

# CONCENTRATING THE MIND

## The role of ritual in RCIA

By KEVIN DONOVAN and VERONICA ROBBINS

**A**S A YOUNG Jesuit, I went somewhat in awe of an older priest, eminent as raconteur and lecturer alike. Endless were his tales of damsels in distress rescued from various fates all worse than death, tales told with obvious relish and a professional attention to detail. Countless too were the souls he personally had gathered into the bosom of Mother Church. Next on his hit list was to be a family friend, an elderly retired engineer of politely agnostic persuasion. 'I shall have him', gloated the apostle, confidently crooking his finger, 'I shall have him'. Surprisingly, the Lord seemed quite satisfied with the engineer as he was—an apparent unbeliever, but happily married to a pious convert wife. My mother had 'stood for her'—been her godmother when she became a Catholic—in the rather hole-and-corner ceremony of conditional baptism which followed her instruction by a craggy old parish priest.

This sort of example has often been used to illustrate the difference between the older manner of 'receiving converts' and the more community-minded style advocated by RCIA. (This convenient abbreviation for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults will be used to refer both to the service book and to the whole process of conversion which it describes). This process, which could last for several months or even years, is punctuated by various liturgical ceremonies or rites, which are the particular concern of this article. The RCIA book occasionally refers to itself as a Ritual, following the Latin. However, in English, the term ritual is more commonly used to refer to ritual activity as a whole: for instance, as studied by social anthropologists. Occasionally, as we shall see, it carries pejorative overtones.

Curious readers of RCIA may be put off by its comparative size, complexity and rebarbative terminology. This may testify to an impeccable patristic pedigree, but does not provide the sort of

rite which can be neatly packaged on to a plastic card for the benefit of friends and guests at a christening. They would be lost by all the talk of elections, scrutinies, illumination, mystagogy and the rest. Admitting the problem, the compilers of RCIA modestly allow that 'in our times, other names may be applied to the elect that, depending on regions and cultures, are better suited to people's understanding of the language' (24/111).<sup>1</sup> Amen to that. Scant justice would be done to RCIA if it came across as a cumbersome piece of archaeology, largely irrelevant to present-day needs.

Of course RCIA has certain advantages. It is not too difficult to see the value of the group support it advocates for prospective members of the community of faith in an age of considerable disbelief. Again, if Jesus taught through stories and vivid examples, we should perhaps adopt a similar method. Did not Paul reach his deepest theological conclusions by reflecting on experience in the light of scripture, and encourage his converts to do the same? This too could present a sound pedagogy for presenting doctrine. But why introduce all these rather artificial and potentially embarrassing ceremonies, dredged up from a less scripturally respectable past? The only answer to this type of objection must be that these ceremonies actually work in practice. This is not something you can prove from theory alone. The argument from authority is far less convincing than from experience. The proof of the pudding . . . or as one member of our parish group put it last year, 'I needed something to mark my decision. After years of putting things off, I was making a sign that I was going to do something'. Besides this self-involving quality of the rites, which primarily affects the individual participants, there is a strong sense of community. After attending the cathedral ceremony at the start of Lent, when Cardinal Hume, in the name of the whole diocese, welcomed all those who were to be baptized at Easter, another of our candidates exclaimed, 'I was overcome by the amount of people who wanted to join the Church. I wondered what it is that the Catholic Church has got that so many people want to join'. And the witness of people asking to join the Church has a powerful effect on those of us who are already in it. It builds up our faith. *Experto crede.*

The present article, then, will refresh memories about the rites of RCIA. In so doing, it will point out where Catholic liturgy is particularly distinctive, and the theory behind it, both traditional

and innovative. In contrast with some contemporary evaluations, Catholics hold ritual in high esteem. The conclusions of a long line of distinguished anthropologists suggest that the Church is right to treasure ritual. At the same time, the treasure is held in fragile vessels. Ritual is necessary—it is also prone to ambiguity.

