

LIGUORI CHRISTIAN INITIATION PROGRAM

Journey of Faith



FOR TEENS

CATECHUMENATE

LEADER GUIDE

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The Catechumenate: A Period and A Process

Since the early Church, generally “the catechumenate” referred to the entire process of Christian conversion and initiation. It spanned multiple years and involved formal instruction, acts of penitence, and public rites that confirmed the community’s approval as well as the catechumen’s changed status.

Today, the term *catechumenate*, and *catechumen* in some respects, refers to a specific stage within the typical RCIA process. The rite of acceptance has been called a “first step,” even though most participants take part in a period of inquiry as well as unknown years of personal discernment before contacting a Catholic parish (RCIA 42). While the rite of election technically “closes the period of the catechumenate proper,” catechumens (then the *elect*) and candidates continue to meet for months and have not yet been fully initiated (RCIA 118; see also *National Statutes for the Catechumenate*, 6).

The period of the catechumenate remains at the heart of the RCIA process. Team members, catechists, and participants should take advantage of all its benefits and allow it to progress naturally. It may be best to extend the length of this period rather than rushing through or shortchanging the participant’s needs and experiences, especially when an inquirer enters the process later than others, Lent arrives early, or there are exceptional circumstances.

While the catechumenate is distinctly reserved for more formal instruction and presentation of essential doctrine, it is also a time for participants to practice and apply their faith. The Church identifies four goals for the catechumenate (RCIA 75). During this period, participants will:

1. receive a “suitable catechesis...planned to be gradual and complete in its coverage....This catechesis leads the catechumens not only to an appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts but also to a profound sense of the mystery of salvation...” (see also Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church [*Ad Gentes*], 14, from the Second Vatican Council).
2. “become familiar with the Christian way of life..., learn to turn more readily to God in prayer, ... and to practice love of neighbor, even at the cost of self-renunciation.”
3. participate in “suitable liturgical rites, which purify the catechumens little by little and strengthen them with God’s blessing....

At Mass they may also take part with the faithful in the Liturgy of the Word, thus better preparing themselves for their eventual participation in the liturgy of the Eucharist.”

4. “learn how to work actively with others to spread the Gospel and build up the Church....”

Throughout the catechumenate, catechumens and candidates will undergo “a progressive change of outlook and morals” (AG 13). RCIA leaders and sponsors can be catalysts for this spiritual transformation by providing opportunities for reflection, interaction with the community, and by supporting their study with clear and accurate information. Many features of the *Journey of Faith* program and materials assist you in achieving those goals.

Prior to the rite of election, leaders, sponsors, and participants themselves should observe an increase in the participant’s understanding and ownership of his or her Catholic Christian faith. The signing of names into the *Book of the Elect* signifies the fuller “yes” to Christ and Church that began in his or her heart at the rite of acceptance.

Rites Belonging to the Catechumenate

Celebrations of the Word of God

The catechumenate, indeed the entire RCIA process, is connected intrinsically to the liturgical year. The Church’s recommendation that it last at least one year is to ensure that catechumens experience the fullness of the paschal mystery as reflected in the liturgy.

Many RCIA groups attend the Sunday Liturgy of the Word together. Others meet during the week to proclaim and reflect on the upcoming readings. You may combine these celebrations with the catechetical sessions or keep them separate. However you structure your RCIA process, maintaining a connection to the seasons of the Church year and regularly, prayerfully breaking open the Scriptures are vitally important. *The Word Into Life*—available in three volumes for Sunday cycles A, B, and C—provides the full text of the readings along with commentaries and questions for an RCIA audience.

Model for a Celebration of the Word of God

1. *Song.* The celebration opens with an appropriate hymn or chant.
2. *Readings and Responsorial Psalm.* A baptized member, ideally a trained lector, proclaims a reading or two from Scripture. As in Mass, the first or Old Testament readings are followed by a psalm, either sung or in a call-and-response format.
3. *Lesson.* The RCIA director, pastor, or another trained catechist briefly explains and applies the readings.
4. *Concluding Rites.* The celebration closes with a prayer or one or more of the optional rites below (RCIA 85–89).

Optional Rites

Catechumens and candidates can be nourished by other liturgical rites during this period. The Church offers texts and guidelines for minor exorcisms (petitions for strength in the challenges of faith and struggle against temptation), blessings, and anointings, which may occur on their own or conclude a celebration of the word (RCIA 90–103). Speak to your priest or deacon about when and how these might benefit your particular group.

