

BEFORE YOU BEGIN RCIA AT ST. THOMAS MORE CATHOLIC CHURCH:

Things you should know about ATTENDANCE:

Experience has taught me that I should attempt to define our “attendance policy”. We are living in a fast-paced world that seems to demand more and more of our scarce time. The RCIA journey is, however, a “faith formation” *process* – one that cannot easily be constrained to a calendar. Because of the *eternal effects* of committing to Jesus through the Catholic faith, we believe this is *the most important journey* one can take! With this in mind, attendance at *all* the scheduled events is important and expected. March Break typically falls in the Lenten period as we prepare for Easter. We encourage families, particularly those preparing to receive Catholic Sacraments at Easter, to consider “fasting” their usual ‘away’ vacations at this time and perhaps consider a ‘*stay-cation*’ as a prayerful & sacrificial way of focusing on the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The “Inquiry” phase of this journey can take as long as you need – ranging from the scheduled 13 weeks to several years if necessary! Indeed, there are a number of Inquirers in the past that followed the program more than once before committing to the Sacraments.

At the end of the “scheduled” Inquiry phase, we celebrate the **Rite of Welcome** where Inquirers that have chosen to, and have been called by this faith community, publicly express their desire to follow the way of Jesus. The Church accepts their intention and welcomes them into the household of the Church. Although at this point one is not yet Catholic and cannot yet partake in the Sacraments, similar to an “engagement”, one is publicly stating an *intention to do so* in the future. Therefore, we have decided that after the **Rite of Welcome**, any more than three absences will be understood as *your decision* to extend your Inquiry phase for another year. We will endeavor to help you “make up” missed sessions within reason of course.

Things you should know about Photos & Videos:

Photos are taken throughout the faith journey and compiled into a beautiful **Gift Book** that is shared in a digital format with all on the journey. To mitigate privacy concerns only 1st names are used in photos. Parents who desire the celebration of Sacraments for their children **at the Vigil** are required to **sign a waiver** permitting the use of their pictures as described above. **Otherwise, parents can pursue the usual process for children’s Sacraments independently.**

Things you should know about SPONSORS:

At an early point in the faith journey, we ensure each Inquirer is paired with a **practicing** Catholic Sponsor who is a “living example” of the Catholic life and weekly participant at Mass. This could be a friend or a family member, but not a spouse or fiancée (or girlfriend/boyfriend). Spouses/fiancées are encouraged to attend in the important role of **“Companions on the Journey”** instead. As the *Inquirer* & their *Companion* attend sessions and journey with their *Sponsor*, wonderful friendships and growth in Catholic community often results! There are numerous eager volunteers from the Parish to act as Sponsor for those who need one.

Things you should know about MARRIAGE and receiving SACRAMENTS:

In order to receive the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) it is important that we be prepared in body, soul and spirit to be a vessel that has been cleansed and ready to receive Christ in this Sacramental way. While the RCIA faith formation process is designed to help the Inquirer do just that, there may be steps required beyond the RCIA to ensure that any impediments to the Sacraments are resolved. Such impediments include multiple marriages that have not been annulled; marriages of Catholics outside the Catholic Church; and pre-marital and common law relationships.

What the Catholic Church teaches about Marriage: We believe that God has called man and woman to become one flesh, one soul, one spirit. Therefore, the Church assumes all legal marriages between men and women from any or no religious affiliation to be **valid and binding**. In other words, the Catholic Church considers that in any marriage, spouses are **“bound to each other”** and thus not “free” to be bound to another until death or unless it can be shown that any previous bonds were dissolved or invalid. A **declaration of nullity (annulment)** is the process by which the Church *assesses the validity* of the initial consent of a marriage. Inquirers who have been divorced and remarried, or are married to a divorced person will have to meet with the priest to pursue an annulment if deemed necessary.

Inquirers are welcome and encouraged to take part in the RCIA process but must understand that marriage issues must **be resolved before** celebrating the Sacraments of the Church.

An important exception - the Catholic spouse married outside the Catholic Church: The Church in Her wisdom recognizes that this natural bond between man and woman given by God is so important to human dignity and the family that She has an obligation to guide Her members (ie: Catholics) in the proper preparation and execution of this union. **Thus, it is a loving and nurturing requirement that a Catholic be married in the Catholic Church** (ie: bound by the form of a Catholic marriage). For a Catholic, a valid marriage must follow the proper form wherein the marriage **vows are made in the Church in the presence of a Catholic priest (Christ's representative) and two witnesses**. If this does not occur, the marriage is considered valid by civil authority (and therefore children are legitimate) but the Catholic Church does not *recognize* the marriage. There are two ways to have a marriage recognized or "*blessed*" in the Church called "*Sanation*" and "*Convalidation*". These will involve meeting with the priest who will explain the difference between the two and begin the process which is relatively simple provided there are no other impediments such as previous marriages which have not been annulled.

The "Blessing" of a marriage (Sanation or Convalidation): In order to proceed with the "blessing" of a marriage the Catholic spouse will require a **recent Baptismal Certificate** which will indicate follow-on Sacraments such as Confirmation. This can be obtained relatively simply by contacting the Church of Baptism. You will also require a copy of your **Civil Marriage Certificate** and a copy of the **Registry of Marriage** from Vital Statistics. The *Registry of Marriage* contains more specific information than most Marriage Certificates, such as the name of the Church, the witnesses and the Minister etc. With these documents in hand, you can simply make an appointment with the priest to begin the process of Sanation or Convalidation.

Divorce: If you are divorced and not remarried or living in a common law relationship you have **no impediments to the Sacraments**. However, if you intend to marry again, you need to meet with a priest to assess the need for an annulment.

Pre-marital and common law relationships: The Church teaches that human love demands the total and definitive gift of persons to one another and that this "**exchange of persons**" is **only morally legitimate within the covenant of Marriage**. The RCIA process endeavors to reveal the beauty of the Church's position on marriage and we invite couples to open themselves to the challenge of such teaching. Several couples from past RCIA sessions have indicated that they have never been challenged in this way in the past, but with their growing faith, understanding and the Grace of God, they were able to take the required action to remove this impediment from their path to the Sacraments. What was most striking about these couples was how grateful they were for the TRUTH.

Refraining from receiving Communion: As Archbishop Cardinal Thomas Collins once said:

"When one says Amen at the moment of receiving Communion in the Catholic Church, one says "I accept the whole Faith of the Catholic Church, and am in communion not only personally with Jesus, but also with the Church through which He comes to me."

Thus, before receiving Eucharist, all Catholics must assess their acceptance of the faith of the Church. At times when we are not "in communion" with the Church either because of sin or a chosen state of life such as a common law relationship or a marriage that needs to be "blessed" **we must refrain or "fast" from receiving the Eucharist until we can achieve resolution** through prayer, change as required and going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. All who are not in communion are encouraged to draw upon the grace of God by attending Mass and coming for a **blessing** at the time of Communion. One indicates they are coming for a blessing by placing their hand on their heart.

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