

ALAN MORRIS

No time like the present

The RCIA is robbed of its effectiveness when it is forced to take place within predetermined dates

Let me share three stories – all true, and all, in their way, a little bit shocking. In the first, a practising Anglican of long standing approaches her local Catholic parish shortly after Easter. She thinks she wants to become a Catholic. The response she gets: “Could you come back in September? We’ve just finished Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, but we start again after the summer.”

The second concerns a group of adults who had been at RCIA classes for nine months, and were baptised some weeks earlier at the Easter Vigil. They are invited to come to a first introduction to “How Christians pray”. In the third, a group of 12 people, keen to become Catholics, spend eight months together meeting weekly being taught about the faith. They celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation with the parish at Easter; but by the following Christmas, most have “gone their own way” – with only two of the 12 still coming regularly to Mass.

These stories all end the way they do because the RCIA programmes in the parishes concerned start in September and finish at Easter. They were set in stone, so they couldn’t start late, they couldn’t start early. There was a lot of doctrine to teach, about Trinity and Incarnation, Mary and the saints, so some things had to be left till last. And, once those coming into the Church had got the Sacraments, what more had we got to give them? So, we left them to it – and, in time, most of them left, too.

Initiation into the Church is not simply a matter of knowing about certain things. It is about becoming a new creation. The Church has a responsibility to teach, but with regard to bringing new Christians to birth, her responsibilities are much more akin to spiritual accompaniment, sharing the truths of faith certainly, but also having the patience to wait for the lessons to be learned.

Salvation does not come through knowing God is three and God is one; or that Mary was immaculately conceived, or that we believe the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God. Salvation comes when we know ourselves enabled to live in communion with the triune God, when we learn to receive the witness and example of Mary; and when we learn how to discern and respond to the living Word of God.

So, funnily enough, though so many of our parishes have their nice and tidy programmes,

this is not what the Church asks of us. She says you can’t have a programme with start-up and finishing dates. For conversion depends on the grace of God. Nothing, therefore, can be settled a priori.

The Church is clear that those coming to the Sacraments need to be well prepared, know what they are about, and be ready to live the life of faith. Our catechesis should be gradual and complete in its coverage of the dogmas and precepts of the Church. But it needs to be more than this. Candidates should be helped to develop “a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate”; as they learn our way of life and through our assistance they are to “learn to turn more readily to God in prayer, to bear witness to the faith, in all things to keep their hopes set on Christ, to follow supernatural inspiration in their deeds, and to practise love of neighbour, even at the cost of self-renunciation” (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, no. 75).

The current assumption in many parishes seems to be that meeting once a week from Advent to the first Sunday of Lent, plus the grace of God, ensures that all this happens. And sometimes it does, but most of the time it has only started to begin. When our programmes and our timetables say it is “time to get ready for the Sacraments”, however, we do the Sacraments “to” them, and hope for the best.

But the Church says “the time spent in the catechumenate should be long enough – several years if necessary – for the conversion and faith of the catechumens to become strong” (RCIA no. 76).

Most parishes in England and Wales seem to assume that, for virtually everyone, the whole RCIA process is going to be completed in seven or eight months. But, in fact, each of its principal stages should be open-ended. The time of enquiry, of first introductions, especially to the person and teaching of Christ, should take as long as it takes for someone interested in this to feel that they have indeed got to know who Christ is and something of what he had to

share. It should also take as long as it takes for us to see that this knowledge has started to have an effect on how they live. So we can have some confidence that when they commit to discipleship they really know at least something of what they are committing to.

When they do commit, this is an important moment for them and for us. It is properly celebrated at a key time in the life of our community. There are many such times throughout the year – the feast of our parish patron, or the dedication of the church are maybe the most obvious times for celebrating the way our community is growing and changing. There are others too – and all of them are at least as suitable for this Rite as the First Sunday of Advent.

The further time needed for the first beginnings to take deeper root in the catechumens must again take as long as is necessary. If the norm is one or two years, then the sense

of rush “to get them ready for [this] Easter” will go. The emphasis will be on doing all one can to help someone to develop their ability to know and love God, learning to live by his inspiration and to be able to share his good gifts with others – however long that might take.

There are many ways in which this formation may be helped along by parishes – all sorts of resources for them to draw on – but the Church’s expectation is that at the heart of it all will be the Word of God. It is not time yet for the Sacraments, but in this time they learn how to live from the living Word of God. It is a time for being trained how to receive that Word each Sunday at Mass, and to draw nourishment from it for their daily lives.

It is time for the seed to be sown, and for the Church to wait patiently for it to bear fruit.

TO DO

Remember that conversion, among other things, depends on the grace of God; consider a rolling RCIA programme with no start-up or finishing dates

Let the time spent in the catechumenate be long enough – several years if necessary – for the conversion and faith of the catechumens to become strong

Think of which three or four days in the year might your parish keep ready for the welcoming of new catechumens

■ Fr Alan Morris is secretary to the Department for Christian Life and Worship of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, chair of the Liturgy Commission of Westminster Diocese and is a member of the RCIA Network (www.rcia.org.uk).