For the record, then, RCIA is made up of four continuous periods, punctuated by three major ceremonies or rites. Readers are probably familiar with the sequence: Pre-catechumenate, Catechumenate, Lenten Purification and Mystagogy. In an attempt to improve on these patristic names, the rite glosses them as: the first preaching of the Gospel, a complete catechesis, a more profound spiritual preparation and a deepening of the Christian experience. This slightly cumbersome set of alternatives does convey the main features of 'the spiritual journey of adults, which varies according to the many forms of God's grace, the free co-operation of the individuals, the action of the Church and the circumstances of time and place' (5/5). As it says elsewhere, 'nothing can be decided *a priori*'. By the same token no great details are given about the content of the instructions to be offered or the type of prayer to be recommended. This is not to say that the introductory material in RCIA is lightweight. It is full of suggestions and recommendations which turn out to be extremely practical. But the only parts of the process to be spelled out in full are the rites—some twenty or more, of one sort or another, with plenty of scope for choice among alternatives or even for considerable adaptation to suit circumstances (64–66/32–34). Nothing can be determined *a priori*. However, among this considerable body of ceremonies, three rites stand out—stages or gateways along the journey, as the RCIA likes to call them.

These three stages are the Rite of Acceptance as a catechumen, marking initial conversion, the Rite of Election or enrolment of names for Baptism, and the final celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation at Easter—Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. Perhaps it is worth pointing out that the original situation envisaged by RCIA is that of non-baptized adults: 'pagans', if the term is still acceptable. This is not surprising, as much missionary experience (from first world as well as third world countries) went into its framing. After all, the Church is—or should be—primarily about mission. However, provision is also made, but almost by way of afterthought, for the reception of already baptized Christians into full communion with the Catholic Church. In an English

parish, these may be much more numerous than unbaptized enquirers. Hence the need for a local ritual, like that produced by the American hierarchy to take account of this situation in presenting the ceremonies. RCIA also contains important sections on the initiation of children of catechetical age: sometimes their parents are also asking for baptism, but the phenomenon of unbaptized children, one or both of whose parents are Catholic, is becoming increasingly common. Rites are provided for them which follow the adult pattern while respecting the children's capacity and the special role and responsibility of their parents. Finally, there is an important section on preparing baptized but unevangelized adult Catholics for the sacraments of Confirmation and the Eucharist. RCIA is emphatic that, though such Catholics may not have heard the mystery of the message of Christ, their status, like that of all baptized Christians, is different from that of catechumens, since by baptism they have already become members of the Church and children of God (295/376). (This last phrase bothers me. Are the unbaptized not children of God, even without knowing it?). Granted that their status is different, what guidelines are offered for helping adults who find themselves in the situation of wanting to catch up with their baptism? Very similar to those recommended for receiving the unbaptized: a warm welcome, and a lengthy period of time in which total acceptance, a prayerful atmosphere, formation in Christian living and the personal support of a sponsor as well as of the community are all readily available. Last but not least, 'the period of preparation is made holy by means of liturgical celebrations' (300/381). The vision of RCIA, then, is that of an extended period of adult formation within a supportive community, a vision in which appropriate rites are seen as an essential part of the journey in faith. Is this so very unusual? Yes and no.

Allusion has already been made to the way converts to Catholicism were treated in the past; this tended to be on an exclusively one-to-one basis, with no liturgy other than an often low-key celebration (odd word) of conditional baptism, usually in the sacristy with no one other than the priest and a witness present. The emphasis is now changed. Following the call of Vatican II, the catechumenate for adults has been restored, and an older heritage recovered. In other Christian bodies, this is only partly so. Whatever may be the practice of individual pastors, the vast majority of revised liturgical books—and virtually every Church has revised its liturgy in recent years—make no provision for

