

C R E D O

AN RCIA PROGRAM

CATECHIST GUIDE



Dear RCIA Leader,

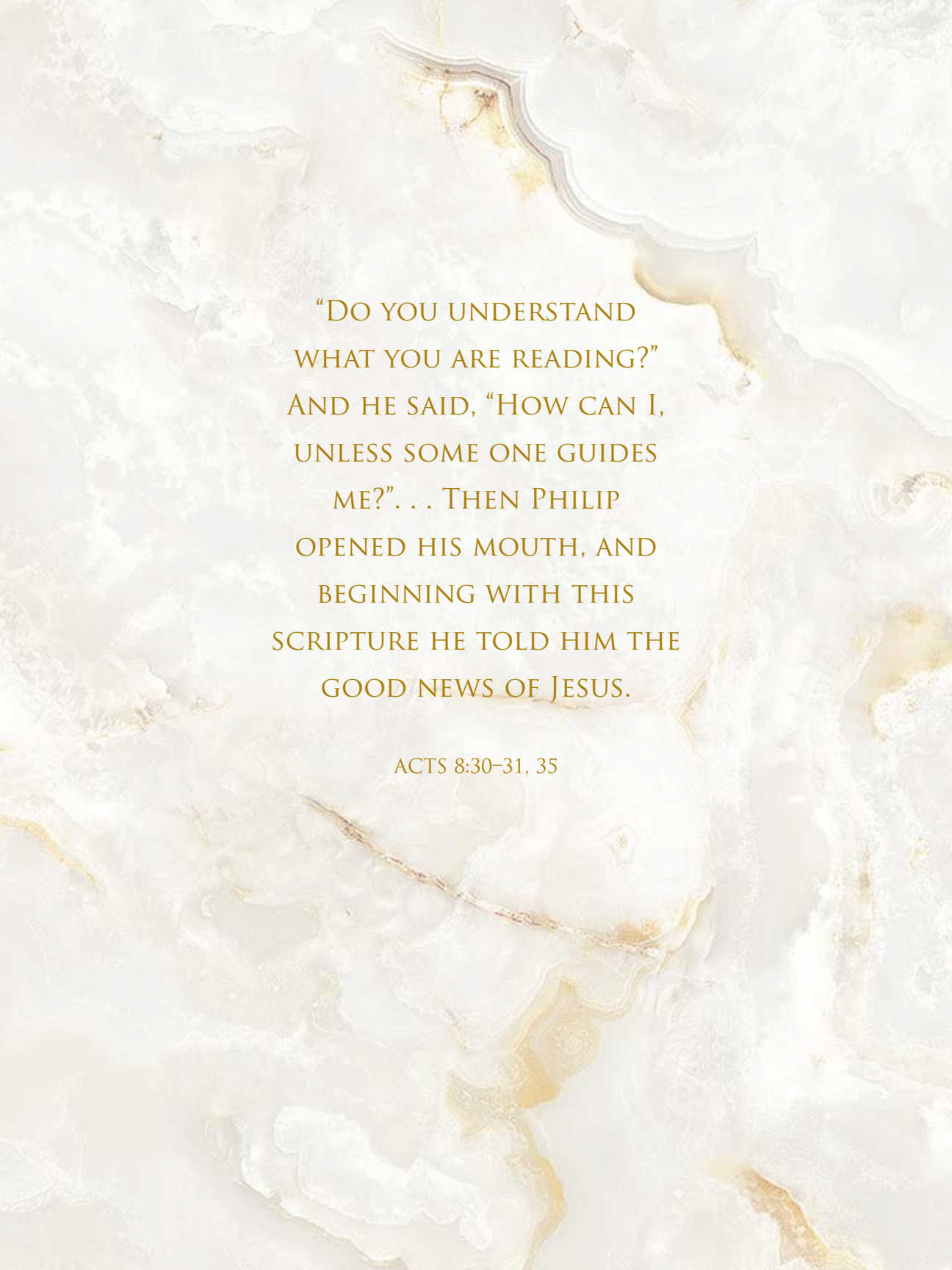
You hold in your hand a summary of the Catholic faith. As human beings, we hunger for truth and clarity about the most important things: God, happiness, and life everlasting. Through his Son, Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself to us and made known the truth on which our salvation depends. This sacred collection of truths is held fast as a rich and precious treasure by the Catholic Church, who shares it freely and joyfully with the world.

