

Walking the Journey with Your Child

by Rita Burns Senseman

Welcome!

Bringing your child to the Church for Baptism and Christian initiation is one of the most important and potentially life-changing steps you have ever taken as a parent. We rejoice that you have brought your child to the Church to learn more about God and Christian initiation. We believe this step is just one of the many steps you and your child will take together in your journey of faith. And we strongly believe that God's Holy Spirit is guiding you throughout this wondrous journey.

Now that you have brought your child, let's talk in more detail about how the Church prepares children to receive Baptism and the other Sacraments of Initiation.

The Journey

The Church's name for this journey that leads to Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist (the three Sacraments of Initiation) is the OCIA. OCIA stands for the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults*. The OCIA is the Church's way of preparing your child for full initiation into the Church. We call it a journey of faith because it's not just some classes where we teach your child about the Catholic Church. Instead, we walk with you and your child together as you deepen your relationship with God and learn about the Scriptures, traditions, and teachings of the Catholic Church.

Here are a few helpful things to know about this journey of faith that we call OCIA.

1. Parents Accompany the Child

Imagine sending your child on a magnificent journey where she or he learned amazing truths and grew and developed and changed. You would want to be a part of it, wouldn't you?

Well, that's exactly why we ask you to accompany your child on this journey of faith. On this pathway, called OCIA, your child will grow in his or her understanding of God, the Scriptures, and the Church. She or he will develop a deeper relationship with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual growth and development is a type of "conversion," albeit a conversion that is appropriate for a child. The conversion is to the Person of Jesus Christ. And we ask that you, the parent, be a part of that conversion journey.

Our hope is that your child will "fall in love with Jesus" and want to become his disciple. We also hope that the OCIA will be a positive, faith-enriching experience for you. Becoming a follower of Jesus is a main goal of the OCIA process, and it is important that you accompany your child as he or she learns what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of his Church.

2. It's a Gradual Process

Learning how to be a follower of Jesus takes time. The OCIA is a gradual process that varies according to the needs and religious history of your child. Some children and their families may have a well-developed relationship with God and an in-depth understanding of the Scriptures. Others may need more time to learn the stories of the Bible and the traditions of the Church. Whatever your story, we take time to get to know you and your child.

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The OCIA process has various stages that your child will move through as her or his faith grows and develops. The following are the four stages, or periods, in the journey and a bit about each.

► **THE FIRST PERIOD: EVANGELIZATION AND PRECATECHUMENATE (INQUIRY)**

The first period, or stage, is an informal time of inquiry. This is a time for your child to get to know the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's a time to get to know God, the Bible, and the Church. It's a time to get to know the parish community. It's a time to begin to understand what it means to be a young disciple of Jesus Christ. You may be paired with a parish sponsor or sponsor family to help you get to know about parish life. Your sponsor or sponsoring family will be a guide and support for you along the way.

This initial period lasts as long as you need for it to last. Once your child has begun to deepen her or his relationship with Jesus Christ and has a sincere desire for Baptism and full initiation, he or she will move on to the second period.

► **THE SECOND PERIOD: THE CATECHUMENATE**

The second period of formation in the OCIA is called the catechumenate period. A catechumen is a person who is preparing for Baptism. If your child is unbaptized and ready to learn about the Christian way of life, then he or she enters the period of the catechumenate.

During this period of Christian formation, your child will be asked to come to Mass every Sunday in order to be in the midst of the parish community and hear the Word of God proclaimed. The formation of a catechumen is based on the Word of God that we hear every Sunday. Also during this period, through our actions as a Christian community, we will show your child how to live, work, pray, and worship as a Catholic Christian.

Once your child has developed her or his relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian community, then she or he is ready to move onto the final period of preparation for Baptism.

► **THE THIRD PERIOD: PURIFICATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT**

The third period of the OCIA process is the final preparation for Baptism. This period coincides with the six weeks of Lent and is a time of spiritual preparation for Baptism and the Sacraments of Initiation. During this Lenten period of spiritual reflection, there are special rituals that your child will celebrate in the weeks prior to Baptism. These Lenten rituals lead up to the most important of all rituals: the Easter Vigil. It is at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night that your child will be fully initiated into the Catholic Church by celebrating the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. Through these three sacraments, your child is united with Christ and with his Church.

