

# Spiritual Gatekeepers: Time and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

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*This article addresses the process of initiation into the Catholic Church by analyzing in-depth interviews with parish-based professional initiation coordinators. The formal title given to this process of initiation by the Church since Vatican II is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Since the RCIA's promulgation, the Church has hired a host of lay and religious professionals to coordinate its implementation at the parish level. Our analysis focuses on the temporal sequencing and the problem of duration of initiation. The data show that both city and suburban coordinators adapted the Church's mandated length of time for initiation in different ways as they negotiated covenantal and contractual social relations among RCIA participants.*

Status passages, as Glaser and Strauss (1968, 1971) analyzed so well, “take time” in at least two ways: they require duration because they are processes rather than events, and persons involved in the passages must attend to time as a social object. Accordingly, we can conceptualize status passages generically as temporal activities designed to transform persons undergoing movement from one status to another.

In some instances, a status passage involves the formal participation of a “coach,” or “someone [who] seeks to move someone else along a series of steps” (Strauss 1969:112). Our analysis focuses on the activities of one type of coach who works to move people through a series of rituals designed to transform non-Catholic adults into Catholics. The set of rituals is known as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), and the coaches are parish-level professionals known as RCIA coordinators who in many ways function as spiritual gatekeepers. In the course of conducting our study, we discovered early on that these coordinators inevitably faced a problem of time—how to organize, define, and coordinate the duration of event sequences for those going through the RCIA.

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## THE STRUCTURE OF THE INITIATION

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is an initiation process of some duration designed for adults who want to become Catholic, and thus it is an initiation process into a particular group. As the introduction to the RCIA guidelines states:

The rite of Christian initiation presented here is designed for adults who, after hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed, consciously and freely seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts. By God's help they will be strengthened spiritually during their preparation and at the proper time will receive the sacraments (baptism, confirmation, and eucharist at the same time) fruitfully. . . . This rite includes not simply the celebration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation [membership status], and eucharist [receiving communion], but also all the rites belonging to the catechumenate. Endorsed by the ancient practice of the Church, a catechumenate [one period of initiation] that would be suited to contemporary missionary activity in all regions was so widely requested that the Second Vatican Council decreed its restoration, revision, and adaptation to local traditions. (*RCIA* 1988:3)

The Church understands this initiation as an ongoing process, rather than an instantaneous event, that occurs in steps and allows candidates ample time to reflect on their experiences. As paragraph 4 of the introduction to the *RCIA* (1988) states, "[T]he initiation of catechumens takes place step by step in the midst of the community of faithful." The *RCIA*, therefore, delineates several periods and steps through which one must pass in order to be initiated into the Church. The periods are as follows: (1) precatechumenate, (2) catechumenate, (3) enlightenment, and (4) mystagogia. The steps are (1) Rite of Acceptance into the Catechumenate, (2) Rite of Election, and (3) Rites of Initiation (baptism, confirmation, eucharist—the original sequence of initiation sacraments). These periods and steps constitute the Church's official model of initiation. Each period intensifies the conversion process and allows the initiate to discern his or her calling to faith. Each step in the process involves a public liturgical ritual that takes place in the midst of the community, publicly marking the initiate's progress.<sup>1</sup>

The *RCIA* is formally regarded as a kind of sacred temporal order involving covenantal relations (Bromley and Busching 1988) designed to produce either identity conversions or alternations, in Travisano's (1981) terms, depending on the prior religious faith of the person involved. The primary metaphor of the *RCIA* is that of a journey, with the stages representing points of passage along its course and the destination being a new Catholic who is able to experience and articulate the presence of Christ in the spiritual community. Considering this metaphor and the goal of spiritual absorption, the Church has recognized the difficulty in assessing progress and movement through the *RCIA*. In 1974 the Church developed the ministry of the *RCIA* coordinator as a way to help guarantee the integrity of the *RCIA*. These coordinators are in charge of implementing the *RCIA* at the parish level and in interpreting and managing the periods and steps of the initiation process. As the

RCIA is inherently a temporal phenomenon, the work of these coordinators accordingly entails dealing with the problematics of time.