We have created this resource to assist you in the important work of communicating the Catholic faith. This program, entitled *Credo* (meaning “I believe”), takes its name from the first word of the Catholic profession of faith in Latin. Whether you are a priest, a catechist, or a director of religious education, *Credo* will help you summarize and hand on Catholic belief and practice to those who are inquiring or who are already on their way to becoming Catholic. The combination of video lessons and the written material included in the guides will give you a treasury of resources to introduce and teach the most important aspects of the Faith.

Credo is not intended to be a substitute for your RCIA ministry or the stewardship you exercise through RCIA. You remain the primary teacher, and your personal contact with students and attention to their individual needs is indispensable. This program can fit within your annual RCIA schedule and can be adjusted to best suit the needs of your group.

The material in this program has been supplied by the Thomistic Institute, which is an academic institute dedicated to bringing Catholic truth to the contemporary world and is an outreach of the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception (Dominican House of Studies) in Washington, DC. All of the authors and presenters in this program are Dominican friars of the Province of St. Joseph, and it is our pleasure to have partnered with the good people at Saint Benedict Press to assist you in the important work of evangelization.

In Christ,
Fr. Raymund Snyder, OP
Thomistic Institute
Director of Campus Programs and Evangelization



“DO YOU UNDERSTAND
WHAT YOU ARE READING?”
AND HE SAID, “HOW CAN I,
UNLESS SOME ONE GUIDES
ME?”. . . THEN PHILIP
OPENED HIS MOUTH, AND
BEGINNING WITH THIS
SCRIPTURE HE TOLD HIM THE
GOOD NEWS OF JESUS.

ACTS 8:30-31, 35



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LEADING RCIA

A GUIDE FOR PRIESTS, DEACONS, AND CATECHISTS

SECTION 1: WITNESS TO CHRIST

Jesus sent his disciples into the world and commissioned them to proclaim the good news of the Gospel. You, too—a baptized and confirmed Christian who has been chosen to teach the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults—share in this commission. Jesus is calling you to be a witness to his power, to the truth that he is alive and active today. If you rely on him, he will not fail to help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit!

This is the most necessary qualification to teach in an RCIA program: to be a disciple of Jesus. If you have a living relationship with him, and if you rely on his help to bring other people to know the peace and joy that comes from him alone, you are already well on your way to success.

Perhaps you feel like this is a tall order. Well, it is! No one is “qualified” from his or her natural talents or personal qualities to be a disciple of Christ, and no one has the power to bring it about, even less to draw others into the supernatural life of faith. But don’t worry; if you humbly place yourself at the feet of Jesus, if you ask him to transform you into a true disciple, if you invite him to be more present in your life and in your teaching, he will not fail to help you.

It is a great blessing and privilege to participate in the work of evangelization by assisting others through the process of RCIA. No book and no video series can substitute for what *you* will contribute: a living witness to the reality and power of Jesus and a living invitation to come to know him better and even to be inwardly transformed by his grace. Whether you are a priest, deacon, or a member of the lay faithful, your faith-filled witness to catechumens and candidates, your welcome and friendship, and your attention to their individual needs is indispensable.

For any RCIA program to be successful, this personal witness and accompaniment in discipleship must be paired with a coherent presentation of what Catholics believe. “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples” (Jn 8:31). The Catholic faith engages both the heart *and* the mind, as Jesus himself tells us (see Mt 22:37). That’s why we have called this program *Credo*: “I believe.” It is not intended to be a substitute for your own RCIA program but is a tool to assist you in your proper role. It can be challenging to set forth, accurately and persuasively, the essentials of the Catholic faith in the brief space of a few months. That is why this guide exists. It isn’t a substitute for your witness and presence but an important supplement to it. Your role remains primary. Strengthened by Christ’s grace, you will assist souls and draw them closer to Christ.