integrating a whole series of rites within the gradual process of conversion. This explains the much greater length of the RCIA volume compared with the corresponding sections on Adult Initiation in the Alternative Service Book of the Church of England, or the admirably compact Service Book of the United Reformed Church.<sup>2</sup> A brief comparison of these three representatives is instructive, revealing similarities, minor variants and this one important difference. For instance, the number of post-baptismal ceremonies (candles, white robe etc.) varies, as might be expected, given their historical backgrounds. Catholics have more of these explanatory ceremonies than do Anglicans, while the Reformed tradition is the most sparing. Again, note the way in which the sanctifying role of the Holy Spirit is expressed. Catholics pray that God will send the Spirit on the waters of the font, and so make it holy. Anglicans ask God to bless the water and send the Holy Spirit on the candidates (Catholics also ask for this) while the Reformed tradition prefers to pray that, in the power of his Spirit, God will so use the water and our obedience that the candidates may receive the fulness of grace. But despite these variations of ceremonial detail and theological emphasis, all three traditions do have a fully developed rite, which in its essential pattern can be traced at least to the time of Hippolytus in the early third century. The point is thus not whether to have a rite of baptism or not. The point is whether to make a whole series of rites integral to the process of conversion. Perhaps one could be more specific. Integral to the process of ecclesial conversion, to finding Christ not in the bible merely, nor in solitary contemplation, (both are surely needful) but in his community. A community needs rites.

Our claim for the rites of RCIA is that they provide a vital focus for God's call and the human response it evokes. The call, first made through the circumstances of an individual's life and refined by contact with the community of faith, is made most explicit through the scripture, dialogue, commitment and prayers which make up the rites. The formal gestures, such as signing with the cross, handing over the copy of the Gospels, and baptismal bath all reinforce the call and embody the individual's response and the support offered by the community. It sounds, and is, a very satisfying corpus of ritual. But to many people these days, ritual is a tarnished word. Take these typical extracts from recent newspaper articles.

Ritual and celebration are for the religious. They are for keeping the spirits up: for consolidating and consoling the faithful and for anathematising the heretics. They inhibit advance, while keeping the spirit of sectarian rectitude alive.

(*The Guardian*, 10-12-88: from Stuart Hall, the *Hard road to renewal*).

#### TRAGEDY DEMANDS ITS UNHAPPY RITUAL

There is an unspoken convention that terrible accidents demand immediate parliamentary statements . . . So the statement comes during that awkward twilight when it is too late for the news yet too early for any immediate judgement. It all takes on an aspect of unhappy ritual.

(*The Times*, 11-12-88).

There is more than a suggestion here that ritual behaviour somehow involves insincerity or self-deception: a sort of comfortable charade that avoids facing reality. The call for honesty in ritual went very deep at the time of the Reformation controversies. The destruction of tangible symbols and the mutilation of a complete ritual system were its most obvious features. Yet even here, the argument took two main forms, of which Luther and Calvin were the outstanding exponents. At its strictest, the attack on medieval ritual allowed only those rites and ceremonies which were expressly commanded in the bible. Thus Calvin. Luther, however, having perhaps a sounder instinct for the pastoral value of ritual, allowed even man-made ceremonies provided they were not expressly forbidden by scripture. Hints of these divergent attitudes persist today. Nonetheless it is significant how any tradition, even the most anti-ritualistic in spirit, like that of the Quakers, soon finds itself adopting a fairly recognizable pattern, however simple. By contrast, Catholicism has encouraged a very full ritual, especially since the time of Constantine.

This development of ritual has been both the strength and weakness of Catholicism. Its strength, because like all human societies, the Church needs ritual to express and embody its faith and values. Its weakness, because ritual is no substitute for faith. Ritual needs faith as much as faith needs ritual. Over the centuries, however, the natural (and God-given) hunger for ritual, with the sense of belonging and security which it can bring, have not always been matched by the personal commitment to leave all and follow Christ on the journey of faith. Or so it would seem. Yet who can measure another's faith, save God alone? Still it was this apparent