Such problematics cut across a number of arenas of activity. Coordinators are responsible for scheduling the many and varied events of the RCIA in the context of the liturgical year. These events need to be scheduled according to the overall parish calendar, which at times can be difficult because the RCIA is not always a top priority in many parishes. They must prepare and execute the major liturgical rites of the RCIA, which involves organizing and choreographing the liturgical celebrations. They also are educators. They must help a variety of associated people such as priests, deacons, family members, and other parishioners to become aware of the conversion process by describing and explaining the RCIA (Morris 1989). In short, RCIA coordinators may well be regarded as “time workers” insofar as they sequence events, interpret the meaning of those events and how they are related to one another, and monitor the movement of people through the steps and stages of the RCIA as it unfolds.

In conceptualizing status passages and their temporal properties as activity, as would Mead (1932), we focus our analysis on the relationships coordinators have with RCIA participants and the contexts of those relationships. We describe below the data and analytic categories for this analysis that establish the grounds for our focus on suburban and city coordinators and on the negotiation processes found to inhere in RCIA implementation.

## METHODS AND DATA

We conducted forty-six, one-and-a-half-hour, taped interviews with RCIA coordinators in the Detroit Archdiocese. At first we attempted to draw a random sample of coordinators; however, we soon changed to purposive sampling when we noticed the importance of the geographic location of parishes—namely, whether they are in cities or suburbs. Suburban coordinators, we discovered, were white, whereas city coordinators were black or brown. These differences did not merely reflect ecological location; they also pertained to implementation strategies of the RCIA.

In comparing city and suburban coordinator data, several differences in overall implementation strategies surfaced. At this point we began to construct social types of coordinators based on the strategies they used to implement the RCIA. Two coding categories, RCIA text adherers and text adapters, became master categories for identifying the various kinds of implementation strategies. Four basic social types of coordinators emerged: (1) text adherers, or suburban coordinators who implemented the RCIA according to the ritual book (for example, they maintained the yearlong process of initiation as the text recommends); (2) text adapters, or city coordinators who did not rely on the ritual book or adapted it radically (for example, they found the yearlong process an obstacle to initiation); and two other social types that steered a middle road, (3) moderate text adherers, or suburban coordinators who adapted the rite when possible but nevertheless maintained a certain faith-

fulness to the ritual book (for example, they reduced the time line for initiation to six to nine months), and (4) moderate text adapters, or city coordinators who had little problem adapting the ritual text quite freely and broadly but realized, nevertheless, that certain aspects of the text were worth implementing at the parish level (for example, they maintained a one- to three-month time line for initiation).

About a quarter of the way through the interviews, we realized that suburban coordinators implemented the RCIA more rigidly than did city coordinators. When we investigated the coordinators' backgrounds further, two very interesting factors stood out. First, suburban coordinators had strong liturgical backgrounds, and second, the social and communal context of the city differed radically from the perceived individualistic suburban context. Combining a city coordinator with little liturgical background with a strong communal context, one finds extreme deviations from the ritual book in terms of the implementation of the RCIA. And combining a suburban coordinator with a strong liturgical background, along with the perception of suburbia as an individualistic context, one finds extreme embracement or adherence to the ritual book as a means of implementation. Consequently, all text adherers and moderate text adherers were suburban coordinators, and all text adapters and moderate text adapters were city coordinators. Regardless of the social type, however, they all expressed concerns of one sort or another about the time line for initiation. The distribution of these social types of RCIA coordinators is shown in Table 1.

THE ECOLOGY OF THE RCIA

All of the RCIA coordinators we interviewed told stories of conflicts over time; stories about not having enough time to implement the RCIA fully, time going too fast during the initiation process, and conflicting church and initiate calendars. We found a basic difference, however, between suburban and city coordinators, which we think of as the ecology of the RCIA. This difference turned on whether initiates already held contractual or covenantal social relationships. Suburban coordinators desired that initiates establish covenantal social relations during the initiation process but dealt primarily with initiates embedded in contractual social relations. In contrast, city coordinators faced initiates who were already embedded in covenan-

TABLE 1.    RCIA Coordinator Social Types

Parish Location	Text Adherer	Text Adapter	Moderate Text Adherer	Moderate Text Adapter	Total
Suburb	15	0	10	0	25
City	0	13	0	8	21
Total	15	13	10	8	46

tal social relations. This critical difference in our understanding of the RCIA emerged when city and suburban RCIA coordinators commented on or discussed the idea of community and the temporal requirements of the RCIA.

