The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and Liminal Experience:
A Theological Anthropological Interpretation

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis focuses upon the spiritual transformation that occurs in the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), the faith-formation process for adults desiring to become full members of the Catholic Church. The primary objective of the thesis is to interpret the liminal transformation that occurs within the RCIA from a theological perspective. The liminal (from the Latin word ‘limen’ meaning threshold) marks a phase of profound transition within a rite of passage, where participants are in an ‘in-between’ state. Liminality, and its associated concept of communitas, which describes close bonding between initiands, is developed in the work of the anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner.

The thesis is cumulative in approach, leading to a theological analysis. It proceeds with (a) the presentation of the empirical experience of twenty-six participants who have participated in the RCIA process, which is (b) interpreted anthropologically, in the light of Turnerian theory, and (c) culminates in the theological interpretation of participants’ liminal experience in the RCIA. The thesis is therefore a tri-partite, interdisciplinary study, incorporating social science methodology (qualitative research and analysis) alongside anthropological interpretation, in a practical theological study.

The theological interpretation is guided by the themes of the theology of grace (especially found in the work of the theologian Karl Rahner), the paschal mystery, sacramental theology and mystagogy (reflection upon the mysteries of faith). The theological exploration reveals the embedded theology of participants’ liminal RCIA experience, principally their spiritual transformation. As theology illuminates pastoral practice, participants’ experience also enriches theological reflection. In addition, this interpretation provides a theological reading of the anthropological concepts of liminality and communitas, and assesses how theology and anthropology may be of mutual service to each other whilst respecting the integrity of each discipline. The study concludes with reflections on aspects of the pastoral practice of the RCIA process in light of the findings.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The rite of initiation is suited to a spiritual journey of adults that varies according to the many forms of God’s grace, the free cooperation of the individuals, the action of the Church, and the circumstances of time and place.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

The RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) is the faith-formation process for adults seeking to become members of the Catholic Church. The primary objective of this thesis is to interpret the liminal transformation occurring within the RCIA from a theological perspective. The liminal (from the Latin word ‘limen’ meaning threshold) marks a phase of profound and meaningful transition within a rite of passage, where participants are in an ‘in-between’ state. Integral to the liminal time is the capacity for personal, social and spiritual change amidst transition and challenge. Liminality, and its associated concept of communitas, which describes close bonding between participants, has been developed by the social anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner. The thesis incorporates the empirical experience of twenty-six participants who have completed the RCIA, and essentially focuses upon the spiritual transformation that occurs during the process. The Turners’ theory is used in an interdisciplinary dialogue to facilitate theological interpretation of the liminal nature of the RCIA journey.

The thesis is cumulative in approach, leading to the theological interpretation. The empirical data, which concern the faith stories of twenty-six participants who for various reasons decided to become Catholic, are presented. This is followed by two distinct interpretive steps:

1. The liminal nature of the RCIA experience: Participants’ individual stories are interpreted through an initial anthropological framework, providing a

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2 See chapter 4 for an overview of the Turners’ theory.
preliminary reading of RCIA experience as a liminal rite-of-passage experience.

2. Theological interpretation of the liminal experience: Participants’ experiences are interpreted through a theological framework. The themes of the theology of grace (and the specific use of Karl Rahner’s theological anthropology), the paschal mystery, sacraments and mystagogy (see description below) form the basis of the theological framework. These theological themes are fully explained and presented in chapter six. Within this theological anthropological interpretation, participants’ experiences and theology are brought into dialogue with one another; this encounter between experience and theology reveals a mystagogical, reflective praxis. In addition, the theological interpretation provides a theological reading of the anthropological concepts of liminality and communitas, and assesses how theology and anthropology may be of mutual service to each other whilst respecting the integrity of each discipline.

The concept of mystagogy, or reflecting upon the mysteries, was used in the Patristic homilies of the early Church Fathers, and was reintroduced to contemporary Church practice through the restoration of the catechumenate and the introduction of the Rite. In contemporary practice, the period of mystagogy is the fourth and final stage in the RCIA process (see pp. 14-16 below for an outline of the four stages of the process). In addition to it being a specific stage in the RCIA process involving personal reflection on sacramental experience, it may also be used to describe

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3 The term mystagogy was borrowed by the early Church from the Greek mystery cults, and derived from the practice of pagan initiation ceremonies. Ambrose of Milan, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom and Cyril of Jerusalem adopted and adapted the term to describe homilies that gave a catechesis of the sacraments of initiation, as no prior explanation of the sacraments would have been given to initiands. The early Church Fathers had a manifold understanding of mystagogy and used various ‘typologies’ in their homilies; see Enrico Mazza, Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age, translated by M. J. O’Connell (New York: Pueblo, 1989). Diana Macalintal summarizes these typologies or techniques as cosmological, anthropological, scriptural, critical, moral and eschatological in ‘Mystagogy: Unveiling Paradise on Earth’, Catechumenate: A Journal of Christian Initiation (March 1998) 25-35 (pp. 28-30).
reflection upon faith experience in general. The term ‘mystagogue’ is sometimes employed to describe someone who accompanies or helps bring others into the faith.

In this thesis, the tri-partite encounter involving participants’ experience, anthropology and theology is an exercise in mutuality. The method used in this study recognizes the integrity of both disciplines of anthropology and theology; anthropology illuminates theology and theology also illuminates anthropology. Bringing both disciplines together in dialogue highlights areas in common and a series of parallel themes that may act as a bridge between the two disciplines. The study reaches an apex in a theological interpretation of the RCIA experience that is richer for the interdisciplinary endeavour.

This introductory chapter provides initial background and context for the thesis, and is split into the following sections:

I. The RCIA: Adult Catechesis – An Overview -- This includes contextualizing the practice of the RCIA within the post-Vatican II Church, and is followed by an explanation of the origins of the research question and the merits of its investigation.\(^4\)

II. Outlining the Research Question: An Exercise in Practical Theology -- A summary of the research question, situating the thesis as an exercise in practical theology.

III. Primary Findings and Overview of Chapters -- A summary of the primary findings and thesis chapters.

We begin with an historical overview of the practice of the catechumenate, which is the inspiration for the contemporary introduction of the RCIA.

I. The RCIA: Adult Catechesis – An Overview

In order to contextualize the RCIA within current pastoral practice, the following overview explains the history of the practice of the catechumenate and the reasons

\(^4\) Vatican II, or the Second Vatican Council, called for the restoration of the catechumenate; see the Overview below.
The stages and nature of the RCIA process, and how catechesis, the passing on of faith, was profoundly influenced by the shifts in theology occurring after the Council are also outlined. These introductory points provide an initial background for understanding the RCIA process, and form an essential preface to the later theological interpretation of experiences of transformation.

\textit{i. Re-introduction of the Catechumenate or RCIA}

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) called for the restoration of the early Christian practice of the catechumenate, a period of preparation or catechesis for adults seeking to be baptized, into contemporary parish practice.\textsuperscript{6} The catechumenate evolved from the baptismal practices of the New Testament Christian communities. It flourished in the early Church, in various locations, reaching its height in the fourth century. Various documents exist which describe initiatory practices in Egypt, Syria, Rome and Africa in the second and third centuries. In both the Eastern and Western pre-Nicene Church, the practice of baptism reflected diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic variations, as well as differences in theological interpretation.\textsuperscript{7} Prior to the Nicene Council (325 CE) it is not clear how long baptismal preparation lasted. In the Egyptian tradition it may have lasted forty days, and, in contrast to celebrations in Syria, Rome and Africa did not seem to have been set within the context of Easter celebrations. References to the existence of a catechumenate of up to three years in length in the West in the \textit{Apostolic Tradition} are now considered unreliable. By the

\textsuperscript{5} The RCIA is the common pastoral usage for the process in the UK, although the term catechumenate is used in both Europe and the USA. For references to the restoration of the catechumenate in Vatican II documents, see: \textit{Sacrosanctum Concilium} nos. 64-66, 71 and 109; see also \textit{Lumen Gentium} no.14; \textit{Ad Gentes} nos. 13-14; and \textit{Christus Dominus} no. 14. In this thesis, wherever I refer to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as a process I use the acronym ‘RCIA’. Where I specifically quote from the liturgical text of the \textit{Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults} I use the term the RCIA followed by the number of the passage in the ritual text and the corresponding page number in the ICEL 2004 edition.


\textsuperscript{7} Maxwell Johnson, \textit{The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation}, revised and expanded edition (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), pp. 41-42.
fourth century CE, however, it is clear there was a preference for celebrating the rites of initiation at Easter with a prior period of preparation during Lent.\(^8\)

After the fourth century, for various reasons, there was a decline in the practice of the catechumenate.\(^9\) The persecution of Christians ceased and the Christian empire grew, and although this led to more people desiring to become Christian, this was often due to reasons of marriage or for personal and political gain, rather than theological or spiritual motives based on inner conversion. Often people joined the catechumenate, even as children, but delayed actual baptism until later in life. This was due to the understanding that baptism cleansed one from all sin, and so its practice was withheld until serious illness was faced or young people had passed the temptations of youth.\(^10\) The rise in the practice of infant baptism was the main reason for the cessation of the catechumenate;\(^11\) however the ritual texts and prayers remained in existence without the emphasis on catechetical formation for baptism.\(^12\)

There were attempts to restore the catechumenate in the Middle Ages and during the Reformation period.\(^13\) During the sixteenth century there was a recognized need for catechumenal preparation in missionary territories. (St. Ignatius, in 1552, requested that Indians go through a three-month period of preparation prior to being baptized, and this recommendation was approved by the Indian bishops of the time.)\(^14\) Despite these efforts, the practice of the catechumenate generally remained stagnant until its

\(^8\) Johnson, The Rites of Christian Initiation, p. 201.
\(^11\) Johnson, The Rites of Christian Initiation, p. 216.
\(^13\) For a history of Christian initiation during the Middle Ages and the Protestant and Catholic Reforms of the Sixteenth century see chapters six and seven in Johnson’s The Rites of Christian Initiation.
revival centuries later in the African continent, where the catechumenate had originally been instituted under Augustine.15

The modern need for a catechumenate as a pastoral response to those becoming Catholics arose from grassroots experimentation, mainly in Africa, but also in France. In 1878, Charles Lavigerie, a French priest and later Archbishop of Carthage, created a catechumenate formation process for those engaged in missionary work in various African countries. The need for this emerged for guiding those converting to Catholicism - helping them learn about the Church’s teachings and navigate ecclesial cultural changes. After the Second World War, an experimental version of the catechumenate was also in existence in France, satisfying the desire of those becoming Catholic for spiritual guidance and doctrinal and moral formation. In 1959, Joseph Blomjous directly suggested to the Vatican that the catechumenate should be restored. Blomjous, originally from the Netherlands, observed the practice of the catechumenate in Africa, whilst he was bishop of Mwanga. As a result of his request, an ‘Order of Baptism of Adults Arranged as a Catechumenate in Steps’ was issued in 1962.16 Prior to the Second Vatican Council, then, there was clearly a growing demand for a catechumenate process which would facilitate the transmission of faith ahead of individual commitment to the Church. The need for a catechumenal model was ‘so widely requested that the Second Vatican Council decreed its restoration’.17 The RCIA is therefore steeped in early Church tradition and heritage.

After the Council, a study group under the leadership of Balthasar Fischer, a German liturgical theologian and priest, developed the ritual text of the Rite. Fischer acknowledged that the reintroduction of the catechumenate could be viewed as anachronistic, but stated: ‘more and more we discovered that what the early Christians established in regard to the catechumenate was fundamentally a timeless

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16 Ibid., pp. 144-155, see p. 152.
17 RCIA, no. 2.
pattern. Fischer was an influential expert on initiation both during the Council and in the drafting of the Rite. His knowledge of the history of the catechumenate, the *Apostolic Tradition* (an early Church text concerning liturgical practice) and the *Roman Ritual* (the official ritual text of the Church) were indispensible to the study group. Working from the *Roman Ritual* the group created a provisional text. Between 1966 and 1969 a catechumenal model, based on this provisional text, was piloted in fifty pastoral centres across the world, including Africa, Belgium, Canada, France, Indonesia, Japan and the USA. After revisions were made to the text, Pope Paul VI approved the Rite in 1972; it was translated into English in 1974, and was introduced into Catholic dioceses in England and Wales in the late 1980s. The catechumenal process has subsequently been introduced into the practices of the Anglican Church of Canada, the American Lutheran Church (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), the Episcopalian Church USA, the Reformed Church in the USA, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. James Dunning, former director of the North American Forum on the Catechumenate, writing in 1993 and after surveying the practice of the RCIA in several continents, claimed that in terms of the formal implementation of the new rites they were flourishing best in the USA. There is anecdotal evidence among some RCIA practitioners in the UK that this is still the case.

**ii. The RCIA Process**

The RCIA process is described by the Rite as a ‘spiritual journey’. It consists of four stages: Pre-catechumenate, Catechumenate, Enlightenment and Reception and Mystagogy. After the Pre-catechumenate stage, entrance to each subsequent stage is

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19 The authorship and date of the *Apostolic Tradition* are contested: see Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 17.
marked by a liturgical rite: the Rite of Catechumens; the Rite of Election and the Reception of the Sacraments, the latter taking place at the Easter Vigil.  

Pre-catechumenate

The pre-catechumenate phase is a time of exploration. Enquirers are introduced to the Gospel narrative, the story of Christianity and the tradition and practices of the Catholic Church. It is a period of initial evangelization, encouraging conversion to Christ.

Catechumenate

Participants then enter the main RCIA stage, the catechumenate. They make a formal commitment in the liturgical Rite of Catechumens. Those who are unbaptized (catechumens) and those who are baptized (candidates), seeking the sacrament of confirmation or Eucharist, prepare together to be received into the Church. In this central part of the process, faith is presented in four dimensions: Word, community, liturgy and mission. Scriptural catechesis is delivered over the course of the liturgical year with appropriate celebrations of the Word. Participants are helped to experience the Christian lifestyle and community life. Special liturgical celebrations mark the different stages and aspects of their RCIA journey. Participants are also called upon to involve themselves in the missionary life of the community. The catechumenate stage is an ‘apprenticeship’ in the faith and in discipleship:

The catechumenate is not a mere expounding of doctrines and precepts, but a training period in the whole Christian life, and an apprenticeship duty drawn out, during which disciples are joined to Christ their Teacher. Therefore, catechumens should be properly instructed in the mystery of salvation and in the practice of Gospel morality, and by sacred rites which are to be held at successive intervals; they should be introduced into the life of faith, of liturgy, and of love, which is led by the People of God.

23 Please see appendix 1 for an outline of how this appears in the text of the Rite.  
24 See RCIA no. 75, pp. 37-38. These dimensions derive from the practice of the catechumenate in the early Church and were known by the Greek terms kerygma, koinonia, leiturgia, and diakonia respectively.  
Purification and Enlightenment

The period of Lent, prior to reception into the Church, is marked by a time of intense spiritual preparation for reception of the sacraments. It begins with the Rite of Election on the first Sunday of Lent, when participants assemble with their godparents (those who accompany them through their reception into the Church) before their parish and diocesan communities. The ‘scrutinies’ – various rites that encourage examination of conscience – may be celebrated on certain Sundays in Lent and on weekdays. This stage culminates in sacramental reception into the Church at the Easter Vigil.

Mystagogy

During the final stage of mystagogy, which lasts until the celebration of Pentecost, the newly baptized (neophytes) and former candidates reflect upon their experiences of receiving the Easter Sacraments and undergoing the initiation process. Mystagogy involves reflecting upon or interpreting the mysteries of faith: ‘Ritual experience gives substance to mystagogy. Mystagogy in turn opens up the ritual in a way that allows personal appropriation of its meaning’. The main place of this post-baptismal catechesis ideally takes place during the masses for neophytes within the midst of community; those recently received along with the whole community are called to deepen their experience of the paschal mystery, through celebrations of the Word, sacrament and acts of charity. In pastoral practice, this final stage of the process is often neglected or given inadequate attention.

At present, catechumens – the unbaptized – are often prepared together with candidates, those already baptized in a Christian Church. It was originally intended that the revised catechumenate or RCIA would cater for the needs of the unbaptized. At the time of the introduction of the RCIA, then, another rite was also introduced: the rite of ‘Reception of Baptized Christians into Full Communion of the Catholic Church’.

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26 RCIA, nos. 128-133, pp. 70-71; nos. 137-171, pp. 72-106.
28 RCIA, no. 237, p. 145.
29 RCIA, nos. 234-241, pp. 145-146.
Church’, which may be celebrated at any time in the liturgical year. Paul Turner highlights how in the USA – and in pastoral practice in the UK – the celebration of a combination of these two rites at the Easter Vigil has encouraged the practice of preparing the unbaptized and the baptized alongside each other and receiving the same catechetical instruction. Given this practice, the rite of reception has become absorbed into the process of a paschal conversion, the dying and rising with Christ, rather than remaining a rite marking a progression culminating into coming into full communion with the Church:

Contextualization in the Easter Vigil has caused the simple rite of reception envisioned by the council to morph into a grand celebration on the most important night of the liturgical calendar. This happened as part of an enthusiastic response to the restored catechumenate in a nation where baptized candidates for reception outnumbered catechumens. However, the decision was costly in terms of understanding the distinct meaning of these rites.30

Turner suggests that the rite of reception is celebrated as tantamount to the baptism of catechumens. The pastoral use of what is considered an ecumenically sensitive document arising from the Second Vatican Council, emphasizing the common nature of baptism amongst Christians, has gone awry.31 This outlines one of the tensions of contemporary practice, given that the RCIA process caters to both catechumens and candidates.

iii. Catechesis after the Council

Despite the pastoral complexities of the RCIA, the process is a significant outcome of the Second Vatican Council; it is an important evangelization effort and means of faith transmission. In order to situate the contemporary practice of the RCIA within a broader theological background we should consider the following influential themes of catechesis that have emerged since the Council. The themes reveal shifts that have occurred in response to radical changes in the pastoral life of the Church. Catechesis, and specifically the practice of the RCIA, is directly linked with Church tradition,

31 Ibid., p. 15.
contemporary ecclesiology, liturgy and sacraments, scripture, the importance of experience and mission and evangelization.

RCIA – Catechesis Rooted in Tradition

The RCIA is rooted within the tradition of the Church and the teachings of the Church Fathers. For example, various fourth-century texts, some in the form of mystagogical and catechetical homilies, illustrate varying yet rich liturgical practices and the theological interpretation of the Christian initiation process. Texts from the West include the writings of Ambrose of Milan and Augustine’s writings on the catechumenate in North Africa. Texts from the Eastern Church include the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom (Archbishop of Constantinople) and Theodore of Mopsuestia; and the works of the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus.\(^{32}\) The catechumenate, with its emphasis on mystagogy, as well as other practices from the early Church, reflect a renewal of contemporary initiation practices in the light of historical and theological sources. As John Pollard notes, the Rite incorporates new language, methods and paradigms from the ancient Church’s liturgical and catechetical texts, reintroducing a new catechetical vocabulary based on ancient Church practice: words such as initiation, conversion, inquiry, catechumenate, enlightenment, election and mystagogy.\(^{33}\)

RCIA – Embodying Changes in Ecclesiology

Vatican II heralded a new understanding of the nature of the Church. The locus of catechesis in the group context of the RCIA, (with its emphasis on a social and communitarian catechesis process), reflects Vatican II teaching on community.\(^{34}\) Prior to the introduction of the RCIA, those seeking entry to the Church would have been prepared individually by a priest. The process now involves the whole parish through its liturgical emphasis. The model envisaged by *Lumen Gentium* (the

\(^{32}\) See Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, chapters 4 and 5.


\(^{34}\) RCIA, no. 9, p. 5; see also the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC), nos. 69-70.
council’s *Constitution on the Church* places emphasis on community, and the Church as the pilgrim people of God.\(^{35}\) This is a vision of the Church in which all are called to participate. The Church is:

> [t]he community of disciples of Christ, the people of God, united by baptism and all having a fundamental dignity and equality as children of God, and brothers and sisters of Christ. Hence each member, just because he is a member, has a role to play in the Church and is called to full, active and conscious participation, both in the Eucharist, and in the life of the Church generally.\(^{36}\)

This vision is reflected in the RCIA. Initiation becomes the responsibility of all: ‘the people of God, as represented by the local church, should understand and show by their concern that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized’;\(^{37}\) the whole community is called upon to accompany those preparing for reception into the Church. The parish journeys, collectively, with participants in the various liturgies and Easter ceremonies, and is also represented through the specific roles of catechist, sponsor and godparent.\(^{38}\) Catechesis in the RCIA group setting thus presents the radical challenge of collaborative ministry between priest and people.\(^{39}\)

James Dunning comments that the shift in the Church’s self-understanding was incorporated into the sacraments of initiation, and over and above the other rites it translated the vision of the Church as community into practice: ‘They enfleshed it in rites that celebrate God’s universal presence in the community of all the baptized and the universal call of that entire community to mission’.\(^{40}\)

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35 See *Lumen Gentium*, chapter two.
36 Bill Cosgrove, ‘Structures of Authority’, in *Authority in the Church*, Columba Explorations 1, edited by Seán Mac Réamoinn (Dublin: Columba Press, 1995), pp. 26-47 (p. 30). Cosgrove highlights how *Lumen Gentium* is a compromise document between the conservative and progressive outlook of the Council Fathers and may be selectively quoted to suit one’s preferences regarding Church structure, see p. 32.
37 RCIA, no. 9, p. 5.
38 Sponsors are parishioners who accompany participants during the RCIA process, acting as a bridge between the RCIA group and the wider parish. Catechists are members of the RCIA team. They assist in the RCIA faith formation process by contributing to RCIA sessions and sharing aspects of their own faith journey.
Renewal of the Liturgy

Vatican II inspired numerous changes in the liturgy.\textsuperscript{41} The call for the restoration of the catechumenate was to transform the reception of adults into the Church, making the catechumenate an important feature of parish life and the Easter liturgy. Changes in both sacramental and liturgical theology have impacted upon conversion in the RCIA process. The liturgical theologian Mark Searle summarizes changes in sacramental theology thus:

During the past twenty or thirty years sacramental theology has undergone an enormous transformation. Undoubtedly the leading indicator if not the cause of this transformation is the abandonment of the questions and vocabulary of Scholasticism in favor of a more existentialist and personalist approaches to understanding what sacraments are and how they function in the Christian life. What began as a recovery of the ecclesial dimensions of the sacraments quickly led to further shifts: from speaking about sacraments as “means of grace” to speaking of them as encounters with Christ himself; from thinking of them primarily as acts of God to thinking of them mainly as celebrations of the faith community; from seeing sacraments as momentary incursions from another world to seeing them as manifestations of the graced character of all human life; from interpreting them as remedies for sin and weakness to seeing them as promoting growth in Christ.\textsuperscript{42}

The introduction of the RCIA into contemporary parish life was a fundamental change in the Church’s liturgical practice. The Church would now have two initiatory practices running alongside each other: adult initiation through the RCIA and the existing sacramental initiation of infant baptism, first Eucharist in childhood, and confirmation, the latter taking place often in the teenage years.\textsuperscript{43} Initial reactions to the introduction of the RCIA in the 1970s reflected the enormous change that it was effecting. As Ralph Keifer states, the introduction of the RCIA was


\textsuperscript{43} This is the general pattern; however, in some Catholic dioceses in England and Wales the celebration of the confirmation of young people occurs before the first Eucharist, and the age at which these two sacraments are celebrated varies.
[h]istorically and culturally speaking, a massive rejection of the presuppositions both of pastoral practice and of most church goers regarding the true meaning of Church membership. This is a revolution quite without precedent, because the Catholic Church has never at any time in its history done such violence to its ritual practice as to make its rites so wholly incongruous with its concrete reality. Such an act is either a statement that the rite is wholly irrelevant or a statement that the church is willing to change, and to change radically, that concrete reality. Such an approach is either suicide or prophecy of a very high order.44

Catechesis and Scripture

Dei Verbum (the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) initiated a re-discovery and re-affirmation of scripture as the primary theological source. It describes the nature of revelation as revealed through scripture as a ministry of the Word, locating catechesis as a constituent part of that ministry:

Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology. By the same word of Scripture the ministry of the word also, that is, pastoral preaching, catechetics and all Christian instruction, in which the liturgical homily must hold the foremost place, is nourished in a healthy way and flourishes in a holy way.45

Prior to the Council, in Mary Boys’ summary, the role of the Church had been to authoritatively guard and expound the truths that God had revealed in scripture and tradition. The role of the religious educator or catechist was to hand on the truths of faith. In contrast, Vatican II’s description of revelation incorporated personalist and biblical foundations that would have implications for catechesis. A renewed and integrated emphasis on scripture and its study, and the understanding of scripture and

45 Dei Verbum, no. 24.
tradition as a unified source, meant, as Boys illustrates, that catechesis would necessarily be grounded in scripture.\textsuperscript{46} This was also directly linked with the liturgy: ‘Even to regard it as a ministry of the Word is to testify to its inherent link with liturgical life, certainly one of the most singular characteristics of \textit{catechetics} [catechesis]’.\textsuperscript{47} The emphasis on catechesis as scripturally based was to challenge its very methodology.

\textit{The Role of Experience}

Contemporary catechesis reflects a theological understanding that stresses the importance of human experience. \textit{Dei Verbum} describes revelation as ‘that act by which God manifests himself personally to man. God truly reveals himself as one who desires to communicate himself, making the human person a participant in his divine nature’.\textsuperscript{48} This teaching places emphasis on the role of the individual believer, encouraging each person to enter into a relationship with God that is both an historical event and a personal communication in the life of the believer.\textsuperscript{49} This underscores the relational emphasis on faith. Seminal texts on catechesis that have emerged since the Council reflect this shift in emphasis, as the following two quotations from the \textit{General Directory on Catechesis} demonstrate.\textsuperscript{50}

\begin{quote}
Catechesis should concern itself with making men and women attentive to their more significant experiences, both personal and social; it also has the duty of placing under the light of the Gospel, the questions which arise from those experiences so that there may be stimulated within man a right desire to transform their ways of life.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 99, author’s emphasis.
\textsuperscript{48} See GDC no. 36, here paraphrasing \textit{Dei Verbum}.
\textsuperscript{51} GDC, no. 117; see also no. 87.
\end{flushright}
Experience, assumed by faith, becomes in a certain manner, a ‘locus’ for the manifestation and realization of salvation, where God, consistently with the pedagogy of the incarnation, reaches man with his grace and saves him.\textsuperscript{52}

\textit{Catechesis and Evangelization}

Catechesis was transformed in the post-conciliar years by two documents: \textit{Catechesi Tradendae} and \textit{Evangelii Nuntiandi}. John Pollard comments that the pastoral mission of the Church was reoriented by the assertion in \textit{Evangelii Nuntiandi} that ‘the Church exists in order to evangelize’. The document situated catechesis as a crucial component within the broader scope of the ministry of evangelization. Pollard also points out that \textit{Catechesi Tradendae} became the mission statement for the catechetical ministry of the Church, as it specified and developed the relationship between evangelization and catechesis.\textsuperscript{53} He claims that these two documents formed the ‘energizing centre for the development of catechetical thought since the Second Vatican Council’.\textsuperscript{54} Contemporary catechesis is therefore located within the Church’s role in evangelization and mission to the world.\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{On the Way to Life}, a document situating catechesis and religious education within a theological and philosophical interpretation of contemporary culture, describes the missionary dimension of catechesis as engaging with culture:

Religious education, catechesis and formation are central activities of the whole Catholic community; they touch every aspect of the Church’s life but they also represent those ‘sites’ where the Church is most closely engaged with contemporary culture. It is in these areas that it will experience the tensions and the possibilities that such interaction creates. In other words, religious education, catechesis and formation take place in a context: ecclesial, secular and, above all, personal. The lines of these encounters run through each one of us.\textsuperscript{56}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid., no. 159.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Pollard, general introduction’, in \textit{The Catechetical Documents}, (‘the Church has always considered catechesis as one of her primary tasks’ \textit{Catechesi Tradendae}, no. 1), p. xii.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} GDC, no. 4.
\end{itemize}
The RCIA has a unique evangelization and missionary mandate, both in how it engages new Church members, and how it inspires those members to engage in outward mission. Robert Imbelli and Thomas Groome, in moving towards a description of pastoral theology, suggest that a primary concern is the ongoing ecclesial catechumenate, whereby each day ‘the Church gives birth to the Church’, in both informal and formal ways. They underline how the RCIA is a versatile model for engaging the whole community, and not just the catechumens: ‘Thus the whole of Christianity becomes an ongoing apprenticeship in discipleship through action and word’. 57

This brief overview of the themes essential to catechesis since Vatican II contextualizes the RCIA within a broader theological landscape. This overview is in anticipation of the discussion of the nature of contemporary practical theology in chapter two, as contemporary Catholic practical theology also reflects the teachings and changes of Vatican II. Certain themes presented here, including the role of experience in faith transmission and sacramental theology, are specifically explored in the theological framework in chapters six and seven.

iv. A Practitioner Perspective on the RCIA

Christianne Brusselmans, who during the 1980s led congresses and workshops across the globe to facilitate the implementation of the RCIA process, at the time described the RCIA as ‘the best kept secret of Vatican II’. 58 It has to be remembered that the RCIA is still relatively in its infancy; there are still many pastoral questions which surround its implementation. 59 Most specifically, theological investigation of the liminal nature of the RCIA arose from practitioner experience.

58 Catherine Dooley and Lisa Gulino, ‘Christianne Brusselmans’ <http://www2.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/view.cfm?n=christiane_brusselmans> [accessed 14th July, 2010]
59 The RCIA was introduced along with numerous other liturgical reforms. Some commentators now reflect that these changes were naively rushed through, creating negative consequences; see Kathleen Hughes, Saying Amen: Mystagogy of Sacrament (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), p. xv.
My own work guiding RCIA groups in various pastoral contexts, both parish and university chaplaincy settings, over a period of eight years from 1994-2002, led me to observe the personal challenges that participants encounter both upon entering and participating in the RCIA. The decision to become Catholic often involves a long thought-process prior to joining the RCIA. Frequently, initial conversations with prospective enquirers reveal that approaching the parish to make enquiries about joining the RCIA group itself marks a significant milestone experience. Often there are prior personal crises that have led participants to seek full membership. The actual process itself involves much personal re-appropriation: growth in faith and spirituality, engaging with a new ecclesial culture, and even dealing with negative reactions from family and friends. I observed that personal change in this time could be a painful and bewildering experience. It is evident that as individuals go through the RCIA, they enter an uncomfortable transition which is often unsettling, as they leave behind one form of life and enter another. Participants grapple with questions of faith and personal identity. For me as a practitioner, this raised issues of how best to accompany people through such challenging times, in which questions of self-identity and faith are paramount.

In the mid-1990s, whilst working with the RCIA group in the parish context (a large parish in the Westminster diocese in West London), I attended a training course for catechists. The course included a brief introduction to the work of Victor Turner, in which he sets out that the testing process of change experienced within the rite-of-passage experience can be accounted for through the anthropological notion of liminality. Course participants were encouraged to look at the RCIA as a rite of passage, a liminal state or time of being ‘in-between’, which presented various challenges. In conversations with RCIA participants at the time, the concept of being liminal was one that they could readily relate to and understand. It had an immediate resonance and helped participants to name the confusing nature of change in this

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60 As participants express interest in joining the Church they usually meet with the catechist or leader of the RCIA group to determine reasons for joining. Chauvet describes the important catechetical potential of this ‘pastoral interview’ process and initial points of contact. See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2001), pp. 184 ff.
transitional phase. The phenomenon of *communitas* was also evident, as participants bonded with each other and gave each other support. The relationship between liminality, *communitas* and the RCIA was a topic that captured my imagination, and reflections on this matter were included in my master’s degree dissertation. It later struck me that an exploration of the RCIA as a liminal journey would be a potential PhD thesis topic.

From leading RCIA groups it became clear that there is a more profound liminal journey taking place within and beneath the various rites and symbolic and sacramental practices of the RCIA than perhaps is accounted for in the Rite or in current literature on it. William Harmless refers to the Rite as a ‘blueprint’ which outlines how the RCIA should be implemented, but he observes that it lacks specific practical directives. He acknowledges that there are ‘catechetical gaps and silences’ in the Rite. The current study partly originates in the observation of ‘silence’ concerning the liminal within the RCIA. The Rite only hints at the liminal nature of the catechumenate, recognizing it as a ‘difficult journey’ involving ‘separations’ and ‘divisions’. However the challenging nature of the RCIA is recognized:

> On the one hand […] the catechumenate is part of a sacrament [baptism]: not a preliminary course of instruction but an integral part of the sacrament itself. On the other hand, the sacrament is not a just a liturgical act but a process, a long road that demands an individual’s whole strength, mind, will and heart.