divorce of rite from (articulate?) faith which the Reformers fastened on with all the fiery zeal of Old Testament prophets. Their criticisms must still be listened to, even if they were expressed with one-sided vigour. The theology behind RCIA is examined in more detail elsewhere. Suffice it to say that it avoids the imbalances of an older sacramental theology which stressed the *ex opere* principle unduly. In the case of baptism, this could lead to such a concentration on the moment of pouring water that it tended to separate baptism from the process of conversion of which it was originally the ritual climax. RCIA strikes a better balance. Due regard for the response of faith is preserved by requiring careful discernment of motives and of the candidate's readiness before allowing anyone to participate in the rites. The rites are efficacious because God is working through this very human activity: throughout, the primacy of God's initiative is stressed: 'their hearts opened by the Holy Spirit . . . that they may co-operate with God's Grace . . .' (9 & 11/36 & 38 and *passim*).

Human societies need ritual. This has been the fairly uniform conclusion of a long line of anthropologists. They have given much attention to the way in which new members are incorporated into a social group. The societies they have described have tended to be homogeneous, studied on location, so to speak, in Africa, Oceania and other places which had not been unduly contaminated by outside Western influence. One of these pioneers was van Gennep, who before the First World War had introduced the term 'Rites of Passage' which has since found wide acceptance. It is even used in the revised English translation of RCIA, though somewhat misleadingly, to refer to two of the subsidiary ceremonies. Among the Rites of Passage discussed by van Gennep are initiation rites: candidates are first segregated from their former peers (rather like novices or recruits). In this liminal or threshold period, various tests are performed and instructions given about adult life or the new status they are to embrace. Finally, successful candidates are solemnly enrolled, aggregated to the community as full adult members. This pattern is very widespread, and RCIA can be analyzed along similar lines. The catechumenate in particular can be seen as a liminal period, with appropriate rites and formation. The problem with the parallel is to establish the distinctive role of voluntary commitment, choice by God and response in faith. Having admitted this peculiarity of Christian initiation, the parallel

may stand. The pattern of RCIA is in no way arbitrary; it is deeply rooted in human social behaviour.

If anyone is still not convinced, and feels that in our more complex and sophisticated society, we have outgrown ritual, let them look around: at the way we celebrate Christmas and New Year, birthdays and Golden Jubilees, St Patrick's Day and Burns' Night. What about Carnivals and Presidential Elections, May Day Parades and Trooping the Colour . . . not to mention Cup Finals, Rock Concerts, Bingo and Old Tyme Dancing. Ritual is alive and well in any big city you care to name. An instructive analysis is afforded by Robert Bocock, in a book entitled *Ritual in industrial society*. After discussing a number of philosophical approaches to ritual and symbol, he proposes this definition:

Ritual is the symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a social situation to express and articulate meaning. . . .Rituals can integrate bodily feelings and emotions with rational purposes, and can thus go some way to healing the splits between the body and intellect . . . Without rituals life becomes utilitarian, technocratic and cold (p 37).

Bocock suggests a fourfold classification of ritual in our urban culture—national and civic, religious, life-cycle and family and finally aesthetic and sporting—for many, an alternative to religion. In reality, of course, these four categories often overlap. Christmas is an obvious example. So is baptism—at least all too often. Is the christening of a child primarily a religious event—the celebration of faith—or is it a family and even tribal affair, with the opportunity for a good party thrown in? One effect of being involved with RCIA is to make one increasingly uncomfortable with anything resembling indiscriminate baptism of infants.

A different life-cycle ritual affords striking confirmation of the rightness of RCIA. Marriage is one of the greatest of all human values, and God-given. Made in the image and likeness of God, the growing relationship needs to be recognized and cemented in ritual. Not just the wedding ceremony which crowns the process, with the mystagogic honeymoon before life together continues in everyday reality. On the way to the altar (or registry office) there are periods of 'going steady', of courtship and of engagement, punctuated with formal and informal rites like meeting the parents, buying the ring, throwing an engagement party and the like. The



parallel with RCIA gets closer the more you look at it—even to the white garment and the sharing of special food and drink. Cana was no accident. It would be a tremendous and inhuman impoverishment to reduce all this to the bare words of consent. 'I do' may be the binding contract, but if anything shows up in the inadequacy of our old sacramental minimalism, that would be it. The parallels between these two faith journeys—marriage and initiation, both leading to a lifelong personal commitment—are further corroboration that RCIA needs its ritual, and also indicate how the ritual 'works'.