Also, you will need to determine what rites are appropriate for the period of enlightenment and how they will fit into the weeks leading up to the Easter Vigil. The presentations of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer can be moved to late in the catechumenate if necessary, but the priest, deacon, or DRE should ensure that the catechumens are ready beforehand. If the rites of election and/or calling are celebrated by the bishop elsewhere in the diocese, both the parish and participants will benefit from the *rite of sending*. In this rite, the local pastor and community preliminarily approve and celebrate the participants' readiness (see RCIA 106–17, 434–45, 530–46). It demonstrates their present, though distant, love and support and strengthens the catechumens and candidates for their return and entrance into the Lenten season.

The Rite of Election

The rite of election is a major milestone in the catechumens' RCIA journey. Usually occurring on the first Sunday of Lent, catechumens' publicly pledge their fidelity to the Church and sign the *Book of the Elect*. Baptized candidates participate in the *rite of calling the candidates to continuing conversion* or in a combined rite. These rites are similar, but do not include any signing.

The *Journey of Faith* program provides a basic outline to the rite of election in lesson C1: *The RCIA Process and Rites* and spiritual preparation through Scripture and reflection in lesson E1 *Election: Saying Yes to Jesus*.

"Before the rite of election the bishop, priests, deacons, catechists, godparents, and the entire community [should] arrive at a judgment about the catechumens' state of formation and progress" (RCIA 121). This doesn't mean an interview or exam is needed; however, pastors who have not attended the RCIA sessions may want to briefly speak to you about the group.

This is a good time to gather the team members' and sponsors' feedback and experiences with the catechumens. Recording and sharing particularly meaningful input or stories can serve as a testimony to the individual's faith as well as to the power of the Spirit working in and through your parish RCIA.

The bishop ordinarily admits catechumens and candidates to their respective rites and presides at the ceremony. Whether or not the rite of election is celebrated in your parish, encourage all team members, sponsors, and close family and friends to attend. Prepare the catechumens by reviewing the steps or rehearsing the responses ahead of time. The steps of the rite are listed below.

1. The rite, held within a Mass, begins with the Liturgy of the Word.
2. After the homily, the celebrant calls the catechumens forward by name, along with their godparents.
3. He addresses the assembly and asks the godparents if these men and women are "worthy to be admitted" (RCIA 131). He asks if they have "sufficiently prepared...faithfully listened to God's word... [and] responded." The godparents answer, "They have."
4. He asks the catechumens if they wish to enter the Church. They answer, "We do."
5. After their names are signed in the *Book of the Elect*, the celebrant declares that they are members of the elect. He exhorts them to remain faithful and "to reach the fullness of truth" and their godparents to continue their "loving care and example" (RCIA 133).
6. The community offers intercessions for the elect.
7. The celebrant prays over the elect and dismisses them before continuing with the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

C13: Christian Moral Living

Catechism: 1776–1832

Objectives

- Discover morality is based on natural law but ordered by Christ.
- Recognize disciples are called to form their consciences according to Church teaching.
- Reflect on personal choices and behaviors with an eye toward conversion and expressing greater love for God and others.

Leader Meditation

Proverbs 3:5–6

It can be easy for us to look at other people and think, “Well, at least I’m not doing that.” But when we “trust in the LORD” we have to do more than rely on our own interpretations of right and wrong. We have to interpret the world the way Jesus sees us. It’s often the most difficult situations and the hardest choices that require us to rely on ourselves the least and God the most. When have you needed the Church to help you make difficult choices? Has it been hard to follow the Church’s teaching in these moments?

Leader Preparation

- Read the lesson, this lesson plan, the Scripture passage, and the *Catechism* sections.
- You may also want to have the Ten Commandments visible somewhere in the room for this lesson or have your Bible open to Exodus 20:1–17.
- Consider using the song “Restless” (Audrey Assad and Matt Maher, from *The House You’re Building*, Sparrow) for your closing prayer.
- Be familiar with the vocabulary terms for this lesson: commandments, conscience, free will. Definitions are provided in this guide’s glossary.

Welcome

Greet participants as they arrive. Check for supplies and immediate needs. Solicit questions or comments about the previous session and/or share new information and findings. Begin promptly.

