

Green paper on reform of the RCIA curriculum

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To: Donna McKenzie.
CC: Fr. Mark Weaver; Sam Bunch.

When I started RCIA in 2009, you asked me to look out for things that could be improved or done differently in the structure and content of the class. I have been percolating on that for a couple of years now, and while I hesitate to make suggestions about a process that I recognize to be exceptionally difficult,¹ I recently set down my thoughts and ran them past a few converts to see whether they agreed. The response has been positive.

Fundamentally, I have contemplated this question: “If I was to design an RCIA course based on what I found useful—what I found convincing, helpful, and decisive during my conversion process—what would it comprise? Assume that the students all start at the same time, and that they arrive as reasonably intelligent Christians who are not strongly denominationally-affiliated.” I have also accounted for what I have concluded are necessary doctrinal foundations for any RCIA course.

There follows a rough sketch of my proposed curriculum, with some marginal notes and tentative suggestions on materials (the use of the Catechisms of the Catholic Church, Trent, and especially Baltimore are taken for granted). I have worked very much at a modular level without too much concern for how *classes* would distill into discrete *sessions*, but I have given a lot of thought to *sequence*, in many cases breaking up a topic across two or more classes.

1. **Church history: Overview.** It can't be stated often enough or strongly enough that we aren't starting from scratch here, that the heavens didn't open and drop upon us this book telling of

¹ The challenge of designing RCIA curricula, it seems to me, is that they must adequately meet the needs of diverse people arriving from diverse intellectual and spiritual backgrounds with have wildly different pastoral and catechetical needs. The problem is all the more acute if students may enter the program at any time, but the alternative—telling potential converts that they must wait until the next cycle of classes begins—is daunting to the point of pastoral impossibility. For all these reasons, like the proverbial dog walking on its hind legs, the wonder is not that it's done well, but that it's done at all. I accordingly hesitate to intrude.

long-ago events that we can or must now try to understand in a vacuum. The organic development of the Church—the discoveries that she has been here since the very beginning, teaching the same doctrine and celebrating the same sacraments, and that we find her *in ovo* in the New Testament and more-or-less fully-realized in the patristic literature—was of critical importance to my conversion, to Scott Hahn’s, and I dare say to those of many other people. I do not yet have a proposal for a working text for this class, but suggested additional reading might include Stephen Tomkins’ *Short History of Christianity*, and Alan Schreck’s *Compact History of the Catholic Church*.²

2. **Authority 101.** Scripture, Tradition, Magisterium: The books and the bishops. This class would introduce the Catholic perspective on scripture, and then hit students hard with apostolic succession. I have come to realize that the latter is the lynchpin of *all* doctrine; if students don’t buy into succession, everything that we give them about Tradition, doctrine, magisterium, and primacy will be built on sand. Speaking for myself, at my first encounter with a bishop, having absorbed a lot of material on Church history and succession, I had an emotional moment where I thought to myself “I’m in the presence of a successor to the apostles!” And that was the turning point. After that moment, after that realization that I didn’t only *understand* what the Church taught about herself but knew it to be *correct*, I would say that my conversion became all-but inevitable, because wrapped up in succession are questions that, frankly, lack persuasive non-Catholic answers. *Ad Lucem Dei* devotes some of its lengthiest entries to topics orbiting this subject, such as the canon of scripture, the apostolic succession, and the magisterium, and I dare say that it could be mined for working materials; other suggested reading might include *Lumen Gentium*, *Christus Dominus*, and *Dei*

² There is a Church history class called “Epic” that we could profitably introduce for AFF; unfortunately, while its structure and content are apt to use in RCIA, its length is prohibitive. I would suggest pitching Epic as a post-confirmation elective for RCIA graduates.