### Suburban Coordinators

Suburban coordinators generally took for granted that people wishing to join their parishes were devoid of a sense of community (see Capps and Fenn 1992; Hudnut-Beumler 1994). They grounded this assumption in part in their belief that suburbia was individualistic and anomic. These coordinators regard Church theology and ideology as communally oriented and as an institutional force capable of countering individualism. Moreover, the RCIA is designed to initiate persons into a communal, sacramental reality, not into cultural individualism. Given this communal void in suburbia, suburban coordinators perceived the RCIA as the means for creating community and demarcating a crisp Catholic identity. The RCIA, they felt, would be the antidote to a pervasive individualism they saw as generally rampant in suburbia and particularly in their parishes.

Although coordinators blamed individualism for creating difficulties in implementing the RCIA, they especially blamed it for altering the temporal dimension of the RCIA and thus the very essence of the initiation process. The following comments about the RCIA's temporal requirements reflect the standard position of many suburban coordinators:

Of course, the problem is with the people coming in. They are used to the school year calendar and so they come in September and we accept them, but we seldom get anyone like in January or May or something. So people are geared to the secular school calendar, but we are introducing them to the Church, which is on a liturgical calendar not the secular calendar. And so here is a major battle between these calendars. How do you initiate them not only into the Church but into the liturgical calendar's rhythms. Indeed, I try to show them from the start the liturgical calendar and our high seasons and the most important dates and that they must schedule their calendars according to the liturgical calendar if they want to be Catholic. You know I don't say it like that, but that is the motive or intent of what I am trying to say. The calendar represents the Catholic patterns of behavior in some ways. These are the days we do things together, it has this communal dimension to it and that is important to get across because of the tremendous individualism we face as ministers. I mean many scholars working in the Church have said that the number one problem we face as a Church is American individualism and the calendar speaks of the communal dimension and so I bring that out. It's just that most don't get it, but we keep trying.

This coordinator's interpretation of parishioners and initiates "not getting it" as an outcome of the anti-Catholic ideology of individualism serves as his rationale for adhering to the yearlong RCIA process.

Another suburban coordinator, liturgically trained, believed in getting tougher about initiation in terms of the liturgical year because individualism was causing temporal problems for her and the Church.

We have it set up so that people wishing to enter the Church can come in any time, but most come in September and are baptized at Easter. Now we even end up doing the catechumens because of the strong group process but not always. We are beginning to get much tougher about this. I really shouldn't say tougher. Not tougher but more adamant about the liturgical year process especially given the suburbs and the pervasive lack of community and the abundance of individualism.

Finally, several suburban coordinators believed the RCIA was the antidote or at least a corrective to individualism. One suburban coordinator felt this strongly:

Right, the group process works. You know the interaction that occurs among the members or the initiates is really what makes the RCIA work, I mean they become like a little community and you want that because the RCIA is all about community. That is, it is a communal process, or I should say it ultimately is about being initiated into this community and so it is at bottom a communal experience versus a strictly individual experience. I mean you have to come to recognize Jesus in the community not just in your own individual heart although that is very important. But anyway, if the personalities I guess click in the group it can be a very powerful experience. I think sometimes that this is the first community any of them have experienced outside their families. We live in such a culture of individualism which tells us to stay busy and get ahead in the secular world that we don't have time to connect with other people to build community. I mean I have a hard time just remaining in touch with my larger family. So I think individualism has something to do with it and then they experience community and they say wow this is great and they really get to know one another and to come to care for one another.

Another suburban coordinator believed as well in the potential of the RCIA to curb individualism and induce a sense of community:

So yeah, the sharing, their getting to know one another, their sense they are becoming a community, especially since many of them come from, you know, the suburbs where there is very little community. Indeed, most Americans are highly individualistic and so this offers them a sense of community through the group process of sharing and lectionary-based catechesis. They realize they are not alone, you know.