Credo at the Service of Your Parish

Credo puts a multitude of resources at your disposal. We have included this brief introductory section to suggest the ways you can best make use of these resources for your RCIA program or adult faith formation program.

If you have coordinated RCIA for many years and if your parish already has existing customs, this introduction will help you plan how to strengthen your current program with *Credo*. If you are responsible for RCIA for the first time, this introduction will provide a basic sketch and overview of the most important practical considerations.

If you are a pastor or the priest overseeing RCIA, you of course have an indispensable supervisory role. Since you are already experienced (and have received a full pastoral and theological formation in seminary), this guide will be helpful in organizing your program and making a plan for how to incorporate others into your ministry. If you are a priest and you typically run your RCIA sessions, *Credo* gives you a substantial base of teaching from which you can easily add your own insight, learning, and experience.

If you are a lay person or a deacon who has been delegated by the pastor to coordinate RCIA, you will of course need to work closely with your pastor throughout the process. This introduction will help you make a plan with the pastor and incorporate him in his proper role.

Everyone charged with coordinating the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults should have a copy of the current liturgical books for RCIA, which include the major and minor rites. These texts also contain explanatory introductions to the various rites and stages of RCIA as well as a general overview of each step. Everyone charged with coordinating RCIA should also familiarize themselves with any specific determinations set forth by the bishop's conference of the given region. For example, in the United States, there are various determinations outlined in the *National Statutes for the Catechumenate*.

Since it belongs to the local bishop to set up, regulate, and promote the formation program of catechumens and candidates, those charged with facilitating a program must also be mindful of the standards set forth for RCIA in their diocese.¹ Check with the chancery of your diocese for the diocesan standards regarding RCIA.

SECTION 2: THE ROLES OF THOSE INVOLVED IN RCIA

The Role of Priests and Deacons

The pastor or priest given responsibility for RCIA has the special role of ministering to the needs of those entering the Church. For many of those becoming Catholic, he will be the first priest with whom they have had any kind of personal contact. We recommend that the program facilitate regular encounters with the priests of a parish in order to get used to the idea that they can reach out to them with their pastoral needs.

In some cases, a pastor delegates the principal responsibility for RCIA to a deacon. By virtue of their ordination, deacons are made ministers of the Word of God and are charged with instructing and exhorting the faithful. Indeed, at a deacon's ordination, the bishop hands him a book of the Gospels, saying: "Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach." Moreover, since the days of the early Church, deacons have been associated with the administration of baptism. Their involvement with RCIA is, therefore, especially fitting.

¹ Introduction to RCIA ritual, no. 12.

Where a deacon is involved in RCIA, we recommend that he get to know the participants on a personal level, that he be charged with introducing the participants to the sacramentals of the Church and other devotional practices (e.g., the rosary, holy water, the stations of the cross), that he conduct a guided tour of the church (perhaps also explaining the vestments, the sacred vessels, and so forth), and that he regularly impart blessings to the participants.

Regardless of who leads RCIA, *we believe it is extremely important that a priest (either the pastor or a priest he designates) meet with each inquirer individually at the beginning of the RCIA program.* This provides an opportunity for the inquirer to establish a personal connection with the priest and creates an opportunity for the inquirer to share what has led him or her to want to learn more about the Catholic faith. Most importantly, however, it belongs to a priest to determine whether there are any potential obstacles that might prevent an inquirer from living as a Catholic in good standing. Since this is obviously a very delicate and confidential matter—and often one requiring a fair amount of training in the Church’s teaching, her canon law, and her sacramental discipline—it belongs properly to the pastor or the priest he designates.