Verbum,³ Bp. Henry Graham's *Where We Got the Bible*, Rahner & Ratzinger's *Episcopate and the Primacy*, and selected texts by the evangelicals J.I. Packer and Bruce Metzger.⁴

3. **Doctrine 101.** Our main focus here should be the large-scale structure of sin (an introduction to original, personal, mortal, venial), grace, and salvation. The Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on Justification* is a great starting point.
4. **Sacraments 101.** “The ring”: The Sacramental worldview and the role of the sacraments in the economy of salvation. When I was in the class, I felt that we launched into classes on the individual sacraments before I felt that I had a sound grasp of what sacraments are conceptually and how the Church understands what it has in its care. As a result, my earliest perception of them was defective: They seemed like little more than ceremonies.
5. **Sacraments 201.** “The gemstones”: The individual sacraments. Necessarily covered only after Doc101 and Sac101.⁵
 - a. *The Eucharist: Source and summit.* (This may, in practice, preempt the need to deal with the real presence in Doc201. As materials and sessions are developed, this point should get clearer.)
 - b. *Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism and Confirmation.*
 - c. *Sacraments of Healing: Reconciliation and Healing.*
 - d. *Sacraments of Vocation: Marriage and Holy Orders.*
6. **Liturgy 101.** The history and structure of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. This would include the “slo-mo Mass” (about which I have some particular suggestions that are beyond the scope

³ As a rule, I think that it is always positive to introduce students to the historical Vatican II, lest students get the sense that the council is amorphous and malleable spirit rather than sixteen very concrete documents.

⁴ Packer's treatment of authority, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, was exceptionally helpful to me in clarifying the questions and issues involved, even if I ultimately came down on the other side of the issue from him. Metzger's work on the canon and “parchment and ink” aspects of scripture, especially *The Canon of the New Testament and The Text of the New Testament*, are enormously helpful and somewhat more accessible than F.F. Bruce's comparable work.

⁵ The individual sacraments are best understood in the context of the sacramental worldview (for which reason I place what I've called Sacraments 201 after Sacraments 101), which is in turn best understood in context (for which reason I've placed both the aforementioned classes after the classes on History and Authority 101). The sacraments are present in scripture, of course, but they become clearest in the history and teaching of the Church—and non-Catholics don't typically care (much) about those things. Thus, before we present any particular teaching of the Church, we must first explain why a catechumen should *care* about what she teaches. The question of authority is logically antecedent to any question of doctrine, and while it can be treated independently of history, I think that it is of great moment, and a real revelation for some people, that the Church has always had this understanding—that she has always celebrated the seven sacraments, always been led by the bishops, and so on.

of this document) and the two ways to receive communion. Unsurprisingly, in view of the liturgical turbulence of the last fifty years, finding a single working text has proved difficult; it may be necessary to construct one. *Mediator Dei*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Nicholas Gihl, Josef Jungman, Edward Foley's *Commentaries on the Order of Mass of the Roman Missal*, and even (if handled with immense care) Klaus Gamber might be mined to produce a viable working text. Donald Card. Wuerl's *The Mass* and Scott Hahn's *The Lamb's Supper*—an exceptionally accessible introduction to the biblical roots of liturgy—will supply useful additional reading.

7. **The life of the world to come.** The afterlife, the saints, Mary, angels, etc.⁶ Richard McBrien's treatise *Catholicism*, although it must be handled with extreme care, has an effective treatment whence to draw, and the Joint Catholic-Evangelical declaration on Mary, *Do What He Tells You*, is particularly helpful. Scott Hahn's *Hail Holy Queen* is somewhat glib but quite accessible.
8. **Doctrine 201.** A tour of the distinctively Catholic substantive beliefs, such as the real presence, purgatory, etc. Waterworth's *Council of Trent*, Coppens' *Systematic Study of the Catholic Religion*, Ratzinger's *Eschatology*, and Brant Pitre's *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist* would be helpful texts.
9. **Discerning the truth, one error-correction at a time: A brief history of heresy.** I realize that heresy is a touchy subject, but the Church has historically moved to define orthodoxy most precisely when it has been challenged by heresy. I found it very helpful to see the “edges of the path”—and not a little comforting to know that virtually every “new” idea one

