Journey to the Fullness of Life is a report on the implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in the United States. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops authorized a national study to determine the status of the rite’s implementation throughout the country. Surveys were carried out to gather data from people who entered the Church through the rite, as well as from diocesan and parish leaders who ministered with them.

Since its implementation in 1998, this rite has slowly become normal Roman Catholic parish practice. Many parishes are very pleased with the results of the implementation, for it has produced genuine renewal among parish members. It has also made them realize that the work of evangelization is the responsibility of all the baptized and not simply of those in professional pastoral ministry (RCIA, no. 4). Each year the number of adults entering the Church rises and this brings satisfaction to many.

Nevertheless, there is still question about the total effectiveness of these efforts. Full implementation of the rite requires that all unbaptized adults, including children of catechetical age, should be brought through the process. Careful examination shows that, for adults, the celebration of the sacraments of initiation often follows the vision of the RCIA. However, in many instances, children’s initiation follows very different paths. Some children are placed in regular parish religious education programs while others are hastily prepared privately, without the richness of the rituals included in the rite itself. The bishops’ report indicates that only 8 percent of all parishes in the United States have a full initiation model in place. About 27 percent have a nine-month model structured after the September to May school year, 13 percent have a one-on-one model, and 41 percent of parishes have no children’s RCIA at all. How can these differing practices be reconciled? The RCIA cannot be fully implemented until children of catechetical age are included in this journey of conversion.

The RCIA includes the celebration of baptism, confirmation, and First Eucharist. Chapter four of Part II of the document addresses those adults and children of catechetical age who were baptized as infants in a Christian community, Roman Catholic or other, but who received no further formation in the faith. It directs that these “uncatechized” persons enter a process similar to the one structured for the unbaptized, with careful ritual adapta-

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tion that recognizes their status as baptized. It has been the practice in the United States to group together both catechumens (unbaptized) and candidates (baptized) and to celebrate many of the same rituals with both. To this end, the bishops have provided a pattern of combined rites in Appendix 1, for implementation. Children of catechetical age are directed to follow the direction of the RCIA and not simply be pushed through classes in order to “catch them up” with those children baptized as infants. Both groups are then to celebrate the completion of the sacraments of initiation which takes place at the Easter Vigil.

The implementation of the RCIA has brought about a major paradigm shift in our sacramental understanding. All the sacraments have been affected by this shift which has led to a growing awareness of the process of conversion and Christian identity. No longer can we understand conversion simply as membership in the Church. We now recognize that it calls for a radical following of Jesus Christ and total affiliation within the community of faith.

Why then has it been so difficult to implement this sacramental process for children? History offers an answer to this question. After the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, the Church’s attempt at reform and catechetical renewal led to the transfer of sacramental preparation from the family and parish to the school. Soon the entire experience of celebrating the sacraments, especially confirmation and First Eucharist, took on a more academic flavor with textbooks and classrooms as the means of instruction rather than the ritual catechesis of the liturgy. Sacramental catechesis thus took on the character of the classroom and conformed itself to the school calendar. This became the accepted practice for more than four hundred years. It even affected the way adults were prepared for entrance into the Catholic Church. Little attention was given to the symbolic nature of the sacraments with the primary emphasis shifting to knowledge of Catholic doctrine as the norm for readiness.

Today there is still widespread ignorance and unfamiliarity with the RCIA in general and with the particular way it affects children. Some bishops and pastors ignore the canonical and liturgical requirements set out for unbaptized children of catechetical age. Many religious educators know something about the religious development of children but are nonetheless locked into a graded classroom system that does not necessarily integrate those spirituality insights into their praxis. The nine-month school calendar, not the rhythm of the liturgical year, drives the agenda. When parishes become fixated on specific ages and grades for the celebration of the sacraments, the natural flow of the conversion journey of children is jeopardized. A significant number of teachers and catechists have no knowledge of the theology of the rite. Nor do they possess adequate understanding of the sacramental renewal brought about by Vatican Council II. Unless there is support for catechetical updating and continuing education of our teachers, priests, and other pastoral ministers, this ignorance will continue and our children will be deprived of the nourishment their souls desire.

In addition to this, many people fail to realize that children are never initiated in isolation. For them, initiation occurs within the context of the family and parish community. The rite adapted for children emphasizes the child’s world revolving around family and peers. The language of the rite is quite strong when it states: “The children’s progress in the formation they receive depends on the help and example of their companions and on the influence of their parents. Both these factors should therefore be taken into account” (RCIA, no. 254). At the present time, the intergenerational
setting for the faith formation of children is underdeveloped and underutilized. This points once again to a lack of understanding of the rite as being conversion to Jesus Christ and his Gospel way of life, a life lived and supported by a community of faith. Book knowledge will never accomplish what can take place when the heart is grasped and a child falls in love with God.

Despite the inadequacy of attention given to children, there is a renewed interest in children’s spirituality on the part of many. However, unless our current structures of faith formation and initiation tap into the growing data on this subject, it is unlikely that much attention will be given to what we know about children’s conversion and the way faith develops in their young hearts. Few seem to understand or believe in conversion as a reality during childhood. With a lack of trust in the liturgy as a “school of faith,” methods will probably continue to concentrate on classroom instruction and doctrinal content without the corresponding focus on conversion dynamics.

It is very important that those responsible for the initiation of children understand the dynamics of discernment which point to readiness for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation. Children and families have their own individual needs. The celebration of sacraments relegated to a certain grade or age precludes any real discernment of these individual realities. Furthermore, there does not appear to be any effective assessment available for parishes to use to meet these individual needs. The development of such an assessment tool would be of great service to parishes and families alike.

Much of our discussion points to the lack of appropriate resource materials that support the vision of the RCIA. The market is not large enough for the major religious publishers to invest in such specialized materials. However, if one of them did venture into this project, they would discover that there is a much greater need than anticipated. A significant amount of work needs to precede such a project, as the practices with children differ so radically, especially when cultural influences are considered. There would have to be a major effort to assure that the RCIA itself is the primary resource. The document *Journey to Fullness of Life* could give indispensable guidance in product development without the danger of multiplying unnecessary resources.

John Westerhoff reminds us so poignantly that “the Sunday Liturgy and all the rites of initiation celebrate and form the faith of a child entering a Christian community long before and long after conversion takes place. A catechumenate team for children must understand the formative nature of liturgy in order to appreciate its full power to change an individual and the world” (1989, 145).

**References**