We recommend the priest ask broad questions to get a sense for the inquirer’s religious and moral background. For example:

- What sort of religious instruction have you received as a child or as an adult?
- Do you have a personal relationship with God? With Jesus Christ? What form does this take?
- What informs your sense of right and wrong? Are you seeking to live a moral and upright life?
- What experience or knowledge do you have about the Catholic faith?
- What leads you to want to learn more about the Catholic faith and consider (or desire) becoming Catholic?

At this point, it is imperative to ascertain the marital status of the person and begin working to resolve any obstacles to full initiation as a Catholic (e.g., a previous marriage or a marriage that has yet to be convalidated). The priest should also attempt to ascertain other moral or lifestyle obstacles. These might be centered around one's relationships: for example, if the individual is cohabitating or involved in a same-sex union. Other obstacles might involve one's profession, like if the person works in a field that would be incompatible with living as a practicing Catholic (e.g., a technician in a lab that does embryonic stem cell research). The priest will need to address these issues individually with prudence, gentleness, and clarity in light of the Church's teachings. Due to the sensitive nature of these meetings and the complexity of the canonical issues that may arise, it is not advisable to delegate these interviews. They should be undertaken by the priest himself.

If the person has been baptized in a non-Catholic Christian congregation, the priest should inquire about that baptism. He should mention that it will eventually be necessary to have some certification of baptism, although the request for the certificate should be made closer to the individual's reception into full communion.

The role of the pastor or priest does not end here. We recommend it extend throughout the course of the RCIA program as he instructs and encourages catechumens and candidates. The Church reminds priests of the importance of providing pastoral and personal care, especially to the hesitant and discouraged.² If the priest is not the primary teacher or facilitator, he should ideally still be present on a regular basis. In addition to exercising his proper ministry in the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, the priest should be diligent in correct celebration and adaptation of all the rites.³ If the priest is not able to be present at every meeting, he should make an effort to be present on a regular basis and especially at key moments, even outside of the official rites.

² Introduction to RCIA ritual, no. 13.

³ Ibid.

The Role of the Lay Faithful

In cases where a priest or deacon directly oversees and teaches RCIA, it is important for him to incorporate the lay faithful in the RCIA process. The work of evangelization belongs to all of Christ's faithful and thus the whole community should be engaged to some extent in the initiation of catechumens and candidates.⁴ For example, members of the community may encourage their friends, family, and acquaintances to consider becoming Catholic. Also, a parish may regularly include the catechumens and candidates in the general intercessions and support them through the various rites.

While all should have some concern for catechumens and candidates, certain members drawn from the community should be charged especially with assisting closely with RCIA as part of their stewardship. It is a great help to have members of the community present for sessions to offer hospitality and their own witness. They represent the support of the community and can naturally become sponsors.

In many places, the organization and the teaching of RCIA have largely been delegated to one or more lay coordinators or catechists. If you are an RCIA coordinator or catechist, know that *Credo* provides a very helpful teaching guide that sets forth the essential points on any given subject. At the same time, catechumens and candidates will greatly benefit from your ability to break down the essential points and talk through the practical application of the teaching. You model for the catechumens and candidates what it is to be a good, joyful, and practicing Catholic. The discussion questions and life application questions have been designed to help you do this, but you should feel free to add additional questions or exercises to complement the lessons.

If the priest supervising RCIA is not present for every meeting, you should think of various ways to creatively incorporate him, even if it is only for a brief visit. For example, you could invite him to give short talks, to bless religious articles, to instruct everyone on how to receive Holy Communion, or to explain the meaning of liturgical seasons.

⁴ Introduction to RCIA ritual, no. 9.

Catechumens, Candidates for full Communion, and Those Completing Christian Initiation

The RCIA program at a typical parish often includes individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds. For the purposes of RCIA, any individual falls within one of three categories.

Catechumens: Those who have not been baptized. This includes anyone with no religious background or those belonging to a non-Christian religion. In some cases, this will also include those who profess Christianity but who have not yet been baptized. Someone definitively becomes a catechumen with the rite of acceptance. Prior to this, they are inquirers in the “pre-catechumenate.”