Opening Scripture


Matthew 22:34–40

Ask a volunteer to light the candle and read aloud. Allow a few moments for silent reflection. Before beginning your discussion of the lesson handout, discuss with participants **why might it be easier to just obey the rules than live and act with love.**

The Ten Commandments are engraved by God in the human heart.

CCC 2072





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In Short:

- Morality is ultimately ordered by Christ.
- We are called to reflect on personal choices.
- We are called to form our conscience.

Christian Moral Living

Evan was very close to getting his first "A" in math, a subject he had always found difficult. Two days before his final exam, he saw a copy of the test sitting on his teacher's desk while she was out of the room. Evan was tempted to look at the first few answers so he could go into the test with confidence, even though he knew that was still cheating. But if he knew a few questions in advance, he would have a much better chance of getting that "A"....Evan was torn.

When Carrie joined her friends near the lockers before school, she heard them saying cruel things about a girl who was new to the class. At first, Carrie just listened to their comments, but soon she was joining the conversation, too. It made her feel like she was part of the group. But she also knew these stories about the new girl weren't true. Carrie started feeling guilty. She wanted to be part of the group and if she said something or stopped hanging out they might start talking about her. But how would the new girl feel if she ever found out about the lies her classmates were spreading?

- What would you do if you were Evan or Carrie?
- What would you tell a friend in a similar situation?

"Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment."

CCC 1776

We are faced with moral decisions every day. These decisions, or our choice to not do anything, develop our moral character. Who you are is defined by the decisions you make or don't make when you're asked to choose between right and wrong, between standing up or bowing out. Jesus tells us how important our actions are:

"Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined."

Matthew 7:24–27

Building your moral house on rock when you're young gives you a strong foundation as you move into adult life. When you choose the right and honest thing consistently, it becomes a habit, and that makes it easier for you to choose the right thing the next time you're faced with a similar option. When we form the habit of choosing honesty, truth, and love, those actions become the ones we default to when facing a problem.

CCC 1776–1832

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Christian Moral Living

- After reading the introductory section, ask participants to respond to the reflection questions. Then ask if there would be other circumstances under which their response might change.
- Discuss ways we can build or destroy our moral character; ask participants for examples.

Suggested responses include: We build our moral character by choosing what we know is right even if it isn't the popular choice, staying honest even when we might get in trouble, acting out

of love for other people, refusing to spread rumors, and so on. We destroy our moral character when we lie or refuse to be accountable for our choices, when we gossip or spread rumors about other people, when we choose to do things we know are wrong, and so on....

- Discuss the relationship between freedom (our free will) and responsibility.

Suggested responses include: Having free will means that we aren't forced to do the right thing. We can choose to do right or wrong and there is no determined path set for us. But we have the responsibility to use that free

will in a way that builds up our community and our Church....

Discuss what happens when we act in our own self-interest instead of as followers of Christ.

Suggested responses include: We can degrade our own moral character, we can lead others into bad choices, we present Christianity in a negative light, and so on....

- Emphasize how choosing to not do anything can also be a choice that affects our morality (for example, when we let someone be bullied by not taking part or standing up to stop it).

Our Conscience

- Ask the participants to describe how their consciences have developed as they have matured. You can ask the following questions to prompt discussion: Do they think about moral questions the same way? Do they spend more time asking about circumstances before making a judgment?
- Brainstorm ways you can make time to step back and listen to your conscience when faced with a difficult decision.

Suggested responses include: quiet reflection or contemplation, prayer, journaling, and so on.

- Give participants time to quietly reflect or journal on the reflection questions presented in this section before moving on.

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If we fall into the habit of lying, cheating, or deceiving others to get what we want, we are building our houses on sand.

"The education of the conscience is a lifelong task....The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart."

CCC 1784

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This is where faith can get difficult. Believing in Jesus and understanding the faith are easy in comparison to actually living like Christ. As small children, it's easy to know right from wrong. But when you're faced with more complex moral issues, what's right or wrong may not be as clear, or we know what's right but struggle to follow through with those actions. Plus, the pressure we can feel from the world or friends or family members to make certain decisions makes the task of choosing right or wrong even more difficult.