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61 My dissertation for my master’s degree examined recent paradigm shifts in catechesis and included the theme of RCIA and conversion.

62 The only direct references to the RCIA and Turnerian concept of liminality in the RCIA literature that I am aware of are: Lawrence E. Mick, *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults: Renewing the Church as an Initiating Assembly* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1989), pp. 34-42, and Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, pp. xvii-xix. Interestingly, while Mick paints a favourable picture of how Turnerian theory may enlighten an understanding Christian initiation, Johnson, although appreciative of anthropological insights, is keen to distance himself from the incorporation of anthropology in his book, instead positioning it as dependent on liturgical, theological and historical texts.

63 Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, pp. 1-2, p. 200. An example of this is the actual content of catechesis during the RCIA.

64 RCIA, no. 95.

One way in which the thesis aims to be of use to practitioners is in revealing how a
deeper theological understanding of the liminal nature of the RCIA process may
further help participants engaged in the RCIA.

There are many specific pastoral questions surrounding the implementation of the
RCIA. Some of these questions are mentioned here, as they will be referred to again
in the conclusion of this study: How much stress should be placed on lectionary
based catechesis (catechesis that is based upon scripture that follows the Church’s
liturgical year) and how much on doctrinal catechesis (catechesis that concerns
Church teaching and dogma)? How can the needs of catechumens and candidates
both be met within the same group? How can the RCIA be integrated into the life of
the parish? Should participants engage in a longer process rather than a ‘school year’
model lasting from September to June? Whilst these and other practical questions
impinge upon this study, they are primarily resource-based questions. Rather than
attempting to address these questions directly, then, the thesis addresses a different
and broader question: how can the practice of the RCIA be understood from a
theological anthropological perspective?

II. Outlining the Research Question: An Exercise in Practical
Theology

The research question to which this thesis responds thus concerns the interpretation
of the liminal nature of the RCIA experience through theological anthropological
themes (primarily the theology of grace). The question first arose from issues in
pastoral practice, and this thesis seeks to bring deeper theological understanding to
RCIA practice through fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue. The research exercise
follows the aforementioned steps, set out as follows.

a. The interviews of twenty-six adults who have completed the RCIA are analyzed
   using qualitative techniques.

b. Their experiences are initially interpreted through an anthropological framework
   (based on the Turners’ theory), prior to a theological anthropological
   interpretation of participants’ liminal experience.
c. Theological interpretation involves reading the RCIA experience in the light of four theological themes: the theology of grace, life in the paschal mystery, sacramental living and mystagogic consciousness.

The dialogue outlined in this study, as it attempts to bring systematic theological themes to engage and interact with participants’ personal stories, is an exercise in practical theology. In locating the research as a practical theological enterprise various questions arise: What is meant by practical or pastoral theology? What method or methods does it subscribe to? How does dialogue between experience and theology take place? What is the place of social anthropology within a practical theology exercise? Are anthropology and theology equal partners in dialogue? How does interdisciplinary dialogue take place? These methodological and hermeneutical questions are addressed in the next chapter and continue to be attended to at later stages of the thesis. Without pre-empting the exploration of these issues in chapter two, some of these issues are briefly addressed.

‘Practicing’ theology

Terry Veling argues that trying to define practical theology is secondary to the actual task or doing of practical theology. In this sense ‘we would be better to speak of “practicing theology” rather than “practical theology”. Subsequently, a crucial question to ask is, “What does it mean to practice theology?”66 As Veling suggests, no particular ‘how to’ method should overshadow or dominate the practical theological endeavor. Instead he suggests that practical theology is more a ‘craft’ than a method.67

Central to the ‘practicing’ of theology is theological reflection on experience. This emphasis on experience is an indispensible characteristic of the theological anthropology of Karl Rahner. His theology of grace forms the backbone of the theological interpretive framework set out in this thesis, which also emphasizes the role of mystagogy in reflecting upon personal faith experience.

67 Ibid., p. 15.
Given that this study engages in interdisciplinary dialogue between participants’ experience and theology and social anthropology, it is written in the spirit of the ‘practicing’ of theology; in so doing it provides an example of the ‘craft’ that Veling highlights. Whilst the thesis is primarily theological, the integrity of both anthropology and theology is recognized; anthropology is used as a partner in the theological exchange. The tri-partite encounter (RCIA experience, anthropological reading, and theological interpretation) involves successive enquiry, culminating in theological interpretation. Bringing both disciplines together in dialogue highlights common areas.

Using social anthropological theory to help interpret RCIA experience exposes a seeming paradox within the research question of this thesis: why should theology appeal to another secular discipline to help interpret its own sacramental and liturgical practice or its processes of faith transmission?

**Using Social Anthropology**

Theology explores humankind’s relationship with God: ‘faith seeking understanding’. Anthropology, rather than being concerned with personal faith experience, instead provides an interpretive framework for a more general understanding of religious experience, often based upon observations of particular social groups. This study employs social-anthropological Turnerian theory in a practical theology exercise; it expands the enquiry, placing participants’ experience within a broader human religious context. Theology then provides an interpretation of the subjective faith experience or ‘spiritual journey’ that the liminal phase discloses. The human experience that the anthropological framework helps to unveil within the RCIA requires theological interpretation for its liturgical, spiritual and sacramental dimensions to be fully explored and understood. Both disciplines therefore work together in a practical theological exercise. The end result is firmly theological, whilst respecting the integrity of the discipline of anthropology. Anthropological interpretation, indispensable as it is to defining rite-of-passage experiences and disclosing the nature of these experiences, only takes one so far in explicit theological terms.
The Turners’ theory however, is not what it at first seems. This thesis presents their work, acknowledging their growing interest in spiritual consciousness throughout their writings and the impact of their own conversion experience. This also includes the implicit influence of Christian mysticism. Their observations of the mystical and transcendental dimensions of liminal experience provide a particular point of comparative enquiry. Transposing the investigation of the liminal into a theological key highlights the themes of grace and mysticism (integral to Rahner’s theology of grace) as important bridges in interdisciplinary dialogue.

Whilst the tension of using social anthropology within a theological exercise is noted, this tension is fruitful. Anthropological concepts and themes are used to assist theology; theology may also engage in encounter with anthropology, and provide theological themes for the reading of liminality itself. This approach seeks to explore new possibilities for engagement between the two disciplines. For example, the liminal phase is challenging yet it is a potentially transformative experience; theological themes, in particular the theology of grace and the paschal mystery, help us to understand this paradox. In turn, the notion of the liminal makes an important contribution to understanding the Christian condition and aspects of its spiritual tradition. The Turners’ work simultaneously provides a departure point and an ongoing hermeneutic within a practical theological exercise.

The use of anthropology in the theological enterprise is perhaps best summarized by the sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet. He outlines how anthropology may be of use to theology through ‘critical service’, ‘epistemological service’ and ‘theological service’. This is explored further in chapters five and seven, and it is a finding of this thesis that each discipline can support and inform the other.

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III. Primary Findings and Overview of Chapters

Some of the primary findings of the thesis concerning the nature of spiritual transformation in the RCIA are as follows.

- The theological interpretation of RCIA participants’ experiences of liminality and *communitas* (through Rahner’s theology of grace) recognizes aspects of this as ‘graced mystical experience’.
- This interpretation of participants’ experience provides empirical and practical descriptions of the workings of grace, including the recognition of graced experience, graced moments of encounter, and graced identity.
- Liminal experience, both formal rite-of-passage experience and the informal liminal moments of life, may disclose apophatic spiritual experience: an encounter of God’s love through the dark and challenging moments.69 These experiences are pregnant with God’s grace. The heightened liminal phase opens one to greater appreciation of the graced nature of these experiences.
- The empirical demonstration of the RCIA as a graced process provides insight into faith transmission. Important connections are made between catechesis and spirituality, which in turn has implications for all catechesis given that the RCIA is the definitive model for it.70
- Initiation via the RCIA concerns initiation into paschal living. An experience of grace through personal encounter with Christ becomes an ongoing hermeneutic for all life experience.

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69 The apophatic (deriving from *apophasis*, or the way of ‘unsaying’) concerns finding God through negative experience (the *via negativa*). One may encounter God through a sense of emptiness or darkness; experience beyond language and images. An apophatic spirituality is also based upon Christ’s passion and death. See Edward Howells, ‘Apophatic Spirituality’ in The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, edited by Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 117-119. (See this article for an exploration of apophatic spirituality with references to scripture, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius, Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross.) By contrast the ‘kataphatic’ refers to spiritual awareness through the human faculties of reason, emotion, imagination and memory. See Janet K. Ruffing, ‘Kataphatic Spirituality’, in The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, pp. 393-394. See also William Harmless, Mystics (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 101, 119, 126, 249, for references to both these terms within the writings of various mystics.

70 GDC, no. 59.
• Dialogue between participants’ experience and theology illuminates practice. For example, the embodied nature of sacramental initiation is a key theme in participants’ descriptions of the process. A theological reading of the embodied nature of sacramental experience brings an implicit theology to the fore. Theological reflection on the theme of embodiment also expands anthropological observations about the embodied nature of liminality.

• The theological interpretation in the study reveals the nature of faith transmission in the RCIA. This is based upon a lived experience of the process, a lived theology. As such the study is an exclusive empirical investigation into the process.

• The findings emphasize the holistic nature of catechesis as appealing to the mind, body and heart, with less emphasis placed on intellectual conversion.

• The multi-faceted nature of mystagogy is explored through its embodied, social and mystical dimensions. The fourth stage of the process, mystagogy, is often a neglected aspect of the process. The exploration of mystagogy is designed to recognize and encourage the importance of mystagogic reflection throughout the entire process.

These and other findings, including reflections upon the nature of the thesis as an interdisciplinary exercise in practical theology, are expounded upon in chapter seven. An overview of the remaining chapters of the thesis is as follows:

**Chapter 2: Methodology**

This chapter explains the interdisciplinary nature of the thesis and how the tri-partite dialogue and encounter between participants’ experience, anthropology and theology is defined and structured. The chapter addresses the use of social science methods in data-gathering and analysis, and the use of anthropological theory within a theological study is further explored. The chapter is framed within questions concerning reflexivity and hermeneutical interpretation.

**Chapter 3: Transitions and Transformations – RCIA Experience**

The starting point of this study is the experience of twenty-six participants who have
gone through the RCIA process. The chapter begins with a brief overview of why the participants joined the RCIA, with following sections describing participants’ experience of personal transition and transformation. The chapter includes numerous examples and excerpts from interviews. Participants’ experiences are presented thematically, rather than as individual faith stories; descriptive snapshots demonstrate rich stories of conversion.

**Chapter 4: Liminality, Communitas and Ritual - The Anthropology of Victor and Edith Turner**

This chapter presents a synthesis of Victor Turner’s theory on liminality, including how the theory was developed across his writings. It also acknowledges the contribution of Edith Turner. The theory is presented in three sections - liminality, *communitas* and ritual - and is also contextualized within a broader social-anthropological framework. A fourth section illustrates how the Turners’ work may also be situated within their growing personal awareness and attention to religious experience. An exploration of implicit mystical themes that influence their work reveals an underlying, implicit theology. The chapter provides an anthropological framework for a first reading of participants’ experience.

**Chapter 5: An Anthropological Reading**

Participants’ experiences, as presented in chapter three, are interpreted though anthropological theory. A contemporary phenomenology of liminality within RCIA experience emerges, revealing how the RCIA is both personally challenging and transformative.

**Chapter 6: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Grace and Other Themes - A Theological Framework**

The theological framework consists of four key themes developed from Rahner’s theology and the Rite: Christian initiation as insight into grace, life in Christ, sacramental initiation and mystagogical consciousness. These systematical theological themes provide a rich structure for engaging in dialogue with participants’ experiences.
Chapter 7: Theological Interpretation

This chapter concerns the theological interpretation at the heart of this thesis. Theology and experience are brought together, illustrating how each may illuminate and challenge the other, while revealing a lived practical theology concerning the RCIA. Participants’ experience of liminality and *communitas* are interpreted through the theology of graced experience and the paschal mystery. The theme of sacramental initiation enables the reading of ritual and worship experience. Reflection on faith experience, including the accent placed on experience in the Turners’ work, is interpreted through the theme of mystagogy. The theological interpretation also includes reflection upon the concept of liminality and offers suggestions for how theology may be of service to anthropology.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The conclusion to this study summarizes the process of spiritual transformation that occurs in the RCIA. It revisits the research question as set out in the introductory and methodology chapters in the light of the findings and interdisciplinary nature of the thesis, and provides final reflections upon the research.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter has explained the origins of the contemporary practice of the RCIA and its place within parish life. The RCIA has a rich historical background, rooted in the tradition of the early church. It also embodies a rich theology, incorporating the vision of the Second Vatican Council: ‘At once extremely conservative and traditional, yet forward-looking and progressive, the Order [Rite] has proven to be one of the most dramatic “surprises” of the Second Vatican Council’. 71 The following chapter explores the methodological structure of the thesis, providing an in-depth exploration of the different interpretive steps involved, and further expands upon its interdisciplinary nature.

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Chapter 2: Methodology

The essence of hermeneutics is to be liminal, to mediate between realms of being, whether between God and human beings, wakefulness and sleep, the conscious and unconscious, life and afterlife, visible and invisible, day and night.

Richard Palmer

This chapter sets out the methodological structure of the thesis; specifically as an exercise in practical theology. Explanation of the tri-partite encounter between participants’ experience, anthropology and theology is presented: the empirical nature of the interview conversations and analysis; the use of anthropology within a theological study; and the dynamics of the theological framework. Questions of reflexivity and hermeneutics are addressed. Furthermore, the methodology involves a mystagogic hermeneutic, which emphasizes awareness of the theological, reflective nature of the entire process from empirical work through to theological findings. Situating the thesis as a theological exercise that involves I-Thou dialogue or encounter is first established, ahead of more detailed explanation of how this encounter takes place.

Practical Theology as I-Thou Encounter

In the introductory quotation, Richard Palmer highlights the liminal or ‘in-between’ nature of hermeneutics itself. In discussing the hermeneutical or interpretive nature

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2 Palmer, quoting Heidegger, explains that the Greek words for interpreting and interpretation, hermeneuein, hermeneia, may be traced back to the God Hermes. (‘A Dialogue on Language: Between a Japanese and an Inquirer’, in Martin Heidegger, On the Way to Language, transl. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 29.) Palmer continues: ‘However questionable the etymological connection between Hermes and hermeneuein may be, hermeneutics, as the art of understanding and of textual exegesis, does stand under the sign of Hermes. Hermes is the messenger who brings the word from Zeus (God); thus, the early modern use of the term hermeneutics was in relation to methods of interpreting holy scripture. An interpreter brought to mortals the message from God. Although the usage was broadened in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to take in methods of understanding and explicating both sacred and secular texts from antiquity, the term “hermeneutics” continued to suggest an interpretation which discloses something hidden from ordinary understanding and therefore mysterious’.
of practical theology, Terry Veling, commenting on this ‘between’ nature, invokes the work of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber:

Perhaps the key word here is “between.” It evokes a profound sensibility for the dialogical quality of life. “All real living is meeting,” says Martin Buber. It is an encounter between two: “Spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou.” Whether we speak of love, or understanding, or forgiveness, or peace – these cannot happen except that they happen between us, except that they become a matter of concern for both of us. “This between,” writes Gadamer, “is the true locus of hermeneutics”.3

This chapter, in defining and explaining the methodological and interpretive structure of the thesis, explores how the interdisciplinary dialogue within this study is ‘crafted’ and framed by moments of ‘I-Thou’ encounter. This proceeds with interview conversations and their qualitative analysis, which provide the data for an anthropological interpretation of participants’ RCIA experience and culminate in the theological interpretation of the liminal experience. The interview conversations proved to be rich I-Thou encounters revealing profound accounts of faith. The three-way encounter between participants’ experience and the disciplines of anthropology and theology is an exercise in mutuality. It is a matter of interpreting participants’ experience from various standpoints, and this multi-textured perspective delivers elevated insight and understanding. This encounter is undertaken in a spirit of partnership, collaboration and respect, and points of similarity and difference come to be understood. The culminating theological interpretation of the RCIA experience is richer for the interdisciplinary endeavour.

The theological nature of the research is acknowledged from the outset. Interviews with participants reflect their faith-stories, seeing respondents as individuals engaging in ‘faith seeking understanding’. The interdisciplinary dialogue recognizes anthropology and theology as different but complementary. Turnerian theory provides a series of parallel themes to take into the theological interpretation. This includes a representation of liminal religious experience which acknowledges the mystical and the transcendent. In chapter four the impact of Christian spirituality on

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3 Veling, Practical Theology, p. 55.
the Turners’ work is acknowledged. The themes of the theological framework are used both to read participants’ experience and to provide for a theological reading of the Turnerian concepts. This culminates in the theological interpretation in chapter seven, as the themes of the theological framework are used to read participants’ experience and Turnerian concepts, and to reflect on the use of anthropology in a theological study.

The use of the social sciences within practical theology provides a vital contribution to the theological enterprise; the methodological framework of the thesis reflects discerned use of the social sciences:

…Practical Theology can hardly survive unless it is in constant dialogue with other studies. Social theory, however good, is not an adequate surrogate for serious theological reflection, nor is Practical Theology the name for social science when it happens to be taught in the theological faculty! Theology must not abandon its proper concerns and appear back on stage in borrowed garments as a kind of amateur social science. But we cannot survive credibly without a responsible dialogue with social science and a discerning use of social scientific methodology.⁴

Neil Ormerod, in discussing the need for social science techniques to be ‘re-oriented’ to suit the purposes of theological reflection, states: ‘The perspective of a reoriented social science must be reintegrated within the theology from the beginning. What is required is a theological gestalt, a framework that is at once theological and social scientific’.⁵ It is such a ‘theological gestalt’, incorporating empirical qualitative research and anthropology in a theological study, which informs the methodological structure of this thesis. The gestalt seeks and encourages wholeness in the practical theological venture.

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Explanation of the methodological structure of the thesis is provided in the following five sections:

I. Empirical Research: Interviews
II. Empirical Research: Grounded Theory
III. Anthropological Interpretation of the RCIA Experience
IV. The Dynamics of the Theological Interpretation
V. Situating the Thesis as an Exercise in Practical Theology

I. Empirical Research: Interviews

The starting point for this study is the experience of those who have completed the RCIA process. Engaging in interview conversations with former RCIA participants yielded a rich and fascinating picture of the process. Twenty-six RCIA participants who had completed the RCIA were interviewed in two phases. The first interview phase consisted of twenty-two interviews. A second, smaller phase consisting of six interviews was undertaken to explore specific lines of enquiry, in order to follow up hypotheses, leads and questions that resulted from the first phase.6 (This is referred to as ‘theoretical sampling’. Please see p. 48 for a description.) This section describes how raw interview data were collected and interpreted through a qualitative analysis procedure. Interviewees’ experiences have been assembled into a narrative descriptive account which will be presented in chapter three.

Interview Phase One

The outline for interviews in phase one included questions about interviewees’ faith journey in the context of the RCIA, their experience of the RCIA process and group, including the nature of any transitional experience, and their experiences of sacramental initiation and the parish community (see appendix 6). Guiding theological anthropological themes from the Rite (grace, conversion, sin, hope) contributed to the semi-structured nature of the interview. The questions were deliberately framed so that they would also enable disclosure of experiences of

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6 Two interviewees from phase one where re-interviewed in the second phase.
liminality and *communitas* if these were appropriate to interviewees’ experience. The interview questions were designed to encourage interviewees to talk about their RCIA experiences without overt bias from anthropological theory (concerning liminality) or preconceptions concerning the RCIA (given my practitioner background). In general, specific anthropological and theological terms were avoided in the interviews, unless referred to by the interviewees themselves. Access to potential interviewees was negotiated through their respective parishes. Parishes where the RCIA was being run well and with due care and consideration were approached deliberately. Identification of which parishes to approach were made through: personal contacts with RCIA practitioners in the dioceses of Arundel and Brighton, Nottingham, Southwark and Westminster; various diocesan Directors of Adult Formation; practitioners met at the RCIA UK Network conferences (September 2006; July 2008); and recommendations made by executive team members of the RCIA Network. To help identify prospective interviewees, meetings were held with the parish catechist or parish priest. As contact with recommended interviewees involved going through these individuals, they had a ‘gatekeeper’ role. Table one provides details of interview participants. The table in appendix 3 provides further details of the interviewees who participated in the empirical research, such as their ethnicity and the date of their reception into the Church.

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7 ‘Consistent with Blumer’s (1969) depiction of sensitizing concepts, grounded theorists often begin their studies with certain research interests and a set of general concepts. These concepts give you ideas to pursue and sensitize you to ask particular kinds of questions about your topic’. See Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2006), p. 16. The use of ‘sensitizing concepts’ acknowledges that the researcher does not necessarily approach the study as a ‘blank slate’, but will have had exposure to the topic in question. Such concepts were used in an ‘abductive’ sense, with a view to seeing what arises from the data (rather than deductive testing out of the theory). See Jo Reichertz, ‘Abduction: The Logic of Discovery of Grounded Theory’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, edited by Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (London: SAGE, 2007), pp. 214-229 (p. 218).

8 The place of the literature review in the grounded theory study is contested; see Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, pp. 165-6.

9 It was felt that including parishes that were examples of best practice would heighten the learning outcomes from the study. In grounded theory research there is also bias on collecting the best data: ‘It is necessary to locate ‘excellent’ participants to obtain excellent data’, see Janice. M. Morse, ‘Sampling in Grounded Theory’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, edited by A., Bryant and K. Charmaz (London: SAGE, 2007), pp. 229-244 (p. 231).
### Table 1: Interviews Phase 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Diocese</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>RCIA status</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siobhan</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>C of Ireland</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>Muslim/Christian</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>Westminster</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
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<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria*</td>
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<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>20-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverley*</td>
<td>Arundel &amp; B</td>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen*</td>
<td>Arundel &amp; B</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timothy*</td>
<td>Hallam</td>
<td>C of Scotland</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela*</td>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>60-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie*</td>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack*</td>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Hexham &amp; N</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Hexham &amp; N</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Hexham &amp; N</td>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>20-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Hexham &amp; N</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>70-79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Denotes Longer RCIA preparation

Arundel & B = Arundel and Brighton Diocese

Hexham & N = Hexham and Newcastle Diocese
Geographical Variables

Geographical variables were applied in the first interview phase. Numbers for the RCIA have generally been higher in London than the rest of the country over the past few years, and this was taken into account. Fourteen interviewees were from the London area. Eight were from the Archdiocese of Southwark, five from an inner city parish and three from a parish in South London. Three interviews took place in a West-London parish in the Diocese of Westminster. A further three interviews took place in a parish in the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton. This parish was specifically chosen as it ran a longer RCIA preparation of up to eighteen months. This is a wealthy suburban parish in Surrey, and although it does not fall within a London borough it was included in the London sample due to its close proximity to London and its geographical location within the M25. This parish provides a stark contrast with the inner city Southwark parish, which includes one of the largest council estates in Europe within its parish boundaries – and some interviewees lived on this estate.

Eight interviewees in this first stage were from outside the London area. These interviewees included one person from a city parish in the diocese of Hallam. Three interviewees from the Hexham and Newcastle diocese were from a city parish and one from a smaller town parish. The three interviewees from the Nottingham diocese were from two neighbouring parishes in the same town; these interviewees were chosen as they had been through a longer RCIA process. The inclusion of parishes outside London was designed to take into account what sociologists of religion term the ‘London Effect’. This refers to the higher numbers of people

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10. The annual statistics may be found in the yearly Catholic Directory and include the figures for baptisms (up to 7 years) and receptions into the Church – see, for example, the Catholic Directory of England and Wales (Manchester: Gabriel Communications, 2010). The figures for adult baptisms are not distinguished in the Directory. For statistics for 2007-2009 (including adult baptisms), which provide an example of the higher numbers for London see Isabel de Bertano, ‘Church to Admit Record Numbers of New Catholics’, The Tablet, 7th March 2009, p. 37. See also the diocesan figures for the rite of election for 2010 <http://www.catholicchurch.org.uk/Catholic-Church/Media-Centre/press_releases/Press-Releases-2010/rite_of_election_weekend_of_joy_for_the_catholic_community> [Accessed 3rd December 2010]

11. I had hoped to interview more participants from this parish, however, interviews with other parishioners recommended by this parish’s gatekeeper fell through, and other parishes in the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle were sought out.
practicing religion in London than the rest of the country, a phenomenon which may be attributed to an increased demographic and greater numbers of immigrants in a global city. All parishes involved in the study remain anonymous to protect the identity of interviewees.

Visiting various parishes gave a snapshot view of RCIA practice. The meetings with parish staff often involved pastoral conversations, given the many pastoral issues surrounding the implementation of the RCIA. Contact with parishes in the Hexham and Newcastle diocese demonstrated that the RCIA was sometimes run on a ‘cluster’ basis, with parishes combining in order to provide the RCIA at deanery level. The two parishes from the Nottingham diocese shared RCIA preparation, for example, with an eighteen-month process alternating between them. Interviewees were deliberately chosen to include a balance between those who had completed a ‘school year’ model (i.e. from September to May/June) and those who had undertaken an extended RCIA process, generally lasting eighteen months or longer. It proved difficult to find parishes running the latter type of extended process and virtually impossible to find an example of a ‘year-round catechumenate’ (a rolling program throughout the year which does not stop over the school summer holidays).

**Faith Background and Other Variables**

Anecdotal evidence from the gatekeepers and other RCIA practitioners suggests that more candidates (i.e. those baptized) than catechumens (those not baptized) complete the RCIA process. However, as far as possible, interviewees were chosen to reflect a relatively equal balance of each, in case any patterns consistent with one particular group were revealed. Ten interviewees were former catechumens (see table 1). This included three interviewees who considered themselves Christians but who had not been baptized (Jack, Pauline and Serena). Twelve interviewees were former


13 For a description of the benefits of such a process, see Mary Birmingham, *Year-Round Catechumenate* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001).

14 Regrettably, one prospective interviewee of Jewish background was unable to be interviewed due to work and travel commitments.
candidates. No candidates from a Catholic background seeking full membership were interviewed, as none were recommended by parish gatekeepers (however, the RCIA does cater for this group).

Interviewees were also chosen to reflect equal gender representation, though gatekeepers often stated that more women than men complete the process. Twelve females and ten males were interviewed. Interviewees were of different ages, the youngest being in their early twenties and the oldest in their seventies. They included those recently received into the Church, i.e. whose interview generally took place a minimum of one year after their reception, through to those received in the late 1980s, not long after the introduction of the RCIA. Interviewees came from different ethnic, social and economic backgrounds, and demonstrated varying levels of theological articulation concerning their faith. Participants included administrative assistants, engineers, healthcare workers (nursing and midwifery), full-time parents, full-time carers, self-employed workers, students, a classroom assistant, a horticulturalist, a lawyer, a journalist, a psychotherapist, a teacher, a participant who went on to become a parish priest and some who were retired. A minority were recent immigrants, and English was their second language. It was also intended to interview more people who had left the Church since completing the RCIA, as anecdotal evidence suggests that the dropout rate is high, but it proved extremely hard to find such individuals. One interviewee, Elaine, who no longer practiced as a Catholic, but considered herself as ‘multi-faith’ (a mixture of Christian and Buddhist influences) was interviewed in phase one. During the course of the interview it became apparent that a major part of her motivation to join the Church was to gain entry for her daughter into a Catholic primary school. A second interviewee, Serena, who still identified as a Catholic but had stopped attending church due to pressure from her husband, was interviewed in phase two. At the time of interview she was contemplating returning to the Church.

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15 No official figures exist to verify how many participants stop attending church after the process.
Interview Dynamic

The interview process was approached with sensitivity to various issues concerning researcher bias, interpretation, and awareness of a possible ‘power struggle’ in the interview setting.\(^{16}\) In a qualitative interview exercise the interviewee has to place some level of trust in the interviewer and how they will interpret their story. Once prospective interviewees were identified and contacted, several steps were taken to ensure they felt at ease during the interview process. Participants were interviewed in a location of their choice: the parish presbytery, their home, or a neutral space such as a café. The nature of the research was explained to them: interviewees were given a copy of a participant information sheet (see appendix 4) and it was explained that the research had been granted ethical approval by Heythrop College. The conditions of the interview were explained; for example, the interview participant was free to pause or terminate the interview at any time, or withdraw from the study at any point. Interviewees were required to sign a consent form (see appendix 5).

As far as possible, the interviews (which lasted up to one hour) were undertaken in a conversational style. Some respondents talked from the moment the dictaphone was switched on without much intervention or questioning. Others were prompted by questions. To help interviewees feel engaged with the process they were asked if they wanted a copy of the transcribed interview, to make any changes if they felt misrepresented (one interviewee made a minor change to a final sentence in her transcript). Interviewees were reassured that they would be informed of findings from the study, and they often expressed keen interest in this. Each participant was assured anonymity, and so all names used in the study are pseudonyms.

Interview Phase Two

After the twenty-two interviews in phase one had been analyzed through grounded theory (see below) a smaller second phase of six selective interviews was

\(^{16}\) Michael Kirwan, ‘Reading the Signs of the Times’, in Keeping Faith in Practice: Catholic Perspectives on Practical and Pastoral Theology, edited by James Sweeney et al., pp. 49-63 (pp. 60-61).
undertaken. This process, where the researcher returns back into the field to test out arising findings, is referred to as ‘theoretical sampling’ (see definition below, p. 48).

As the second interview phase involved selective interviewing, a new interview schedule was drawn up that included questions following specific lines of enquiry. Themes that were subject to further exploration included personal transition and identity, the embodied nature of participants’ sacramental experience and the extent to which the process inspired a lived sacramentality (see schedule in appendix 7). Given the exploration of these themes it was not necessary to fulfill the research sample variables adhered to in phase one (such as gender, faith background, location etc). Two interviewees from the first phase were re-interviewed, two new interviewees were recommended by gatekeepers and a further two interviewees were met through a chance encounter, including one from a different diocese (Portsmouth). Also by chance, the second phase included three catechumens and three candidates: four females and two males (see table 2). The same interview procedure as described in phase one was followed: the gaining of consent, explanation of interview procedures, length of interview etc. Once ‘saturation point’ had been achieved, with no new leads coming from the interviews, it was decided that the interview process had reached a point of conclusion.

Table 2: Interviews Phase 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Diocese/Parish</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>RCIA status</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria*</td>
<td>Westminster</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena*</td>
<td>Westminster</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh</td>
<td>Westminster</td>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>Catechumen</td>
<td>30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Westminster</td>
<td>C of England</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Denotes Longer RCIA preparation

Although interviewees in the second phase were mainly from the London area they were not chosen due to accessibility, but rather to help explore particular lines of enquiry.
Interview conversations had a mystagogic capacity as participants reflected upon their faith during the interview. Although often following a semi-structured schedule, the interview was a pastoral conversation, something more profound than just a qualitative research exercise. When participants were asked what it had been like to reflect on their faith, some indicated that they would not otherwise have thought about their faith in such a focused way. Participants described how the interview was a positive experience; they were often pleased at the chance to re-visit memories of the process. Pauline shared how the interview ‘just made me quite emotional really, remembering it, because it was a very, very special time’. Karen described how the interview was challenging and made her revisit the impact of the RCIA, and helped her to consciously realize the changes it invoked in her life. Sarah, who was interviewed a second time, said she kept the first interview transcript at home and periodically brought it out to read as it helped her reflect on her faith journey, giving her a sense of how far she had travelled. Interviewees would also often directly appeal to me, perhaps to check if I had understood, or to draw me into the conversation (as excerpts in the next chapter demonstrate). Often, at the end of the interview, when I asked interview participants if there was anything they would like to ask me, they would ask if I had gone through the RCIA or how long I had been a Catholic. These points demonstrate a sense of reciprocity, of engaging in a shared reflective exercise. The length of time since participants had completed the process did not seem to negatively affect how they remembered the experience. Some who had completed the RCIA almost twenty years ago were surprised at the amount they remembered. Other participants who had completed the process within the past year or two claimed they would always remember the process clearly.

II. Empirical Research: Grounded Theory

The interview conversations were recorded and transcribed. How does one streamline the myriad faith-stories within these transcribed texts in order to engage with them in theological reflection? The social sciences are of service to theology in this regard, and grounded theory was chosen for the data analysis. This qualitative technique enables analysis of transcribed texts and results in a theory ‘grounded’ in
participants’ experience. This enabled maximum inclusivity and expression of this experience whilst simultaneously creating a thorough and tested theory aimed at careful representation of the truth of participants’ faith stories.