### City Coordinators

Coordinators in city parishes did not assume that initiates or parishioners lacked a sense of community or that individualism was surreptitiously eroding Church community. Indeed, in the predominantly black and Hispanic parishes initiates were really "already members" of the Church community insofar as they had been parish members for many years. City initiates possessed "already membership status," in other words, but had not yet celebrated formal sacramental initiation. Consequently, most city coordinators found the RCIA an obstacle to ritual initiation. For example, a black coordinator illustrated this when he expressed a concern about initiates being forced through "formal initiation":

Many of the initiates come and they have been praying all their life. A number of people were even participating at Mass, not going to Communion, I don't

think, but their children, some anyway, have gone to Catholic school, and they have gone to church for many years, and so they have been participating at Mass and many people think they are Catholic. And then something comes up and like you go over the registration card and you find out this person has never been baptized and all they need is just an invitation to come in. But then you look at the process of the RCIA that you have to form them in, you know forming them in prayer and in the spirit and in the knowledge of scriptures. But then I look and the people in my class had been doing scripture study, they were acquainted with Old Testament, New Testament, prophets, gospels, they knew the difference between them and everything, and so you just don't have to take them through that type of formal initiation. Because people have been acquainted with it. The prayer Our Father they all knew, even the unbaptized ones. So, you know.

This coordinator refused to impose on initiates a yearlong process of initiation with ongoing scriptural or lectionary-based catechesis when they were "already members" in every conceivable way but institutional. Their sense of belonging legitimized his allowing them to circumvent extensive initiatory ritualization.

Another city coordinator, a woman, spoke more directly about the predicament she found herself in because of "already membership status":

My experience in this city parish, actually situated in a neighborhood that is all African American, is that the people coming in are from the neighborhood. Also, they all come out of Christian traditions, you know. Mostly Baptist, one is the Church of Christ. So as I gather together with them it is a whole different experience . . . . They are people coming to the church for some reason, usually because of someone in the neighborhood. And this year more than ever, five or six people because of that. And so because of their Christian background they come with a very rich tradition of scripture and so we do a different process than the RCIA of sorts. . . . So because of their strong Christian background I hesitantly approach them to ask them to receive the sacraments officially. It was out of sorts because they had already become members in a way and so now to ask them to do these rituals was strange kind of. So we decided not to wait till the Easter Vigil and just initiate them now at the upcoming Sunday Mass. Because their readiness to me was already there. And then there were several others too who were in the same boat, you know, that is who were very active in the Church before going through the RCIA. And so it is odd. I mean some of them are already receiving Communion and everything.

This coordinator referred twice to the oddness of her situation because of the institutional demands of the Church about the practice of initiation. Nevertheless, she decided to bypass the Church's requirement of going through a lengthy process of initiation and "officially" initiate them immediately. Later in the interview she seemed to be at greater ease about her predicament:

You just learn to take what you need from the RCIA, and if you just need to do the sacraments you just do the sacraments and in some other cases you can do a lengthier thing, but even then it should not be too long because of their backgrounds, their rich scriptural and Christian backgrounds. And this I just had to learn and let go of stuff about the RCIA in the book.

Clearly this coordinator saw the RCIA presented in the institutional book as an obstacle to ritual initiation. Her definition of the situation as coordinator evolved over time and no doubt was filled with personal and pastoral struggles. But in the end, she pastorally gave priority to the people over the ritual, a priority suburban coordinators had greater difficulty acknowledging.

Another city coordinator was direct about not following the RCIA because of the already membership status because it causes a “sticky situation”:

I am supposed to tell you I am doing everything by the book, doing everything right, but I am not going to lie. They are initiated at the Easter Vigil, but you have to realize a lot of these people have been coming to this parish for years but that doesn't necessarily mean they are officially Catholic. But they already feel that they are a part of it. So therefore you don't want to break the, you don't want to separate them with classes or rituals because it is a sticky situation sometimes and so you don't want to make that separation because they have already been coming here. And it might be that someone will say to me you know that this person has never been initiated in the Church or whatever and then I might have a discussion with them and they'll come forward. But they feel you know as if they are a part of it [parish community]. So it is just a matter of doing something official and often that is all we do. You know my dad went to a Catholic church for as long as I can remember. I'm a cradle Catholic, but my father wasn't, yet he went to church every Sunday, he only got baptized when he was in his sixties [laughing]. But he felt he was part of the parish, and I guess it was something that was done to him when he entered a church in California—he stopped going—and then until he came back here you know he was then baptized because they made him feel that he wasn't part of that California church. And so I guess I am very sensitive and conscious of that fact and so I try to understand that and so I often overlook much of the RCIA.

Clearly she situates her ministerial priorities with the people and not with Church RCIA policies.