None of these comparisons is drawn out in the text of RCIA. Nor is this surprising. RCIA is not a treatise on ritual, any more than it is aiming to be a treatise of speculative theology. Indeed, if it had tried to be other than middle-of-the-road, it would probably not have passed the strict scrutiny of the various Roman Congregations. And yet there is a profound theology behind it. In the same way, RCIA is essentially a practical handbook, one that can be used all over the world. But it does enshrine a healthy approach to ritual, setting it firmly in the context of life of faith as a whole, and not relegating or confining it to the sanctuary. In so doing, RCIA marks a not-inconsiderable advance in the teaching of the magisterium. Since it is not a full-blown treatise on the Church's ritual, RCIA is relatively silent, or not very explicit, on a number of interesting questions. How is the undoubted power of the Church's ritual to be explained? What is the relationship between personal faith and the community's ritual expression of faith? What about liturgy in the home: is the Church's interest in liturgy limited to her official sacraments?

Here RCIA gives more than a hint of an answer. It contains several rites which may be conducted by someone other than a priest—for instance, a catechist—and in a place other than a church. RCIA, then, must be recognized for what it is—a process of conversion, a body of rites to accompany that process, and an important, although limited, introduction to both. No doubt it could be faulted for not being more incisive in its denunciation of evil in the renunciations that form part of the baptismal ceremony. Arguably this could still be done, if the celebrant thinks it appropriate. But in many ways, the homily is the proper place for prophetic denunciation. However, RCIA has been prophetic in another, although less dramatic way. Since its publication, it has inspired a number of programmes of sacramental preparation which have

been adopted by an increasing number of dioceses. They exist for parents in the case of Infant Baptism or First Communion, as well as for candidates preparing for Communion, Confession and Confirmation. These combine formal instruction in doctrine with great stories of scripture and a chance to reflect on one's own experience of life. The debt to RCIA is particularly obvious in the various liturgies of the word which form an integral part of these programmes. Like RCIA, they recognize the truth that growth in faith takes time, and is aided by being expressed and embodied in liturgy. Ritual is a harbinger of God's presence. And as Doctor Johnson observed of another of God's harbingers, it concentrates the mind wonderfully. RCIA does more than just concentrate the mind—it concentrates the whole person.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In these references to RCIA I have given the old Latin number first, followed by the new numbering adopted by the definitive ICEL translation.

<sup>2</sup> The 1988 Lambeth Conference invited the Provinces of the Anglican Communion to consider the provision of guidelines for a revived adult catechumenate (cf *Report* p 72 para 199). The Province of South Africa would appear to be the only province to have done this prior to the Lambeth Conference.

#### FURTHER READING

The bibliography of RCIA is enormous. We can, however recommend the following in particular.

We have already mentioned *Ritual in industrial society* by Robert Bock (London 1974). Another spirited defence of ritual is to be found in *The language of the Rite* by Roger Grainger (also London 1974). The seminal work of Arnold van Gennep, *The rites of passage* originally appeared in French in 1909 with an English translation in 1960 (London). At about the time that the compilers of RCIA were at work, there appeared important studies on ritual by two distinguished English Catholic anthropologists: *The ritual process*, by Victor Turner (Chicago, 1970) and *Natural symbols* by Mary Douglas (London, 1970). It is not suggested that these works contributed to the text of RCIA in any way: the literary sources were mainly patristic. But the influence of Turner and Douglas may be detected in a number of commentaries on RCIA, either directly or by way of reaction.