**Coding Hierarchy**

Grounded theory is created through a hierarchical coding procedure. In brief, this involved the initial line-by-line coding of each interview script; initial codes were subsequently sorted into a higher level of focused codes; and focused codes were raised to categories. As the coding progressed, memos were written that captured ideas, questions or patterns concerning what was happening in the data. Memos become valuable signposts for further exploration and delineation of categories and concepts. They also contributed to the later write-up of the theory. (See appendix 8 for a diagram explaining the grounded theory process.)

Although the grounded-theory method follows a strict hierarchical coding process, in practice it was an intuitive and creative way of engaging with the interview data. Coding results from defining what is seen in the data. It is an interactive process, as the researcher asks questions of the data and interacts with the data again and again. The meticulous, line-by-line coding and ‘constant comparison’ (the checking of codes against each other) across early codes helped to manage researcher bias,

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19 Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, p. 47. Charmaz explains: ‘We interact with our participants and subsequently interact with them again many times over through studying their statements and observed actions and re-envisioning scenes in which we know them. As we define our codes and perhaps later refine them, we try to understand participants’ views and actions from their perspectives. These perspectives usually assume much more than what is immediately apparent. We must dig into our data and interpret participants’ tacit meanings. Close attention to coding helps us to do that’. Ibid.
ensuring the arising theory remained grounded in participants’ experience. (See appendix 9 for an example of the early coding process.)

A crucial component in the creation of grounded theory is ‘theoretical sampling’. This involves re-interviewing or collecting new data at an appropriate stage in the process, to test hypotheses, address gaps in the data analysis and confirm the fit of existing categories. The sampling forms a ‘pivotal part’ in developing grounded theory, and one which cannot be produced from ‘one-shot interviewing in a single data-collection phase’. The sampling also helps to distinguish variations between particular categories. Existing categories in the emerging theory are therefore qualified through further enquiry and subsequent refinement before the final theory is arrived at. Theoretical sampling was undertaken late in the interviewing process in this study, after twenty-two interviews had been coded and categorised. This was in order to avoid forcing data, affecting how it emerged, or encouraging premature closure to the analysis. After theoretical sampling, when a ‘saturation point’ was reached with no new insights or leads arising from the data, data collection was completed. Categories were subsequently refined into concepts which were used to create a final narrative theory. This resulted in a grounded theory which stayed close to the original data, to be used as the basis for the presentation of participants’ experience in chapter three. The analysis process enabled the streamlining of a large amount of data whilst paying close attention to this accumulation of material.

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20 Nvivo 7 and Nvivo 8 computing software was used to help manage the coding process.
21 Sampling involves ‘abductive’ reasoning or ‘reasoning about experience for making theoretical conjectures and then checking them through further experience’. See Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, pp. 103-104.
23 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, p. 109.
24 Charmaz, ‘Grounded Theory’, pp. 519-520.
**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

A constructivist grounded-theory approach was used in the analysis.\(^{26}\) This acknowledges that grounded theory is co-constructed by the researcher and interview participants through shared experience and relationship.\(^{27}\) Instead of researchers being distant experts or silent authors, they are authors of a ‘co-construction of experience and meaning’.\(^ {28}\) This is an explicit ‘reflexive stance’ encouraging the researcher to be attentive to the conduct of the research including how participants are related to and represented in written reports.\(^ {29}\)

Constructivist grounded theory, as an interpretive tool employed within a theological study, helped facilitate the I-Thou encounter. Given that the research was undertaken within my own faith community, the interviews were mediated in a shared experience and collaborative exercise rather than as a purely formal qualitative exercise. The accent on co-constructed mediation of experience facilitated an ongoing encounter between interviewer and participant beyond the initial interview conversation and into the analysis of interview texts. The continuation of the encounter is evident in the emphasis on the voice of participants in the subsequent write-up of findings. This was to develop a mystagogical hermeneutic: recognition of the theological reflective nature of both interview participant and researcher.

The constructivist approach also recognizes the processual nature of social life; that people are dynamic and reflective.\(^ {30}\) Parallels exist between this aspect of constructivist grounded theory and the process element inherent within the RCIA, including ongoing mystagogical reflection. (A connection may also be made with the

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\(^{26}\) For a discussion of constructivist and objectivist grounded theory approaches see Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, pp. 129-132. In contrast, ‘Objectivist grounded theory resides in the positivist tradition and thus attends to data as real in and of themselves and does not attend to the processes of their production’. Ibid., p. 131.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.


\(^{29}\) Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, p. 189.

\(^{30}\) Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective derived from pragmatism, which assumes that people construct selves, society, and reality through interaction. [...] This perspective assumes that individuals are active, creative, and reflective and that social life consists of processes’. Ibid.
Turnerian description of the ‘processual’ nature of life, see chapter 4, pp. 154-156.) The approach also respects the fact that personal narrative often discloses complex situations or ‘multiple social realities’ within participants’ lives.\(^{31}\) This accounts for a complex emerging picture evident through different expressions of the RCIA experience, leading to respect for various social realities: cultural heritage; faith background (or the absence of a faith background); the distinction between catechumen or candidate; different geographical settings (i.e. inner-city or suburban); and different pastoral settings, either parish-based or cluster parish-based RCIA processes.

### III. Anthropological Interpretation of the RCIA Experience

Chapter four will provide a presentation of the Turners’ theory – specifically the themes of liminality, *communitas* and ritual – a fourth section will also highlight my own observations on the theme of religious experience within their work. These themes will be used as a framework for an initial anthropological interpretation of participants’ experience in chapter five. The anthropological analysis reveals the nature of the RCIA process as a liminal journey and transformational matrix through which faith is transmitted. Experiences of liminality and *communitas* form a dominant motif of participants’ experience and articulate a contemporary phenomenology of liminality, which helps to disclose unique dimensions of the personal and communal faith journey of participants.

The previous chapter introduced the methodological question apropos the place of anthropological interpretation in a theological study. The creative tension inherent in this interdisciplinary venture reveals potential for mutual learning and ‘critical service’.\(^{32}\) This tension acknowledges that the anthropological interpretation itself occupies a somewhat liminal position within the thesis. It is the position of *between*, i.e. after the participants’ experience and before the theological interpretation. One of the characteristics of the liminal in-between is that it reveals a subjunctive mood, a

\(^{31}\) Charmaz, ‘Grounded Theory’, p. 510.
phase of untold possibility and opportunity, the ‘highest pitch of self-consciousness’ (see p. 136, p. 167). This in-between position unleashes a distinctive potential: the anthropological interpretation acts as an illuminative focal point, shedding light on participants’ faith and rite-of-passage experience before the theological reading, providing insight into the unique aspects of a liminal state. As Edith Turner states: ‘anthropology + theology is able to produce a quite extraordinary illumination, a door opened from the entire social sciences to the world of theology’. 33

The Turners’ work, therefore, may be said to mediate between participants’ experience and theological enquiry. Such mediation may also be defined as a communitas encounter. For the Turners, communitas, the strong bonding experienced by those going through a liminal rite of passage, may also occur beyond this setting, involving any genuine, mutual encounter with another. Victor Turner also adopts Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ motif when explaining communitas (see pp. 131-132). The interaction between anthropology and theology reflects a communitas, I-Thou encounter.

How exactly are this interdisciplinary dialogue achieved, creative tension managed and the point of mutual service between theology and anthropology attained? It has been acknowledged that anthropology and theology are different yet complementary disciplines. In particular, theology and anthropology are brought into encounter with each other in this thesis through a series of corresponding themes. 34 Areas of complementarity arise directly from the Turners’ theory. Their work includes specific Christian themes that are ripe for theological reflection. For example, communitas is compared with the Christian notion of grace; the liminal time is charged with mystical possibility. 35 Given the accent on religious experience within

33 Edith Turner, email personal communication, 21st October 2010. Another serendipitous I-Thou encounter during the course of this study has been the personal communication and occasional meetings I have had with Edith Turner. Edith Turner made this observation in response to the bullet points set out below on pp. 51-52, which outline how anthropology is of service to theology and vice versa.

34 This approach follows a structure similar to that utilized by Douglas J. Davies in Anthropology and Theology (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002). Davies explores various parallel themes; see for example chapter one: ‘Embodiment and Incarnation’, pp. 19-51.

the Turners’ work and lives, their theory naturally dovetails with an interdisciplinary theological investigation. Various influences upon their work include observation of religious experience within African fieldwork which inspired their conversion to Catholicism,\(^{36}\) the influence of Christian mysticism, (especially on Victor Turner) and their work on pilgrimage. The presentation of their theory in chapter four acknowledges the impact of Christian spirituality upon their work and the growing ease with which they discussed religious experience within an anthropological academic environment at times hostile to religious faith-experience (see p. 150 note 149). These influences within the Turners’ work enhance the sense of encounter between theology and anthropology in this study. Given these areas of convergence, the anthropological framework which is introduced to interpret participants’ experience is found to be of service to theology in the following ways.

- It throws the liminal nature of the RCIA experience into sharp relief, providing terms and concepts for naming a challenging transition.
- It provides a rich and illuminating framework for interpreting a rite-of-passage experience, and opens up particular lines of enquiry for theological investigation.
- It provides the language and concepts for defining not only the elusive nature of RCIA rite of passage experience, but the Christian journey as a whole, including aspects of the spiritual journey.

The anthropological framework, therefore, enhances and informs the practical theological exercise. The theological ‘gestalt’, in its appeal for integration and wholeness in working with the social sciences, helps to illuminate RCIA practice.

As anthropology informs and assists the practical theological task, how might theology also inform anthropology? The potential for reciprocity between theology and anthropology is highlighted by Chauvet:

> …might not Christian theology, doubtless in its content and manner, have some service to render to anthropology, since it is constantly battling not only

\(^{36}\) Edith Turner, personal email communication, 15\(^{th}\) October 2010; see chapter four, p. 142.
with interpretation but also and above all with the question of the implication of the confessing subject in an object that s/he is nevertheless seeking to treat with all the resources of critical reasoning?\textsuperscript{37}

In the context of this study, a theological reading of liminal experience informs anthropology:

- Theology provides rich scriptural themes to help understand the liminal experience; such as the Exodus story or the paschal mystery. These imbue the liminal experience with hope and assurance, and eschatological promise.
- Theology provides themes by which to read experience beyond the parameters set by anthropology. For example, theology provides the framework to interpret participants’ somatic experience during initiation.
- The liminal, mystical and transcendent encounter may be interpreted through classical Christian spiritual terms. The theology of grace helps interpret liminal experience.

These themes are developed in the theological interpretation in chapter seven.

**IV. The Dynamics of the Theological Interpretation**

The theological interpretation within this study occupies a pivotal stage in the thesis. The function of the theological framework is three-fold. It is used to interpret participants’ experience, shed light on aspects of the Turners’ theory, and address the use of anthropology within a theological study. The theological framework also interprets and defines the practical theological nature of this thesis through its emphasis on mystagogic reflection.

*The Theological Framework*

An interpretive framework will be developed in chapter six by using the previously mentioned themes: Christian initiation as insight into grace; life in Christ; sacramental initiation and mystagogic consciousness.

The themes derive from the Introduction to the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. The Rite, the authoritative source for RCIA practice, is primarily a liturgical as well as catechetical document. It contains several theological anthropological themes namely the theology of grace, sin and conversion, and the *Imago Dei* (how humanity is created in the image of God). The theological framework themes also follow the structure of the RCIA process: i.e. the stage of pre-evangelization as following God’s call; the catechumenate as a period of conversion to Christ; sacramental initiation in the period of purification and enlightenment; and the emphasis on reflection in the phase of mystagogy.

Karl Rahner’s theology was chosen as a main contributor to the theological framework given his emphasis on theological anthropology. As one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, in many respects his work revolutionized contemporary theology. His theology of grace, central to his understanding of the human person, offered a new theological anthropological vista. Rahner’s theology of grace and his references to mystagogy are indispensable themes for interpreting the RCIA experience.

Given that the Rite is primarily a liturgical document, inclusion of Rahner’s theology helps create a robust and integrated theological framework. This in turn maximizes the theological anthropological impact of the Rite and further develops its theology. As noted in chapter one, the Rite is a ‘blueprint’ offering a foundation for implementation of the RCIA, but execution of it requires further skill, effort and imagination. The insights gained from a Rahnerian reading of the RCIA experience helps illuminate the practical implementation of it.

*Theological Interpretation*

The theological framework includes two types of theological sources. Firstly, the theology of the Rite reflects Church teaching and tradition, including scripture, creed and magisterial teaching. As such it is a *normative* authoritative theological source for RCIA practice. Secondly, the developed work of particular professional theologians, especially the systematic theology of Rahner, represents the influence of
formal theology, which offers an ‘intellectual’ articulation of ‘faith seeking understanding’ by ‘practising a form of thought which engages in critical and historically and philosophically informed enquiry, regarding the way in which faith is, and has been, expressed’.  

In chapter seven these normative and formal theological sources are brought into encounter with a third theological source, the experience of RCIA participants. This is the operant or lived theology of RCIA practice. This is to recognize RCIA experience as a ‘bearer of theology’.  

As the previous chapter outlined the role of experience is a key theme in catechesis. Participants’ experience is already a source for theological dialogue as the human person personally experiences God’s revelation; to paraphrase Dei Verbum, experience is the ‘locus’ for the realization of salvation. The interview conversations proved to be rich I-Thou encounters revealing profound accounts of faith-stories. In the true sense of catechesis, participants’ stories revealed God’s Word active within their lives.

The interviews had a distinct mystagogic quality. Participants reflected on their faith journey in the course of the interview, describing the process with a surprising level of honesty and depth, in what was often a humbling and privileged encounter on my part as interviewer. My role was one of ‘mystagogue’: helping lead the interviewee into further appreciation of the mysteries of their faith. In the process of data-gathering, analysis and interpretation I became aware of the ‘in-between’ status of this role, mediating between participant and God, as the quotation by Palmer at the beginning of this chapter suggests.

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38 Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, Clare Watkins, and James Sweeney, Talking About God In Practice: Theological Action Research And Practical Theology (London: SCM, 2010), p. 55.
39 Bhatti et al., Living Church in the Global City, p. 25.
40 Dei Verbum, n. 159.
41 Dunning, Echoing God’s Word, pp. 32-33; see quotation below, chapter 6, p. 195.
42 The term ‘mystagogue’ was borrowed by the early Church from the Greek mystery cults. After initiation a ‘mystagogue’ led initiands through a series of ritual re-enactments of the life events of cultic gods, see Mary Frolich, ‘Toward a Modern Mystagogy’, Liturgy 4, 1 (1983) 50-59 (p. 52).
As these theological streams are brought into confluence, the operant or implicit theology of RCIA practice is brought into sharp distinction. In turn, the theology of lived practice – participants’ lived experience and wisdom – may also illuminate and enrich theological reflection. The ‘disclosing of theology’ through this encounter is inspired by a particular model: the ‘theology in four voices’ model as developed by the Heythrop College ARCS (Action Research Church and Society) project.

Bringing these theological sources into a reflective engagement involves the interaction of various theological texts, each with its own richness and depth. For example, the transcribed interview conversations are an ‘embodied theology’, as these texts capture the lived faith-experience of grace. The Rite is primarily a dynamic liturgical text, which contains a theological anthropology. Rahner’s theology of grace helps to intellectually develop the theology of the Rite and this in turn demonstrates how formal and normative theological sources interrelate. The interaction between these three theological sources leads to a transformati

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44 See Cameron et al., Talking About God In Practice, pp. 56-58. The ARCS project involved a theological action research process that enabled church groups and other agencies to reflect upon aspects of their practice through iterative cycles of research. The research included conversation between operant, normative, formal and espoused theological voices. Through this conversation a group’s espoused theology – the theology that the group thought they were living or promoting – was revealed. This was often challenged by the operant theology of actual practice, as revealed by joint theological reflection. Theological conversations between the ARCS team and practitioners led to transformation of practice. See pp. 53-56. The ‘theology in four voices model’ in turn reflects the method of the pastoral cycle, see pp. 27-29. Given this thesis focuses on individuals who have completed the RCIA, rather than the work of RCIA practitioners and their respective parishes, it does not explore the espoused theology of RCIA practice. (However it is recognized that the Rite does espouse or advocate a particular ecclesial vision and anthropology, which will have influenced participants’ RCIA experience.) Instead, the focus is upon the operant theology of practice through the lived experience of the RCIA process.

45 It also important to note that the various theological ‘voices’ – espoused, operant, formal and normative theologies – are overlapping and not mutually distinct, see pp. 53-54: ‘[…] there is, in all this diverse articulation, a certain coherence of faith, of the truth being revealed to faith in the Spirit […] Recognizing the four voices as a working tool, rather than any kind of complete description of theology, is important. We must be clear that these four voices are not discrete, separate from one another; each voice is never simple. We cannot hear one voice without there being echoes of the other three’.

encounter and moments of shared insight and reciprocity, which facilitate enhanced theological understanding of RCIA practice, especially its liminal nature.

As Veling captures in the quotation below, the I-Thou encounter and subsequent interpretation help mediate participants’ reflections and memories in an act of enquiry and active listening:

An important claim of hermeneutics is that we are always interpreting – or entering into conversation – not only with texts, but with people, life, and events of the world around us. [...] the art of interpretation happens between the I and Thou, between one person and another, between text and reader, past and present, present and future, memory and promise, questioning and answering, listening and responding, reflecting and acting.47

The quotation at the beginning of this chapter on the essence of hermeneutics refers to the liminal nature of mediating between two realms. It is the role of the theologian to interpret texts.48 The practical theological task in this thesis involves bringing the different theological texts, and indeed voices, to a point of convergence and joint interpretation. The role of the theologian involves mediating between spoken word and written text in the qualitative research exercise, between the interdisciplinary realms of theology and anthropology, and between the human person and God. As stated, such a mediating role in the practical theology exercise concerns being a mystagogue, or interpreting the sacred mysteries, leading others deeper into the mystery of faith. The hermeneutical encounter at the heart of this exercise, in bringing theology and experience together, is mystagogic. Mystagogy forms an essential dynamic within the theological dialogue, moving beyond its capacity as an integral theme of the theological framework to become a component part of the reflective process or practice of theology. Mystagogy is therefore an emerging hermeneutic, one that will play a continued role throughout this study.

V. Situating the Thesis as an Exercise in Practical Theology

This thesis, as it brings experience and theology together in an interdisciplinary enquiry, is an exercise in practical theology.\textsuperscript{49} Whilst defining the nature of practical theology is not the focus of this thesis, it marks a particular contribution to practical theology through its nature as an interdisciplinary study and a unique empirical investigation of the RCIA. The following section contextualizes the thesis within the broader mandate of practical theology, with specific reference to Rahner’s understanding of practical theology.

A contemporary Catholic pastoral or practical theology is currently emerging, one which accounts for the influence of \textit{Gaudium et spes}, and the need to read the ‘signs of the times’.\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Gaudium et spes} established a missionary mandate for the Church:

After more than a century of turning away from the world, this document resolutely turned the gaze of the church towards the world. Its tone was optimistic, yet marked by a realism about the nature of sin and the complexity of the world's problems. For many within the church, it mapped out a way of encountering the world pastorally. For those outside the church, it signalled a commitment to the world that had not been in evidence for generations.\textsuperscript{51}

Rahner identified the need for a practical theology, with its own methodology and objectives, which would engage with the issues raised by \textit{Gaudium et spes}.\textsuperscript{52} In doing so he envisaged a practical theology that is praxis-oriented. Given that the

\textsuperscript{49} In general, the term ‘pastoral theology’ has been used in Catholic theological vocabulary; the term ‘practical theology’ is used in Protestant vocabulary. An exception to this is found in the work of Karl Rahner who preferred the term ‘practical theology’. Historically, pastoral theology referred to issues of clerical pastoral care and then became a discipline in its own right, separate from, for example, dogmatic or moral theology. Rahner preferred the term ‘practical’ theology as it offered a broader interpretation of pastoral ministry beyond a clerical definition. See Karl Rahner, ‘The Second Vatican Council’s Challenge to Theology’, in \textit{Theological Investigations 9: Writings of 1965-67}, translated by Graham Harrison (London: DLT, 1972), pp. 3-27 (pp. 24-25). For recent contributions to the debate from Catholic theologians see \textit{Keeping Faith in Practice}, edited by James Sweeney et al. For distinctions between Catholic and Protestant usages of these terms see Cameron et al., \textit{Talking About God in Practice}, chapter two.


\textsuperscript{51} Robert Schreiter, ‘Culture and Inculturation in the Church: Forty Years on Dovetailing the Gospel with the Human Kaleidoscope’, \textit{New Theology Review} 18 (February 2005) 17-26, (p. 18).

\textsuperscript{52} Rahner, ‘The Second Vatican Council’s Challenge to Theology’, pp. 24-25.
church exists in a historical continuum, it is the task of practical theology to reflect on the church’s ‘self-actualisation’ in its contemporary context.

Practical theology is that theological discipline which is concerned with the Church’s self-actualization here and now—both that which is and that which ought to be. This it does by means of theological illumination of the particular situation in which the Church must realise itself in all its dimensions.\(^{53}\)

Practical theology’s subject matter is everyone and everything in the Church, i.e. all those who participate in the Church’s self-realisation…

Everything is its subject matter; i.e. the Church’s self realisation in all its dimensions.\(^{54}\)

It is this inclusive understanding (that practical theology is integrated with other aspects of theology rather than a separate discipline) which is adopted in this study, and the term practical theology is used in this integral fashion. Rahner states that practical theology has a prophetic dimension; it engages in sui generis reflection ‘which sees into the future, seeking what is to be done here and now, extending the horizons of the possible future’. It has a task to establish the correct balance between theory and practice. In promoting the self-realization of the Church, practical theology has to convey the true nature of freedom and hope, and emphasize the centrality of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church.\(^{55}\) In its relationship with other theological disciplines, practical theology has a role as a ‘critical function’ or conscience. ‘Practical theology should provide the particular disciplines with an awareness of the element of practical theology inherent in themselves, and which must be taken account of themselves (something which in practice is often neglected)’.\(^{56}\) In bringing the normative, formal and operant theology of the RCIA together in this study, the practical theological dimensions of the RCIA, both theory and practice, are brought together in a mutual learning exercise.

\(^{53}\) Karl Rahner, ‘Practical Theology within the Totality of Theological Disciplines’, in Theological Investigations 9, pp. 101-114 (p. 102), author’s emphasis.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 104, author’s emphasis.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

Practical theology is both a reflective and mission-focused enterprise. Rahner, in identifying the future-oriented dimension of practical theology, highlighted its missionary and mystagogic nature. He predicted that the church will be made up of individuals who are committed through personal choice, and that theology needs to equip church members to answer questions concerning belief in God, Christ and – to some extent – the Church. Practical theology has a both a missionary and a mystagogic dimension as it helps its members reflect on their personal faith. It must also help the church to be ready to engage in dialogue with the world ‘as a way of perpetual self-realisation and reappropriation of her truth’.

These themes further contribute to an understanding of the transformative nature of practical theology. They provide a useful background for the practical exercise outlined in this study and will be referred to again in chapter eight.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explained both the nature of the empirical research in this study and the interpretive structure of this thesis; it has also outlined the nature of the theological dialogue that will take place in chapter seven, and contextualized the thesis as a practical theological study. The interdisciplinary nature of the thesis involves two interpretive steps: firstly an anthropological reading of RCIA experience and then a theological interpretation. Ahead of these steps, participants’ experience, assembled and analyzed by a grounded-theory method, is presented in the following chapter.

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Chapter 3: Transitions and Transformations - RCIA Experience

The deepest ‘grammar’ of Christian life is found not in professional theology but in the school of liturgy, the mystics and the saints, and in the silent eloquence of the language that the Spirit speaks in the lives of the faithful.

_ON THE WAY TO LIFE^1_

_But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting._

T. S. Eliot, _East Coker_, III, 26

This chapter presents the experience of twenty-six interviewees (across twenty-eight interviews), from various faith and social backgrounds, all of whom have completed the RCIA process. The findings provide a rich, kaleidoscopic view of faith transmission during the RCIA as analyzed through grounded-theory techniques (i.e. grounded in respondents’ experience). Since there are few empirical studies on the experience of RCIA participants, the findings provide an important insight into the dynamics of the process.\(^2\)

Given the sheer volume of the transcribed data (twenty-eight interview scripts of interviews each lasting up to one hour), it is beyond the scope of this chapter to present each of these individual faith stories in great detail, or to follow up every single line of enquiry. Participants’ experience is therefore presented through a series of six themes arising from the hierarchical grounded-theory analysis. This presentation deliberately includes numerous excerpts from interviews, demonstrating the inclusion of participants’ voices that is part of the grounded-theory analysis process. These chosen streams of data provide glimpses into participants’ faith stories, revealing a sense of the depth of their faith, often capturing moments of personal epiphany, and demonstrating the rich quality of the interviews.

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^2^ For example, the only published qualitative study to date is: Yamane et al., _Real Stories of Christian Initiation_, which explores the strengths and weaknesses of the RCIA process (through interviews and participant observation) in five parishes in the US diocese of Fort Wayne-South, Indiana.
The six themes, which involve both transitional and transformative experience, are outlined as follows:

I. *Reasons for Joining the RCIA*: a series of themes describing why participants joined the RCIA process.

II. *Transitions*: the challenges of the process as participants adjusted to a new church and identity.

III. *Social Transformation*: the socially transformative nature of the process, including how the RCIA group was often supportive.

IV. *Faith Transformation*: the growth in participants’ faith during this time; how their relationship with God and Christ deepened.

V. *Sacramental and Liturgical Transformation*: the impact of sacramental and liturgical experience.

VI. *Personal Transformation*: how faith inspired change on a personal level in the context of everyday life.

Given that grounded theory places a natural bias on gathering the best data, rather than strict adherence to representative samples, the extracts in this chapter provide the most prominent examples of transition, change and transformation. Particular extracts have been chosen due to their relevance in delineating aspects of a theme; sometimes they are definitive examples. Since this accent on incorporating good examples, some participants’ stories are mentioned more than others and examples have been chosen irrespective of geographical variables or parish location (for example). Where significant variables do arise, such as status distinctions between catechumens or candidates, or social factors such as the impact of migration, these are highlighted, and the impact of these is further drawn out in the ensuing anthropological and theological analysis. For ease of reference, where participants are directly quoted a brief description of their faith background is provided i.e. Church of England, and if participants were previously practicing in a different religion or Christian denomination, this distinction is highlighted by the term ‘former practicing’. (For further information on participants’ backgrounds see appendix 3.)

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3 See chapter two, p. 39, footnote 9.
The presentation of the data reflects the nature of the interview as an exercise in storytelling, plus the conversational and relational nature of the interview. Participants often situated their RCIA journey within the broader context of their life experience: some participants described their faith in childhood or adolescence; others shared profound life events which had led them to deeper faith. The relational nature of the interview is reflected in the fact that participants would often explicitly appeal to me within the course of the conversation, as demonstrated by the recurrence of the phrases ‘you know’ or ‘right?’ In the excerpts, these phrases have often been kept to emphasize this. Sometimes the interviewees made an even more direct appeal. For example, one participant, Pamela, expressed empathy when participants in the RCIA group shared difficult experiences, saying: ‘I could have cried with them, Debbie’. Furthermore, the interview encouraged participants’ personal reflexivity as they revisited memories of the process. It reminded participants of their personal motivations and how they themselves changed through the process. Sometimes conversation fillers (i.e. ‘ums and ahs’) and pauses have been retained in the excerpts to capture a sense of the reflective nature of the conversation, especially when participants’ grappling with language suggests a sense of the numinous or indescribable nature of faith experience.

We begin with the first theme: the reasons that participants gave for joining the RCIA. These reasons help to set the scene for the ensuing description of the transitional and transformative dynamics of the process.

I. Reasons for Joining the RCIA

During the initial stages of the interviews, participants described their various reasons for joining the RCIA. These reasons are grouped into six themes. However, participants often recounted a combination of influential factors on their decision to become Catholic, and so the themes should not be read in isolation. The reasons combine, creating a contextual field within which people engaged in the RCIA.

The decision to approach the Church was rarely one of chance or random selection; it was a well considered action. So extensive was this prior discernment process or
commitment that the great majority of participants had already decided to become Catholic prior to joining, rather than seeing the RCIA as the specific place and time to determine this. This is not to say that the preceding decision-making eased the process, which was not without its personal trials, prompting continued reflection. Then again, an extremely small minority had not made a prior decision about becoming Catholic and their approach was more tentative.

Transitions

Various life changes or major life events acted as turning points for the majority of participants, prompting them to search for deeper faith and seek membership of the Church. These events revealed a longing for God accompanied by the desire to belong to a faith community. Enquiry about joining the RCIA was a pro-active response to changing personal circumstances. These included bereavement, divorce, engagement, graduation, immigration, pregnancy, parenthood and retirement. Some participants had considered joining the Church for many years, or had previous contact with the Church; the transitional experience thus acted as a defining catalyst for their faith journey, prompting them to join the RCIA. For others, personal, dramatic, existential crises led to a more urgent reappraisal of life and faith. For some, a transitional experience may have confirmed prior gentle promptings concerning the desire to become Catholic, steering the way towards a gradual recognition of which faith-path to follow.

Social and Ecclesial Contact

Many participants were inspired to join the RCIA through an association with the Catholic community over a period of time. This involved familial or friendship influences alongside the experienced warmth of community. A few interviewees explained how one particular person had been an instrumental influence upon them. Ten participants were married to Catholics. The majority of these participants, however, emphasized that it was their own autonomous decision to become Catholic, and that the influence of their spouse was an only an implicit factor (some of the
spouses were nominal rather than practicing Catholics). For some it was more often the case that attending Church with their families, often over a period of many years, had elicited a strong sense of feeling ‘left out’ when not receiving the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. This in turn prompted them to seek membership. This pattern marked a more gradual approach to faith (two candidates, Timothy and Carl, commented that there was ‘no Damascene experience’ or ‘Damascene conversion’).

Two participants (Helen and Maria, both former Anglicans) did mention that part of their decision to become Catholic arose from the desire that their respective families worship together in the Catholic Church rather than in two different Christian communities, i.e. Anglican and Catholic. Two participants (Ian and Victoria) were engaged to Catholics as they went through the RCIA process but did not cite their forthcoming marriage in the Catholic Church as the predominant reason for becoming Catholic; again, it was more the result of a search for personal faith.

One participant, from a background of no religion, had recently emigrated from Japan. For both he and his wife, joining the RCIA satisfied a need to belong to a community whilst settling into a new country. Faith-belief and conversion came subsequent to joining the process, as both got to know the person of Jesus through scripture and the sacraments.

**The Appeal of Church Aesthetic and the Liturgy**

Some participants were drawn to the Church partly through their experience of the aesthetic of a place of Catholic worship. One participant, Sarah, a former Hindu, described the appeal of her local parish church, how she was initially impressed by the statues and would visit the church and absorb its atmosphere, which led her to

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4 This finding contrasts with the survey-based study by the United States Conference on Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), which found that the principle reason that participants in the USA became Catholic was because they were married to a Catholic partner and wanted to regularize the marriage. Out of 700 respondents 25% were catechumens; 61% candidates from another Christian denomination; 14% baptized Catholics seeking confirmation and/or Eucharist. The study also conducted telephone interviews of 107 people who did not complete the RCIA. See <http://www.nccbuscc.org/evangelization/journey.shtml> [accessed 19th March, 2008]
enquire further. Some respondents were drawn through their experience of attending Mass and the sense of community they encountered.

**Vocational Calling**

Several respondents described a strong, instinctive vocational calling to become Catholic. It felt the right decision on a discerning level: it ‘seemed to make sense’; they ‘knew it was the right thing’; they felt a ‘sense of rightness’. This sense of vocation may have been the result of an extended search across various denominations or religions (see ‘comparative searching’ below), or reflected a general feeling of certainty in proceeding with the RCIA. As these participants progressed with the RCIA, this sense of ‘rightness’ increased. This theme highlights an intuitive or felt sense of knowing within the decision-making process.

**Comparative Searching**

Often catechumens, but also candidates, recounted a prolonged, comparative searching process prior to joining the RCIA. Some engaged in a comparative search across various Christian denominations, world faiths, or both, resulting in them joining the Catholic Church. The searching process was sometimes prompted or accompanied by a transitional experience, such as migration. However, the decision to become Catholic was often based on other reasons: participants were encouraged by the welcome they received at a Catholic parish, or felt a strong calling to become Catholic.

**Theological Reasons**

A minority of participants (all of whom came from a Church of England background) gave explicit theological reasons for joining the Church: attraction to Catholic teaching on the real presence in the Eucharist or the appeal of particular aspects of Church tradition. (Former Anglicans, in interviews in phase two, described how they already believed in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist prior to going through the RCIA.) In general, such theological issues were the least motivating, or least articulated, factors for joining the Church, and those who
referred to them also had other reasons in their story, including personal transitions. For others from different world faiths or a background of no particular religious faith, learning about the doctrinal elements of Catholicism during the process provided compelling reasons for becoming Catholic.