Common to all of these RCIA coordinators as they confronted the situation of already membership status was granting priority to the people over the ritual. In their pastoral judgment, belonging to the community outweighed any ritual requirements, even though they respected those requirements. Indeed, they still wanted people to be sacramentally initiated, but they perceived the many preparation rituals as well as the catechetical and scriptural requirements as obstacles to initiation and therefore adapted or simply dropped them. Nevertheless, all of the coordinators struggled with this already membership status, on the one hand, and the RCIA's ritual requirements, on the other. In the end, however, their coaching methods gave honor to the people and the people's sense of social solidarity while simultaneously diminishing the emphasis on the ritual requirements of the RCIA.

## NEGOTIATION AND RATIONALITY

In turning our attention to how coordinators and some candidates deal with the prescriptive RCIA temporal order, we observe that most RCIA coordinators struc-



ture the RCIA liturgical year according to contractual, secular social relations. For example, many coordinators allow initiates to negotiate the time it takes to complete the RCIA process rather than make them commit to the Church's sequencing. Often this led to a mutual agreement to truncate the process of initiation to five or seven months in suburban parishes and often much less time in city parishes. For example, one suburban coordinator noted:

After talking with most inquirers, I found that they are simply too busy. And it's a joke to think that we could get them to attend during summer months.

Another suburban coordinator said:

Many of those wanting to become Catholic told me that they had children and that it wouldn't be possible to attend all of the sessions. It was after hearing this time and again that I shortened the RCIA and realized it would be better to initiate adults according to their children's calendar. So if you ask me, what the school demands is more important than what the church wants.

One suburban coordinator apologized for the time line after seeing the shocked look on initiates' (inquirers) faces—a nonverbal means of negotiation. Another coordinator understood the import of the liturgical year but found that many of the college student initiates were locked into other calendars.

We might have a few preevangelization sessions, you know, a couple of sharing sessions with the group and then subsequent to that the regular formal sessions begin in mid-October and continue throughout until Easter time. And we don't go after Easter time, no no, I wouldn't say. You know there are a lot of young people involved and they have their things to do, for example, their classes, not so much their classes but their times for study and so forth, and there are conflicts here and there but they are fairly good about advising us of those occasions when they come up and fairly faithful I would say in their attendance. But year round, no.

Yet another suburban coordinator believed in the liturgical year as well but through pastoral practice discovered it did not work. As she explained it, people are just too busy today:

Making it more than one year is hard. I think you do well getting them in August and September and preparing them for the Easter, the coming Easter Vigil. We had in all the years that I have been doing it, we have had a couple of people who stayed over for more than one year. But now—that is a rarity. People today have extremely busy lives and if you tell them going in—I mean if you tell them going in that its going to be nine to twelve months they look at you like “you’ve got to be kidding.” Now ideally I agree wholeheartedly with the premise that it should take a longer time. But.

This coordinator still believed in the liturgical year and a lengthier process of initiation but adjusted to the situation of people's lives and adapted the rite.

Another suburban coordinator based her pastoral adjustments on the needs of the group:

The liturgical year, the full thing, depends on the group again. Usually with all the groups we go through till Pentecost and then depending on the group I will continue if it is their desire. I have some groups that, you know, say hey I need some time off. But there are other groups who say no this is fine and we would like to come back again. So the invitation is always open.

Overall, the coordinator framed the RCIA process in the liturgical year but did not insist on it. She accommodated her groups whether they wanted a summer break or not. Her comments illustrate the attempt to maintain a liturgical year framework and at the same time remain flexible. She went on to say:

Once again, it depends on your group whether or not more or less time is needed with them. The dynamics of every group is so different. It is mind-boggling. I have notes from year to year and I say wow this worked great last year and so I will use this again this year and then find that this doesn't suit the dynamics of that particular group. So you have to change.

With that statement, she gave priority to the people over the text but not to the extent that city coordinators do. The next coordinator also was confident in not following the year-round approach because it was not practical for initiates:

Well, the calendar. September through May is our process. And even after reading commentaries and reflections by people who steer away from that and promote the liturgical year, year-round approach, from a practical point of view people's lives revolve around (1) their school—when their kids are in school—and (2) most people take time off during the summer to play. And I think people in the church need to do that and so that is my response to all those commentaries.

Although strict about implementing certain aspects of the RCIA, such as lectionary-based catechesis, she was willing to adapt to people's secular calendars. A city coordinator, in contrast, summed up the city perspective this way:

I think that, because of the culture of the people and their "already" kind of belonging, that for them to say I've got to wait that long we have to take seriously. I mean really, that is a long time to them, especially since they feel they already belong. A year process is an obstacle here. So we don't do it.

