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## Guide to the Catechumenate

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A friend of mine likes to hunt, but he's a city boy. Whenever he ventures out into the wilderness, he hires someone who knows the area. So on one trip, he and a group of buddies are being led through the woods by a local guide. After a while, my friend realizes the group is lost and confronts the guy.

"You told us you were the best guide in Colorado!" says my hunter friend.

"I am," replies the guide, "but I think we're in Wyoming now."

An important part of any journey is knowing where *not* to go. You don't want to wind up in Wyoming if your destination is Colorado.

### **ROMAN CATHOLIC INTELLIGENCE AGENCY— WHAT RCIA IS NOT**

The catechumenate process is so often referred to as the "RCIA" that our understanding of what it is has become blurred. We don't always remember what the initials mean, and it is too easy to project on them whatever we want them to mean.

So here is a quick list of what the RCIA is not.

- It is not an adult confirmation program
- It is not an adult education program
- It is not a marriage preparation program, even if one person in the couple is not Catholic

- It is not CCD for adult Catholics who “dropped out” after confirmation
- It is not a place for sponsors or spouses to “catch up” on facts of the faith
- It is not a small faith sharing community
- It is not a support group for dealing with emotional distress
- It is not a class
- It is not a club
- It is not a program for making Protestants into Catholics

### ***Welcome to the church’s transmogrifier***

So what is the RCIA? If you are a *Calvin and Hobbes* fan, you’ll understand when I tell you that the RCIA is a transmogrifier (see [tinyurl.com/2cxafa](http://tinyurl.com/2cxafa)). A transmogrifier is an upside-down cardboard box with a dial drawn onto the side. According to Calvin, “You step into the chamber, set the appropriate dials, and it turns you into whatever you’d like to be” (*Calvin and Hobbes*, March 23, 1987). In a similar way, the RCIA transmogrifies an unbeliever into a believer, a person of little or no faith into a disciple of Jesus Christ.

### ***Conversion machine***

Go get your copy of the rite and look at paragraph 1. It says so right there:

The rite of Christian initiation...is designed for adults who...consciously and freely seek...[to] enter the way of faith and conversion.



*Whenever we refer to a line from a ritual text, we always refer to the paragraph number, not the page number. Several publishers have published the RCIA, and the page numbering is different in each edition. The paragraph numbers are consistent.*

The RCIA is a transmogrification machine. Or if you prefer, a conversion process. You put the “Calvins” into it, and disciples come out of it.

Of course, the process is not a cardboard box. It’s much more complex than that, and oftentimes we don’t get disciples in the end. But that is what the pro-

cess is built to do—make disciples. Unlike Calvin’s box, you cannot just turn the dial and get whatever you want at the end. The process only has one setting: Disciples. If we put folks who are already disciples into the process, it won’t make them “better” disciples. That’s not what the process is designed to do.

Or, to return to our hunter story, if we want to hunt in Colorado, we have to be sure our guide knows how to move around Colorado. We have to be passionate about using the RCIA as a conversion process and only as a conversion process.

I think that word “conversion” is where we sometimes go astray and wind up in Wyoming. Because aren’t we all in need of conversion? Isn’t discipleship a lifelong conversion journey? Well, yes and no.

Grab your copy of the rite again, and flip to the back. In the appendix titled “National Statutes for the Catechumenate,” paragraph 2, read the following:

The term “convert” should be reserved strictly for those converted from unbelief to Christian belief...

There is an initial conversion, after which you can never be “converted” again. You can be a bad convert, and your conversion may require some serious maintenance. You can fall away and even deny your conversion ever happened. And these are serious issues that need to be remedied. But the catechumenate is not the remedy. The catechumenate is a process of conversion for those who have never believed—even a little.

So in the church’s transfiguration process, we put catechumens in the transmogrifier, adjust the dials, and take out disciples. And what exactly goes on inside that amazing “cardboard box”?

That’s what we’re going to explore.