The following extract (quoted at length) from Mark’s interview, demonstrates how reasons for becoming Catholic are often diverse and overlapping.

Well, when I retired 12 years ago I went on the Board of the Ambulance Service and we made friends there with two people in particular who are members of the Order of Malta, right? And we’ve developed into fundraising for the Order of Malta and we particularly support an AIDS hospice in South Africa. And we’ve continued with that and those two people who have become very good friends are one of the influences; the parish itself was an influence; the priest who has become a very, very good friend, he is retired, he was a particular influence in the whole process; and then the parish itself we’ve seen how it’s accommodated the lack of priests. We’ve not had a regular priest for some years now; we’ve become part of a cluster where we share a priest. And we’ve been a part of a community that has been very self-supportive, and we’re happy to be there in that community. So I think those are the real influences […] And my wife, of course…

Mark, Church of England background

These six reasons set out in this section for joining the Church provide a background for the following descriptions of transition and transformation in the RCIA process. For some, the process confirmed their reasons for joining the Church; their sense of vocational calling became stronger, or the theological reasons resonated on a deeper level. Personal transition, a leading reason for joining the Church, became a dominant motif for describing the RCIA experience itself, even in the case of those who joined for other reasons.
II. Transitions

The RCIA was, for the majority of participants, a transitional experience, a time of personal change, for some even confusing and turbulent. Participants described feeling a sense of displacement as they navigated various changes in self-identity, waited to receive the sacraments, or faced opposition from friends or family. The various dimensions of such transitional experience are explored, including how this waiting revealed a heightened self-consciousness. Participants often also experienced parallel transitions alongside the RCIA.

*Transitions: Displacement and Reintegration*

Transitions within the RCIA marked a sense of displacement for some: participants struggled with the concept of a new faith identity; waiting to receive the sacraments was isolating; and navigation of the various changes or thresholds within the process was accompanied by a sense of anxiety. Although some experienced a strong sense of dislocation, this was resolved through sacramental reception. The following excerpts, (quoted at length) from candidates who were former Anglicans, are defining accounts of the painful aspects of transition. They capture how the process was for some uncomfortable, and even an experience of spiritual darkness.

In the following excerpt, Abigail describes attending a service for Christian Unity week before her reception into the Catholic Church. She recounts her dilemma concerning how to sign the visitor’s book and that she felt ‘like a spare part’:

I went to a vigil and you had to sign the visitors’ book and I didn’t know which book to sign, so I signed the Church of England which I was kind of part of, because I didn’t feel like I belonged to the Catholic Church. And my parish priest, who’s a bit of an old gossip, came along behind me and saw it and said to one of my friends, “Huh! She can’t even sign herself part of [name omitted]’s [Catholic] Church”. Well, I didn’t feel able to; you know I didn’t feel that, and it was sad he hadn’t recognized that but I just felt so very in-between, I didn’t feel like I belonged anywhere. But I had to commit at that point, and I thought, “Well, I haven’t made the jump yet so I still belong to St [name omitted]’s Anglican Church of England” and it was a really
weird, really weird time. And I don’t think as people, as humans, I don’t think we like being there. I think it’s an uncomfortable place to be.

Abigail, former practicing Anglican

Abigail continued to expand upon the uncomfortable nature of being ‘in-between’, as demonstrated in the following extract. Here the paradoxical nature of the experience is revealed: the joyful nature of the time exists alongside a sense of being in suspense; this candidate was poised on the threshold but did not yet belong.

And I think that time is very…is more uncomfortable than anything. There are bits of it that are lovely, because you, you treasure it and you treasure the time of being allowed to ask questions and people are nurturing you because they want you. But […] mostly, the feeling is this inner limbo and wanting to just become… Go through those big doors and become one of the masses, even if you are standing on the edge, at least you’ve crossed that threshold and you’re part of it […]. I mean, I admire this young girl in our church who went through the whole process and then didn’t go through the confirmation but came back to Mass, because she said, ‘I still need to think about this’, and I thought, ‘That is so brave’, because you’re still purposefully standing in…that in-between time. Whereas everything human in us wants us to either walk away completely or go onwards.

Abigail

One of the strongest expressions of displacement was that of ‘segregation’, of not being able to receive communion whilst preparing to be received into the church. The following participant experienced feelings of ‘darkness’ due to lack of sacramental participation in the liturgy.

I often liken it to going through a big, dark, tunnel and you didn’t know where the end was, until Easter Sunday night when you were actually received in and you’d got a new dawn and everything was fine. But it took a hell of a lot getting through that tunnel [slight laugh], you know. […] And all the way through I would get real feelings of darkness, thinking “Good grief, we’re here. We have to attend church here and work for the RCIA”. We couldn’t receive sacrament here (sic), we just used to sit and watch the Mass but at the same time we knew we were being fed interiorly. We weren’t left alone in this tunnel; we were fed every time at Mass, I felt, even though we
weren’t actually receiving it physically. So we weren’t left alone, but the tunnel lasted a good eight, nine months, whatever the transition period was.

Peter, former practicing Anglican

In the following extract Peter describes a sense of reintegration into the community; reception at the Easter Vigil marked coming out of the darkness and returning home.

I think the Easter Vigil was just so overpowering. It was really powerful that night; there seemed to be a sense of the Holy Spirit there, really powerful. We were being received into the Church, like coming home. It’s a strange thing to say because…if you’re a Catholic you can’t understand it at all really. If you have made a conscious decision and struggle to get to what I would say is the truth, then you’re aware of the sense of the elation of the night. When you know that’s it and nothing can be taken from you then. Nobody can stop you now; you belong to that […] Because by this stage God has become so important in your life, Christ has become so important, and to go to the Church that He left on this earth is very powerful; it’s very orthodox still and means so much. You’re six inches off the floor when it’s happening [laughs]. That’s been the highlight, I think, of the journey. Because then you came home, you were coming out of the tunnel, you were in the light. You might have been terrified while you were there...

Peter

Both of the above participants were theologically articulate. They became Catholic for theological reasons, specifically the Catholic teaching on the real presence in the Eucharist. Both were involved members of their former Anglican communities. For Peter this prior involvement actually accentuated his feeling of isolation, as he mourned the loss of the companionship of his former faith community.

The above examples capture a sense of threshold anxiety that was common throughout participants’ experience. Various dimensions of such anxiety were described. It was not uncommon for participants to encounter opposition from friends and family at their decision to become Catholic. This occurred for a number of participants, including both catechumens and candidates. A few participants expressed feelings of disloyalty to former faith traditions or particular family members, mainly parents who had been instrumental in bringing them up within a
particular faith tradition. This included parents who were long deceased. For one candidate, family perceptions of her choice to become Catholic, and her subsequent loss of identity were particularly acute:

…my whole identity as a Protestant you know, and of family was Huguenots, and my name was [name omitted], which has come back right down from the 17th century as the same name for people that left France … It was just a really important part of me and who I was […]. A lot of when I was talking to the priest was actually about, you know, what my mother was going to think; how my family would accept the situation as a Catholic, you know, it was a big thing in the family. So, for me, it was more them accepting me with a different identity and not being too upset by it than what I was actually going through to accept myself as a Catholic.

Maria, former practicing Anglican

Some participants felt nervous about approaching and joining the RCIA group. This may have involved anxieties over particular doctrines – including the prominent role played by Mary – or particular moral teachings such as the Church’s stance on contraception and how to guide their teenage children on the issue. Others were concerned with what would the community be like – what would be expected of them? What would the people in the group be like? There was relief on the part of two participants who found that people in the group were ‘normal’; and for others that contemporary Catholicism seemed markedly different from the Catholicism that they had heard about whilst growing up. A minority of participants felt a sense of ‘unworthiness’ at participating in the group. In reality, the group was a place of welcome and was described in reassuring terms: participants were much supported in the process by catechists and priests, some highlighting how this support began when they first approached the parish to join the RCIA.

Faith Transitions

The transitional experience of interviewees, both catechumens and candidates, involved charting new territory in terms of faith and belief. Some catechumens, who were coming to Christianity for the first time, engaged in a distinctive comparative faith exercise. This was a dominant theme in Sarah’s interview, in which she
compared Catholicism with Hinduism. She was brought up as a Hindu and had practiced Hinduism for a period of approximately eight years before deciding that she wanted to be a Christian. (She had encountered prior Christian influence in her schooling in Africa). She visited a Catholic Church ahead of joining her RCIA group; whilst there she heard about ‘forgiveness of sin’:

…the priest started by saying we come together asking for forgiveness of sin, and then I looked back thinking, *that’s never been said in the Hindu religion*. You never come asking for forgiveness of sins, although being human, and we have committed so many things, knowingly and unknowingly, but it was never addressed to us in that way.

Sarah, former practicing Hindu

This was a point of distinct comparison that engaged her thinking: ‘How can the Christian faith teach that? How can Jesus Christ forgive me for things I’ve done?’

Another point of enquiry concerned the monotheistic nature of Christianity in comparison to the polytheistic nature of Hinduism:

And you know in Hinduism they’ve got all these gods? Whereas in Christianity it’s God as Supreme God, our Heavenly Father, then His Son, and then His Holy Spirit. It’s not like that in the Hinduism religion; you’ve got the Lakshmi and the Vishnu and the Krishna and the Durga and I remember all these gods. And they worship these gods for particular things, so if you want money you go to worship Goddess Lakshmi, you get money. If for one reason something you need revenge, you go and worship Goddess Durga, and they had all these gods had something that they did. Well, to the Christian faith it is not like that.

Sarah

Sarah had felt uncomfortable about the many gods of Hinduism and that her many questions concerning why there were so many gods were unanswered. She described how she felt forced to practice Hinduism by her father, but when she was in her early twenties had the opportunity to explore Christianity. She was the only interviewee in the study who came from a polytheistic faith background, but she was not the only one to have been touched by Christianity; interviewees from Muslim backgrounds
had also had Christian influence in their upbringing, and Natalie was married to a Catholic (although her spouse did not practice). These latter individuals, seeing as they were moving from another monotheistic religion, did not seem to have the same struggle as the erstwhile Hindu woman, as they felt they were worshipping the same God. In this sense their faith journey showed continuity within the obvious transition to a different world faith.

Participants from Christian backgrounds navigated other transitions concerning personal belief. Peter’s main reason for becoming Catholic and for leaving the Church of England was his belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. He wanted to belong to a Church where everyone accepted the reality of this, rather than belong to a tradition where members had different theological understandings of what the Eucharist meant to them. Maria specifically felt that the wait for reception of the Eucharist was unnecessary.

I knew why we say we can’t receive communion, but I didn’t feel that it was necessary myself, but I did it because it was part of the whole thing and I felt...because I was surprised at, you know, you are not allowed to take communion in your own church you have to not take communion at all for all that time and I found that really hard.

Maria, former practicing Anglican

On the other hand this contrasted with the experience of Abigail, who felt the transitional nature of the process provided necessary formation in another Christian denomination and way of living:

What it has taught me is [...] you need some process or period of transition. So it demonstrated to me that you can’t always just jump, that you need a time of change, and thought, and reflection, and formation [...]. So in that time I changed from an established Anglican into, you know, a fledging but fully-emerged Catholic, so I kind of stepped over the threshold into the Church, became a full member as a baby Catholic but not tentatively, but you just need that time, and it taught me that.

Abigail, former practicing Anglican
**Heightened Self-Consciousness**

Experiences of transition and displacement were often accompanied by an increased self-consciousness, operating at different levels. Some described feeling awkward in regard to joining the new group. A few were embarrassed when initially participating in liturgies, as they did not know the proper sequence of events and accompanying ritual responses and gestures. Several respondents felt uncomfortable or personally challenged when publicly participating in liturgies, specifically at having to stand up in front of the congregation, although some participants were not threatened by this; one even found it ‘cathartic’. As previously mentioned, some participants felt a sense of segregation on not being able to receive communion whilst preparing to be received into the Church. Participants’ personal witness and active public participation in liturgies led to perceived public scrutiny. Some felt judged by other congregants for not receiving communion. In contrast, some respondents felt included because they went up for a blessing during communion. An apprenticeship-like quality of the RCIA was observed by Abigail and compared to starting a new school or new job, or taking driving lessons. There was a distinct sense of being ‘consciously incompetent’ during the process. It was

…the worst time because you know you don’t know what you’re doing, and who you are, and you’re conscious of it. And I think that’s what it’s like with RCIA; you’re standing there and you know that you know you’re exposed to everybody as kind of a Churchified incompetent and that pushes you up to the next bit.

Abigail, former practicing Anglican

This example demonstrates the challenging nature of increased self-consciousness, and reveals how a desire for a sense of arrival and proficiency provides momentum.

Heightened self-consciousness was not wholly negative; it revealed a deeper level of self-awareness beyond the aforementioned emotional responses. During this time participants had a sensitive acuity of themselves and their personal journey. It was

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5 This is referred to as the ‘four stages of competence’ within psychology. The final stage is ‘unconscious competence’. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence) [Accessed August 26th 2011]
often in retrospect that participants integrated the negative aspects of the experience or were fully able to appreciate and view it as a time of heightened perception. Participants’ increased perspicacity is explored in the following sections outlining the transformative nature of the RCIA experience.

**Multiple Personal Transitions**

Some participants encountered significant transitional experiences juxtaposed alongside their RCIA involvement. These included pregnancy, becoming a parent, family sickness, bereavement, ill-health and waiting for health-test results. Experience of multiple transitions is evident in the following example from Beverley who was expecting her second child whilst also tending to her dying father. She identified certain events – being pregnant whilst accompanying her father through chemotherapy, the death of her father, and experiences at the Easter Vigil – as points of deep, significant personal change. She portrayed the RCIA time as both ‘strange’ and ‘special’. Despite the death of her father she reflected on the period in very positive terms:

…it pulled me towards God because […] I was given four months of a very, very special time with him [father]; of seeing him literally every day […] and although he was obviously getting sicker and sicker, it was a really, really special time and I felt God gave us that time together you know; closer than we ever were in all the time of our lives. And to be totally honest with one another and have deep and meaningful chats that we’d never had the chance before, he was always too busy or he was away […] and I found a great comfort, you know, in the Church and in prayer during that time […] I mean I can remember when he was really, really sick, in month three, he came to Mass with me and, you know, what a special moment. We had never done that before and it was just really special. How lovely…that we shared that in this church.

Beverley, no religious background

This participant’s growing faith journey helped her to come to terms with her father’s death, as she gained a Christian perspective on the afterlife. The above extract demonstrates how parallel transitions were integrated into her RCIA experience and became part of her faith story. The RCIA journey helped her
integrate associated changes in self-identity – the loss of her father, continuing motherhood – with becoming a Christian. She also experienced a growing sense of spirituality as prayer became increasingly important.

The cumulative nature of transitional experience accounted for why some participants navigated the process with greater ease than others. Participants who had a prior transition, such as immigration, and individuals who had experienced multiple transitions before or during the RCIA often reported fewer negative effects or were able to deal more adequately with the changes invoked by the RCIA. This was outlined by Richard, who had been brought up in Zimbabwe and had lived in different locations around the world. Prior transitional experience enabled him to develop a flexible and open-minded attitude to personal change:

… so this sort of thing [the RCIA] wouldn’t have affected me quite as much as maybe some people who have lived all their life in one area and decided to change churches, you know? I’ve often wondered how somebody like Anne Widdecombe suddenly made that change; that would have been a big change for her, you know? And Tony Blair, of course, you know?

Richard, Anglican background

Broad cultural transitions, such as immigration, helped some participants to manage internal ecclesial and cultural transitions, and prior experience of major shifts in self-identity also provided a different perspective. Maria, a former Anglican, retrospectively identified cumulative transitions as preparatory, as part of necessary growth and development that was part of God’s wider plan. On returning to the UK after living in the US, she embarked on the RCIA.

I’ve been going through a hell of a lot of transitions for years […]. In America before the RCIA and everything and during the time we were in this [prayer] group and all these things were happening, that I thought my heart was being stretched [laughs]. But it was like He [God] was enlarging it, preparing it for all these things that were going to happen during the RCIA. And, yes, I do think that every time I’ve been through a huge change that it’s helped me the next time. I wouldn’t have gone into the Catholic Church at all if I hadn’t been through all those already.

Maria, former practicing Anglican
Serena, a former practicing Anglican, was at the time of being interviewed not attending Church, and was considering returning. After she had been received into the Church, her husband became so hostile to her attending that she had to stop. Given these obstacles, she understandably described how her transition within the RCIA was somewhat incomplete, although she felt she had the strength and inner peace to deal with the situation. Her former husband’s behaviour resulted in her having to put Christian statues and devotional objects away at home. Despite having to physically hide her Christian identity in this way, and even though she could not attend church during this time, she still felt a sense of ecclesial belonging:

It was…just trying to think of the best way of putting this [pause]. It was the knowledge that, although I didn’t go to church, and I was still carrying on, but deep in my heart that I had God with me and that no matter what, if I had a need, a real, real need I could walk through those doors and there would be lots of people around to help me, to carry me if I needed it. That it, you know, it wasn’t that I was never at any time, ever, on my own. That there were…I just had to go and say…and that there were others still there for me and with me. I think that’s the best way I can put it.

Serena, former practicing Anglican

In summary, participation in the RCIA involved personal transition. Experiences of displacement and reintegration were accompanied by changes in identity and heightened self-consciousness. The process was often concurrent with other experiences of personal change, which participants often managed to integrate into their personal faith journey. Although the transitional nature of the RCIA was often challenging, participants encountered moments of profound personal epiphany. The following sections explore its transformative nature, starting with its social dimensions.

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6 Serena is listed as a catechumen in table 2, p. 45. She was raised as an Anglican and discovered during the RCIA, to her surprise, that she was not christened as an infant as previously thought.
III. Social Transformation

The interviews reveal that the RCIA was a time of social transformation for participants, particularly as they engaged with others in a mutually supportive process. Several dimensions of the socially transformative nature of the RCIA are explored in this section: how participants experienced a sense of friendship and community in the group; how the group became a symbolic space in which participants explored their spirituality – all of which were often emphasized above the catechetical content or what was learnt during the group process. Personal, social and spiritual support was also inspired by people and liturgical activities beyond the group setting.

Friendship and Community

In contrast to accounts of the challenging nature of the RCIA, the social aspect of the group was often talked about in positive and pleasant terms. Strong experiences of friendship and community were evident within participants’ stories; companionship, trust and mutual support were key characteristics of the group process. This was most prominent for those who underwent an extended RCIA process (of up to eighteen months). The following example highlights how participants together made sense of the joys and sorrows of their individual life experiences within the group setting.

I mean you talk personally to one another and they share their life’s journey and their heartaches, because we’ve all had heartaches, you know, and you get to know people […] they’ve been through tragedies as well and so, you know, and I could cry with them, Debbie, I could cry with them you know […]. And you miss that, because then all that’s gone, and it’s a wonderful time, really, it’s a tragic time, but it’s a wonderful time; to share with people, you know, and then we would hold hands and have a prayer when someone had spoken like that. It was really a special time, because people open up.

Pamela, former practicing Methodist

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7 Certain examples have been omitted from this excerpt to preserve anonymity.
This excerpt, with the simultaneous use of the words ‘tragic’ and ‘wonderful’, illustrates the paradoxical nature of the group experience. This chimes with the previous example (given on p. 75) of the paradoxical nature of the RCIA as being both ‘strange’ and ‘special’. Another candidate also referred to the group sessions as being serious and informative as well as filled with laughter, jokes and camaraderie.

Participants often appreciated the strong level of trust and confidentiality within the group, which enabled a deep level of sharing to occur. This went beyond a sense of familiarity or mere acquaintance that one might experience by attending a weekly meeting and testified to a deeper bonding. Jack, who engaged in an extended process, recalled how the group dynamic shifted when someone was absent. Concern was expressed if someone missed a session due to illness, as participants reminded each other that ‘we really wanted, needed you here, and we missed you’:

…if you wasn’t with that group it was like tearing the body apart, if you like; like losing an arm or a leg, you know, the group wasn’t always together. So when everybody was together then the group went fine but if somebody was missing then it slacked a little bit. So it was very important and I think they all felt the same way.

Jack, Christian background (Baptist/ Catholic influences), unbaptized

The imagery used to depict the group as a physical body is noteworthy; the experience of the group as a living entity sustained this participant. He also mentioned how participants supported catechists through difficult times, which exposed the reciprocal nature of the group; all were journeying together and helping each other through life’s struggles. The level of sharing and trust really surprised Jack and surpassed his initial expectations. He appreciated and acknowledged that such a level of trust is hard to accomplish within a group.

The intimacy and mutual self-reliance within a group not only surprised some participants but also helped to counter a sense of personal vulnerability. The following excerpt depicts a profound sense of relational experience and intimacy.

I felt that closeness that we shared…we were coming up to Easter, we obviously met again just the sort of three of us in preparation on Sundays and
we went through different methods of prayer during that time; different methods where you actually put yourself into the situation, and, gosh, it was such an emotional time and there was tears and laughter and I just felt, “Gosh we really know each other on a totally different level and we’ve exposed ourselves to one another that we haven’t to even maybe our husbands” you know that sort of depth…

Beverley, no religious background

**Variations in Length of Process**

The above examples of group solidarity are from participants who engaged in an extended RCIA process. Some participants identified the capacity of the group to function as a form of peer support; those further along the process were able to guide newer members. Participants both from Christian and non-Christian backgrounds appreciated the extended time span. The longer catechumenate fulfilled the need that some participants had for a more gradual process. (Some participants also commented that breaking the group sessions over school summer holidays somewhat stilted the process.)

Although the strongest examples of relational experience were often given by participants who had been through the extended process, this was by no means limited to this group. Sarah, a catechumen and former Hindu, who underwent a shorter process lasting between six and seven months in an inner-city, south-London parish, also gave a striking account of the group dynamic. She was in a group of fifteen participants and again was impressed by the level of sharing and absence of shyness, even on behalf of the priest leading the group. Sarah acknowledged the group as space for shared evangelization through collective faith experiences and joint witness. She identified that all members, despite coming from ‘different backgrounds’ were united in that they ‘all had one common goal’ – wanting to know God and Jesus better – and together were looking forward to receiving the sacraments.

Those experiencing the shorter RCIA process generally described the group interaction in more varied terms, depicting a spectrum of experiences. For some, the
formation of close bonds and friendships did occur (sometimes leading to lifelong friendships). For others, social interaction was limited to the making of acquaintances, with much less emphasis on deeper interpersonal interaction – Pauline, for example, who was from a Baptist background and who spoke very highly of the process as a whole, identified the group as a means to a sacramental end rather than a way of engaging in significant encounters with others. These variations may have been caused by the limitations of the shorter time scale, or because of geographical location and/or type of parish. For example, it may be harder to establish strong friendships in an inner-city parish with a transient congregation than in a close-knit parish group. Nevertheless, the group experience in the shorter process still provided meaningful encounters, and acted as an entrance point into the parish and an anchor point for recent immigrants arriving in the country. A small number of respondents (from both extended and shorter processes) continued to attend the RCIA group after they had been received and they helped with the ongoing running of the group. One participant went onto become a catechist, and another a sponsor.

**Symbolic Nature of the Group: Sacred Space and Time**

The nature of the RCIA group was described in distinctive symbolic terms: as a sacred space which facilitated a different quality of time and encouraged spiritual reflection, and a protected space which formed an environment that supported individuals as they encountered various levels of change.

Several participants commented that the group enabled them to access moments of space and quiet, enabling a deeper level of spiritual reflection. The group sessions were often compared to being a ‘special time’ or allowing members to enter ‘a different kind of space’ apart from everyday routine. Participants would often describe the format of group sessions, saying that through prayer or scriptural reflection they were able to pause and contemplate and become still and calm:

…after quiet time you would go into yourself. We would always say a little prayer and it just got you into the right almost spiritual mode, I suppose. It
made you realize why we’re here and what we’re doing. It’s not just a social thing it’s…we’re here for a purpose.

Helen, Anglican background

Together with being made welcome and the group delineating a time apart and a space for spiritual reflection, the group also offered a sense of feeling special and protected:

…especially during that time it was like…feeling warm, like being within a warm bubble [laughter]. Like feeling very sort of secure and…like, it was a really funny, funny experience, you know just soft, warm and feeling a presence; definitely feeling you know a presence. Yeah, feeling that I’m not alone and you know that what I’m doing is okay…

Beverley, no religious background

This sentiment of feeling protected was echoed by other participants along with reluctance to leave the group after the process had finished. Indeed, leaving the group marked another transition. Siobhan, acknowledging this feeling of protection and feeling special, likened leaving the group to swimming without armbands. Several participants stated they would have liked the RCIA to continue beyond their time of preparation, and identified a need for a longer process.

**Group Process over Informational Content**

The group experience was defined through meaningful interaction with others, often over and above the actual content of the process. Participants valued the content of the RCIA sessions; however, references to the catechetical content tended to be low key: catechesis and scripture were mentioned, but not in specific detail.

The relationship was very important so it wasn’t just learning about the history and tradition of the Church and its scriptures, it was how they were actually manifest in the group, in the relationships with people there. It was living it, really living it.

Siobhan, former Church of Ireland

Victoria, had the contrasting experience of being prepared one-on-one prior to joining the RCIA group. She formed close friendships in the group, describing it as a
‘support group’, and almost ‘like a sorority kind of session’. For her, the emphasis on scripture and learning about Catholicism ran parallel to the group process:

Because although we were kind of chatting and working on the Scriptures and all those kind of things we still had group discussion time, so we found ourselves, especially with a couple of members of the group, kind of feeling a lot closer to them; you know – kind of chatting to them and asking them how they were doing and so on.

Victoria, no religious background

Victoria went onto agree that the group aspect of the RCIA was very important and that members formed a strong emotional bond.

This observation – that participants valued process over content – was not unusual; the same finding occurred in the national study on the RCIA in the USA, Journey to the Fullness of Life. (This also feeds into the wider debate within RCIA literature about what content should be covered in the process, whether this should be doctrinal catechesis or more lectionary based catechesis, or a combination of both.)

More emphasis was placed on the atmosphere and spirituality of the group than on catechetical or informational content. The group provided ‘freedom to question’; participants felt welcome, ‘at home’; the group was ‘lively’, ‘respectful and fun’. Participants attended retreats and were introduced to different types of prayer – some portrayed the atmosphere of the group as ‘very prayerful’. The learning of dogma or theological concepts was sometimes mentioned explicitly (often by more theologically articulate participants). This generally referred to changes within their own understanding rather than containing detailed account of specific content. (Participants’ changes in belief are referred to in section VI, p. 110.) One interviewee described how in the absence of being able to receive communion he instead ‘gained more knowledge’.

The content of sessions was criticized by a minority of participants. Sarah hungered for more information on the devotional side of Catholicism. She continued her own

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8 USCCB, Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, Journey to the Fullness of Life, see <http://www.usccb.org/evangelization/journey.shtml>
independent spiritual enquiry through reading literature on devotional spirituality as well as attending the group. Maria supplemented her RCIA experience through personal spiritual direction. Given that she had studied theology for five years, she was theologically articulate. A minority cited disappointment at the lack of mystagogy sessions. One participant said she would have appreciated people coming in to talk to the group about different aspects of parish life and involvement during this time. (Another participant from the same parish but different cohort did describe this happening.)

**Social Transformation beyond the Group**

Participation in the RCIA involved socially transformative experiences that went beyond the initial boundaries of the group. For example, a minority mentioned their relationship with their sponsors, which were further examples of friendship and bonding with others. Their sponsors had helped them navigate the ups and downs of their faith journey as well as acting as a bridging link to the parish and its activities.

Other than contact with sponsors and other parishioners at the Easter Vigil liturgy (see below) respondents’ accounts of social transformation did not include much interaction with the wider parish. Given the lack of parish liturgical practice of the Scrutinies, Minor Rites, or the Rite of Dismissal during the process (in most cases), participants typically did not have a strong visible profile in the parish. Their relationship with the rest of the parish community was often minimal or irregular, with some groups seemingly marginalized or confined to weekly/bi-weekly meetings in the parish centre; for others there was some occasional wider parish contact. Some respondents described a sense of disappointment at this, and observed that the level of intensity of friendship experienced in the RCIA group was not necessarily maintained in regular parish life.

A sense of social connection with others was evident in descriptions of the Rite of Election, however. This diocesan liturgy, celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent, marks the stage of ‘purification and enlightenment’ leading up to the Easter Vigil. This was enthusiastically spoken about by many participants as a ‘special’
experience, which marked a strong experience of community and solidarity with others across the diocese. Helen described the atmosphere of the Rite of Election as buzzing with excitement, during which she felt special, and she was amazed how many people across the diocese were also going through the RCIA. Another participant described the experience as very moving; she also commented on how struck she was by the numbers of people in the cathedral who were also becoming Catholic, especially as there were only four people in her group:

I think that brought it home to me that night when I saw the people. Being in the cathedral, it was very moving, it was very uplifting and the people who came with us as supporters and not just our sponsors and everything...you really felt that they loved and they wished you well in this, you know? Like after you’d been in front of the bishop and everything, everybody was shaking your hand and giving you a kiss and a hug and all this and it was an absolutely marvellous night you know?

Patricia, Anglican background

The Easter Vigil was also a powerful experience of community, and provided meaningful contact with the parish which had often been absent throughout the RCIA process. Participation in the Easter Vigil was equated to joining or belonging to a universal family:

…and it was just wonderful to think that everywhere around the world, at this one time, were all these different people, you know, being accepted into...the full faith and it was just really, really inspiring I suppose, you know?

Beverley, no religious background

These examples provided bridging experiences to help participants assimilate into the life of the parish, and in the case of the Rite of Election gave a broader diocesan community perspective. Social interaction through liturgical celebration is given specific attention under the theme ‘Sacramental and Liturgical Transformation’ (see section V, below).

Richard, a candidate from a High-Anglican background, felt that the wider Church was missing an opportunity to learn by not engaging more with the experience of newcomers. He felt that the interaction between the RCIA participants and the
Church could have been a richer, more reciprocal process, with the Church learning from the insights of new members as to how they thought the Church was performing in the community.

In summary, previous descriptions of the challenging, transitional nature of the RCIA (under the section *Transitions: Displacement and Reintegration*) contrast with descriptions of the process as a socially transformative experience. For many (but not all), the group provided an influential social support as they prepared to become members of the church. The group also functioned as a vehicle leading the participant towards a broader social involvement with parish and liturgical experiences. Within the interviews the social dynamic of the group was often described in more detail than the catechetical content of the process.

**IV. Faith Transformation**

This following section describes how participants’ faith grew during the RCIA. It focuses on their growing faith-relationship with God and Jesus, including the undulating nature of the faith journey and their increasing recognition of God’s sustaining presence. Participants described encounters with God and Christ in very profound terms, often reorienting their lives through such encounters and a deeper realization of Christ’s presence within their lives.

The RCIA process catered to participants at different stages on their faith journey. For participants who were not baptized, and those who were baptized but not practicing their faith or who were lukewarm in their beliefs, the group became the main context for evangelization to Jesus Christ. For those who were already baptized and had strong faith in Christ, the process often acted as a socialization exercise as they became immersed in a new ecclesial culture. These latter participants continued to become closer to Jesus Christ within the RCIA process.

*Gradual Realization*

Some participants spoke of how their desire to become Catholic – approaching the Church to seek out membership and their overall faith transformation, including the RCIA experience – was a very gradual process. One participant, Siobhan, described
her faith journey as an implicit, ‘underground’ process spanning several years, which eventually led her to seek membership in the Catholic Church. She felt it was difficult to pinpoint exactly what led her to become Catholic, stating:

I feel very strongly that there was something going on underground all those years, even when I wasn’t really interested in church things, there was something around then.

Siobhan, Church of Ireland background

Siobhan had a Church of Ireland background, and fondly remembered her childhood experiences of being educated in a Catholic boarding school, especially the school liturgies. At university she became agnostic. Gradually, prompted by particular life experiences – and especially becoming a parent – she came to a distinct recognition of her need to explore the Catholic faith.

But it wasn’t until, I suppose, I had my children and I slowly began to think there was something here that I was missing, and my children were christened Church of England, um, but I don’t know what…something was going on below the surface and then suddenly in the eighties, early eighties I just felt there was something I had to do about this. If I let it go on and on and on I would never actually make enquiries or explore.

Siobhan

She acknowledged the gradual realization that she wanted to become Catholic. She also recognized points in her faith journey which were ‘quite dramatic’, and distinct realization junctures where ‘something awoke’, which occurred prior to the verbal articulation of her desire to explore her faith:

It was kind of something awoke in a way and, and realizing that this is what I wanted and then verbalizing it and exploring, really I suppose.