Candidates for full Communion with the Catholic Church: Those who have been baptized in another Church or ecclesial communion but who are seeking to be received into the Catholic Church and receive confirmation and first Holy Communion.⁵

Baptized Catholics seeking instruction and one or more sacraments of initiation: In many cases, individuals were baptized Catholic but did not receive any subsequent catechetical instruction and have yet to receive one or more sacraments. For example, they may have been baptized Catholic but have yet to receive the sacrament of confession or Holy Communion. Alternatively, they may have received confession and Communion but not confirmation.

Everyone involved in RCIA should be aware of these differences and the appropriate terminology for each group. Even in parishes where these diverse participants are grouped into one “RCIA program” for the purposes of instruction, those involved in RCIA should be sensitive to the differences

⁵ “The term ‘convert’ should be reserved strictly for those converted from unbelief to Christian belief and never used of those baptized Christians who are received into the full communion of the Catholic Church.” USCCB, National Statutes for the Catechumenate, no. 2.

in their standing.⁶ The RCIA coordinator must also study the ritual to identify what rites are appropriate to any given group. For example, only catechumens take part in the scrutinies.

The Role of Sponsors and Godparents

Everyone entering the catechumenate should have a sponsor. A sponsor is one who has known and assisted someone and can testify to his or her moral character and accompany him or her through the rite of acceptance.⁷ The sponsor may also act as the godparent; that is, as the one who accompanies the catechumen through the rite of election, the sacraments of initiation, and the period of mystagogy. Ideally, a sponsor or godparent will be able to participate in the sessions alongside the person they are sponsoring.

If someone does not begin the RCIA process with a clear sponsor or godparent in mind, it is important to encourage him or her to choose someone promptly so that the person will be available to act as a sponsor at the rite of acceptance and in subsequent rites. In many places, godparents and sponsors must provide a document testifying that they are practicing Catholics (e.g., a letter from their pastor). Priests approve the choice of godparents.⁸ Not everyone will find choosing a sponsor easy, especially if there are few Catholics among their friends and family. In these cases, the coordinator or pastor should be happy to help provide sponsors or godparents from the parish.

SECTION 3: OVERVIEW OF A TYPICAL RCIA PROGRAM

Promoting RCIA

Before beginning a cycle of RCIA at a parish, it is a good idea to have some promotional meetings or “pre-sessions” to foster interest among inquirers. For example, these could be informational and social gatherings during the summer months. This ensures that there is some RCIA activity year-round

⁶ USCCB, National Statutes for the Catechumenate, no. 3.

⁷ Introduction to RCIA ritual, no. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 13.

and provides a consistent forum for those who join an RCIA cycle too early or too late.

This should work in tandem with the evangelization efforts of the parish. For example, the pastor or RCIA coordinator could make announcements at Mass to encourage parishioners to invite family, friends, and colleagues to consider becoming Catholic. Or the pastor or RCIA coordinator could send a personal letter to non-Catholic spouses of parishioners and invite them to consider becoming Catholic.

Planning the Major Events

Careful advanced planning is necessary in order to have a program run smoothly. Before welcoming participants and holding sessions, you must plan out the events for the year, keeping in mind the diocesan and parish calendar (and when applicable, the school calendar). Include in your calendar the major events of RCIA, marking the date of the actual initiation (typically the Easter Vigil) and work back from there. Choose a tentative date for the rite of acceptance (often the First Sunday of Advent). Also, inquire about the date of the rite of election, which is typically held on a diocesan level. Lastly, it is advisable to hold an off-site retreat day to help participants prepare for initiation. If you intend to do this, pick a date and make arrangements early. The other liturgical rites of RCIA should also be listed; that is, the scrutinies and, if appropriate, the presentations of the Creed and the Our Father and the preparation rites. Part of the reason for planning so far in advance is so that you can present everyone with a calendar that includes dates for events that are absolutely required of them.

