to complete their sacraments of initiation. Thus, it has been disheartening to hear enquirers to the CEC relay stories of the lack of welcome they received when making their initial enquiries to a parish, and in some cases being told that they would have to go to another parish because RCIA wasn't being offered in the local parish.

These thoughts led me to propose a small-scale research project on the vitality of RCIA in Australian parishes as part of my ACU master's degree. In the second semester of 2019, a literature review was conducted to ascertain what other research had been done in this area. In short: in Australia, not much. There had been an attempt to survey dioceses quite a few years ago, but it appears no reports were published. There was certainly mention of RCIA, adult faith formation, outreach etc in the Plenary Council¹ reports. And from overseas there was some research by the US Centre for Applied Research (CARA)² and by sociologist David Yamane³.

With a lack of local research about what was happening, I launched into the development of a survey, welcoming input from a wide variety of people interested in this ministry. In early 2020 I distributed an electronic survey to every parish priest/administrator in Australia. Prior to the survey being distributed, a copy was sent to every diocesan bishop for his information. While the survey was addressed to the parish priest, he was able to delegate the completion of the survey to someone else in the parish, for example the RCIA coordinator or the pastoral associate. Parishes were sent a reminder about the survey after three weeks, technical assistance was offered and complete anonymity was assured. The survey process was approved by the Australian Catholic University (ACU) Human Research Ethics Committee. It was estimated that the survey would take no longer than 30 minutes to complete, assuming that the parish's sacramental registers were accessible and up-to-date.

Space does not allow a detailed report on the findings. However, the following summary might provide some insight into the current status of the RCIA process in Australia.

1. DISTRIBUTION AND COMPLETION OF THE SURVEY

The survey platform used for this research was Qualtrics, which was approved by the ACU. Surveys were successfully sent to 1,118 parishes out of a possible 1,300 parishes. Of the 1,118 surveys, 64 (5.72%) parishes returned a completed survey.

As participants had been provided with my email address for technical support, 33 (2.95%) emailed me a response rather than participate in the survey. No quantitative data could be captured from these emails. However, some comments have been included in this summary.

The following provides some brief details on how the survey was distributed and who responded.

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- 1 Dantis T, Bowell P, Reid S, Dudfield L. *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying. Final Report for the Plenary Council Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue*. <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FINAL-BOOK-v7-spread-version-LISTEN-TO-WHAT-THE-SPIRIT-IS-SAYING.pdf> Accessed May 23, 2020.
 - 2 Gaunt SJ, Thomas. *Pastoral Practice in Light of the National Statutes on the Catechumenate*. This is an unpublished report and was received via private correspondence with the author, in his role as Director, CARA. Received May 7, 2020.
 - 3 Yamane, David. *Becoming Catholic: Finding Rome in the American Religious Landscape* (New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Participation by state	Actual Numbers	Participating parishes (%)
NSW	13	20
ACT	2	3
Victoria	18	28
Tasmania	10	16
South Australia	2	3
Western Australia	6	9
Northern Territory	-	-
Queensland	13	20
Participation by geographical location <i>(based on classifications used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics)</i>	Actual Numbers	Participating parishes (%)
Within a major city	30	47
Within an inner regional area	16	25
Within an outer regional area	17	27
Within a remote area	1	2
Within a very remote area	-	-

N=64

2. CATECHUMENS AND CANDIDATES IN EACH PARISH AND THEIR ONGOING PARTICIPATION IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The RCIA process usually comprises people who have never been baptised (catechumens) and those who have been baptised, either in the Catholic Church or another Christian tradition (candidates), and who are looking to complete their sacraments of initiation. The following data gives an indication of how many parishes, of the 64, had no catechumens/candidates, and how many of the neophytes were still attending Mass.

(a) Catechumens

Of the 64 parishes:

- 38% had no catechumens in 2017
- 47% had no catechumens in 2018
- 34% had no catechumens in 2019

Of the 64 parishes:

- 55% of catechumens initiated in 2017 were still attending Mass
- 54% of catechumens initiated in 2018 were still attending Mass
- 54% of catechumens initiated in 2019 were still attending Mass

(b) Candidates – previously baptised Catholic

Of the 64 parishes:

- 80% had no candidates in 2017
- 72% had no candidates in 2018
- 69% had no candidates in 2019

Of the 64 parishes:

- 71% of candidates initiated in 2017 were still attending Mass
- 73% of candidates initiated in 2018 were still attending Mass
- 68% of candidates initiated in 2019 were still attending Mass

(c) Candidates – previously baptised in another Christian tradition

Of the 64 parishes:

- 67% had no candidates in 2017
- 64% had no candidates in 2018
- 66% had no candidates in 2019

Of the 64 parishes:

- 51% of candidates initiated in 2017 were still attending Mass
- 61% of candidates initiated in 2018 were still attending Mass
- 77% of candidates initiated in 2019 were still attending Mass

This section of the survey also recorded the geographical location of the parish. Anecdotally, there is a suggestion that regional areas have a higher “retention” rate than city areas⁴. I suggest that there is insufficient data to confirm this, but certainly there was no large disparity between city and regional areas.