Siobhan

Other participants shared the sentiment of something stirring deep within them which they felt they had to acknowledge and act upon. For example, Theresa, on discussing why she wanted to attend church again after not attending for approximately ten years, said:
I can’t really explain why; it was just this feeling that, um, there was something you might say that I wasn’t attending to.

Theresa, Church of England background

Theresa acknowledged something going on at an intangible yet deep level, and her experience of personal awakening resonated with that of other interviewees. Natalie, a former Muslim, stated that she had always believed in God; however, what she described as a ‘vague’ Christian influence later came to fruition through her RCIA experience. She was brought up as a Muslim and had also attended Christian churches as a child in Africa with members of her extended family, which led her to describe herself as ‘in-between’. After experiencing the death of her mother, she came into contact with a Catholic parish in London and sought out membership, although obviously her faith in God had existed before her Christian conversion.

The RCIA process became the forum for a distinct realization of faith experience. However, participants again expressed the gradual nature of the change that took place in it. Timothy did not experience what he termed a ‘Damascene conversion or flash point’, rather it was a coming to faith, and his RCIA experience was a gradual process, which he compared to the scriptural quotation of ‘seeing through a glass darkly’ (1 Cor. 13:12). This sentiment of gradual change was echoed by other participants. For example, Victoria described transformation in the RCIA as

…a very gradual kind of change. I didn’t have any one moment where I thought ‘Wow, I’ve flipped and totally changed’. I found it was quite a gradual process and a kind of realization.

Victoria, no religious background

Beverley also talked of a ‘subconscious’ spiritual awareness that grew during the process:

…yes, sort of becoming, starting to pray but in a rather selfish way and in a rather like, ‘Hang on, like, please be there for me’ and sort of subconsciously becoming, er, more interested and more aware.

Beverley, no religious background
This realization manifested itself in a transformative way, and is narrated in the following sections concerning transformation. For example, Theresa described the RCIA process as ‘like a realization’ which prompted the integrated nature of her faith: ‘that’s what I see now; it has an impact on every part of my being, every day’.

**Wrestling with God**

Participants were often drawn to the RCIA or expressed an interest in becoming Catholic in response to a prior transitional experience. Peter recounted such an example which led to his conversion to Christianity. Although this was well before his RCIA encounter, the example is mentioned in detail as it provides a profound sense of wrestling with God which other participants also echoed. A huge personal crisis that was very traumatic prompted this participant’s faith search. During the crisis he felt abandoned by God and cried out to God:

The only thing I liken it to now is that God removed his hand from me, like a protection. And I faced this thing…I got that far down with it, that the only person who could help me was God, this God. And I pleaded with Him to help, and He helped. And I, obviously, I did a bit of plea bargaining. I said to Him “You get me out of this, you help me with this” because I, I’d totally used all of my resources, everything, and I just, I just wasn’t capable of coping anymore with what was happening.

Peter, former practicing Anglican

In retrospect, Peter could see how God had helped him even though at the time he felt that he was at the edge of his own resources. He was grateful of God’s presence within the seeming absence; he knew his prayers were answered:

I knew I was talking to God that night…there was nowhere else for me to go. So if it didn’t (sic), I wouldn’t be here. That’s how desperate things were. So I, you know, they had to be answered, and I knew I was talking to God, I knew He was listening to me. And obviously, one of the things I have found since then is that when He does let me go through these experiences, He’s ever watchful, He’s ever close because He won’t let me fall. Do you understand? At the time, you think you’re falling and you end up looking into a pit and there’s nothing there, just a pit, a black hole. And, He did, He did help me because, as soon as I pleaded with Him really from the bottom of my
heart because nothing was...there was nothing left of me. I said “You must help me”, and, do you know, that was it. More or less instantly, and He helped...

Peter

During this occurrence, he promised God that he would return to Church, and subsequently described experiencing ‘a gradual strengthening and growing’.

Other participants recounted difficult and dark experiences prior to the RCIA and which directly prompted them to join; often this was an experience of loss, such as bereavement. One participant, Simon, from a background of no particular faith, recounted feeling tested by God. At the time of interview he had recently arrived in the country from Mauritius. He searched for answers from God regarding where he should be living his life, given he was so far from home, was facing financial burdens and difficulties with his studies, and had to navigate various cultural differences. He spent time trying to understand God’s ‘way’, and in the midst of this he decided to approach the Church and join the RCIA. He moved from feeling that God was ‘playing’ with him, and being ‘very depressed and very confused’ to trusting in God and God’s plan for him.

These experiences of wrestling with God were indicative of participants’ ongoing faith experience before, during and after the RCIA. The following participant, Pamela, described the recurring nature of dark experience, and how the writings of the mystics and Jesus’ agony in the garden helped her understand such times:

...like St John of the Cross, I’ve read quite a lot of his...have you read that? He spoke about the dark night of the soul, didn’t he? Well, Jesus did: “My God and my God why have You forsaken me?” And I think we have those times and then you’re sort of reconverted again.

Pamela, former practicing Methodist

Pamela acknowledged her doubts concerning her worthiness to meet Christ in eternal life; she drew strength from the recent revelations of what she termed as Mother Theresa’s ‘doubts’. Her ongoing faith experience since the RCIA has resulted in learning to trust further in God. She described the ‘testing’ of her faith when dealing
with friends who have cancer: ‘you pray and then you’ve got to leave it in God’s hands’.

Timothy described awareness of God in transitory, fleeting moments:

I think, occasionally you get a genuine flash of feeling close, but and I’m sure, you know, that there are some people in the religious orders who, who feel close a lot more often than I do because I fill my life with other things as well, but I think that’s something that you should cherish when it happens but don’t expect it to be like that all the time.

Timothy, Church of Scotland background

In the context of the RCIA, and in their faith experience more generally, participants shared encounters of wrestling with God, or the seeming absence of God, which led them toward experiencing God’s sustaining presence even in dark times.

**God’s Sustaining Presence**

God’s sustaining presence was indeed a hallmark of faith experience during the RCIA. Certain participants felt led by God to the RCIA, or believed that through the process they ‘started to come back to God’, or that they got to know God better. There was a tangible experience of the felt presence of God for many; God’s benevolent, sacred and steadfast presence was described. For Beverley, the process confirmed the ‘wonderful’ nature of God and God’s ‘goodness and pureness’. Another recounted feeling ‘touched by God on a very deep level’. Some participants specifically acknowledged the presence of God within each human person. A heightened awareness of God’s presence through the RCIA process was specifically identified. This included learning to trust in God and in God’s time. Life was reoriented by God’s presence, and faith in God was also spoken about in a general sense across life experience:

I know God is always with me. I never used to think like that. When I’m doing something at the back of my mind, you know it’s more like a picture, I can see God behind me and in front of me too. In front of me and behind me and I know God is with me. You know it gives me more hope than anything.

Ian, Baptist background, unbaptized
The relationship with God was typically portrayed in interpersonal and relational terms, through images of God being a loving father (including the image of the father in the parable of the prodigal son) or of God being a friend. God was actively encountered through forgiveness, guidance and loving presence. God’s presence was steadfast: ‘sometimes I left God but He never left me’. The relationship was often described in reciprocal terms, as participants expressed their love for God.

In addition to profound descriptions of God’s ever-present nature, a personal relationship with God was hard to define. A minority stressed the transcendent nature of God. Victoria experienced support from ‘this most amazing’ God which she felt could not be humanized, as ‘it’s just something that’s totally out of your hands…’. She went onto stress the mystery of God’s nature and how it may only be fathomed by an ‘inner spirituality’, saying:

…it’s something that we won’t probably ever fully understand, which is the whole magic and the mystery and the power of it because it’s not something that’s human. So we can never put it into human terms. So I think that kind of makes you kind of go “Ah well, I don’t fully understand it”, but you’re kind of in awe of it and you’re kind of on your way to understanding it better.

Victoria, no religious background

Growing faith in God was a key element of the RCIA process, which was often situated within the totality of participants’ life or faith journey. A distinctive theme that runs throughout this section and continues below is that of ‘knowing’. Participants’ growing faith was expressed through a lived knowing of God’s presence within their lives. Faith in Christ also grew in the process: participants shared how they related to Christ in interpersonal terms: how they came to understand their own trials through His life, death and resurrection. As participants described a sense of ‘knowing’ God, they also shared how they came to a deeper realization of who the person of Christ was for them during the RCIA.

Interpersonal Relating with Christ

The RCIA prompted a deepening, active, growing faith-relationship with Jesus. Participants commented how the process provided an ‘invitation to know Christ’ and
enabled a ‘stronger relationship with Christ’ to develop. Rich descriptions of faith in Jesus were shared, revealing the multi-faceted nature of faith experience, alongside various patterns of evangelization and personal conversion to Jesus. These include a growing personal relationship with Christ, relating to him through His suffering and resurrection and coming to a deeper realization of his presence.

A central feature of growing faith in Christ involved relating to Jesus in interpersonal terms. Jesus was considered a personal friend, brother, and teacher. Richard admired Jesus’ human qualities, including His ‘great love for people’, extreme tolerance and even His anger. An assuredness and dependency on Christ was evident. This had a practical emphasis: Jesus was a friend that one could talk to, he was helpful and accepting, he could be approached in times of need. Others encountered a comforting, unconditional and constant presence in Christ:

I felt like he was always with me. No matter what I did, no matter where I was I believed there was always someone with me […] in my life. Always there.

Natalie, former practicing Muslim

Because, it was like I could actually feel Christ walking with me and even sometimes, yes, I have actually felt that He’s carried me before. Yes, there have been times when I’ve felt that.

Siobhan, former Church of Ireland

Pamela felt Jesus had intimate knowledge of her personal trials and difficulties, and that He was compassionate and understanding. She saw Jesus as the personification of love:

…well He is love, in’t He? (sic) And nothing else but love.

Pamela, former practicing Methodist

Abigail, a former practicing Anglican, identified the RCIA as a time of discernment over which Church she should belong to, rather than a period of conversion to Christianity. She appealed to Christ in this decision-making process, which reflected another example of a living faith-relationship with Christ.
Relating to Christ through His Suffering and Resurrection

Certain participants shared that Jesus’ death, suffering and resurrection became a paradigm which helped them to cope with their own suffering, or the suffering of others. This reoriented participants’ interpretation of life; profound examples revealed how faith helped participants cope with difficult situations, such as bereavement and loss. The struggle to accept suffering was often acknowledged; however, hope and appreciation of the promise of eternal life were found and experienced through the paschal mystery. Siobhan described formerly looking at the cross and seeing suffering which contrasted with her experience post-RCIA: ‘Now, I look at it and I see the hope’.

Often participants shared their thoughts about the challenges of faith. Pamela understood that God was present in suffering, although she felt this was a mystery beyond comprehension. Despite her struggle to accept suffering and the death of loved ones, she had faith in eternal life: ‘I don’t know how to put it into words, but you know they’re with the Lord. I feel that, they’re with the Lord’. She recounted becoming closer to Jesus through Mary during the RCIA. After experiencing the death of her young child many years previous, she felt that she could relate to Mary through the image of the Pietà - through Mary’s loss of Christ and Christ’s suffering:

I think growing closer to Our Lady, growing closer to Mary, you know, and how she felt when Jesus died, and I don’t know if whether you ever watched ‘Jesus of Nazareth”? Robert Powell, you know? And she was cradling Him and rocking Him like a baby, and when you’ve seen your own little boy…you know, and you can relate to that, you know, so really growing closer to her, and her suffering and her sorrow in that way. Always a closeness to Jesus, always.

Pamela, former practicing Methodist

During a second interview Sarah shared how the faith paradigm that she embraced during the RCIA became a way of reorienting her life:

The renewal, Jesus Christ, the resurrection, is a renewal in so many aspects of our lives. It could be marriage, divorce, a renewal. It could be the death of a child, a renewal. Hope in life; the resurrection is hope. Believing that our
tomorrow will be better than today. And resurrection is: every day is a blessing. Every day is the renewal […] The resurrection, Jesus Christ rising to heaven, is to show that He has done it; He has overcome the world. We can also overcome the world by looking to Him, Him rising; we can also rise again from the ashes. And that’s how I now feel. With maturity now, not then, but now.

Sarah, former practicing Hindu

She had recently encountered a negative experience at work which involved her reassessing her career. She described this as ‘a death of something I had loved’, which caused her to lose her ‘identity’. Her faith in Christ’s resurrection helped her to experience ‘renewal’ and to see her loss of job and identity as a new beginning.

**Deeper Realization of Christ’s Presence**

The RCIA prompted each individual’s growing relationship with Christ. Even participants who came from a practicing Christian background experienced a deeper connection with the person of Jesus during the RCIA. Participants shared examples of how their realization of Jesus – of who Jesus was for them – grew or changed during that time. The following participant’s relationship became ‘more real’ and a growing reality for her; she experienced a felt presence of Jesus.

It went from being a vague identity to feeling like a positive presence. That’s the way I would describe it. As if, like, ‘Yes, you know, I know He’s here and I know that He’s around’, rather than a vague identity that was somewhere.

Patricia, Anglican background

The following examples demonstrate how a growing realization of Christ’s presence developed through encounter with Christ in scripture, and how experience of Christ disclosed experience of God. Here, participants’ faith in Jesus was portrayed in reference to other aspects of the Trinity. Prior to the process, some participants said they had related more to God the Father or the Holy Spirit, and only became closer to Jesus through the RCIA process. Participants often referred to the unity of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, stating that there was ‘no huge difference between them’, and that ‘it’s more like three in one’, ‘so when I say I believe in God I mean the
three’. Although participants did continue to refer to the Holy Spirit, the frequency diminished and there was less emphasis placed on pneumatological expression than on the relationship with both Jesus and God.

The following excerpts are from Maria’s interview (a candidate who had a degree in theology and was extremely theologically articulate). She participated in a guided retreat week, or Retreat in Daily Life, as part of her RCIA process, and did the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises immediately after being received into the Church. Through participating in the Retreat in Daily Life during the RCIA she ‘definitely, definitely began to see Jesus in a different way’. This encounter expressed itself as a profound experience of love. After praying with the passage from John 14 (concerning Jesus’ answer to Thomas’s question about ‘how do we know the way?’) she said:

So I just opened the Bible and read it and so I didn’t even think hardly about what I’m going to do to pray or how I’m going to do it, but then I just felt this love, I just felt this love, really, bubbling through me from right…It just came straight through me from everything, completely, so much that it was pain…incredibly painful. Just so much love. I don’t think I knew if it was God, but I didn’t know anything else that was going on. It was just really incredibly powerful.

Maria stated that she initially thought that this encounter was something that she had earned or achieved as she had been through testing experiences prior to the RCIA: ‘One of the biggest things I’ve done wrong was to think it was something that I’d done – deserved’. She came to recognize that the encounter was a profound experience of God’s love. Her relationship with Christ was deepened through newfound revelation experienced through engaging with the scriptures and prayer:

…after the week of guided prayer, that experience made me think, ‘Wow, it’s all true, completely and utterly true’. You know, that Jesus did that; it all happened. It wasn’t just, you know, saying it; it all happened and it’s all really important, and it all happened. And then I moved on, during when I was doing the spiritual exercises and when I was finishing the RCIA as well,
to seeing it also as a story of what happens, can happen to human beings: that Jesus is in us and that our development is in, is in the pattern of Jesus because we are in the image of God and what’s happening to us is [...] all the Gospel stories are relevant to us, much more immediately because I saw it as a, you know...it is really happening now as well as it was really happening then. So, yes, so my experience of Jesus changed in that time, definitely.

Maria, former practicing Anglican

When questioned if her understanding of Jesus had moved on from the academic and the historical she answered that she was ‘always rejecting the academic’. Instead she revealed an existential search in her relationship with Christ: ‘I always had a sense that it was more but I didn’t really know what...’. The RCIA allowed for the recognition of Christ and various epiphanies concerning a relationship with Christ at different faith stages. She described her initiation at the Vigil as: ‘I was really living it; really totally and completely living the whole Easter experience’ and she engaged in a similar living encounter during the Ignatian Exercises after being received.

Peter also experienced the presence of Christ, this time in scripture:

He is a friend and you know, and He talks to you intimately. Even in the Psalms, ‘oh, this is Old Testament stuff’, but it isn’t; it’s Christ. He used them, and it’s God talking to you and you know, you read them and you know He’s there. It’s as if He’s stood before you, as if He’s you, and it’s amazing.

Peter, former practicing Anglican

For others, experience of Jesus explicitly pointed towards experience of God. The following participant described learning more about Jesus during the RCIA, ‘but it was Jesus teaching me about the Father’:

…the person of Jesus is very important to me, but more fundamental is that understanding of God … and so I think because of that things like inter-faith dialogue and all of that, doesn’t seem to me a problem [...] that what we have in common is more important.

Liam, former Anglican
In summary, the RCIA was a time when participants’ faith exploration deepened and they became closer to God and Christ. Their faith journey was also influenced by the sacramental and liturgical nature of the process, and the following section describes how a growing sense of sacramentality was an integral aspect of their faith transformation.

V.  Sacramental and Liturgical Transformation

As the RCIA process focuses on sacramental initiation, sacramentality formed a key part of interview conversations with participants. A multi-faceted picture emerged, portraying a growing anticipation for receiving the sacraments, striking accounts of reception of the sacraments and resulting changes in self-identity.

*Anticipation and Arrival*

The RCIA elicited a yearning for participation in the sacraments. This was often expressed through an emotional overtone of waiting and longing, echoing prior experiences of isolation and darkness. For some, the longing began well before joining the RCIA; indeed, being unable to participate in the sacraments prompted them to join. The waiting was also characterized by feelings of excitement and expectation. This yearning and excitement marked a growing sacramental orientation and consciousness, a forward-looking trajectory that culminated in sacramental initiation at Easter. Initiation marked a new way of sacramental living and a new sacramental identity.

Various liturgies marked stepping stones or the crossing of thresholds prior to initiation at Easter. Celebration of the Rite of Election marks significant personal progression toward sacramental reception and was frequently mentioned by interviewees. It acts as a gateway to the Easter Vigil and often reflects growing commitment and the expectation of imminent arrival and commitment. For some, the Sacrament of Reconciliation marked an important step in the journey, accentuating a sense of progression as they found it a cathartic, liberating experience; for others, however, it was an ordeal as it took place publicly in a reconciliation service.
The Vigil itself was referred to as a ‘crossing point’ and ‘turning point’. For Timothy the experience was a crescendo, which he continues to re-live each year:

…but the whole way that the Church builds up to Easter I just think is fantastic, the whole thing was just such a fantastic climax that, that it was just…every year, that year was just because I was actually going to make a commitment more than anything else, but every year the whole thing brings it back again I think and the whole build up to Easter is just sensational.

Timothy, Church of Scotland background

Initiation signified for many a sacramental arrival point; baptism, confirmation and Eucharist were momentous personal landmarks in the journey of faith, as well as entry points into the community. For various participants sacramental reception was the high point of the RCIA. For some, reception marked a ‘new beginning’, a ‘sense of accomplishment’; entrance into the Eucharistic community was a ‘great honour’.

The embracing of a new faith identity is affirmed through liturgical action and the bodily dimensions of the sacraments: the actions of water being poured, being anointed with oil. This explicitly marks a new Christian identity:

Being baptized was the greatest, greatest thing for me. Having that water being poured onto my head. It was Father [name omitted] who did it, and then having the oil of chrism anointed on my forehead. For me, at that point, signified that I had become a Christian […]. And then being able to partake of the Eucharist. That really was the greatest turning point in my life.

Sarah, former practicing Hindu

A couple of participants described the sacraments as a ‘seal’ of their new identity, indicators that an extremely significant shift in personal faith had occurred. A minority of participants, both candidates and catechumens, described feeling that they were Catholic on entry to the RCIA group, which was further accentuated by receiving the sacraments. One participant identified spiritual change before receiving the sacraments; reception marked a physical, embodied change:

Well, I think the (laughs) the day I was confirmed, that was probably the day, you know…? Because that was day I physically became a member; although as I said to you I was spiritually…I changed spiritually; but physically that
was the day, the day I was confirmed, I was baptized and confirmed; because I had never been baptized before so I had to be baptized.

Ian, Baptist background, unbaptized

Sacramental participation marked a move from the simply personal to the more public declaration of faith. Acceptance by the parish accentuated membership of the community and a sense of new identity within that community.

Some participants acknowledged the importance of receiving the sacraments; however, this was situated within their broader faith journey. It did not mark a final destination point; it in fact delineated a new sacramental beginning or departure point:

I felt a sense of belonging….I suppose, yes, I had arrived basically, but not arrived full stop. I realized that, you know, this was, just the beginning, and there was just, you know…my journey in effect into the Roman Catholic faith had only just begun, because there was just very much for me to learn.

Pauline, Baptist background, unbaptized

How wrong I was [laughter] there was an awful lot more to being sort of completely Catholic than having signed on the dotted line, or received the sacraments. It’s holistic and deepening and developing and all of that.

Liam, former Anglican

Fr. [name omitted] gave me the biggest host of all. I remember saying to Fr. [name omitted]: ‘Father, I want the biggest one, I don’t want the small one. I want the biggest one’. And Fr. [name omitted] laughed and I think he took that on board because when he got to me he gave me the biggest one. But it was very, very, very empowering and I felt that each time I partake of the Holy Communion I am strengthened. It’s given me more strength to cope from day to day. Because sometimes life can be very challenging and when I come to church and I pray and I receive the Holy Communion I’m able to go out and know that Christ is in me, and I’m strengthened to do whatever I have to do knowing that Jesus Christ is supporting me. And that’s it really.

Sarah, former practicing Hindu

The welcome of the parish community at the Vigil also contributed to the sense of arrival for respondents, especially those who had an extended period of attending a
particular parish before being received. The welcome was a positive experience of the parish community; participants described feeling welcome and wanted – it was like ‘coming home’.

**Embodied Experience**

Sacramental and liturgical experiences were often described in affective, emotional terms. The Vigil was aesthetically beautiful, ‘emotive’, ‘indescribable’, ‘serious and powerful’. Despite the sometimes daunting nature of initiation for some, a range of positive, emotional responses were used to express the occasion: participants experienced joy, excitement, peace, elation. The following excerpt captures the exuberant feelings experienced immediately after reception at the Vigil:

It was just totally…it was wonderful. It was a lovely, wonderful feeling. I can remember talking to [a friend] afterwards and saying to her, ‘I don’t think I’ll get such a marvelous feeling until I’m in my coffin’, and she said, ‘Serena, don’t talk like that’. And I said to her, ‘It’s like you’ve died and gone to heaven and you know God’s all around you’, that was how it felt. It was just so wonderful.

Serena, former practicing Anglican

In particular, participants recounted examples of visceral experience during liturgies and sacramental reception. These included descriptions of multi-sensory experiences, within or around the body, often resulting in participants feeling changed by the encounter on some level. Often these experiences were beyond words, and participants were conscious that they were struggling to articulate them, as the following description illustrates:

When the water was put on my head, I just felt like that there was something going through my body – I had never had that feeling before. I don’t know if it’s all the same for the others but it’s like something had happened in my life. I had that feeling [...]. Yes, through my body. [**Question: was that a physical sensation or more an idea or feeling or...?**] It was all over; all over my body...like a change, a very big change that happened; I don’t, honestly I can’t explain it but, something really happened to me that night, that night, yes. [**Question: And how did that leave you feeling?**] It was like I’d been touched by some, I don’t know, I don’t know…I just don’t want to say things
and I get it wrong, but something, something...I knew something happened in my life that night....Yes, I felt it physically in my body.

Natalie, former practicing Muslim

Natalie recounted feeling peaceful and of being God-fearing after the above experience. She agreed that she had encountered a real sense of God's presence and had been touched by God on a very deep level. She reaffirmed an understanding of something extraordinary happening.

Participants who had such a somatic experience often struggled to interpret it. Often the participant recalled the experience whilst simultaneously almost downplaying it, especially if it was something that they did not fully understand or felt they could not adequately explain. In the following example, the participant is describing receiving the Eucharist:

As I'd received the bread, the Body, it was just sort of ah, I don't know, just like ah, I don't know, a tingling sensation, sort of ‘ohh’. Yes.... You know you have sherbet or something, and you feel things going off in your mouth, but this was sort of in the brain and sort of around and [inaudible]. I just felt a really, really pleasant sensation.

Carl, Anglican background

Carl agreed that it was a significant experience, although he slightly discounted it: as perhaps imaginary (‘whether it was in my head’), or had occurred given the build-up to Easter. Regardless of these doubts he stated ‘but I felt something’.

These descriptive accounts of sacramental experience reveal the nature of this encounter through the emotions, intellect and body. This is summarized by Abigail when describing her confirmation:

...You know, whether it’s just, oh I don’t know, when you get this kind of shivery feeling when something lovely happens. I really felt something change, physically as well as emotionally, mentally and intellectually; whole bodily changing. And I know – sort of – people say, ‘Oh, I’m going to get knocked out by the spirit’ and all that stuff, but there was a change. But the laying on of hands, there was a power. There definitely was a power there.

Abigail
This participant felt ‘warmth all around’ and ‘a comfort and an assurance’ on being confirmed. She went onto agree that the body is important in faith transformation experiences and enables one to come closer to God.

I think you need a body, as well, for these sacraments, don’t you, when you think about it? You do, don’t you? […] To be baptized, for everything […]. The sacraments are all about; you’re eating something, the laying on of hands, oil, water, touch. I think that is important, because Jesus did that, didn’t he?

Abigail, former practicing Anglican

Participants’ experience revealed that the body is a conduit for sacramental and faith encounter.

Other participants also spoke of the meaningful nature of human touch within the liturgy. Eddie, from a background of no religious faith, described how the Rite of Signing, during which the head, heart and hands are anointed, illustrates an important need for physical contact which is counter-cultural. He appreciated this being broken down in an ecclesial context.

For some participants the embodied nature of sacramental experience noticeably dovetailed into their sense of newfound sacramental identity. For example, after being received, Abigail subsequently married in a registry office. She and her husband then waited for a period of ten years before his annulment came through from his first marriage, allowing them to be married in the Catholic Church. During this time she attended church but was unable to receive the sacraments. She described how she longed for the ‘reality of the sacrament of marriage’ in the same way that she had longed for being received into the Church:

…[marriage] was just that reality of another sacrament that I’d longed for. And then the next day, you know, to be able to take communion was just fantastic. I have never, ever […]. And the one thing that’s come out of it is every time I take communion I’ve never taken it for granted. Every time is like the first time for me, since then, because I know what it was to have been deprived.

Abigail
Embodied Knowing

The above-mentioned embodied experiences were unique in that, although participants could not always articulate or understand what happened on an intellectual level, they could express a sense of embodied knowing (‘but I felt something’, ‘I knew something happened in my life that night’ etc). Three specific dimensions of this embodied knowing arose from the data.

Firstly, embodied knowing revealed a direct experience of God. Some participants ‘knew’ they had experienced God. Peter specifically sensed experiencing God and Christ through the Eucharist. He described his reflection after receiving communion at the Easter vigil:

You know: there’s a knowing, that it’s God; it’s Jesus Christ that you’ve received…. It is, and that causes a deep, intimate union with Him because you know it’s God…you know it’s God. That’s when it hit me, that night.

Peter, former practicing Anglican

Secondly, embodied knowing affirms faith and confirms the direction of the spiritual journey. For the following participant, her sense of ‘knowing’ on being confirmed established she was on the right spiritual track. The ‘knowing’ helped to counteract the opposition she had experienced from her former Methodist community over her decision to become Catholic. She stated that as soon as the priest anointed her with oil:

I knew, I knew, you know…? I used to think, “Am I doing the right thing?” But then I knew, then I knew yes, and it doesn’t matter what other people think anyway, does it?

Pamela, former practicing Methodist

Thirdly, embodied knowing provides memories that sustain the faith journey beyond initiation. Eddie described his physical reaction on seeing other RCIA participants being dismissed during the Rite of Dismissal or being sent to the cathedral for the Rite of Election. Each time he witnessed this he was reminded of his own experience. He likened this to a ‘cycle’ in which he physically felt his own memory
of being received. The following extract begins with his agreement that the RCIA liturgies impact upon the rest of the parish:

Yes, definitely, because each time it happens and each year I get a feeling inside… thinking, ah, that was me, you know? [Question: What’s that feeling like?] Butterflies; it’s like anticipation, expectation, you know, am I scared still? You know, it’s a whole – it just brings back my being received so clearly, you know? When I see them dismissed from the Church and then, you know, we’ve got Easter coming up and we’ll see them being received into the Church ‘cos they’ve just been to Nottingham, I think, last week, for the Rite of Election.

Eddie, no religious background

In summary, the above descriptions provide powerful descriptions of sacramental encounter during initiation. (In contrast, there were fewer references to other liturgies or the liturgy of the Word within Mass. Participants did, however, also mention the ‘Signing of the Senses’, reciting the Creed for the first time and the words of the bishop at the Rite of Election as examples of other meaningful memories during this time.) Conversations with participants disclosed profound descriptions of sacramental initiation, accompanied by a growing sense of sacramentality. The following section describes how participants lived out their faith after the RCIA.

VI. Personal Transformation

Participants shared retrospective accounts of how they personally changed as a result of participation in the RCIA. Description of personal change centres on three main themes: personal and affective flourishing; moral change and a heightened form of conscience; and a range of changes in belief. These various dimensions of personal, faith-based transformation demonstrate respondents’ personal appropriation of their faith and amplify previous themes. In particular, respondents referred to personal transformation through a sense of sacramental living (albeit sometimes implicit sacramental living). This section also reveals how increased faith in God and Christ impacted on participants’ behaviour, both in terms of personal flourishing and everyday living. Overall, the following themes continue to express how, through
their journey in faith in the RCIA, participants experienced a deeper holistic awareness of what it means to be human.

**Personal Flourishing**

Elements of personal change within the RCIA most often concerned affective transformation. The process encouraged personal flourishing, which was observed as a sort of ‘blossoming out’, a sense of personal awakening or maturation. Participants embodied a range of personal attributes as a result of participation in the RCIA: feeling stronger, gaining inner peace, worrying less, growing in confidence, being less sceptical, becoming more relaxed, and demonstrating increased patience. Liam specifically identified his need to grow in an affective sense:

> I think it did awaken me that there was a different level of learning that I needed to do as a human being; that it wasn’t just about learning about the Catholic faith […] but that just as a human being there were parts of myself that I wasn’t accessing as perhaps as readily and everything as I should. So I think, subsequently, quite a deal of my engagement in what was being offered in the RCIA process, and subsequently […] I hope I was being much more open to that.

Liam, former Anglican

Liam developed this side of himself through volunteering with a group in his parish for adults with learning difficulties which he felt helped him develop an ‘affective sense of faith’.

Affective change was attributed to participation within the RCIA. It involved participants’ personal appropriation and working through of faith issues. Participants demonstrated heightened reflexivity concerning personal flourishing; a desire to move towards becoming a better person was recognized. For example, for some, this involved managing negative emotions. Others described how their personal spirituality grew. The RCIA helped to facilitate such change, spurring new vision. Rather than providing a panacea, new-found faith helped participants to access the inner resources needed to cope with the challenges of life. It helped participants gain new perspective, to celebrate human life rather than being overly worried about the
insignificant matters of life. Beyond the group setting, such personal transformation helped individuals become better people. Some participants described how this change was often acknowledged by others, including, for example, colleagues who were not church-goers.

Personal flourishing in the RCIA also resulted in a new ecclesial identity. For some, this was something they accepted with relative ease. For others, it marked an initial painful loss of the former self. Abigail identified the public nature of initiation as making a ‘big statement about yourself’, as not many adults ‘change their faith in such an exposed way’, insisting that adult faith initiation is unexpected in contrast to other rites of passage, such as learning to drive or getting married. The resulting change in identity for this candidate led her to feel secure. It was a change in core identity, which was likened to being as deep if not deeper than family identity:

> It does go very, very, very deep, actually, because, you know, if you cut me in half you’d still find [name of former employer] stamped through me because I had 33 years in it. But you’d find sort of Catholic more indelibly inked through and although I had to make a transition when I stopped work which took me you know at least a year, probably two, and I’m probably out of it now after three, I couldn’t make that transition out of the Church. You know, if somebody said to me tomorrow, ‘You’ve got to leave the Church’, well I can’t. How can I?

Abigail, former practicing Anglican

*Heightened Conscience*

In addition to examples of inner emotional transformation as a result of the RCIA, accounts of personal change had a distinctive moral hue. Participants acquired a heightened conscience, which demonstrated another dimension of increased personal reflexivity. This caused them to question their daily motivations and interactions with others and examine their own personal shortcomings.