Designing a Syllabus Using *Credo*

Credo has been organized to explain the Catholic faith according to a logical sequence that benefits the learner. We recommend starting at the beginning and covering the lessons in order. Of course, adaptation is always possible, but in our experience, it is easier for the learner if the material is presented in the order in which we have organized it.

In addition to planning the major events of RCIA, you will need to plan how to make use of the various lessons in *Credo* by determining which lesson will be covered at each session. Planning this syllabus will help you ensure that you can cover all the material adequately. The entire *Credo* program has been divided into thirty-six chapters so that it may be used on a weekly basis for nine months. Your program may be longer or shorter in many cases; if it's longer, you may host other sessions, such as exploring other elements of Catholic culture. If your program is shorter, it may not be possible to devote an entire weekly session to each lesson. You should feel free to adapt *Credo* by covering two lessons in one session, for instance, or by asking participants to consider the life application questions and watch the Witness to Conversion segments at home. (Make sure to talk to your Saint Benedict Press sales representative to ensure your entire parish has access to all *Credo* videos online, which you should have upon purchasing it. This is a good resource for not only your participants but your entire parish community.)

Credo has been designed to help all three categories of RCIA participants (Catechumens, Candidates for full communion, and baptized Catholics completing initiation). The first three parts ("Faith and Doctrine," "Sacramental Life and Practice," and "the Christian Moral Life") do not correspond to any particular stage of RCIA. For this reason, *Credo* is flexible and need not correspond to the stages of the individual participants. The final part of *Credo*, "Pillars of Catholic Living," has been designed for the period of post-baptismal catechesis, or mystagogy (in the weeks following initiation).

While the presenters make reference to the liturgy, *Credo* has also not been designed to interface with the liturgical calendar in a specific way. For this reason, it is flexible and you may begin using it at any time throughout the year. Teaching individuals about liturgical seasons and other seasonal catechesis is left to the leader to do at the appropriate time. For example, before the beginning of the Lenten season, it is important to introduce RCIA participants to the Church's life of penance (e.g., customs about giving up something for Lent and the fasting and abstinence requirements of the Church). You should also encourage candidates to keep the Good

Friday fast through the Easter Vigil. The Church encourages candidates for initiation—and those accompanying them—to keep this fast.⁹

Preparing for Sessions

It is important to familiarize yourself with *Credo* before using it as a teaching resource. If you are unable to watch all of the videos and read the entire book, you should at least familiarize yourself with the overview of the book and the sequence in which topics are covered. This will enable you to tell participants when to expect different topics to surface or where they can turn to learn more about whatever they are interested in. But we recommend you do make an effort to watch all of the video lessons of a given part before teaching it.

In addition to watching the videos, you should also read the discussion questions and the answers that are given in this guide before each session. It is also important to familiarize yourself with the key terms and any quotations found in a given chapter. Doing this will also give you a chance to consider any other topics you would like to teach or discuss.

Building social time into the RCIA program is also important so that participants have an opportunity get to know one another and form connections with other parishioners. This may take the form of extra time before or after the teaching component of each session, or it could be a monthly gathering hosted by parishioners. It is always nice to encourage each year's class to spend time together even outside of meetings at the parish. How to do that will depend on what you think is realistic for your group. For example, some programs will suggest that participants take turns hosting a discussion session or potluck dinner in their homes.

Making Expectations Clear from the Beginning

It's important to make your expectations clear to those participating in RCIA. You should do this upfront in the first few meetings since it will be difficult to do so later on. For example, this meeting could take the following form:

⁹ Introduction to RCIA ritual, no. 15.