⁴ The term “retention rate” may not be the most appropriate term, however, it is the phrase commonly used to refer to neophytes who are still practising their faith.

3. HOW IS THE RCIA PROCESS CONDUCTED IN PARISHES?

Participants were asked to briefly indicate which components of the Rite they usually use, some broader questions about discerning the readiness of a candidate and the process around keeping connected with the neophytes.

How is the RCIA process conducted in your parish	Participating parishes (%)
We have not used the RCIA process in the last three years.	17
Using the rituals of the RCIA process	
We celebrate the Rite of Acceptance.	53
We celebrate the Rite of Election.	56
Our usual practice is to baptise adults at Easter.	61
Our usual practice is to baptise adults whenever it is determined that they are ready.	16
Candidates are only ever fully initiated at the Easter ceremonies.	25
Candidates can be fully initiated whenever it is determined they are ready.	34
How are catechumens and candidates prepared for initiation into the Church?	
Catechumens are dismissed from the Sunday Mass after the Liturgy of the Word.	14
Candidates are dismissed from the Sunday Mass after the Liturgy of the Word.	13
We run regular catechetical sessions for all those preparing for full initiation (typically September through to Easter).	48
We design our catechetical sessions based on the individual needs of the adults.	50
We use a set program that is the same for all our catechumens and candidates.	27
All adults preparing for full initiation would be actively invited to other parish activities (e.g. prayer groups, social justice or outreach activities).	50
The neophytes gather regularly during the Mystagogy stage.	23

Pastoral care of catechumens and candidates	
On one or more occasions I have helped a catechumen or candidate discern that they are not ready to be initiated and should take some further time to prepare.	34
If an adult preparing for initiation was not attending Mass regularly, I would probably suggest that they delay initiation.	31
We are intentional about re-connecting with our neophytes during the first year following their initiation.	31
I would personally make contact with a neophyte if I knew that they weren't regularly attending Mass in the year following their initiation.	20

N=64

Participants able to select more than one option

Participants were asked who was usually involved in their parish RCIA process. Almost one half indicated that the parish priest and a team of parishioners accompanied the candidates (28/64). The remainder either did not have an RCIA process in the last three years, or the candidate met only with the priest or a designated person.

Participants were then asked if the parish priest, or someone from the parish team, had advised an enquirer that they should go to another parish for the RCIA process. Of the 64 participants, 12 said they had referred an enquirer on. This was either because the enquirer was not actually in that parish or that the parish did not offer the process every year.

Participants were then asked what they would do if a person interested in becoming a Catholic enquired outside the normal RCIA process time period, usually August/September through to Easter.

What would be offered	Participating parishes (%)
We would ask them to wait until the process started.	23
We would invite them to come to Mass.	59
We would connect them with some parishioners who might mentor them until the next RCIA process begins.	38

We have developed a year-round catechumenate process so it doesn't matter when an enquirer contacts us as they can be slotted in at any time during the year.	27
We offer several opportunities, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - prayer and meditation - invitation to speak with priest - make regular contact with them 	20

N=64

Participants able to select more than one option and provide comment.

4. FORMATION OF RCIA TEAM MEMBERS

Participants were asked if they felt that parishioners were confident, competent and willing to be part of the RCIA process.

Types of parishioner support	Participating parishes (%)
We have enough parishioners who are confident and keen to share their faith and are willing to assist with the RCIA process.	44
We have parishioners who would like to share their faith, but do not feel confident or competent to do so.	23
We have parishioners who are confident and competent to share their faith, but they indicate they are too busy to be involved with RCIA.	23
We do not have any parishioners who are willing or able to assist with RCIA.	6
Other: Participants indicated no RCIA process or also provided comments.	14

N=64

Participants able to select more than one option and provide comment.

5. RESOURCES FOR RCIA

When asked what resources are used for the RCIA process, the resourcefulness of RCIA practitioners was evident. The top four resources are listed below, but there was a broad range of resources, including several people who wrote their own material or adapted material to suit their candidates.

- Bible
- Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Study Guide (ICEL, St Pauls Publications)
- At Home with God's People (Brisbane)
- Catechism of the Catholic Church

Participants were asked about the formation they received in relation to the RCIA process and invited to provide relevant comments. Of the 64 responses received from parishes:

- 9% indicated that they did not need any help.
- 16% indicated that their diocesan office provided good training.
- 23% indicated that they do not have an RCIA team currently.
- 27% indicated that they had sent parishioners to an RCIA Conference.
- 28% parishes indicated that they offer faith formation for their parishioners.

There were many comments made in response to this question. Here is a sample:

"Parish numbers are low. The parish is 'static', with no new families coming from the Catholic school in the parish. Because the parish is static, it's dying. QUESTION: How is a dying parish brought back to life in a small, rural dying country town? (I don't know the answer)."

"Sadly everyone says it would be a good idea but don't want to be part of any training or preparation."