A heightened conscience was often directly inspired by scriptural values, by following Jesus’ example, and through a growing relationship with Christ. For example, Victoria referred to the Ten Commandments as providing both a starting
and continual reflection point by which to gauge how one leads one’s life. For Timothy, the observation that Christians are called to recognize that Christ is in everyone caused him to have ‘more of a conscience’ when relating to others. A few participants discussed going to confession, which prompted increased awareness of personal failings. Overall, respondents shared how they became more aware of their actions regarding everyday behaviour: they became more forgiving, less selfish and materialistic, and less judgmental.

Becoming more forgiving was mentioned by a few individuals as the most significant form of personal change prompted by the process. Pauline noted that before the RCIA she found it hard to forgive others and that the process helped her to mature. For her, becoming more forgiving was the deepest point of change. Sarah also identified the challenge of Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness (‘“Seventy-seven times seven”, meaning you have to forgive unconditionally’). She struggled to forgive a family member, and talked about this during the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Her Catholic sacramental identity prompted her to embrace the teaching on forgiveness:

It’s hard. It is very, very hard. Eventually, gradually, when I went for confession, having to talk about it, I had to keep on bringing it up all the time because I felt deep in my heart I hadn’t forgiven her for what she had done. But…I became a Catholic, being baptized. Receiving the Eucharist. Again, each time Jesus Christ has forgiven me, I have to forgive. Then, having to pray the Our Father, saying ‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us’, it’s a two-way thing. I’ve got to forgive. I can say it verbally, but forgiving must be coming from the heart.

Sarah, former Hindu

The above instances of what may be described as moral change involved adjustment on a personal level. In contrast, there was lack of emphasis in the interviews on social transformation in a broader social or mission-oriented sense. Most participants did not talk of change in reference to social and political issues. Two London parishes in the sample had become involved with the ‘London Citizens’ group,
encouraging all parishioners – including those on the RCIA – to become more aware of and involved in social-justice issues.

Some participants did reveal that they witnessed to their faith in the workplace; others had been involved with social-justice ventures in their parish or beyond. Jack gained an increased interest in ecological and environmental issues. He also recounted that the group taught ‘self-discipline’ and encouraged participants ‘to live life simply’ (this was encouraged through the charity Cafod’s ‘Living Simply’ campaign, which helped him to reassess the way he lived his life from a material point of view) and to take one day at a time, focusing upon God rather than materialism. Siobhan had always admired the outward mission focus of the Catholic Church. A sense of ‘actually doing things for other people’ and helping the outside world had grown within her during the process. She had since volunteered at a drop-in-centre, continuing for a period of twenty years, which provided a sense of serving an extended family. Patricia shared how she had to balance the Church’s moral teachings on abortion with her medical career, which was ‘a big, big sort of wrestling area’ a conflict between what she explained as ‘what I should believe and what I did believe’. She was able to fully discuss the moral issues concerned in her RCIA group, and came to a sense of peace and acceptance.

Whereas some participants described a mission-oriented dimension to their faith, concerning community involvement beyond interaction with friends and family, in general, personal faith-transformation happened internally. On the whole, respondents did not resonate with the term ‘discipleship’ in the interview, as this sounded too pious or extreme. Instead, references to the living out of faith were often implicit: participants described ‘living by example’ or ‘getting involved in the parish’. Some participants, noticeably those from an African background, shared that their extended families (siblings, parents, children) often decided to become Catholic after they themselves had gone through the process.
Changes in Belief

Previous themes have demonstrated how participants’ faith increased during the RCIA as they re-thought their image of God and Christ, or aspects of the Trinity. Participants grew through increased knowledge of scripture and the Church. Learning about specific doctrinal teachings also ignited changes in belief which were integral to participants’ personal flourishing both during and beyond the RCIA process. Changes in belief yielded an increased sense of hope, causing participants to re-think important issues such as forgiveness and redemption, life and death. Overall, these changes contributed to a continuing deeper appreciation and vision of what it means to be human.

Participants’ descriptions of heightened conscience demonstrated how they confronted the reality of sin in their lives and the need to change. Sarah, who was formerly Hindu, found the Church teaching on forgiveness and redemption in Christ to be of enormous appeal, yet this teaching was also something that she struggled with, given that by her own admission she had a tendency to be judgmental. She continued to make comparisons with her former Hindu faith throughout the interview, and highlighted its lack of emphasis on redemption and forgiveness of sin. She was drawn to Christianity due to Christ’s teaching on these issues; this marked a huge turning point during her faith journey.

Change in belief in eternal life was significant for many. For a minority, both from Christian and non-Christian backgrounds, there was a dramatic change in understanding, which included belief for the first time. For others, there was continuation in this belief and for some increased hope in the afterlife. Liam had new-found belief ‘in God’s love and that our lives continue in God’, whereas before,

…prior to coming back to faith, I had a fairly sort of deterministic understanding of what we were as human beings, and I think when we died, we died and that was it. It didn’t seem to me that there was any point or even reason to speculate about life beyond that which we experienced here.

Liam, former Anglican
The process therefore encouraged (a sometimes newfound) eschatological hope. Peter hoped that his growing faith and living the Christian life as best he could would lead to him seeing Christ. He expressed trust that his life would ‘acuminate (sic) by me closing my eyes and, hopefully, hopefully, opening them and seeing Him’.

A deeper eschatological hope helped participants come to terms with the death of loved ones, both during and after the process. Victoria became less fearful of death and embraced it ‘a little bit more’. She spoke of her father’s sickness and her changed understanding; when he died he would be looked after by God. This was something she claimed she couldn’t fully understand, but felt assured that her loved ones would be at peace and not suffering.

Certain participants embraced the concept of the communion of saints and were able to relate to people who had died: ‘they are there in your thoughts…encouraging you and supporting you’. Others spoke honestly about their belief in eternal life, and that what it would actually be like was beyond comprehension. Some participants (from an African background found this topic difficult, (which may have been a cultural difference), and claimed that life beyond death was not something that they thought about.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has recounted experiences of twenty-six participants who completed the RCIA process. This presentation has demonstrated the transitional nature of the process, its challenges as well as its personal rewards. Its transformative nature reveals how participants’ faith grew during the process. This included a growing deeper faith in the person of Christ and in God; a growing sacramental consciousness alongside entrance into a new faith community; and identifiable moments of conversion – affective, moral, and intellectual. All of these transformative experiences prompted changes in self-identity.

The narrative account of participants’ experience presented in this chapter, including the deliberate use of numerous excerpts from interview conversations, reveal a ‘grammar’ integral to the initiatory experience in the RCIA. As the quotation from
On the Way to Life at the start of this chapter suggests, such grammar is the ‘deepest’ grammar of the Christian life, ‘the silent eloquence of the language that the Spirit speaks in the lives of the faithful’. The interview excerpts have illustrated how the transcripts are important theological texts in their own right, as they disclose an implicit or embedded theology of RCIA practice.

This descriptive account of faith will be returned to in chapter five, where it will be given an initial reading through the anthropological themes of liminality, communitas and ritual. In anticipation of this, the following chapter presents a synthesis of these anthropological themes in the Turners’ work.
Chapter 4: Liminality, *Communitas* and Ritual – the Anthropology of Victor and Edith Turner

*The most difficult mountain to cross is the threshold.*

Danish Proverb

*And as we allow ourselves to be ‘done unto’ by the depths, we too are being marked with the ochre-red paints of initiation and told new yet strangely familiar stories by the soul itself.*

Michael Kearney

This chapter presents Victor Turner’s theory on liminality, *communitas* and ritual. The concepts of liminality and *communitas* are explained, followed by an assessment of Turner’s interpretation of ritual. Turner’s theory (which is contextualized within the anthropological field – most notably in relation to the theories of van Gennep and Maurice Bloch\(^2\)) enables an explicit anthropological reading of the dynamics of the rite-of-passage experience. The chapter therefore provides an interpretive framework which will enable analysis of participants’ RCIA experience in the next chapter.

This presentation acknowledges the joint nature of Victor Turner’s work with his wife Edith.\(^3\) Victor Turner undertook African fieldwork with Edith, and she worked with him behind the scenes throughout his career. Although Victor Turner was a prolific writer, much of his work reflects their collaboration.\(^4\) After Victor’s death in 1983, Edith Turner became an anthropologist in her own right, publishing numerous anthropological works, and she continued exploring themes presented in Victor’s

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3. For ease of clarification in this chapter Victor Turner is cited as Turner, his wife is referred to as Edith Turner.
4. Victor Turner’s anthropological writings are numerous and incredibly rich, incorporating many references from literature, philosophy and theology. His work has been widely used beyond the field of anthropology and has influenced work on – for example – ritual and liturgical studies (which will be referenced later in this chapter) and performance studies, including the ritual nature of theatre. See, for example, Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).
writing, especially *communitas*. The current chapter therefore is also designed to synthesize their work and assess its implications.⁵

Whilst the main part of the chapter is descriptive, in the fourth section I explore an underlying theology within the Turners’ work, which was inspired by their reading of the Christian mystics and research within their own Catholic faith community. These observations, made possible by Edith Turner’s autobiographical reflections contribute to a subsidiary theme in the thesis concerning how anthropology may be of ‘service’ to theology.⁶

**Biographical Details**

Victor Turner (1920-1983) was born in Glasgow, Scotland. He started a degree in English literature which was interrupted by the Second World War. After serving for five years in the military as a conscientious objector he went back to study. During this time he also married his wife, Edith, who was born in 1921 in Ely, Cambridgeshire, and who would later work closely alongside him. In 1949 he received his BA Honours in anthropology from London University. He followed this with postgraduate study at Manchester University with Max Gluckman, professor of social anthropology.

In 1950 the Turners went to Africa; Victor was a research officer at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Lusaka, Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia). They both carried out fieldwork with the Ndembu people in Zambia from 1950-1954. This research would be the foundation for Turner’s doctoral thesis (at Manchester University), ‘Schism and Continuity in an African Society’ (published in 1957), and

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also prove to be of central importance to his work on symbol and rites of passage.\(^7\) In this monograph Turner developed his concept of ‘social drama’, drawn from the observations he made in his fieldwork. Social drama consists of the following phases. Firstly, a community experiences a problem which leads to an upset or breach in the social fabric; secondly, there follows a phase of crisis, which would either (a) resolve itself and lead to reintegration of the community, or (b) lead to schism, and therefore rupture in society.

In the 1960s Turner embarked on an academic career in the United States. He was professor of anthropology at Cornell University (1963-1968), then professor of anthropology and social thought at the University of Chicago (1968-1977), and finally professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia (1977-1983). It was just before he took up his teaching post at Cornell University that Turner read van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage*, and from this his theory of liminality developed. Whilst living and working in America he wrote *The Forest of Symbols* (first published in 1967) which focuses on the Ndembu, and *The Ritual Process* (first published in 1969) in which he broadens his theory on liminality from the Ndembu to include examples of liminality occurring within world religions and in a broader social context.\(^8\) Liminality is a central theme in Victor’s writings, a theme that he continually developed until his untimely death in 1983. After Victor’s death, Edith Turner was appointed as a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Virginia, where she continues to teach part-time.

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I. Liminality

Liminality concerns the *in-between* stage of a rite of passage, as a person moves from one social state to another. Victor Turner’s theory on liminality finds its genesis in the original work of the Belgian ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep, who wrote *Rites de Passage*, (first published in 1909).\(^9\) Turner, in defining a rite of passage, employs van Gennep’s tri-partite use of the term:

a. A person enters a phase of separation from a previous group.

b. A phase of ‘margin’, ‘limen’ or ‘threshold’ ensues, during which many aspects of life are often changed or distorted.

c. The person re-integrates into the community, marking entrance into a new social state.

The rite of passage retains these three movements and can be brief or prolonged, simple or complex.\(^10\) Turner developed the middle stage of van Gennep’s theory, that of ‘limen’, using the terms liminal and liminality.\(^11\) Liminality therefore concerns the *in-between* stage of a rite of passage.

Van Gennep observes that a society or ceremonial event may emphasize one or more aspects of this threefold schema, depending upon the goal of initiation. He also notes that rites of separation, transition and reintegration may occur sequentially or simultaneously, thereby introducing a flexible element to his tri-partite model. While he did not emphasize the liminal phase of a rite of passage in the experiential way that Victor Turner does, van Gennep explains that the transitional phase may be ‘sufficiently elaborated to constitute an *independent state*’ (my emphasis). The

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\(^9\) Victor Turner was reading *The Rites of Passage* before leaving England to take up his first lectureship in the United States, and, as Edith Turner points out, he was in a liminal place himself, and therefore could readily identify with van Gennep’s concept. See Edith Turner, ‘prologue: From the Ndembu to Broadway’, in *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Performance*, edited by Edith Turner (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), pp. 1-15 (p. 7).


transitional stage may contain duplication of several rites (i.e. of separation) within it.\textsuperscript{12}

Van Gennep provides various examples of each phase of his model: leaving behind a former religion is a ‘rite of separation’; funerary rites, where the deceased may be suspended between two worlds are ‘rites of transition’;\textsuperscript{13} the naming of a child and baptism are ‘rites of incorporation’.\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, van Gennep cites the catechumenate and initiation rites in the early Church as an example of the above three phases: catechumens withdrew before the beginning of the ‘true mysteries [i.e. the Mass]’, engaging in a rite of separation and phase of transition. The receiving of the sacraments were a rite of incorporation, and through this the catechumen went through a process of death and re-birth.\textsuperscript{15}

Van Gennep is primarily concerned with explanations of how rite-of-passage experience involves changes in participants’ social status. This involves movement from one stage of life to another. For example: the new social status that accompanies marriage after a transitional betrothal period is a new life stage; and motherhood marks a form of ‘social return’ after the transitional experience of pregnancy and childbirth.\textsuperscript{16} Van Gennep uses the image of entering a house to depict the societal dynamics of the initiation process and changes in participants’ social status. Accordingly when initiation occurs, society helps participants (who are ‘strangers’ to the new group) to step over the threshold and enter a house ‘divided into rooms and corridors’. As participants cross the threshold and learn to navigate entrance into particular rooms, they gain increased social membership and prestige.\textsuperscript{17}

In the next chapter van Gennep’s initial framework will be employed to interpret participants’ experience. The Church, much like society in van Gennep’s above example, leads participants through various thresholds and phases as participants are welcomed into the community.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 186.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 54.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., pp. 93-95.
\textsuperscript{16} Van Gennep, \textit{The Rites of Passage}, pp. 116-117 and p. 187, respectively.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 25-26.
As noted previously Turner’s work stems from van Gennep’s original theory. Turner develops the middle stage of liminality. In doing so he moves away from Van Gennep’s emphasis upon changes in social status and explores the empirical dimensions of liminal experience. Such experiential aspects evoke the personal and emotional challenges of transition; the heightened creative potential of transitional experience; and the registration of liminal experience in the body. These themes will be explored and expanded with reference to the work of Bloch and other anthropologists. We first contextualize Turner’s theory within the early African research setting, ahead of reviewing some of its key features and its universal application.

i. Liminality in the Indigenous Setting

In *The Ritual Process*, Turner outlines features of liminality as observed during indigenous rites of passage with the Ndembu. The main characteristics of the indigenous liminal state in this tribe included:

- The ambiguous status of initiands: ‘threshold people’ who were socially ‘betwixt and between’. (‘Initiand’ refers to those about to be initiated.)
- The seclusion of initiands.
- The anonymous status of initiands, who were required to dress the same, possess nothing, be passive or humble in nature, and occupy low status.
- The requirement that initiands be submissive and silent, undergo ordeals and humiliations.
- The frequent use of symbolism of death and re-birth.

Although this marked an unsettling period for initiands, in which they were socially undefined and weakened, they were liberated from social obligations. This situated them ‘in close connection with asocial powers of life and death’; they were ‘dead to the social world, but alive to the asocial world’, open to a transformative experience on a social and spiritual level:
• Initiands were of ritually superior nature, and their secular weakness was replaced with sacred power.
• Initiands were open to a new way of experiencing life and reality, endowed with ‘additional powers’ for coping with their forthcoming new stage in life.
• Initiands compensated for being socially disregarded through learning about cosmological systems, often through rite, myth, song and instruction in a secret language.
• The experience of communitas, or strong bond of solidarity, was in evidence.
• Initiands were open to transcendent, mystical experience: ‘mystical character is assigned to the sentiment of human kindness in most types of liminality, and in most cultures this stage of transition is brought closely in touch with beliefs in the protective and punitive powers of divine or preterhuman [beyond that which is human] beings or powers’.  

Turner observed these characteristics in life-cycle rites or rituals of status elevation, and in reversal rituals that redressed crisis.

This study involving exploration of the RCIA as a contemporary rite of passage is, in Turnerian terms, comparable to the significance and gravity of indigenous rites of passage given its sacramental focus:

...the sacramental system does have something of the irreversible character of tribal rites of passage, giving direction to social and personal life, and coordinating sacred and secular processes. Baptism, confirmation, ordination to the priesthood, all are irreversible, once-only rites of passage, which are declared dogmatically to “imprint an indelible character on the soul”.

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18 Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, 1995, pp. 103-105. Turner, after describing the above theory, proceeds to give detailed description and examples of liminality within initiatory practices of the Ndembu of Zambia (see pp. 98-106). This includes a description of rites in other traditional societies (the Tallensi of Ghana, the Nuer of Sudan and the Ashanti of Ghana).

19 Victor and Edith Turner Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 31-32. In contrast, in post-industrial society the liminal is regarded in a metaphorical sense, rather than as a traditional rite of passage. The Turners' introduced the term 'liminoid' (see Image and Pilgrimage, chapter one) which marks distinction between the obligatory rite of passage liminality and voluntary liminal or 'liminoid' experience within a society where religion has become a matter of choice. Both the liminal and the liminoid exist alongside each other in a complex society, and religious ritual clearly belongs within the domain of the liminal. Turner acknowledges that the term liminoid has an exploratory quality is an area for
Furthermore, Turner also predicted that other types of liminality ‘will undoubtedly be discovered’.\textsuperscript{20} This observation provides creative license for exploration of the liminal within the context of a contemporary rite of passage.

Observations of the liminal in an indigenous setting were the foundation for Turner’s later writings on liminality. Several of the above-mentioned liminal attributes, such as the ambiguous threshold status of participants, remain true for all going through a rite-of-passage experience. Turner believed that the theory of liminality had universal application and cross-cultural potential beyond the parameters of indigenous ritual. In his later writing he applied his theory to western culture, including the field of Christian pilgrimage, on which he published jointly with Edith Turner.\textsuperscript{21}

By his own admission, Victor Turner’s work did not follow a systematic framework; he was against what he termed as ‘system building’ in anthropological theory – ‘prejudiced against system-building, though seduced by it’.\textsuperscript{22} Instead, his approach to anthropology, influenced by his work on liminality, was what he termed


‘processual’. He emphasized process – the importance of human nature engaging in a process of becoming. This marked a departure from the school of structuralism which was an influential element in his anthropological training. The emphasis on process in Turner’s work, the ‘anthropology of experience’ is analyzed on pp. 154-156 below.

The following two themes highlight how Turner developed his theory across later writings.

**ii. The Liminal Paradox: Challenge and Potential**

The liminal phase is marked by a ritual which demonstrates a change in time or the construction of a separate cultural realm (in contrast to secular processes or routine). The liminal phase within a rite of passage involves crossing a threshold into a new social state. The term threshold ‘is derived from a German base which means “thrash” or “thresh”, a place where grain is beaten from its husk, where what has been hidden is thus manifested’. This etymological description hints at the demanding nature of liminality; moving from one social state to another marks a dying to a former way of life and entering a new social existence. Turner recognized the paradoxical nature of liminal experience. On the one hand it is personally testing; on the other it is a time of untold opportunity. He describes it as ‘a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process’.

Consequently, liminality presents various challenges. The liminal phase can be a time of ‘dread’; given that it occurs within a rite-of-passage context it is ‘demanding, compulsory’. Its potentially destructive nature is acknowledged as one leaves behind familiar social structure:

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Liminality is, of course, an ambiguous state, for social structure, while it inhibits full social satisfaction, gives a measure of finiteness and security; liminality may be for many the acme of insecurity, the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos, of disorder into order, rather than the milieu of creative interhuman or transhuman satisfaction and achievements. Liminality may be the scene of disease, despair, death, suicide, the breakdown without compensatory replacement of normative, well defined social ties and bonds.27

The segregation that often accompanies the liminal state has a mysterious, concealed nature; Turner employs the image of a tunnel to represent ‘its hidden nature, its sometimes mysterious darkness, and reaggregation’.28 Given that those in the liminal state may pose a threat to themselves and others they are often set apart ‘from quotidian life in a milieu hedged around by ritual interdictions.’29

Liminality also presents a unique creative interstice, an opportunity to reflect by stepping outside normal social existence. It is a phase of immense potential. Initiands, when released from their ‘cultural script’, enter a world of endless possibilities.30 They experience freedom to learn, to be, to explore and to encounter. Turner describes it as an ‘interfacial region’ or ‘interval’ in which ‘the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future not yet begun. There is an instant of pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance’.31

Turner also highlights the concept of ‘play’ – or the ‘ludic’ element – as crucial to the liminal time. This is drawn from his direct observation of forms of play in indigenous rituals, including the use of liminal symbolic forms (such as icons, figurines and effigies) which have a pedagogic function designed to help initiands look at the building blocks of their culture and world. With such stimuli their powers of analysis are provoked, inspiring them to examine their ‘taken-for-granted

27 Victor Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, p. 46.
31 Victor Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, p. 44.
world’. The importance of play and its pedagogical function, where the initiand learns new roles and rules, is extended to all liminal situations. This potentiality opens up a new, novel sphere: ‘a free and experimental region of culture, a region where not only new elements but new combinatory rules may be introduced’. Thus Turner also identifies how the liminal state provides a process of regenerative renewal for society: ‘Yet I see it as a kind of institutional capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future social developments, of societal change, in a way that the central tendencies of a social system can never quite succeed in being’.

The liminal state therefore has contradictory qualities; as a concept it still remains somewhat mysterious and hard to understand. Edith Turner reinforces its elusive nature in her autobiography:

Looking back, I see that what Vic Turner and I saw happening in the betwixt-and-between periods of rites of passage, puberty ceremonies, and initiations, happen in a spirit-laden “liminal” region where the normal does not apply. It is a kind of crack between the worlds, like the looking glass world of Alice, where animals and chessmen speak – and reprimand the visitor. By now the liminal is being recognized, even though it is hard to put into logical terms.

**iii. The Embodied Nature of Liminality**

Though the liminal experience may be hard to define, the various transformative capacities of the liminal state present themselves in an embodied sense. The experience is registered intellectually, somatically, verbally (through the use of language and metaphor), visually (through images), and through a particular mood or feeling.

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During the liminal phase, initiands learn about the sacred (or *sacra*). These mysteries have a transformative quality; encouraging the participant to reflect upon the transcendent, temporarily putting them in close connection with the ‘generative powers of the cosmos’. Turner observes that they point the initiand toward a mystical world beyond everyday social, secular life. Through myth, the participant is exposed to a liberating boundless symbolic freedom that is representative of their free status in contrast to their usual social status. Encounter through myth does not merely involve the intellectual or ‘cognitive restructuring’ or indeed ‘ritual legitimization’ of new status; ‘rather rites, myths, and symbols are felt to have something akin to salvific power’. It is through such transformative encounters that initiands are enabled to undertake the tasks required of their new status.

Transmission of the *sacra* is particularly reflected at the bodily level. There is ‘a crucial anchoring of ideas and symbols in the human body and in its somatic processes. The body (with its unconscious rhythms and orectic processes) is viewed as the epitome or microcosm of the universe’. During the liminal phase, ‘the nonlogical and biopsychical modes of thinking and acting prevail. The behaviour in such phases is “inspired by all things as they are and not by things as they ought to be”’. This underscores the fact that initiands learn through multi-sensory experience – primarily through an intuitive, corporeal (rather than just cognitive) sense. This is

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37 In defining *sacra*, Turner refers to the work of Jane Harrison, see Jane E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1903). He states that ‘in the Greek Eleusian and Orphic mysteries this communication of the *sacra* has three main components […]’. By and large, this classification holds good for initiation rites all over the world. *Sacra* may be communicated as: (1) exhibitions, “what is shown”; (2) actions, “what is done”; and (3) instructions, “what is said”. See Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, p. 102. See *The Forest of Symbols* pp. 102-108 for Turner’s further explanation of the three types of *sacra*.


39 Ibid., p. 577.

40 Ibid., pp. 576-577. Turner claims how myths have a liminal character even when not connected with rites, see p. 577.

41 Ibid., pp. 579-580.
in contrast to both the separation and aggregation phases of ritual ‘in which the sacred has to come to terms, so to speak, with the profane, where the two realms interdigitate’.\textsuperscript{42} Turner refers to Levi Strauss’ ‘sensory codes’, the visual, auditory and tactile experiences that underlie the re-telling of myth or experiencing of ritual.\textsuperscript{43} Acknowledging the role of the somatic accentuates the embodied nature of transmission of the sacred in the liminal process where ‘we find not merely the sacred but the most sacred. And paradoxically this is where we also find the most human, indeed, the all-too-human’.\textsuperscript{44}

A liminal language may be created from images, metaphors and symbols that are essential to the liminal phase: ‘human experience, both male and female, is ransacked for telling symbols, metaphors, and images which can provide the building blocks – or better, the alphabet blocks for a liminal language, as much nonverbal as verbal, in which potent messages are delivered to those undergoing changes of state’.\textsuperscript{45} The creation of a liminal language, including the non-verbal use of symbols and images, adds another embodied dimension to the liminal experience. In the ritual setting a liminal language also helps to frame and structure liminality: ‘Ritual liminality, containing sacrifice and stressing wishes and vows, here seems to underlie a grammatical mode of framing language’.\textsuperscript{46} Symbolic language is therefore used to convey the \textit{sacra}; and it also provides the linguistic means to organize the commitments made within the rite-of-passage experience.

Liminality exemplifies a subjunctive mood, as it conveys a time of possibility and opportunity. Turner makes an explicit link between the subjunctive and indicative

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 580.
\textsuperscript{45} Victor Turner, ‘Morality and Liminality’, p. 133. In this article Turner discusses liminality from a moral perspective. He does not explicitly define what he means by morality; this is drawn out as one reads the article. The closest he gets to an outright definition comes towards the end of the chapter, where he determines ‘moral dynamics’ as consisting of the ‘cultural devices men and women use to discover meaning in or to ascribe meaning to the ways they develop or terminate their relations with one another, their patterns of mutual use and abuse, friendship and exploitation – their moral dynamics’, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 134.
aspects of language and culture: ‘but just as verbs in many languages possess directly (in terms of suffixes, infixes, or prefixes) or indirectly (as in the English “may”, “would” and “might”) subjunctive and optative moods, so do cultural processes, and so does experienced life or lived-through experience in all cultures’. In particular, the subjunctive mood is integral to the liminal time and contributes to a set of verbal and non-verbal meta-languages that transcend everyday language. Concerning the liminal rite of passage within a traditional religion, it is predicted that an iconographic grammar will surface:

In long-established cultural systems I would expect to find the growth of a symbolic and iconographic syntax and logic; in changing or newly established systems I would expect to find in liminal situations daring and innovation both in the modes of relating symbolic and mythic elements and in the choice of elements to be related. There might also be the introduction of new elements and their various re-combination with old ones, as in religious syncretisms.

Turner comments that these linguistic observations are an area for further research, arguing: ‘Syntax and logic are problematic not axiomatic features of liminality. We have to see if they are there empirically’. The liminal represents what Turner terms as ‘pods’, ‘pockets,’ and ‘capsules’ of ‘space-time’ in which the subjunctive mood exists: ‘here play, in the full ambiguity of the term, may reign’. Highlighting the various dimensions of the embodied nature of liminality in this way provides a holistic understanding of the liminal process. The embodied nature of liminality leads in turn to the increased perspicacity of initiands.

**iv. Transcendent and Transformational Experience**

Turner focuses upon the experiential and existential dimensions of liminality, rather than the changes in social status that van Gennep observes occurring within a rite of passage. As referenced above, Turner notes that participants are more open to

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47 Ibid.
49 Ibid., p. 255.
51 Davies, *Anthropology and Theology*, p. 137.
transcendent experience during the liminal phase of indigenous ritual. He refers to ontological change occurring through engagement with sacred texts and symbols: ‘…it is believed to change their nature, transform them from one kind of human being into another’.\(^{52}\) Turner also highlights the importance of language and its ontological significance: ‘speech is not merely communication but also power and wisdom. The wisdom (mana) that is imparted in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte’.\(^{53}\) The themes of transcendence and ontological change are not further explored within Turner’s work. Instead he concentrates upon the emotional dimensions of liminality (especially *communitas*, see below).

By contrast, the anthropologist Maurice Bloch develops the notion of transcendental experience and transformation within a rite-of-passage transition. In his book *Prey into Hunter* Bloch explores the rite-of-passage ritual for children coming of age in the Orokaiva tribe of Papua New Guinea. In brief, the village engages in a ritual in which children participate as ‘prey’ and are chased and caught. Participants are held in a liminal-like existence in an isolated part of the bush, separate from the village. They are introduced to sacred myths and stories and experience a symbolic dying to oneself and re-birth (similar to the Ndembu ritual that Turner narrates). The children experience a new spirit-like existence and are later liberated, returning to the village as ‘hunters’.\(^{54}\)

Bloch maintains van Gennep’s tripartite rite-of-passage structure within his theory, including the middle, transitional phase. Yet he ascribes distinct qualities to each of the stages. For example, the liminal phase is specifically characterized through the acquisition of a new ‘transcendental identity’ which will be influential throughout participants’ lives.\(^{55}\) The stage of re-integration, which van Gennep equates to re-entrance to society, and which Turner equates to a return to routine existence, is instead characterized by Bloch as a newfound vitality. Participants are transformed

\(^{54}\) See Bloch, *Prey into Hunter*, chapter two, pp. 8-23.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., p. 6.
through contact with the supernatural. They undergo existential and ontological change. This personal transformation involves a change in identity - in how reality and being (as well as social status) are perceived - as the participant quite literally moves from being ‘Prey into Hunter’.56

Bloch argues that van Gennep and Turner entirely miss the significance of the ‘violence’ that participants experience when they return to the mundane.57 He therefore develops their observations through his concept of ‘rebounding conquest or violence’. Bloch believes that the participant, through the symbolic death encountered during a rite of passage, experiences a form of ‘violence’. This experience is important for two reasons. Firstly, the subordination of vitality experienced through symbolic death leads participants to a subsequent heightened appreciation of the reoccurrence of such vitality. Secondly, such ‘violence’ may later be re-directed towards others (i.e. through hunting or warfare).58 Bloch argues that his model captures the central core of all ritual experience and is cross-cultural.59

Douglas Davies provides diverse examples based upon Bloch’s model. For example, he refers to W. E. H. Stanner’s work on the Murinbata of Australia which demonstrates how male initiation rites bring participants into a world transcending their previous experience, creating men of ‘mystical understanding’. Participants encounter a new ‘ontology of life’, a life which transcends their former limited experience.60 Davies observes that Bloch’s theory also has broad application within the Christian theological field. Aspects of ‘rebounding conquest’ are evident within Christian spiritual themes, for example: the process of dying and rising with Christ through baptism. Bloch’s model is also reflected in St. Paul’s distinctions between the ‘flesh’ and the ‘spirit’, or between and ‘old Adam’ and the ‘new Adam’, as one is

56 Ibid., pp. 8-23.
57 Ibid., p. 6.
58 Ibid., pp. 4, 19, 21, 24. Bloch makes the connection between this aspect of his theory and the work of Rene Girard on religion and violence, see ibid., pp. 6-7.
59 Ibid., pp. 10-11; p. 23.
transformed through God’s grace and the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{61} Indeed a specific example of ‘rebounding conquest’ may be observed in St. Paul’s own conversion experience. His previous life, involving the persecution of Christians, was transformed into his new existence as a Christian. His newfound sense of vitality found expression in his mission to convert others to Christianity.\textsuperscript{62}

Bloch’s theory extends Turner’s observation that participating in a rite of passage involves deeply transformational and transcendental experiences. The data presented in chapter three acknowledges the transformative nature of the RCIA. These aspects of conversion experience will be explored in chapter five with reference to the themes set out in this section.

In summary, the theory of liminality can be traced from its origins in indigenous ritual, revealing a paradigm which, Turner argues, is universal in its application. The liminal, in-between stage of a rite of passage involves embracing challenges both positive and negative. The liminal phase is one of heightened reflexivity; this is expressed in an embodied sense, engaging the whole person. The various phenomenological features of the liminal ritual experience provide an interpretive framework by which to analyze participants’ RCIA experience. Here, anthropology can serve theology; anthropology provides a linguistic and conceptual framework to describe the elusive nature of the in-between, rite-of-passage experience ahead of a more detailed theological reading of the liminal state itself. \textit{Communitas}, an essential part of liminal experience, continues to expand this framework.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{61} Davies, \textit{Anthropology and Theology}, p. 138. Davies further develops Bloch’s concept through his work on ‘Eucharistic rebounding-vitality’, see ibid., pp. 87-90.
\end{flushright}
II. Communitas – A Model of Sociality

Victor Turner uses the Latin noun *communitas* to describe an experience of oneness or unity by those sharing a rite-of-passage experience. The Turners observed the expression of *communitas* during their fieldwork in Africa, and both Victor and Edith Turner developed the concept throughout their writings to include experiences beyond ritual. Victor Turner first recognized its workings first-hand during the Second World War, when he refused to fight as a conscientious objector.