As a result of people already belonging to the community (city initiates), being too busy, adhering to school calendars, or experiencing initial shock at the length of time required (suburban initiates), coordinators adjusted to and accommodated the initiates' social situations, resulting in a temporal patterning of initiation different from the Church's mandate.

Some suburban coordinators, however, did not change the Church's stance on the one-year minimum time line after negotiating with initiates. For example, a coordinator in a middle-class, white, suburban parish reported:

In talking with inquirers I don't apologize for what the RCIA is or the length of time it requires. I believe in it and I think it is just fine. People will follow what the Church asks if you stick to your guns. If I begin apologizing the people will think it is unjust. So I go with it.

Another coordinator in an upper-class suburban neighborhood said:

We abide by the yearlong catechumenate. Once, a couple living together complained about this cutting into their work time. At that point we challenged them about their priorities by asking them about their standard of living and that maybe they needed to reconsider that standard.

Although these coordinators followed the Church's mandate, their stories reveal problems that center on the issue of time. But they used their understanding of the RCIA to uphold rather than change the time order of initiation set down by the Church.

Rationality, which we understand in Blumer's (1965) terms as a social construct, is also a major interaction component in contractual, secular social relations. Specifically, relationships dominated by rationality entail the priorities of self-interest, logic, calculation, and reason. In covenantal social relations, however, people express and convey connection, involvement, and identification with one another (Bromely and Busching 1988). So in contractual relations employers and employees routinely negotiate work schedules, task responsibilities, performance, and money. Conversely, in covenantal social relations the covenant is communicated through the language of commitment, tradition, and enduring bonds.

As already noted, suburban RCIA coordinators shortened the initiation process to accommodate initiates' time constraints, sequenced initiation according to the school calendar to accommodate initiates' children, and sometimes apologized for the length of time required and then proceeded to shorten it. City coordinators, on the other hand, often bypassed the entire initiation process. Initiates rationally negotiated their timetables according to their self-interest. And coordinators rationally negotiated a time frame more in accord with the secular time frame of the initiates. Even suburban coordinators who did not change the yearlong time line still had to rationally negotiate for their position. City coordinators, however, faced with people who were "already members," disregarded the RCIA because initiation into covenantal social relations were already established. Only the formal, public ritual needed to be enacted for these initiates. In the city parish, where covenantal bonds are already evident, coordinators deemed it "rational" to conclude that a lengthy initiation process was unnecessary.

The initiates themselves often rationally negotiated with RCIA coordinators about the temporal ordering of initiation. As one suburban coordinator said, "Most people want to know what is required, and then after I tell them they want to know if there is a quicker way." Another suburban coordinator logically and rationally concluded that having "fifteen-minute zinger sessions" was the best way to implement the RCIA. As she noted: "I realize that initiates' schedules are chuck full, especially if they are parents, so I try to at least zap them with something—so I have fifteen-minute zinger sessions."

Another way inquirers rationally negotiate is by asking about other parishes where they might pursue the RCIA because the time lines at their parishes do not

meet their needs. Some coordinators are upset by this. For example, one suburban coordinator commented:

I understand that people don't have a lot of time, but we are talking about being initiated into the church, into faith, and into faith in a local community, not the amorphous reality of the universal Catholic Church. So when people come to me from another parish to attend our sessions because it is more convenient for them and their schedules, I just get frustrated, even annoyed. I mean initiation is about entering this community and forming relationships in the community where you will be baptized, and so not to be involved with that community from the beginning really makes no theological sense. So I tell them no. I have, though, for people in this parish changed the time frame so they could get baptized in this church, you know like having sessions at another time and in some cases having a much shorter time line.

Here again is someone rationally negotiating different avenues to becoming Catholic besides the one afforded by his parish. The interview went on to reveal that the candidate actually hoped that this coordinator's RCIA was not as lengthy as that at his parish or have as many requirements. A similar situation occurred with the following suburban coordinator:

Honestly, I couldn't believe the nerve of this woman. She simply pranced in and wanted to know how long our RCIA program was and what were the requirements. And before I could answer her, she went on in a very derogatory tone about her parish and the unrealistic expectations of the person in charge of the program there. She just wanted it her way, never giving what the Church might expect a moment's thought. It just makes you mad.