► **THE FOURTH PERIOD: POSTBAPTISMAL CATECHESIS (MYSTAGOGY)**

Through the Sacraments of Initiation, your child is united with Christ and becomes a full member of the Catholic Church. That is a pretty amazing reality! In fact, it is such an amazing reality that Church spends the fifty days of the Easter season reflecting upon this great mystery. This fourth period where we reflect upon the sacraments received at Easter is called the Period of Mystagogy. Mystagogy means "reflection upon the mysteries."

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3. The Rites Along the Way

The Church marks your child's journey to Christ with special liturgical rituals. These rituals celebrate your child's passage from one period of formation to the next. They mark his or her progress on the pathway to Christ. These special rituals also offer the parish community an opportunity to pray with and for your child and you.

As the child's parent and first teacher of the faith, you will present her or him to the parish community during these rituals. You stand as a witness to your child's growth in faith. You are not only a witness to your child's faith, but your presence at the rituals is a testament to your role as a continuing support and guide along the way.

In addition to presenting your child at the various rituals, the Church asks you to be involved in your child's initiation journey in other ways, too. Let's look more closely at the role of the parent in the OCIA process.

4. Your Role as Parent

By now you have the idea that the main role of the parent is to accompany, or "walk with," the child on the journey to Baptism and Christian initiation. And we described how you present your child at the liturgical rites that are along the way, too. Now we would like to give specific examples of your role as the parent of a child who is asking for Baptism and/or reception into the Catholic Church.

✠ Pray with Your Child

First and foremost, children learn to pray from their parents. It's never too late to start praying together as a family! Even if you have not been comfortable with prayer before now, you can start by saying traditional Catholic prayers together at bedtime or mealtime. (Ask your OCIA coordinator for a book or a handout containing the words to traditional Catholic prayers.

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As a start, pray simple prayers like, "Dear God, please bless our food. Amen." Also, pray for your child and for your family. In the quiet of your heart, speak to God about your deepest desires for your child and your hopes for your family.

✠ Attend Formation Sessions

Every parish is different, but there will no doubt be occasions for parents and families to meet with the OCIA group. These formation sessions may be weekly or they may be monthly, but it is important for you to attend for several reasons:

- a) Your child's formation **depends** upon your involvement. Yes, that's right. Your child depends on you! You know from experience that your child depends on you. And the Church reinforces that point in her official OCIA document: "the progress of the children depends on the formation they receive . . . by parents" (OCIA 254).
- b) You will enrich and enliven your own faith and your relationship with God and the Church. On the other hand, even if you are not interested in developing your own faith or making a commitment (or recommitment) to the Church, you will be aware of what your child is learning.
- c) By actively participating in sessions with your child, you will have opportunities to share faith and to pray together. Walking the faith journey together will not only give your family a special bond with Christ and the Church, it will give your family members a special bond with each other, too.

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d) You will know where your child is in the initiation process. Being involved in the process will allow you to understand where your child is in her or his faith development. Your involvement will help you to know whether your child is ready to move on to the next period of the formation process.

✠ *Discern Your Child's Readiness for the Sacraments*

On more than one occasion throughout the initiation process, you may be asked to give your personal impression of your child's faith development. In other words, we may ask, "How's it going?" Is your child growing in her or his relationship with God? Is she enjoying and learning from the stories of the Bible? Is he getting to know people at the parish and feeling a part of parish life? Is she feeling drawn to Jesus Christ? Your thoughtful responses to questions like this will help you and the OCIA team discern whether your child is ready to celebrate one of the rites of the OCIA. As Lent and Easter approach, you will also be asked to help discern whether your child is ready for Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.

✠ *When Parents Are Not Able to Be Involved*

Although the ideal is for parents to be involved in the process of Christian initiation, with all the complexities of modern life there are many reasons why you may not be able to participate. If a parent cannot be involved in the process, your pastor or OCIA coordinator will talk with you about the best possibilities for supporting and celebrating your child's journey of faith.

5. Celebrating Your Child's Baptism

Ultimately, this journey that we call the OCIA will lead to your child's Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. (Or if your child is already baptized, he or she may be confirmed and receive Eucharist). These Sacraments of Initiation are the Church's most sacred and holy mysteries. Through the sacraments, by the power of the Holy Spirit, your child will be united to Jesus Christ and become a member of the Church.



Alleluia!

We rejoice with you as you begin this wondrous journey, and we will do all we can to support you and your child along the way.