- Give everyone a warm welcome and general introduction and overview.
- Make it clear that you are here to help them grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ and that the whole RCIA process is about growing in union with God.
- Encourage them to begin learning prayers and building a habit of daily prayer.
- Make it clear that you expect them to be open to the fullness of Catholic teaching and life.
- Encourage them to begin living according to the fullness of Catholic life even now (e.g., in regards to doctrine and living the moral life).
- Give a description and calendar listing of the major RCIA events that are absolutely required.
- Be frank in acknowledging that not everyone will necessarily be ready to enter the Church at the same time (i.e., this year).
- Explain the requirement for regular attendance of RCIA sessions and the calendar of all the sessions. Give other expectations about working with the RCIA team and sponsors.
- Give an explanation of the period of mystagogy and the requirement to attend sessions after initiation.
- An exhortation to read the “At Home Reviews” and Scripture passages to prepare for the sessions.
- Any other expectations you may have for participants.

We recommend that the RCIA leader also meet individually with each participant at least once, to get to know the person a bit, to learn something of his or her background and interest in Catholicism, and to ascertain the status of each participant (future catechumen, candidate, or Catholic seeking full initiation).

In addition, it is imperative that, early on in the process, you arrange for each participant to have a one-on-one private meeting with the pastor or other designated priest (as mentioned in section 1 on the role of the priest). The aim is to welcome the person, to establish a relationship of trust and approachability, and to talk over the status of each participant as well as to identify any potential obstacles to full reception into the Church. For example, are there any irregular marriage situations (e.g., married outside the Church but one party was baptized as Catholic)? Are there any other possible obstacles to living a Catholic moral life? These matters can be complex and call for confidentiality. If there are issues that need resolution by a canonical process (like obtaining a declaration of nullity of a previous marriage), the priest will want to begin working on them as soon as possible.

Running a *Credo* Session

Going through a one-hour session of *Credo* is meant to be simple, and it is! For a minute-by-minute breakdown, please see the Group Session Plan on page xxxix, and for a breakdown of each component found in the guide, please see the Understanding Your Guide on page xxxv.

Keeping the Group Strong Throughout the Process

As the months progress, it is important to remain attentive to the needs of the individual participants. Some who began strong may become hesitant. Some who attended regularly at the beginning may have had several absences in a row. To help address individual needs, it is recommended to have at least one “midterm interview.” Ideally a priest closely involved in RCIA should meet with the individual. At this time, you can answer a person’s specific concerns and offer encouragement or challenge them to attend sessions consistently and be wholeheartedly engaged.

A few months into RCIA, it is also important to encourage participants to decide on a sponsor or godparent if they have not already done so and have their choices approved by the priest.

At this point, it is also important to expose RCIA participants to devotion to the saints, especially in light of the fact that many will need

to choose a patron saint for their confirmation. Encourage them to look through a short book on the saints for ideas or help them identify a saint that might have an appropriate patronage for them. If a participant already has a Christian name, they should research something about the saint whose name they bear. Within *Credo*, you may direct participants to chapter 35 on “Mary, the Saints, and Devotions” as well as the “Wisdom of the Saints” quotations in each chapter, where they might learn more about the saints and those they might bond with.

Also, as the months progress, do not forget that a baptismal certificate should be obtained before the date of initiation for anyone who has already been baptized. To avoid last minute anxiety about this, please remember to have candidates request certification of their baptism a few months before the date of initiation.

Preparing for Initiation

Hopefully the RCIA group will naturally become more intense and focused as the date of the actual initiation approaches. If not, set the tone by reminding people of the proximity of their initiation and the profound reality of the sacraments they are about to receive. An off-site retreat day will go a long way in helping you communicate this disposition.

As the date for being received into the Church approaches, the pastor or RCIA coordinator should be prepared to have another personal interview for those who may have obstacles to their entrance to the Church. Some candidates may need to be told that they should wait longer or will have to wait longer, while others may need to be asked to manifest a clear commitment of faith and morals.

As the time for initiation approaches, you should make concrete logistical plans for the Easter Vigil or Mass of Initiation. Schedule a rehearsal to walk through the liturgy. If you have not already done so, explain and concretely demonstrate to them how to go to confession, receive Holy Communion (under both species), and do any other liturgical gestures that will be expected of them (*Credo* provides extra resources for this; be sure to ask your Saint Benedict Press sales representative for more information).