⁶ While not diminishing the blessed mother in the slightest, I agree with Richard McBrien that for catechetical purposes, Mary is best treated as a special case within the broader questions treated in my Life of the World to Come class. Protestant difficulties—and I think it fair to assume that the average catechumen is arriving from a protestant background—with Mary are partly cultural, but fundamentally arise from differing conceptions of the afterlife and our interaction with it. If a catechumen doesn't buy that we can ask the prayers of any given saint, they *could*, but in practice I think will *not*, buy that they can ask for the blessed mother's prayers. I think all that stuff is best treated as a single unit, with Mary as the culmination and capstone. I also think that given the assumed intake from Protestantism, there is only very limited need to cover eschatology beyond the distinctively Catholic dimension just mentioned.

can come up with has already been met. (A dictionary of heresies with chronological and thematic indices, under the working title *What Not to Believe*, is in the works.) Doubts about including this one evaporated when I recently saw someone advocating a position that was, in every key detail, Marcionism. When people have no idea where the edges of the road are, they're going to tumble.

10. **We've been here before.** A brief introduction to the fathers, doctors, martyrs, and other great teachers of the Church. Jimmy Akin's *The Fathers Know Best* and Pope Benedict's two volume *Church Fathers* are ideal secondary texts; St. Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures* may be useful. Careful selection of primary texts can bolster what is covered in other classes—for example, we will meet Justin Martyr for the first time in Church History, and again in Liturgy 101, before a more detailed look here. Likewise, St. Irenaeus will be met in Authority and Heresy, but he has more to say and we can cover it here.
11. **Liturgy 201.** A more advanced look at the prayers of the Mass (particularly the Eucharistic prayers). An introduction to the Latin Mass—if *Summorum Pontificum* left any doubt that the EF is here to stay, *Universæ Ecclesiæ* dispelled it—and the Eastern Rites.
12. **The fabric of Catholic practice:** The lexicon and “speaking Catholic” (*Ad Lucem Dei* covers essentially that ground), devotionals, sacramentals, the grout list, religious life, etc. A how-to on the divine office. This might be better-handled broken into a series of addenda attached to each session rather than as a discrete class.
13. **Doctrine 301.** A review of the fundamentals through an exploration of either of the creeds. Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity* and Coppens' *Systematic Study of the Catholic Religion* would be great working texts.
14. **Authority 201.** A refresher/review looking with greater specificity. Could be skipped depending on the class' actual needs (i.e. if everyone's on board and understands the various

levels of teaching authority and the relationships of scripture, Tradition, and the episcopal college, it can be skipped).

15. **Dissent.** An elective (or breakout session from the Heresy class) introducing dissent as a concept, practical dissent right and left (issues like birth control, abortion, gay marriage, the death penalty, ordination of women), modern schism (e.g. sede vacantism, SSPX etc.), and explaining why they're wrong. The class should also cover false positives—identifying the scope of teaching and thus what *isn't* dissent, e.g. advocating married priests, deaconesses, and so on. There is a temptation to close our eyes and pretend that these issues will go away, but sticking our heads in the sand isn't a strategy. Unless they are contemplating a vocation as hermits, *Catholics are going to encounter these issues*; far better for converts to encounter them for the first time in a safe and authentically Catholic environment.

I would love to be involved in preparing materials for these classes and teaching them, particularly the authority and liturgy classes. I believe (at risk of outing him) Sam Bunch also has some interest in getting involved with catechesis, and I think others do also. At any rate, I submit these suggestions not as a definite proposal, but as green paper: A proposal or series of proposals that I think would help, in order to prompt and provide a suggested framework for further discussion on a vital if thorny topic.⁷

December 7th, 2011, on the Feast of St. Ambrose

⁷ For this reason, discussion and explanation—rather than presentation—have been sparing in this paper, deferred for later discussion.