These last few quotes reveal how candidates can give little credence to the institutional Church and want an initiation process that fits their needs. Sociologists of religion have noted again and again the shift in the locus of religious authority from the institution to the individual. It appears to be no different in matters of initiation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Problems of time can be lodged in a number of processes, including differences in temporal experiences (Flaherty 1987), multiple meanings of the past (Katovich and Couch 1992), cultural configurations (Maines 1989), and degrees of temporal rationality (Zerubavel 1981). The problematics of time for the RCIA coordinators we studied, however, rested in the tensions between a prescriptive, sacred temporal order and enacted, secular temporal orders.

From the point of view of the Church, the establishment of covenantal relations and the full absorption of persons into the spiritual community of Catholics was at issue. To accomplish the Church's goals, the RCIA, constituted of various steps and a one-year time frame, was to guide coordinators' activities as they sought to move persons through the status passage process. The only aspect of this process that was consistent across all cases in our data appears to be the desire for and focus on the

end product of baptism during the Easter Vigil. That is the point at which candidates become “Catholics.” How coordinators accomplished that desired end point, though, varied a great deal in response to local contingencies (see Warner 1993).

City coordinators were very likely to feel that a covenant already existed with their RCIA candidates because of their “already membership status.” Many of them had been parishioners for years and for all practical purposes were practicing Catholics. These coordinators, therefore, quite willingly shortened the RCIA process to only a few months. Moreover, because few of these coordinators had formal liturgical training, they felt it appropriate to adapt the prescriptive texts to the level of theological knowledge of the candidates before them. This adaptation coupled with the “already membership status” legitimized for coordinators altering the mandated duration and sequencing of activities.

Suburban coordinators seemed to struggle if not suffer more than did the city coordinators as they adapted the RCIA. They usually had liturgical training and believed that the new liturgical texts were indispensable for covenantal relations (McCallion and Maines 2000; McCallion, Maines, and Wolfel 1996). Accordingly, they tended to adhere to strict and full interpretations of those texts and to insist on full educational experiences for the RCIA candidates. This factor in itself extended the time frame beyond that typically found in city parishes. Suburban candidates, furthermore, came to the RCIA as nonmembers, which confirmed in their coordinators’ views the candidates’ individualistic attitudes and noncommunal lifestyles. Yet the challenges of school schedules, weekend activities, work demands, and social calendars that candidates brought to the RCIA induced coordinators to negotiate reduced time commitments. In the process, the suburban coordinators ironically became the ones less convinced that the covenant was really present at baptism even though they more fully implemented the prescriptive temporal order of the RCIA.

Kavanagh (1990) argues that RCIA coordinators, more than other ministers in the Church, are constantly patrolling the borders of Catholic identity. They appear to have a heightened awareness of identity issues because they are constantly being confronted with what a “Catholic” is and whether RCIA candidates are becoming one. Patrolling these borders is a catch-22 situation. If coordinators let people into the Church too easily, are they compromising Catholic identity? If they are too demanding and candidates quit the RCIA, are they being inhospitable and unwelcoming? So these coordinators live in a fragile world of opening and closing the borders of the Church, at the heart of which are the adjustments to the sacred temporal order of the RCIA.

## NOTE

1. The period of the precatechumenate is when the individual begins to respond to the stirrings of faith. This is a period of searching and asking questions. There are no liturgical celebrations during this time. The Church’s primary emphasis is on evangelization. The Rite of Acceptance follows, which is the first public ritual celebrated. During the ritual, the inquirers declare their intention to become Catholic. This ritual bestows on them the title “catechumen.” Then follows

the period of the catechumenate, a prolonged period of catechetical, spiritual, liturgical, and apostolic formation. There are many liturgical celebrations during this time, the most notable being that the catechumens are dismissed every Sunday after the scripture readings that make up the first part of the eucharist or Mass. The rite of election follows the catechumenate period, at which the catechumens go to the cathedral for the bishop's blessing and calling them to the status of "elect." A six-week period of enlightenment or purification follows during Lent. This is a more spiritual time of preparation. The celebration of the sacraments of initiation occurs at the end of the Lenten season and during the Easter Vigil. After this celebration the elect are considered part of the faithful, full members of the Catholic communion. The final period of initiation is called mystagogy. This is a period that allows the newly faithful to reflect on the mysteries they have received at Easter.

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