Because God loves us, we have a free will. Having a **free will** means we have the freedom and power to make choices, to act or not act, to choose how we respond. God won't step in and stop us from making a wrong choice. We have to do our best to discern (make a well-informed decision) what's right and what's wrong; what's the will of God and what's selfish desire.

- How do you make difficult choices?
- Do you ever avoid making choices because you aren't sure what's right or wrong?

Our Conscience

"A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator."

CCC 1783

We might have an image of conscience being a little angel and a little devil hovering over each shoulder while telling us what to do or not do. But our conscience is actually a part of who we are. **Conscience** is what enables us to "recognize the moral quality of a concrete act" that we're thinking about doing, in the process of doing, or have already done (CCC 1778). Conscience gives us feelings of peace when we make moral decisions or unrest when we make poor moral choices.

- Write about a time when you felt contentment and joy because you did the right thing.
- Write about a time when you felt uneasy or anxious because you did the wrong thing.

It's important to get into the habit of listening to our conscience, and to be sensitive to how we feel after we have made a difficult choice. Our conscience is subtle. It softly urges us to act as God would want us to act. When we are aware of our consciences and act on what it tells us, we are building that firm foundation written about in Matthew's Gospel.

Unfortunately, we can also get into the habit of ignoring our consciences. We can also miss the quiet voice of our consciences if we don't take time to be quiet and listen. When we're constantly surrounded by the noise of the world, we can miss the gentle voice of conscience inside us. This is where a strong prayer life can help us stay on the right path. Without the quiet and solitude necessary for prayerful reflection and clear thinking, it can be very difficult to discern right from wrong when we are faced with moral decisions.

- What are some ways you can step back from the world and get in touch with your conscience?

Conscience and the Bible

"In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path; we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's Cross."

CCC 1785

Once we decide to take the time (or make the time) to come to know God's will, we can begin our search with sacred Scripture. Jesus promises us, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (John 14:23). These are wonderfully reassuring words. They tell us that if we make Jesus the center of our lives and use his words and actions as our guide, we will know the best way to live. We will not be perfect. We'll fail sometimes and make bad choices, but Jesus won't give up on us. He dwells within us and will work to bring us back on track.

The moral teaching of Jesus includes understanding and obeying the **commandments** of the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments were accepted by the Jews in Jesus' time as God's will. They were given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:1–21; Deuteronomy 5:1–21). They have remained the standards of morality for generations.

After the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, God gave them the commandments to keep them from falling into a worse form of slavery—slavery to sin. When we lie, steal, or take another's life, we can't be truly free. We can't experience full human joy. The great value of the commandments can be seen if we ask ourselves the simple question, "What would the world be like tomorrow if everyone kept the Ten Commandments?"

• How do you think the world would be different if everyone followed the Ten Commandments?



The Moral Teachings of Jesus

[Jesus said] "But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly."

Mark 7:20–22

Jesus did more than affirm the Ten Commandments. He challenged us to aim for an even higher standard—a morality based on love. Jesus questioned old beliefs that allowed hatred and revenge. He told us it was not enough to follow the law if our hearts were full of anger and hatred.

Jesus was urging us to move beyond legalism—obeying a list of laws—to a morality that truly fosters love. When we choose to obey the speed limits, we should do so out of respect for the safety and well-being of others—not simply because it's the law and we don't want a ticket. When we choose to avoid saying something untrue about another person, we should be motivated by our love and respect for the children of God—not just the need to obey the Ten Commandments.

Conscience and the Church

Catholics believe that we have another resource to help us form good consciences—the teachings of the Church. Jesus is present in his Church and has given its leaders the authority to speak and act in his name. New Testament Christians looked to their leaders for guidance in moral questions, like when the Corinthians wrote to Paul for advice (1 Corinthians 7:1). All New Testament letters offered moral guidance, and some gave rules of conduct in matters of Church organization, relationships with one another, and daily life.

Since then, the Catholic Church has provided moral leadership for its members through laws and instruction from pastors, bishops, and popes. Church leaders strive to understand and teach how the Gospel applies to modern life.