In his early ethnography, Turner identified three types of *communitas*: spontaneous, normative, and ideological. Spontaneous *communitas* describes unprompted occurrences of equality and mutuality. These experiences, even if fleeting, remind a person of their connection with the whole human race:

But where it is socially positive it presents, directly or by implication, a model of human society as a homogenous, unstructured *communitas*, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species. When even two people believe that they experience unity, all people are felt to be one by those two, even if only for a flash.

When experienced over a period of time, spontaneous *communitas* needs some form of social control and organization of resources, and it thereby evolves into an experience of normative *communitas*. Turner uses the example of St. Francis of Assisi, whose ideal of spontaneous *communitas* evolved into the creation of the Franciscan order with its necessary structures (i.e. a normative *communitas*).

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65 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 47. For an exploration of the darker side of *communitas* (i.e. as expressed by supporters of Hitler) see Ian Maxwell, ‘The Ritualization of Performance (Studies)’, in *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, edited by Graham St. John, pp. 59-75 (pp. 59-60 and pp. 64-65). Maxwell notes that Turner thought that elements of fascist behaviour were not true experiences of *communitas*, see p. 65.
67 Ibid., pp. 140-154.
Ideological *communitas*, in turn, refers to various utopian social models based on a spontaneous or existential *communitas*, such as the hippie subculture of the 1960s.\(^{68}\)

The Turners’ later work often refers to *communitas* generically rather than by distinguishing between these types. Accordingly, Edith Turner views *communitas* as

\[\ldots\text{a very simple thing, but an enormously important part of social life. It does not often find its way into the social sciences because scholars do not know what to do with it. I now see it as unconditional love, outside any differentiated respect for rank, moral status, and social structures. It flourishes best in those precious in-between times when stress about status is low and nobody bothers about rank.}\(^{69}\)

*Communitas* is explored through the following three themes (which mainly arise from Victor Turner’s writings, and are complemented by Edith’s later published work): firstly its nature as relational experience; secondly its critical function within society; and thirdly how it may contribute to the dynamics of identity formation.

\[i. \quad \textbf{Communitas: Relational and Spiritual Experience}\]

*Communitas* is a relational experience of equality, solidarity and unanimity, where human beings relate to each other through their common humanity rather than through social roles.\(^{70}\) This experienced affinity, which flows from a common spirit and shared experience, is viewed by Turner as an essential human social need\(^{71}\) or ‘generic human bond’.\(^{72}\)

Turner emphasizes the spiritual qualities of this relational experience. *Communitas* is ‘a relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate human identities (William Blake’s phrase), which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances’.\(^{73}\) It is also compared with the Christian experience of grace: ‘This is the experiential basis, I believe, of the Christian notion of “actual grace”. Thus, in the workshop, village,

\[68\] Ibid., p. 133.
\[69\] Edith Turner, *Heart of Lightness*, p. 93.
\[71\] Ibid, p. 243-244.
office, lecture-room, theatre, almost anywhere, people can be subverted from their
duties and rights into an atmosphere of *communitas*.74

In addition to having transcendent qualities, *communitas* is also characterized by its
dynamic of encounter with another: a spiritual dimension, a sacred experience of
mutuality with another, to be compared with Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ concept.75 Through
this comparison Turner stresses the reciprocal qualities of *communitas* and the sense
of the sacredness of an encounter with another person: ‘This relationship is always a
“happening”, something that arises in instant mutuality, when each person fully
experiences the being of the other’. Turner remarks that the ‘I-Thou’ concept, and
Buber’s ‘essential We’ as a socially transient, highly potent form of relationship, is in
essence *communitas*.76 Turner therefore interprets Buber’s theory in the light of
*communitas*: ‘Buber, in short, wishes to preserve the concreteness of *communitas*
even in the larger social units, in a process he regards as analogous to organic
growth, or to what he has called “the life of dialogue”’.77 Viewed from a Turnerian
perspective, mutual I-Thou dialogue encounters are *communitas* encounters.
*Communitas* therefore encourages relationships of positive regard, reciprocity and
encounter with the other based on recognition of human equality. It is a mutually
enriching way of meeting the ‘other’. An authentic *communitas* experience demands
honesty and transparency, and openness to a communitarian ethic. Such experience
derives from a purely selfless motivation, an instinctive understanding of human
nature in which people reach out to one another without expectation of personal
gain.78

Experiences of *communitas* have practical consequences. As Edith Turner illustrates:
‘The benefits of *communitas* are joy, healing, the gift of “seeing,” mutual help,
religious experience, the gift of knowledge, long-term ties with others, a humanistic

76 Ibid., p. 137.
77 Ibid., p. 143.
conscience, and the human rights ideal’. The fact that *communitas* enables a different way of seeing is also emphasized by John Eric Killinger, as he comments on the Turners’ theory:

…*communitas* as anti-structure really means it is an inversion of the normal. In this respect, we are open to the play and fascination of mirrors as apophatic third eyes. *Communitas* thus extends our gaze, including our backward gaze or re-gard. We are negatively defined – not contradicted – as *neti...neti*: neither this nor that. We are thus opened up to new experience and meaning-making such that we can work and play well with Others as we see ourselves as Others, too.80

### ii. Communitas: An Alternative, Contrasting Experience

*Communitas* is referred to as a ‘sacred’ experience, as it dissolves norms that govern structural boundaries and opens up experiences of ‘unprecedented potency’.81 This highlights another feature of *communitas*: its capacity to contrast with everyday reality through an experience of ‘anti-structure’. Given that Turner viewed society as hierarchically structured, anti-structure offers a contrasting experience different from the usual norms of society or ‘structure’.

Turner saw the structure/anti-structure cultural dynamic as central to the organization of human society; human beings flourish by engaging in the *communitas* experience and then return to their everyday ‘structure’ renewed and rejuvenated.82 In addition, anti-structure has an innate critical role. From its unique vantage-point society may be critiqued, just as all social structural rules or conventions may be questioned.83 As

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82 Ibid., p. 129. Edith Turner provides an example of this in her autobiography, where she describes her own experience of settling in Zambia. Her description of life in Africa as a liberating experience, in contrast to her life back in England, expresses an experience of *communitas* and anti-structure. See Edith Turner, *Heart of Lightness*, p. 62.
such, anti-structure has a transformative function, as *communitas* permeates everyday social structure with anti-structural values. Everyday structure is therefore not static, ‘for it is constantly being influenced and modified by anti-structure, just as anti-structure is continually being curbed and penetrated by structure which sets limits on its capacity for experimentation and critical reflection’.\(^\text{84}\) Turner refers to this dialectical relationship between structure and anti-structure as a ‘primordial human modality of relationship’ in which both structure and anti-structure are inter-dependent, as one cannot exist for very long without the other.\(^\text{85}\)

This dialectic confers a prophetic and cathartic dimension to the concept of *communitas*. Turner illustrates the structure/anti-structure dynamic with examples from the historical religions – in particular, Christianity. Through the religious orders, Christianity has learned to integrate ‘enclaves of *communitas*’ within its official structures. These ‘oxygenate, so to speak, the “mystical body” by making provision for those ardent souls who wish to live in *communitas* and poverty all their lives’\(^\text{86}\). A religion or a church might also engage with surrounding society from such a position of anti-structure or *communitas*: ‘a great religion or church may contain many organisational and liturgical sectors which overlap with and interpenetrate the secular social structure but maintain in a central position a sanctuary of unqualified *communitas*’\(^\text{87}\).

*Communitas* is a powerful phenomenon, as it has the capacity to erupt when structure becomes too stifling. Yet it also possesses something of a vulnerable nature: ‘its own readiness to convert into normative structure indicates its vulnerability to the structural environment’.\(^\text{88}\) Elsewhere, Turner suggests that *communitas* has a timeless quality: ‘But in passing from structure to structure many rituals pass through *communitas*. *Communitas* is always thought of or portrayed by

\(^{84}\) Victor Turner, ‘Morality and Liminality’, p. 133.
\(^{87}\) Ibid.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 238.
actors as a timeless condition, an eternal now, as “a moment in and out of time”, or as a state to which the structural view of time is not applicable’. 89

iii. Dynamics of Identity Formation

The dialectical structure/anti-structure dynamic has a critical role for participating individuals as well as for larger society. Moving between the two states invokes heightened reflexivity concerning personal identity. During the structural phase, or when he or she adopts a customary social position conforming to usual social roles and norms, a person has a particular ‘identity’ or is a ‘someone’. During the anti-structural phase, when social roles are dissolved, a person has a generic ‘non-identity’ or is a ‘no-one’. 90

A tension exists in alternating between the modes of ‘person’ and ‘individual’. 91 The tension may prompt either a dilemma, or increased self-perception, or both. This is neatly summarized by an example from Edith Turner’s autobiography. She describes being on retreat with her small Christian group in the USA in 1995. On entering the liminal situation of the retreat house (moving into anti-structure) Edith Turner experienced something of a personal quandary: ‘I felt I was nobody at all, even estranged from Jesus whom I happened to love’. 92 Her retreat experience, however, proceeded to be an important personal spiritual experience of communitas; furthermore, this was a defining communitas experience within her anthropological career. 93 This aptly demonstrates Victor Turner’s definition of the ‘ambiguous’ nature of anti-structure, which ‘may represent nihilistic solitude for the temporarily exposed individual, or it may be the epiphanic uncovering of a new depth of human communion, brotherhood and sisterhood, transcending the kinship terms through

91 Victor Turner describes how this challenges one’s identity, and that ‘The liminal period becomes an introduction to, and test of, moral being’, see ‘Morality and Liminality’, p. 144; Turner is here quoting Burridge, Burridge’s emphasis.
92 Edith Turner, Heart of Lightness, p. 230.
93 Edith Turner describes the retreat as an event that changed her life; see ibid., p. 226.
which it is often metaphorized’. Edith Turner’s retreat experience included a transformative personal epiphany as she bonded with others on the retreat.

The heightened self-consciousness revealed by moving between two social roles outlines a moral dimension of the liminal: a ‘reflexive moral self-critique’. Turner’s observation that one ‘grows though anti-structure and conserves through structure’ demonstrates increased personal perspicacity. The phase of non-identity or anti-structure provides one with new perspective; it is an altered viewpoint that is freeing or almost visionary. It is to stand ‘outside of a particularized social position, to cease to have a specific perspective, in a sense to become (at least potentially) aware of all positions and arrangements and to have a total perspective’. The liminal stage therefore prompts heightened reflexivity for initiands, as Turner describes: ‘I see liminality as a phase in social life in which this confrontation between “activity which has no structure” and its “structured results” produces in men their highest pitch of self-consciousness’.

In summary, this section has outlined the various dimensions of communitas, thereby expanding the liminal framework to enable the interpretation of social dynamics and the nature of social reality. The exploration of the communitas theme charts a transition from viewing liminality in purely phenomenological terms to appreciating its inherent critical and didactic function. Communitas is integral to a conceptual and critical anthropological framework, which, in the context of this study, will be used to analyze and streamline participants’ experiences ahead of a theological reading of those experiences.

95 Ibid., p. 136.
96 Ibid., p. 144. Turner is here quoting an earlier passage in The Ritual Process, p. 203, and also the work of Burridge (see footnote 73), pp. 146-147.
III. Ritual Expression

The following section outlines the critical features of Turnerian theory regarding ritual: the embodied and paradigmatic aspects of ritual and its significant didactic function (in that it critiques as well as forms society). These facets demonstrate ritual’s transformative effect, as ‘ceremony indicates, ritual transforms’. Turner’s often quoted negative critique of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II is also given attention.

i. The Embodied Nature of Ritual

In the article, ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic’, which is comparative in nature (evaluating both Catholic and African ritual), Victor Turner provides a definition of ritual that accentuates its embodied dimensions. Ritual is:

…a synchronization of many performative genres, and is often ordered by a dramatic structure, which energizes and gives emotional colouring to the interdependent communicative modes which express in manifold ways the meaning of the dramatic leitmotif. Ritual is not threadbare but rich by virtue of the variety of its impact upon the senses. Participants in major rituals of vital religions can be passive and active in turn with regard to the ritual movement. All their senses may be engaged; they hear music and prayers, see symbols, taste consecrated food, smell incense, and touch sacred persons and objects. They have kinesthetic forms of dance and gesture to bring them into dynamic relation with one another. In song they merge in another way.

Ritual is therefore a rich, holistic process appealing to all the senses, which heightens sensitivity to the message of the ritual. In particular, the affective dimensions of ritual are heightened by the different performative expressions of ritual. That is, ritual often involves a dramatic element, which may involve a sacrificial or self-sacrificial act (such as the Sacrifice of the Mass). This in particular

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100 Victor Turner, ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic,’ *Worship* 50, 6 (1976), 504-526 (p. 505).
brings an emotional dimension and energy to the diverse expressions of the dramatic message.¹⁰²

The ritual experience is also heightened through the experience of ‘flow’, a means by which an exalted state of reflexivity may be induced. This is a state ‘in which action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part; we experience it as a unified flow from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions’. ‘Flow’ has a timeless quality, ‘in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present and future’.¹⁰³ Turner also accentuates both the sensory capacity of symbols (the sensory pole) and the more cognitive and intellectual aspects of ritual (the ideological pole). The sensory has the capacity to engage participants’ affective, spiritual sensibilities. The ideological concerns personal engagement, expressed through, for example, the doctrinal and moral dimensions of ritual.¹⁰⁴

Another dimension of ritual relates to its spiritual and mystical dimensions, as it has the capacity to disclose an abyss or ‘infinite depth’:

Ritual, in other words, is not only complex and many-layered; it has an abyss in it, and indeed, is an effort to make meaningful the dialectical relation of what the Silesian mystic Jakob Boehme, following Meister Eckhart, called “Ground” and “Underground” […] Many definitions of ritual contain the

¹⁰² Victor Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, p. 81.
notion of depth, but few of infinite depth […] the passage form of ritual, as elicited by van Gennep, postulates a unidirectional move from the “indicative” mood of cultural process, through culture’s “subjunctive” mood back to the “indicative” mood, though this recovered mood has now been tempered, even transformed, by immersion in subjunctivity; this process roughly corresponds with his preliminal, liminal, and postliminal phases.\textsuperscript{105}

Thus, Turner is here saying that participation in all ritual involves immersion in the realm of the liminal. This quotation emphasizes how the embodied nature of ritual is further accentuated by how it engages one’s mood and affect (as one enters the subjunctive mood, a tentative, in-between phase). Elsewhere, Turner suggests that the subjunctive mood, with its negative rather than positive overtones, ‘its “may be” and “might have been” rather than its “is,” “was,” and “will be”’ may be compared to a via negativa entered by everyone, not just by mystics.\textsuperscript{106}

\textbf{ii. The ‘Paradigmatic Function’ of Ritual}

Turner suggests that ritual provides a valuable and necessary ‘sacred’ frame, enabling form and structure for the liminal. Rather than implying a restrictive structure, the ritual process instead transcends rules or rubrics in a sacred performance.\textsuperscript{107} Within this sacred frame, ritual exercises a ‘paradigmatic function’. It has the capacity to communicate deep values, anticipating change as well as inscribing order in the hearts and minds of participants.\textsuperscript{108} In terms of Christianity, Turner comments that ritual has the capacity to invoke embodied experience of the spiritual message of the paschal mystery: ‘The whole person is impregnated with a single message through all the channels of communic available to him. He has to live what is being communicated, not merely to understand it’.\textsuperscript{109} Christ’s sacrifice of his life for his followers lies at the heart of Christian ritual; consequently, the paschal mystery is opened up to Christians through participation in ritual. ‘Sacrifice is here regarded as a limen, or entry into the domain of communitas where all that is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{105} Victor Turner, \textit{From Ritual to Theatre}, p. 82, author’s emphasis.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Victor Turner, ‘Variations on a Theme of Liminality’, in \textit{Blazing the Trail}, pp. 48-65 (p. 57).
\item \textsuperscript{107} Victor Turner, ‘Liminal to Liminoid’, p. 79.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Victor Turner, ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic’, p. 506. This article is comparative in nature. Turner compares the African Chihamba ritual with Catholic ritual prior to Vatican II, seeing them both as ‘cultural processes’ rather than ‘creedal statements’.
\item \textsuperscript{109} Victor Turner, ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic’, p. 510.
\end{itemize}
and ever has been human, and the forces that have caused humanity to be, are joined in a circulation of mutual love and trust”.110

Roy Rappaport develops both van Gennep’s and Turner’s theories by reflecting upon the nature of sequence within a rite of passage - specifically how time is constructed and altered within ritual. He also explains how consciousness may be altered through *communitas*. His observations help to explain further the paradigmatic nature of ritual and its capacity to frame religious experience. Rappaport acknowledges Turner’s observation that during ritual society is at once “destructured” and “prestructured”. He notes that ritual creates a heightened sense of order (rather than chaos), reflecting a simple structure in contrast with that of everyday living. During ritual time has a different quality: “time out of time” really is out of time’.111 Experiences of *communitas* within ritual encourage an alteration of consciousness (as well as positive relational encounters). During ritual ‘primary process thought and strong emotion’ become dominant displacing logic or rationality, although reason does not completely disappear.112

The participants do not simply *communicate* to each other *about* that order but *commune with* each other *within* it. In sum, the state of *communitas* experienced in ritual is at once social and experiential. Indeed, the distinction between the social and experiential is surrendered, or even erased, in a general feeling of oneness with oneself, with the congregation, or with the cosmos.113

This illustrates how through *communitas*, participants encounter ‘the other’, and communicate with each other *within* the liturgical setting.

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111 Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 1st edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 181. Whereas this study connects anthropological themes with the theology of Karl Rahner, Rappaport’s work includes reference to the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, see pp. 120, 394, and 398. The theme of symbolism is important to both Tillich’s Protestant form of existentialism and to the ecclesial theology of Rahner.


113 Ibid., p. 220. For Rappaport liturgy ‘does more than create two “states” of time. It relates them to each other’, see ibid., p. 234.
iii. Further Exploring Embodiment and Ritual

Earlier we explored how Turner understands rite-of-passage liminality - in its affective, intellectual, linguistic and somatic dimensions - as an embodied process. That is, liminal transition, and its accompanying ritual expression, is physically experienced and somatically registered within the body. Turner is credited as an early observer of the importance of the theme of embodiment within anthropology\textsuperscript{114}; however his observations are best contextualized within a broader anthropological and philosophical schema.

The anthropologist Thomas Csordas describes embodiment as a ‘paradigm’ for anthropology - a way of understanding the body, and indeed the self, as a subject of culture - rather than as an ‘object’ to be studied. This paradigm views embodied experience as an initial starting point for analyzing human participation within a cultural world (rather than suggesting that cultures have the same structure as bodily experience).\textsuperscript{115} Csordas notes how his paradigm corresponds with Turner’s ‘anthropology of experience’ (see below) as Turner also views the body as a methodological starting point.\textsuperscript{116} Indeed this paradigm may be nuanced further: Davies draws attention to the work of Jenkins and Valiente, both of whom emphasize the ‘degree of intentionality and agency of the body in creating experience’. Davies continues: ‘By emphasizing the body’s own way of ‘creating experience’, amid ‘social domains of power’, they [Jenkins and Valiente] compensate for the frequent overemphasis on cultural influences upon the body; they affirm the body’s own capacity to create cultural and interpersonal responses.’\textsuperscript{117}


\textsuperscript{115} Thomas J. Csordas, \textit{Body/meaning/Healing}, 1st edition (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 58-59. Csordas here states that the origins of this paradigm are to be found in the work of Irving Hallowell and Marcel Mauss. Through an analysis of ‘perception’ (using the work of the philosopher Merleau-Ponty) and ‘practice’ (the work of Bourdieu) and how these are grounded in the body, Csordas collapses the conventional distinction between subject and object. He argues that this collapse enables understanding of how the self and cultural objects are constituted or objectified through ‘the ongoing indeterminacy and flux of adult life’, see p. 87.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p. 242.

Csordas’ embodiment paradigm provides an important framework for continued exploration of the themes of embodiment and ritual. Given that embodied experience is an important starting point for learning more about culture, one which respects the agency of the body, it is necessary to explore both ontological themes (acknowledging the wisdom of the body) and social themes (through ‘somatic modes of attention’ and habitus) within the ritual context. Such investigation will help to illuminate the importance of the body in faith transmission.

The philosopher David Michael Levin draws attention to the nature of the human body, within initiatory and liturgical settings, as a locus of wisdom. Basing his work upon Heidegger’s philosophy, Levin claims that the human body is itself an ‘ontological gift’. Levin believes that the body has the capacity for allowing the human person to engage in a process of reflection enabling one to go beyond oneself - to engage with ‘Being’ and with feeling in Heideggerian terms. This process involves conscious reflection upon the body, and its inherent wisdom: ‘what is ‘already ours’ through a pre-cognitive knowledge, alerts one to our relationship with Being’. Taking inspiration from the philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin, Levin advocates exploration of such wisdom through a ‘bodily felt sense’. He argues for the need to relinquish metaphysical modes of ‘thinking’, instead embracing knowledge gleaned from the body: ‘We must simply give our thought to the body. We must take our thinking ‘down’ into the body. We must learn to think through the body. We must learn to think with the body’.

Levin claims that such wisdom is most accessible and indeed heightened within during ritual, especially during the reading of liturgical texts. While Turner briefly mentions the capacity for the sacra (including sacred narratives) to transform a


119 Ibid., p. 50.

120 Ibid., see pp. 53-54, p. 78.

121 Ibid., p. 53.

122 Ibid., p. 61, author’s emphasis.
person\textsuperscript{123}, we may extend this observation through Levin’s powerful description of the lived experience of such change. Through prayerfully and receptively engaging with the liturgical text (‘we offer our body to the text; we submit to it as an act of devotion’), the inherent wisdom of a text is communicated to the individual, and in turn is passed down through successive generations. The individual is then able to absorb the wisdom of the tradition in a bodily sense; the text becomes part of the person as it is absorbed into the psyche and the physical body:

...as we listen to the words we sing, as we consecrate our ears and our mouth to the enchanting sounds we echo; as even the frame of our entire body yields itself up to the rhythmic measures and the rising and falling intonations, we gradually recreate within ourselves an intimate, unshakeable, non-objectifiable understanding of the body of knowledge: the sacred language is woven, is insinuated, into the very fibers and bones of the body. And then we know our tradition in a way that we could never have known it, if we had been pure minds or souls, separate from the temple of our body. Understanding the texts, we place our body in a stance which supports them and grounds them firmly on the earth where we stand...\textsuperscript{124}

This interpretation captures a reciprocal sense of giving (through the offering of the body to the text) and receiving (the wisdom of the tradition) through the bodily knowing of the tradition.

The wisdom of the body to which Levin alludes - a somatic form of knowing through one’s body - has important social dimensions. Csordas, drawing upon the work of the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, uses the term ‘somatic modes of attention’ to describe ‘culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others’.\textsuperscript{125} Such attention involves sensory awareness of the situation of the body in the world. This awareness is heightened, as Csordas describes, through ‘attending’ both with and to the body; through ‘paying attention with one’s body’. This is not a purely subjective exercise: the body may tell us about the world and other people as one shares with others.

\textsuperscript{124} Levin, *The Body’s Recollection of Being*, p. 215, author’s emphasis.
\textsuperscript{125} Csordas, *Body/Meaning/Healing*, p. 244.
‘intersubjectively’.126 (An example of this would be *communitas* encounters with others.) This intersubjective encounter draws attention to the important theme of ‘the other’. As Davies highlights, ‘the other’ and its cultural naming is one of the most fundamental aspects of embodiment theory.127

In further developing the social dimensions of embodied experience we briefly return to the theme of engagement with religious texts. The embodied encounter which religious texts may inspire increases in significance, both individually and collectively, through an individual’s lived practice. This lived practice is referred to as *habitus*.128 Consequently as Davies notes, *habitus*, a person’s regular way of life within a given culture, illustrates how religious identity stems from action.129

By way of example, Davies observes that theological doctrines, rather than functioning as abstract theories, may become embodied ideas that are practiced personally or socially within liturgical life. Accordingly, individuals change as they engage with texts that are ‘paradigmatic scenes’. These scenes, such as the life, passion and death of Christ, enable participants to ‘reorient their personal frame of reference’ and become a focal point for organizing the ‘emotional repertoire’ of a group.130 One’s lived emotional experience - the joys and sorrows of life - may be interpreted through the paschal mystery and brought into ‘some kind of sensory alliance with Christ’. Within the context of ritual events, and over the course of a lifetime, participants become familiar with such ‘paradigmatic scenes’. This familiarity - the synthesizing of one’s affective experience through the framework of a religious paradigm - is based upon lived experience or *habitus*.131 As will be developed in chapter five, the paschal mystery is one such important ‘paradigmatic

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126 Csordas, *Body/meaning/Healing*, pp. 244-45.
128 The concept of *habitus* was originally introduced by Marcel Mauss. Csordas develops the concept with reference to both Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu and describes how in parallel fashion both wish to collapse the dualities of mind and body distinctions. For a detailed account see Csordas, *Body/meaning/Healing*, pp. 61-62, and Davies, *Emotion, Identity, and Religion*, pp. 65-66.
131 Ibid., pp. 48-49.
type-scene’ for RCIA participants; personal appropriation of the paschal mystery leads to action and changes in how individuals conduct their lives and everyday choices.

iv. Ritual and Society

The paradigmatic and reflexive nature of ritual extends beyond personal ritual experience to become a means for a group’s social expression. Turner claimed that all rituals might be said to construct society (‘in much the same way as Oscar Wilde held life to be “an imitation of art”’). Ritual has both an inward-looking, critical function and an outward-looking, social function. On the one hand, ritual enables a society to reflect upon and evaluate its internal relationships. On the other hand, part of its outward-looking function is to convey communication with the transcendent: ‘Not all ritual is religious ritual, but religious ritual is society not only talking about itself but also talking about what transcends it, about God’. Ritual therefore communicates the values and beliefs of participants in a particular religious culture. In this sense, ritual is not always, or solely, about the transcendent, but is also concerned with ‘society talking about itself, the reflexivity of society’. Ritual may therefore be considered a meta-language, as it serves to communicate generic tendencies and needs evident across the human race. This calls for attention to be paid to ritual and to its meta-social commentary and meta-linguistic nature.

v. Victor Turner and Vatican II

Turner was a strong critic of the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council and set out his views in ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic’. Fundamentally, he viewed

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137 Victor and Edith Turner became Catholics after returning from their fieldwork in Africa, see p. 142 below.
the changes as interrupting the nature of ‘flow’ and tradition in Church liturgy. He saw the liturgical reforms as impeding the flow of communicated values and practice, rather than as facilitating a continuum with these past practices. He launched a critical attack: ‘depth has been abandoned for breadth’, the ‘spiritual for the material’, the ‘historical for the ultramodern’, he asserted, claiming that the liturgy now fell within the functionalist schools of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown. This attitude does seem incongruous when set beside his critique of the Latin Mass, describing how every detail of the ‘central Catholic ritual was governed by rule […]. Liturgical dress alone would provide material for a structuralist’s thesis’. Nevertheless, Turner lamented what had been lost through the recent changes: ‘It might be said that everything in the Mass has texture and structure, from the major dramatic plot which controls the total procedure to its most minute details. Or at least this was the case until recently’. Based on his fieldwork experiences of pilgrimage across the world, Turner appreciated how the use of the common language, Latin, created a unity and bond between Catholics, and feared the result of the use of the vernacular in Catholic liturgy. He described particular groups using the changes to support their own ends, and the ‘liquidating’ of ‘the ritual bonds which held the entire heterogeneous mystical body together in worship’.

In ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic’, Turner does not recognize the liminal nature of the period of transition resulting from the Second Vatican Council, or indeed interpret the liturgical reforms through aspects of his own anthropological theory. For example, his theory of liminality and communitas acknowledges how anti-structural experiences are regenerative for both individuals and society. He might have interpreted the liturgical changes of Vatican II as being anti-structural leading to the regeneration of the Church, or acknowledged that the Church was itself possibly going through a liminal time during the period of the Council, and that the years afterward were a time of great adjustment or re-aggregation. Instead, he hearkens

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139 Ibid., p. 524.
140 Ibid., pp. 514-515.
141 Ibid., p. 525.
back to the notion of Catholicism as being tribal. He refers to it as ‘sort of a “tribal” community’ which offsets the

alienation of the growing division of labour and political nationalism and class conflict. The creation of a single body of ritual has been one of its supreme instruments in forming bonds which on a global scale replicate even while they transcend those of tribal society.142

Sadly, Turner does not demonstrate trust in the ‘workings of the spirit’ and ‘the creative imagination’ to which he refers to in this article: ‘This mutual involvement is more than merely pragmatic; it must be given shape and substance in that liminal realm where human communities expose themselves to the workings of the spirit and the creative imagination which we call “the public work” (liturgy) of religious action’.143

In summary, Victor Turner’s work highlights the paradigmatic, didactic and critical functions of ritual, as well as the importance of the human body in ritual. In particular, these themes are of service to theology, as they expose how Catholic liturgy may be interpreted as an event with an important didactic function; liturgy communicates to the whole person though language both ancient and contemporary, forming a culture based on a sacramental consciousness.144

This chapter has so far surveyed Victor Turner’s writing on the themes of liminality, *communitas* and ritual. It has illustrated how Turner explored and interpreted the various individual, social and embodied dimensions of the liminal rite-of-passage experience. Turner’s acknowledged lack of systematization proves a challenge for

142 Ibid.
143 Ibid. Part of Victor Turner’s strong reaction to the changes perhaps lies in his experience of experimental liturgies in Chicago after the Council. Edith Turner describes how they attended Masses where the priest was wearing jeans rather than vestments, and communion was ministered from a ‘chip and dip’ bowl rather than the usual chalice and ciborium, personal conversation with Edith Turner, November 2008.
any researcher trying to synthesize his work, especially as his concepts developed over time. Despite Victor Turner’s apprehension about ‘system building’,\textsuperscript{145} his theory on liminality, \textit{communitas} and ritual provides a firm structure for the interpretation of the rite-of-passage experience. The breadth of his writings also provides a comprehensive framework, one that is engaging and deeply reflective.\textsuperscript{146}

David Tracy mentions the need for more cross-disciplinary work to be done within practical theology, and he specifically acknowledges the work of Victor Turner (and Mary Douglas) as examples enabling the study of the ‘myths, rituals, symbols, and symbolic forms of this amazing, pluralistic, and rich Catholic tradition’.\textsuperscript{147} The themes explored in this chapter will be used to engage anthropology in such interdisciplinary dialogue with theology and will be of service in the interpretation of participants’ RCIA experience.


\textsuperscript{146} Exploring Turner’s opposition to the liturgical changes of the Second Vatican Council in a thesis that also uses the theology of Rahner - who was an instrumental figure in the Council - exposes an implicit tension within the study. Despite Turner’s opposition to the liturgical changes his work on liminality and ritual continues to be frequently referred to in both liturgical and theological studies.

\textsuperscript{147} David Tracy, ‘The Uneasy Alliance Re-Conceived: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity and Postmodernity’, \textit{Theological Studies} 50, 3 (1989), 548-570 (pp. 548-549).
IV. Towards an Inherent Theology in the Turners’ Work

Whilst there is some reference to specific theological themes in the Turners’ work on pilgrimage and to Christian themes in Victor Turner’s writing on ritual, along with other passing references to the theology of grace, a close reading of the Turners’ collaborative work in fact discloses an inherent theology. This provides a rich seam of material to be mined concerning the relationship between the fields of anthropology and theology. This section, therefore, reviews further aspects of the Turners’ work in this regard: the influence of mysticism upon Victor Turner; the Turners’ own experience of threshold-spirituality including their conversion to Catholicism (they were previously Marxists) and elements of the Turners’ joint writing on pilgrimage; and the emphasis on the ‘anthropology of experience’. Explicit theological interpretation of aspects of their work follows in chapter seven.

i. Victor Turner the Mystic

The influence of Christian mysticism is central to the exploration of an underlying theology in the Turners’ work. The Turners were no strangers to the Christian mystical tradition. Edith describes how as a child Victor was inspired by a ‘Padre’ who introduced him to the writings of the Christian mystics, including St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, William Blake and St. Francis of Assisi (along with Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Zen texts). In her autobiography Edith Turner explains:

It will be seen how Vic, my great collaborator, was first a mystic at twelve years old. However in young adulthood both he and I went through a stage of

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148 For example, Victor Turner describes spontaneous *communitas* as ‘more a matter of “grace” than “law”, to use theological language’, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 45.