"With an aging practising population and the sheer distance any training courses are from us, it is near impossible to get them to travel that far and for that long to get to what is offered."

"At present we have an experienced team, however in the future there would be a need for a new process on how to train the team."

6. FINAL COMMENTS BY PARTICIPANTS

At the conclusion of the survey, participants were asked if they wished to make any further comments. A few of the priests (or their delegate) who emailed me directly also provided some very valuable feedback. The following provides a sample of the responses.

“Our priest carries the burden of two parishes and because he is so busy, does not engage in RCIA as much as we would like. I regularly confer with Father who is supportive—our good fortune! So many parishes do not have an RCIA, with the consequence that candidates are referred to us. We accept them, but as neophytes, they are likely to return to a more convenient parish. This does not trouble us, but it is part of the dynamic.”

“RCIA is not stand-alone: it is important how welcoming the church community is in receiving the catechumens. An experience of belonging to a community is as important if not more important than catechesis.”

“No need to comment as we have not used the RCIA process in the last 3 years (it hasn’t been used here for over 15 years).”

“It is very difficult to sustain the parish RCIA process due to lack of parishioners with adequate faith formation and personal capacity for catechesis of adults from a wide range of backgrounds. The parish priests have a superficial knowledge of what the RCIA process requires. They think it is just a series of lessons on doctrine and moral teaching of the Church. They do not understand that the parish community should be a primary source of catechesis and support for catechumens and candidates, nor do they appreciate that catechumens should have a strong faith before being fully initiated.”

“The RCIA process is dependent on the leadership in the parish and the diocese, if the leadership changes and wishes to use a different process then any processes in place are abandoned.”

“The RCIA process is a good way to get people into the life of the church but not enough to keep them there.”

“The RCIA/Rite of Christian Initiation of Children of Catechetical Age (RCICCA) cannot be left solely to priests, often isolated in small parishes, such are those in our diocese of xxx. We have no coordination for the RCIA/RCICCA across parishes, and the quality of any faith journey and celebration is at best poor or sketchy, with most who proceed through the RCIA/RCICCA fall away quickly (due in part to lack of discernment and no/poor Mystagogia).”

“The RCIA journey witnessed by our Parish community brings a demonstrated re-vitalisation to each of us. As co-ordinator and Pastoral Assoc. I am privileged to see how powerful RCIA is for all people of faith. For we continually grow as we journey with each other and the confidence we gain in expressing and witnessing God’s Spirit ALIVE! is life—giving to our Church. The process thus far has borne fruit and that truly is God’s work.”

FINALLY, WHAT CAN WE MAKE OF THIS?

Firstly, the low participation rate was certainly a disappointment. Could there be a correlation between the low response rate and interest in the RCIA process? To a certain extent, I believe there is. However, I do acknowledge the following as being possible reasons for the low engagement:

- COVID-19 restricted some participants from accessing their parish sacramental records.
- Some priests were new, or “taking care” of a parish and were not sure of the status of the RCIA locally.
- Several priests commenced the survey but did not complete it, possibly because they struck technical issues. As I had to comply with strict rules about anonymity of participants, I was unable to reach out to them to assist.
- Had the survey been managed by a church agency or PhD candidate, it might have attracted more interest.

Since the finalisation of the research, I have had a number of informal discussions about the findings. Some people have not been surprised by the low response rate because they believe it does correlate with the general lack of momentum in this ministry. Others have been a little defensive citing a lack of knowledge about the survey and suggesting that just because a parish doesn’t offer the RCIA process, it does not mean that they are disinterested in bringing people to the faith. It is difficult to argue with this assertion.

However, despite the low participation rate, my sense is that the survey does provide a stimulus for further thought and dialogue about how we evangelise and how we accompany people on the journey to full initiation into our Catholic faith, and beyond. Here are a few questions worth considering:

- How are programs, like Alpha, revitalising interest in RCIA? If there is evidence of this, would it encourage other parishes to undertake Alpha, or other similar programs?
- How can the Christian Initiation Adult Network support dioceses/parishes, especially those who do not have the means to financially support the resourcing of this ministry? (Noting that CIAN is self-funded by membership fees.)

- Similarly, what support can the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, possibly through the Catholic Enquiry Centre, the National Centre for Evangelisation or the National Liturgical Council, offer in this area of ministry?
- Do parish priests and seminarians require training in this ministry?
- Is there a correlation between the level of adult faith formation being offered in parishes and the offering of the RCIA process in the same parish?
- Could further research be undertaken to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the RCIA process in Australian parishes? This might enable those parishes who are using the RCIA process effectively to share their experiences and learnings.

Finally, if we accept what the Rite advises, that “the community must always be fully prepared in the pursuit of its apostolic vocation to give help to those who are searching for Christ”⁵, then Australian parishes should be encouraged and assisted in revitalising their efforts towards the RCIA process.

5 ICEL. *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Study Guide*. (St Pauls Publications, Sydney: 2018) Introduction, paragraph 9, page 5.