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adhere to its teachings and interpretations of the law as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

- Participants may have questions about whether or not they can dissent from Church teachings because they feel the Church is wrong about a particular point. It is important to distinguish between the three levels of Church teaching: dogma, definitive doctrine, and authoritative doctrine. We cannot dissent Church dogma or definitive doctrine without separating from the Church. While it is possible to dissent from authoritative doctrine, that dissent must still come from a place of submission of will and intellect to God and the Church. This kind of dissent is only possible in very rare circumstances.
- Refer to the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, 25. Dissent is possible, but only if a person has sufficient expertise to study the matter thoroughly and has discovered important reasons, that the person believes were unknown to the pope, that would cause him to alter his decision. If such be the case, the person may suspend his or her assent until the pope has made a final decision.

- You may also refer to Pope St. John Paul II's apostolic letter *Motu Proprio Ad Tuendam Fidem* and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the Professio Fidei."
- As you conclude the lesson, discuss tools that human beings have to help them make good moral choices.

Suggested responses include: the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of the Church, the influence of family, the influence of responsible friends, the virtues and gifts of the Spirit [CCC 1828, 1830].

The Moral Teachings of Jesus

- Emphasize that Jesus takes the Ten Commandments a step further when he gives the two great commandments (in today's reading)—both based on love of God and neighbor rather than simply following the letter of the law. Read section 1778 in the *Catechism* and ask participants to reflect on what it says.

Conscience and the Church

- Emphasize for participants that following the teachings of the Church is not about simply not sinning or finding a loophole in a teaching we, personally, find

difficult to accept. The ultimate goal of our lives as Christians, and the teachings of the Church, is to live more like Christ on earth and to prepare for eternal life in heaven. This means there will be times we have to let go of our personal opinions and embrace Church teachings—even if that process is painful or confusing for a time.

- If participants have additional questions or you'd like to spend more time covering this topic, see CCC 143–152, which talks about a free submission to the whole truth revealed by God, and CCC 85–95, which discusses in more detail the Magisterium of the Church and our duty to

Forming Your Conscience

With a partner, make up a scenario that would require you to make a difficult choice. Work through steps one through four under "Forming Your Conscience" and come up with a way to handle that scenario. Share with the rest of the group. (An example follows.)

Scenario: You're at the store and, after reviewing your receipt, you notice the cashier didn't ring up one of your items but included it in your bag. Do you go back and pay for the item or consider it a bonus and do nothing?

1. After prayerful reflection, you might begin to think that leaving without paying for an item, even if you had every intention to, is still taking something you didn't pay for.
2. The Ten Commandments say stealing is wrong, but is this really exactly the same as stealing? Following the spirit of this commandment, however, would require you to go back and pay.
3. Church teachings would tell you that taking something that doesn't belong to you, no matter how you got it, isn't the moral thing to do. It would also tell you that you should respect the cashier and do what you can to help correct the mistake.
4. Solution: While you haven't actually done anything wrong yet, keeping the item knowing you didn't pay for it and that you haven't attempted to make things right would be the immoral choice. You should return to the store, explain the situation, and pay for the item.

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Catholics trust that Church leaders continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit. As we seek to make good moral choices, it's important to know the moral teachings of the Church and, more importantly, to understand the reasons behind these teachings. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a great place to start if you have questions on Church teaching, but your sponsor or parish priest can be great resources, too.

Forming Your Conscience

When we are faced with moral decisions, there are several steps we can take to make sure our consciences are well-formed:


1. Take the time or make the time for prayerful reflection. Make sure you can hear the small voice within.
2. Know and understand the Ten Commandments, and then ask yourself, "What would be the morally right thing to do?"
3. Know and understand the teachings of the Church. If a Church teaching is confusing, don't be afraid to discuss that issue with a priest or well-informed Catholic.
4. If you make a mistake, seek forgiveness and grow from what you've learned.

With a partner, make up a scenario that would require you to make a difficult choice.

Work through steps 1 to 4 under "Forming Your Conscience" and come up with a way to handle that scenario. Share with the rest of the group.

Recall a time when you did something wrong that you later regretted.

If you were faced with that situation again, how would you respond?



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Journaling

Recall a time when you did something wrong that you later regretted. If you were faced with that situation again, how would you respond?

Closing Prayer

Dim the lights and have the participants gather in comfortable positions. Keep the candle lit. Play a recording of "Restless" as a closing prayer.

Looking Ahead

Before next class, ask participants to think of some moral issues we struggle with today that didn't exist for the early Church. Where can we look for guidance on these issues? Where can we find guidance on modern-day issues?