149 As well as the specific Christian influences on Victor Turner, it is also possible to trace various philosophical influences upon him. As Tom Driver observes: ‘The theory of Victor Turner is far more dialectical than those of Durkheim, Gennep, and Eliade. Its philosophical roots appear to be Hegelian, not the positivism of Durkheim, the phenomenology of Gennep, or the Platonic idealism of Eliade’. See Tom F. Driver, *Christ in a Changing World: Toward an Ethical Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 158. As already stated, Martin Buber is a key influence on Victor Turner’s understanding of the *communitas* dynamic. Kierkegaard’s philosophy was also influential, as seen in the inclusion of the theme of paradox in Turner’s writings. See Edith Turner, *Heart of Lightness*, pp. 91-92 and p. 99.

dryness, sheer positivism, the politicization of our lives. That discipline walled off poetry, magic, religion from us.\textsuperscript{151}

Christian mysticism had a vital function in reawakening the Turners’ religious awareness after their Marxist experience. Victor’s mystical consciousness, although for a time somewhat hidden, formed an interpretive framework for understanding African ritual in Zambia.\textsuperscript{152} The following excerpt from Edith Turner’s autobiography illustrates the influence of the particular writings of St. John of the Cross upon Victor:

There was a drift, a pull, a weakening of the membrane. In the field Vic had read St. John of the Cross’s mystic poetry. Vic’s own poetry had been pouring out of him: “I cry and cry on the salt sea verge…for yesteryear.” He was making an invocation. He kept writing this kind of poetry, it’s all down there in black and white. Crying. Africa had opened him up and he had become far too much for the Communist Party to cope with, with its hideous rationality and moralism.

We both of us broke through, and this is how it happened.\textsuperscript{153}

Edith proceeds to explain how their stay in Africa had transformed them on a spiritual level. This inspired them so greatly that on their return to England they searched out numerous places of worship. On finding a Catholic Church, they were immediately struck by the comparative nature of worship, which resonated with their African ritual experience – they felt immediately at home. Edith relates: ‘As regards the effect of Africa, it was a jolt. That was what made him and me Catholics’.\textsuperscript{154}

In a diary entry in 1984, four months after Victor Turner’s death, Edith recalls how mysticism enabled Victor to access and understand indigenous religious experience. Through St. John of the Cross’ writings Victor was able to grasp a sense of unity in

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., p. 96.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., pp. 87-88.
\textsuperscript{154} Edith Turner, personal email communication, 15\textsuperscript{th} October 2010. This was much to the chagrin of Victor Turner’s academic colleagues in Manchester, and the Turners’ conversion was frowned upon. As Douglas Ezzy comments, this was the result of ‘the constraining power of atheistic beliefs of key anthropologists, rather than a product of the irrelevance of religious experience to the cultures that anthropologists have studied’. See Douglas Ezzy, ‘Faith and Social Science: Contrasting Victor and Edith Turner’s Analyses of Spiritual Realities’, in Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance, edited by Graham St. John, pp. 309-323 (p. 309).
all things, and was reminded of a sense of the transcendent nature of the soul. Edith Turner captures this in a memory of being in Africa, whilst walking ‘over the north side of Kajima village with Vic’:

The tiny crystal flowers of an old village site lay at our feet while we talked – I saw the wide open space, almost a desert, a rain-fed tiny tropic desert, a wilderness – and it was there that Vic saw the way of the cross, attained a sense of it, the truth of St. John of the Cross the mystic, flaming clear; the unity of all, in silent awe in front of [...] what the soul soars to. And your soul is there, on that African plain now, Vic, and you knew it then, and though April 30 1984 is not in your calendar and it is in mine, that’s not the point. That’s when your soul sang, in 1953. It sang with eternity and thus is singing now.

Here it comes. Like a shaft of light. I tell you, this is not to be understood.155

The influence of Christian mystics and saints, including Eckhart and St. Augustine, informed Turner’s understanding of communitas:

Now Vic was reading St. Augustine’s City of God, about the two cities, the city of God and the city of man. The city of man was the world, with its dominions, powers, structures, laws, force, violence, business cares, and family troubles […]. The city of God was that oneness that Vic had known through Eckhart; it was love; the last shall be first; communitas; beyond alienation (what Karl Marx first thought of and lost); strange ancestor figures; a state of betwixt-and-between the ordinary business world; of the world and not yet of it […]. It was what happened in the so-called “liminal” or threshold period of a rite of passage and it was its own thing and had meaning in its own right.156

Thus, it may be said that Victor’s exploration of liminality and communitas was intermeshed with his own Christian theological ideas. At an implicit level, he was using theological themes to interpret experiences of liminality and communitas.

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155 Edith Turner, Heart of Lightness, p. 141.
156 Ibid., p. 93. Edith continues to explain that they revealed a flaw in Durkheim’s theory of society, as he did not recognize the in-between times, or paradoxical nature, of the rite-of-passage experience. However, Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence alludes to liminality and communitas, a fact which Victor Turner recognizes – see his introduction to Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual, pp. 15-33, (p. 33).
ii. **Threshold Spirituality**

It is possible to identify a sense of threshold-spirituality within the Turners’ work – in other words, the spiritual dimensions of the in-between state. The reader will recall the etymological roots of the term ‘threshold’: the grain being beaten from its husk, the manifestation of what is hidden. This description echoes Jesus’ saying that the grain of wheat must die, or it will remain a single grain (John 12.24). Such awareness of death and new life emerges in the Turners’ later work on pilgrimage. Given that this work took place within their own faith community, explicit theological themes are evident.

Embarking on pilgrimage involves passing into a liminal or threshold time which involves ‘metaphoric’ death on several levels. This occurs through separation from normal social existence, through the dissolution of social rank between fellow pilgrims\(^{157}\) and through the liminal nature of pilgrimage itself, involving an ‘in-between state of life-in-death’.\(^{158}\) Such death, comparable to a ‘mystical death’, is viewed positively as a form of regeneration, and equivalent to the experience of ‘metaphorical death’ found in indigenous rituals:

Thus we have metaphorical death in tribal rituals, parallel perhaps with “mystical death” in the salvation religions of complex societies, and metaphorical rebirth, homologous to spiritual regeneration. Or perhaps we might speak of ritual liminality as an exteriorized mystical way, and the mystic’s path as interiorized ritual liminality.\(^{159}\)

Victor Turner describes pilgrimage as ‘a rehearsal of the pilgrim’s death’.\(^{160}\) The Turners observed the spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage, which includes a process of

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\(^{158}\) Ibid., p. 47.

\(^{159}\) Ibid., pp. 32-33.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., p. 35.
dying to oneself in order to find oneself. The Turners explicitly highlight the mystical dimensions of pilgrimage:

Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage. The pilgrim traverses a mystical way; the mystic sets forth on an interior spiritual pilgrimage. For the former, concreteness and historicity dominate; for the latter, a phased interior process leads to a goal beyond conceptualization.

This mystical dimension of pilgrimage, whether experienced on pilgrimage to particular sites or through personal, inner pilgrimage, involves confronting the self and acknowledging a deeper level of being.

A sense of threshold-spirituality, based upon the influences of the Christian mystics and incorporating themes of light and darkness, may be traced through the Turners’ own liminal periods. Autobiographical evidence from Edith Turner reveals personal experiences of liminality and transition. Leaving Marxism prompted an in-between experience prior to her conversion to Catholicism. She notes this as having been a difficult, dark stage. Her engagement with Catholicism was accompanied by an ‘apodictic’ sense of knowing, or an absolute sense of certainty: ‘I knew I had to accept the gift [i.e. of Catholicism] and follow its implications’.

Edith Turner observes the liminal within Victor’s personal ‘dark nights of the soul’. She comments that Victor often had dark moods, lasting up to four days, which frequently prefigured moments of deep insight. She equates this with the poet Keats’ notion of ‘negative capability’, of embracing uncertainty: ‘It is when one is most in the dark that one is coming to it – which is how negative capability works’. These in-between, liminal experiences are comparable to dark-night-of-the-soul experiences. Such dark places are places of learning, akin to the ‘in-between state’ of the pilgrim’s journey where liminal wisdom is communicated.

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161 Ibid., p. 47.
162 Turner and Turner, Image and Pilgrimage, pp. 33-34.
163 Edith Turner, Heart of Lightness, pp. 85-89; p. 89.
164 Ibid., p. 91.
165 Ibid., p. 264.
166 Ibid., p. 90; Ronald Frankenberg foreword to Heart of Lightness, pp. xi-xxvi (p. xii).
There is potential inherent in such experiences: the mystical dimensions of the liminal experience offer profound moments of personal insight.

Edith Turner also identifies significant moments within the Turners’ anthropological careers which were threshold experiences and spiritual experiences. With humility, Edith describes how she finally ‘got’ (as in understood) the Marian Irish pilgrimage site in Knock, Ireland after twenty-nine years. This was as much a result of her own personal faith experiences while there, the ‘living moment’ as she would term it, as it was from observing or studying the pilgrimage site. Reflection upon their work on pilgrimage led Edith to recognize that it was often a ‘quest for spirit consciousness, although at the time we thought we were researching ritual’. ‘Spirit consciousness’, exploration into human experience of the divine, is a continuing theme in Edith Turner’s work. A seminal moment in her anthropological career and a further initiation into ‘spirit consciousness’ occurred through seeing the Ihamba spirit in the Ndembu ritual on her return to Africa after Victor’s death. Edith Turner has continued to write about ‘beyond words’ phenomena. The topic of healing, which includes her work with the Iñupiat Eskimo people, and her interest in the near-death experience phenomenon provide a few examples.

iii. The Anthropology of Experience

Over the course of time the Turners truly fostered and encouraged the ‘anthropology of experience’; the anthropologist becoming fully inside the experience of those being studied. It is possible to recognize an implicit spiritual dimension in their notion of the ‘anthropology of experience’ which also includes the above-mentioned ‘living moment’. They encourage the anthropologist’s own reflexive awareness as part of the fieldwork process:

Thus experience is a journey, a test (of self, of suppositions about others) a ritual passage, an exposure to peril, and an exposure to fear. Does this not sum up something akin to fieldwork, even to pilgrimage, which is, again

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168 Edith Turner, *Heart of Lightness*, p. 84, p. 123.
169 Ibid., p. 135.
170 Ibid., chapters 10-12.
171 Ibid., p. 135.
etymologically, a journey “through fields” (*per agros*), a kind of peregrination? Anthropological fieldwork surely deserves its very own kind of experiential theory, its own edifice of practical, yet poetical knowledge.\(^{172}\)

Turner advocated an experiential theory based on process, viewing life itself as transitional, a journey through various changes and states. He argued that as a species, humanity needs shared experience to inform, inspire and educate; human beings learn from each other. This is not limited to basic survival techniques, but also speaks to the deeper meaning of human life in connection with others.\(^ {173}\) Turner thus sees life experience as relational as something that needs to be shared in order for humanity to grow and develop as a whole from collective experience and consensus. Turner’s shift in thinking (which, as stated earlier, marked a move away from the structural/functionalist school of thought and towards the processual nature of life) was inspired by the work of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey helped Turner to recognize the primary importance of ‘lived experience’:

> He makes the obvious point that we feel and think immediately, we “live through” (*erleben*) our own thoughts and feelings, experience them directly. But experience is not as the structuralists assert, invertebrate, assigned its “reality” so to speak, by conformity to a coherent set of intellectual principles. Dilthey writes of “structures of experience.” These are not cognitive structures, though they contain thinking. They also involve emotions and volitions, in other words they are structures of action. It is important to realise that for Dilthey an *Erlebnis*, an experience, is not an immediate, self-enclosed unity since it carries within it direct relations with the past.\(^ {174}\)

Turner emphasizes the Diltheyian understanding of experience as that which is assimilated over the course of time:

> If cultural institutions and symbolic modes are to be seen, in Diltheyian terms, as the crystallized secretions of once living human experience,


\(^{173}\) Ibid., p. 207.

\(^{174}\) Ibid., p. 211.
individual and collective, we may perhaps see the word “experience” itself as an experienced traveler through time!\textsuperscript{175}

In further advocating the anthropology of experience, Turner stresses the performative nature of reflection upon experience:

It all sounds rather like Dilthey’s description of *erleben*, “living through” a sequence of events – it may be a ritual, a pilgrimage, a social drama, a friend’s death, a protracted labour, and other *Erlebnisse*. Such an experience is incomplete, though, unless one of its “moments” is “performance,” an act of creative retrospection in which “meaning” is ascribed to the events and parts of experience – even if the meaning is that “there is no meaning.” It is also “living through” and “thinking back.” It is also “willing or wishing forward,” i.e., establishing goals and models for future experience in which, hopefully, the errors and perils of past experience will be avoided or eliminated.\textsuperscript{176}

Ritual also involves a ‘living through’ of experience: ‘Religion, like art, *lives* in so far as it is performed […]. In ritual one lives through events, or through the alchemy of its framings and symbolings […] the deeds and words of the prophets and the saints, or if these are absent, myths and sacred epics’.\textsuperscript{177} This emphasis on experience is perhaps parallel to the process of mystagogy, a moving into a deeper lived experience of the sacred, although here expressed in secular terms. For Turner, this emphasis on reflective experience comes to full fruition through a collective process of becoming. The emphasis on process has mystical and transcendental dimensions which supersede the paradoxical elements of liminality:

So it is not merely a matter of dividing liminality into serious and ludic halves, the former concerned with transforming structural persons from members of one status role to another, the latter giving scope to the individual for subversion of the sociocultural status quo and the development of an individual moral style. Beyond the serious and the ludic lies the visionary or mystical, which transcends, perhaps even transgresses, both. Here we may be in the presence of our human ontological reality as an uncompleted being—or, rather, a community of beings still in process, still in


\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., p. 18. Turner references his work with Richard Schechner, a performance theorist.

\textsuperscript{177} Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 86.
evolution, still open-ended. In the deep cultural sincerity of the midliminal moment, we have an evanescent, fascinating, but fearful glimpse not merely of our nakedness when divested of manifest order but also of our still unformed clay, our radically unfinished state—a view of ourselves [...]. Then we know it would be inauthentic to declare ourselves or any of our works perfect, whole rounded off, anywhere near attaining closure.  

In summary, this final section explores how theology may be of service to anthropology, as themes from Christian mysticism help to interpret the darker side of liminal experience. This is further reflected upon at the end of chapter seven. In turn, anthropology can be of service to theology, as it provides the language and concepts to name the elusive in-between time of the mystical experience. For example, John Welch applies the Turner’s observations on mysticism and pilgrimage to the writings of the great spiritual Christian mystic Teresa of Avila. In The Interior Castle, written in 1577, Teresa describes the inner journey of faith through seven different stages, which are compared to seven different mansions in a castle. The journey culminates in meeting God in the seventh mansion, within the deepest part of oneself. Welch observes that ‘interior footwork’ is necessary for all pilgrimage, and this is what Teresa asks her community and other participants to do when they move through the seven different abodes or stages.  

Significant for the present discussion is Welch’s observation of the structure/anti-structure dynamic in Teresa’s writing: ‘Teresa has created an internal anti-structure, a free space away from the enclosures of the body and mind. Her invitation is to a pilgrimage. Her language is the symbolic language of pilgrimage. She invites a wandering, a playing among the images’.  

**Conclusion**

In exposing the liminal rite-of-passage experience as a universal comparative theme, this chapter has served a two-fold purpose. Its main purpose has been to establish an anthropological framework to interpret participants’ experience. A subsidiary

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180 Ibid. This links with the concept of ‘play’ as a liminal characteristic.
purpose regards anthropology serving theology; the phenomenological, critical and didactic elements of the Turners’ work have been highlighted in this respect.

The practical application of this theory in respect to the RCIA experience will be reflected upon at the end of chapter five. For example, the work of the Turners and that of other anthropologists may serve theology as it a) helps to frame religious experience ahead of theological reflection; b) opens up specific questions, such as theological reflection on the embodied nature of ritual experience; and c) exposes important comparative themes in an inter-disciplinary study, such as mysticism. Presenting an anthropological framework prior to a theological interpretation has enabled a thorough exploration of liminality and its associated themes ahead of theological reflection. It has also enabled exploration of the Christian spiritual influences upon the Turners’ work.

In chapter seven, the lived experience of liminality and *communitas* will be explored through the themes of the theology of grace, mystical experience and the paschal mystery. The ritual or liturgical aspects of the RCIA experience will be examined through sacramental theology, and the theological theme of mystagogy will be used as a defining theological hermeneutic. In turn, this theological interpretation will show how theology is of service to anthropology.
Chapter 5: An Anthropological Reading

*You are neither here nor there,*

*A hurry through which known and strange things pass.*

Seamus Heaney¹

*It is the hour of the pearl – the interval between day and night when time stops and examines itself.*

John Steinbeck²

In this chapter participants’ RCIA experience, as presented in chapter three, is read anthropologically. It is relatively straightforward to identify the RCIA as a rite of passage and to observe patterns of liminality – the middle stage of van Gennep’s model - in the way participants report their involvement in the RCIA. As a result, key anthropological themes are revealed within the data. Collectively, these gathered data give new expression to the theories of liminality and *communitas* as they apply to an advanced society and to the religious journey of Christian believers, resulting in their reception into the Catholic Church. The first section of this chapter situates the RCIA as a rite-of-passage experience. The central part of the chapter falls into three sections – liminal transition in the RCIA, *communitas* and ritual – which correspond with the Turnerian themes presented in the previous chapter.

The analysis also incorporates later scholarship, such as the work of Bloch that emphasizes ontological and existential change during ritual initiation (rather than van Gennep’s accent upon changes in social status). This exploration helps set the stage for the theological reflection in chapter seven. In the final section of this chapter the subsidiary theme of how anthropology may serve theology is also explored.

**The RCIA – A Contemporary Rite of Passage**

The previous chapter demonstrated that Turner’s theory (and the work of other anthropologists) expands the middle (liminal) stage of van Gennep’s rite of passage model. Before exploring the transitional nature of the RCIA it is appropriate to

contextualize the lived experience of the RCIA process within van Gennep’s broader framework. This chapter acknowledges that van Gennep’s three stages – separation, transition and incorporation – are evident within the experience of participants. However, as the Rite itself emphasizes through its focus upon threshold journeying, it is the transitional phase that is most prominent for respondents, especially as we explore its affective, somatic, ontological and transcendental dimensions.

It has been noted that van Gennep observed how a particular group or ceremonial occasion may emphasize one or more aspects of his tri-partite scheme depending upon the nature of the ritual context.³ The Rite primarily emphasizes the goal of sacramental initiation into full membership of the Church, whilst also acknowledging the challenges of the transitional phase, and bringing participants towards this goal through a series of phases and liturgical celebrations.⁴ The sentiment of being in-between arose as participants navigated thresholds along the journey of the RCIA. The sense of crossing thresholds was cumulative: indeed joining the RCIA group, with all the many associated reasons for doing so, was an initial threshold. Some participants described the daunting nature of approaching the Church for the first time – another threshold. The various liturgies, especially the Rite of Election, marked a significant stepping stone towards being received at Easter. Even leaving the group after the process was completed marked the crossing of another threshold, this time into parish life.

Peter’s description of his RCIA experience on pp. 69-70 represents a clear example of a classic tri-partite, rite-of-passage experience. Leaving his former Anglican congregation marked separation; entering the RCIA for a period of preparation was a stage of transition; being received into a new Catholic community at the Easter Vigil - a ‘coming home’ experience – an incorporation. However it was the middle, transitional phase of the RCIA which he most struggled with and which he likened to

³ Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 11, see chapter four, p. 117.
⁴ RCIA, no. 95; see chapter one p. 26. The RCIA literature also acknowledges the primacy of threshold experience in the RCIA. For example see: Pamela E. J. Jackson, *Journeybread for the Shadowlands: The Readings for the Rites of the Catechumenate, RCIA* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993).
‘going through a big, dark, tunnel’. This was a striking image of liminality, one which matched the Turnerian definition of the hidden nature of the liminal stage.\(^5\)

Given the prominence of the transitional phase it is not my intention to ignore significant experiences of separation and integration, which are present in varying degrees in participants’ stories. In effect these experiences also generally intensified the nature of transition. For example, participants experienced separation as they left behind a former religion or a former way of interpreting life (in the case of those with no religious background), and this contributed to their sense of transition as they navigated a new belief system. Participants did indeed have the experience of being incorporated into the new ecclesial community through sacramental initiation. Yet this was often accompanied by feelings of disappointment over lack of parish integration, which intensified a sense of a partial transition (with full incorporation into parish life occurring later over an extended time span). Changes in participants’ social status (a particular concern for van Gennep) were therefore less emphasized, although changes in their ecclesial status, i.e. becoming full community members, were obvious resultant factors for participants.

Whilst recognizing that participants’ experience generally follows the tri-partite rite-of-passage structure during the RCIA, this chapter specifically explores the more dominant *transitional* phase of this experience - the personal challenges of the process alongside the nature of change during the RCIA - in an attempt to understand the RCIA process more fully. We now explore the nature of such threshold journeying: a phenomenology of liminal transition within a contemporary rite-of-passage experience; the demands such transition poses; as well as the unique process of change that it invokes.

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\(^5\) Turner employs the image of a tunnel to represent ‘its hidden nature, its sometimes mysterious darkness, and reaggregation’; see Victor Turner, ‘Passages, Margins, and Poverty’, p. 232; see chapter four, p. 122.
I. Liminal Transition in the RCIA

The previous chapter outlined the origins of the Turners’ theory on liminality within indigenous experience, describing its broader application at the macro-level. This not only included the rite-of-passage experience that takes place in all religions, but also human society’s experience of the liminal. A Turnerian reading of the RCIA experience demonstrates contemporary expressions of liminality. This will now be presented in three sub-sections: an overview of the types of liminality as observed within a contemporary rite of passage; the specific phenomenology of the liminal transition, especially participants’ sense of ‘being in-between’; and the nature of change within the RCIA (incorporating the observations of both Bloch and Levin).

Contemporary Expressions of Liminality

Participants’ RCIA experiences are filled with examples of liminality, to be understood in two distinct senses, which, when combined, highlight a third. Firstly, the RCIA can be described as a liminal phase as found within the classic tri-partite rite of passage, as participants move through the formal RCIA process, which is punctuated by its various liturgical thresholds. Participation in the RCIA process corresponds with a definite liminal ‘in-between’ stage. Secondly, the concept of liminality may be used in a broader metaphorical sense, to describe experiences of personal transition or the crossing of personal thresholds. These include, for example, experiences of sickness and times of waiting, or the transitional nature of immigration, involving physically moving from one country to another and adopting a new cultural identity. Thirdly, participants’ experience revealed a sense of cumulative or juxtaposed liminality, occasions where transitional experiences frequently overlapped: personal, transitional experience often occurs alongside the liminal rite-of-passage experience. These various aspects of liminality provide a contemporary snapshot of the Turners’ observation that liminality may be found at all levels and stages of society (see p. 120).

Participants’ experience also included numerous examples of metaphorical experiences of liminality before, during and after the RCIA process. These in-
between situations were demarcated by personal transitions rather than by a formal ritual process. For example, Siobhan described ‘something going on underground’ during the time before she decided to become Catholic. This suggests some level of liminal experience as she searched for deeper meaning and authenticity in her life. Having children finally prompted her to become Catholic. For many participants, liminal experiences, such as the loss and transition experienced through bereavement, or reaching a new status in life such as parenthood or retirement, were commensurate with rite-of-passage liminal experience with all its difficulties and potential. These liminal experiences often prompted a faith search and enquiry into joining the Catholic Church which is testament to the potential of such transitional experiences.⁶

These new expressions of liminality were often cumulative in nature. Where experiences of personal transition coincided with the rite-of-passage experience in the RCIA they often compounded its liminal nature. For some participants the juxtaposition of their experiences intensified the liminal nature of their rite of passage into the Church. This was evident in Beverley’s story (see p. 75). For her, the RCIA was a ‘strange time’, given the concurrence of transitional experiences in her story. During the RCIA she was expecting her second child (a rite of transition); she also experienced her father’s illness and death (a rite of separation).⁷ For some, prior cultural transitions eased the negative effects of the transformative movement of the RCIA. Shifts in self-identity provided new perspectives, as the example from Richard’s story, concerning his immigration to England, illustrates (p. 76). For many, cumulative experiences of liminal transition strengthened resolve and helped them to navigate future transitions, including the transition into Church membership. Here we see how the rites of separation, transition and reincorporation – in the original sense that van Gennep outlines – are often experienced within a liminal

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⁶ A comparison may be made here with the Turners’ own faith search and decision to become Catholic after experiencing a ‘jolt’ from their African fieldwork and with the liminal pause they experienced after they left Marxism. Edith Turner, personal email communication, 15th October 2010; see chapter four p. 150.

⁷ This movement provides a literal example of Turner’s observation that ‘the most sacred’ (i.e. experiences of death and new life) and the ‘most human’ (i.e. sickness and human frailty) co-exist in an integrated manner during the liminal state. Victor Turner, ‘Myth and Symbol’, pp. 579-580; see chapter four, p. 125.
phase demonstrating the complex and multi-layered nature of rite-of-passage transition (i.e. the ‘reduplication’ of the tri-partite experience within a pronounced transitional period\textsuperscript{8}).

For obvious reasons, the interpretation of participants’ experience in this chapter is primarily concerned with the RCIA; however, the influence of other liminal, transitional experiences on the process and their cumulative and spiraling nature are also taken into account. We explore how anthropological theory sheds light on what happens during the RCIA process and what participants’ experiences reveal about the contemporary liminal experience.

\textit{Liminality: The Realm of the In-Between}

We now focus more specifically upon the \textit{experiential} nature of liminal transition within the RCIA, particularly the challenging nature of being ‘in-between’. The affective dimensions of the RCIA experience are contextualized within the Turnerian framework alongside the van Gennep tri-partite schema.

In his early indigenous fieldwork Turner recognized the ambiguous position of initiands. The in-between or threshold status of those engaging in the RCIA process is also evident in participants’ experience. This sense of ambiguity is apparent despite the voluntary, self-selecting nature of RCIA participants, which is in contrast to the obligatory nature of indigenous rites of passage.

Some of the most striking ‘in-between’ phenomena to arise within the RCIA were negative and unsettling. This was characteristic both of the ritual process itself and the transitional, liminal experiences that preceded and accompanied the RCIA. The RCIA process invoked feelings of displacement, of not belonging, or of resistance to the uncomfortable dimensions of being liminal, such as waiting.

Some candidates (those already baptized) described feeling left out of liturgical celebrations as they attended with their families prior to starting the RCIA. Given

\textsuperscript{8} Van Gennep, \textit{The Rites of Passage}, p. 11, see chapter four, p. 117.
they were already Christian, but could not fully participate in the liturgy, they felt especially in-between. Whilst some of these candidates commented on the navigation of different Catholic doctrines, such as the teaching on Mary, their transition focused upon, being embraced by, and wanting to belong to the new ecclesial community. The transition for these candidates was generally driven by a desire for a ‘rite of incorporation’ into a new Christian community.

Liminal transition was further heightened for candidates if they were former *practicing* members of a Christian faith community and active within that community. They had often experienced a strong sense of what may be termed a ‘rite of separation’ from a previous group. This was often especially acute, as these participants left behind a community of friends, a way of worshipping and an ecclesial identity. Peter and Abigail’s stories reflect the most prominent examples of being in-between in this way. Abigail captured the ambivalent sentiment of this time, saying that she felt like a ‘spare part’; the experience was difficult emotionally and she described the RCIA as an ‘uncomfortable place to be’. She characterized this through a hesitant mood during which:

…everything human in us wants us to either walk away completely or go onwards.

Abigail, former practicing Anglican

For Peter the separation and transition was particularly pronounced, and as previously mentioned Peter’s transition felt like going through a ‘dark tunnel’. He elaborated on this image, describing ‘real feelings’ of ‘darkness’ and stating that ‘you might have felt terrified while you were there’. This image suggests isolation and sensory deprivation. His liminal waiting experience was characterized by a distinct sense of loss of his former community and a desire to receive the Eucharist, coupled with a sense of grief at not being able to participate. These descriptive terms correlate with Turner’s description of liminality as being the scene of ‘insecurity’ and ‘despair’. By contrast Peter’s sacramental reception at Easter, which involved

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returning ‘to the light’, signified an arrival point (a rite of incorporation). The subsequent sense of belonging resulted in an experience of empowerment.

The threshold experience of catechumens reflects further nuances in transitional experience. The transition for those coming from a background of a different religious faith, or of no particular faith, was often different for those who came from a Christian background, in part because it involved navigating new doctrines and a new ritual expression. This was particularly evident in Sarah’s interview, as she described grappling with the Christian doctrine of forgiveness of sin and the transition of moving from a polytheistic to a monotheistic faith:

And you know in Hinduism they’ve got all these gods? Whereas in Christianity it’s God as Supreme God, our Heavenly Father, then His Son, and then His Holy Spirit. It’s not like that in the Hinduism religion.

Sarah, former practicing Hindu

Similarly, Beverley and Victoria, both from a background of no particular faith, came to a deeper understanding of the Christian doctrine of eternal life as they experienced the suffering and death of loved ones and appropriated these experiences through their faith (see pp. 73-74 and p. 110). However, those from a former Christian background, but who were not actively practicing, also came to a deeper understanding of Christian doctrine. Liam, who was from an Anglican background but who had also gone through an agnostic period prior to becoming Catholic, came to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Christian teaching on eternal life. He described moving from a ‘deterministic understanding of what we were as human beings’ – that ‘when we died, we died and that was it’ – to a belief in eternal life.

That the transition between different faiths, or from a background of no faith to one of faith, was a prominent feature of the RCIA process was reflected in the comparative nature of the interviews, as participants continued to reflect upon their previous faith expression or prior absence of faith throughout the conversation.

Participants often used metaphorical and thematic language to describe their experience of being ‘in-between’. This often reflected the embodied nature of
liminality; for example, participants spoke of metaphorical movement: moving from darkness into light, desiring to enter the Church through its doors, wanting to either walk away from the process or go onwards. These examples capture how their imaginations were engaged by a sense of liminal experience, which was spoken of in emotional terms: negative, in the sense of uncertainty, and positive in the sense of anticipation and excitement. These emotive descriptions contribute towards a liminal mood and may be described as examples of a liminal language. Some participants’ speech in the interview process itself was often framed tentatively (what Turner would describe as the ‘subjunctive’).\textsuperscript{10} When reflecting on their faith experiences, participants often used terms such as ‘I suppose’, ‘probably’, ‘almost’, ‘possibly’, ‘sort of’.

But it wasn’t until, \textit{I suppose}, I had my children and I slowly began to think there was something here that I was missing.

\textit{Siobhan, Church of Ireland background (emphasis added)}

Such ambivalent expressions illustrate how the interview was a reflective space for re-living both memories and faith experience. The use of this conditional uncertainty to try to describe past liminal experience also retrospectively illustrates the delicate nature of that liminal time and the inherent vulnerability that it often invokes.

It was observed in the previous chapter that van Gennep’s theory was concerned with changes in social status, and later developments of his theory evolved in various ways, i.e. Turner accentuated the experiential dimensions of the middle, transitional phase of a rite of passage. This section seeks to substantiate that, as Turner argues, the liminal phase demands specific attention; indeed for RCIA participants the transitional phase was often most acute. During this phase participants were dealing with the emotional effects of the separation from a previous group, the strangeness of the new situation or beliefs of the new group, and the heightened anticipation of

\textsuperscript{10} Victor Turner, ‘Morality and Liminality’, p. 134; see chapter four, p. 126. The RCIA, through introducing the practices of the early Church into contemporary practice, has, as Turner would state, its own ‘iconographic’ language, see Victor Turner, ‘Passages, Margins and Poverty’, p. 255; see chapter four, p. 126.
incorporation into the new faith. Other associated personal experiences of transition often resulted in an experience of cumulative liminality; participants encountered other simultaneous experiences of separation (such as bereavement) and incorporation (joining the RCIA group) during the RCIA process. All these elements reflect a heightened sense of being, the ‘highest pitch of self-consciousness’ as Turner framed it.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Liminal: The Realm of Change}

The in-between nature of the RCIA encouraged the opportunity for both personal and social renewal. This was realized in several dimensions: spiritual, intellectual, moral and social (through \textit{communitas}, see below). Cumulatively, these accounts of faith-journey experience illustrate Turner’s observation of the all-encompassing ‘total perspective’ that may be gained during liminal transition.\textsuperscript{12} These dimensions of renewal also give weight to Bloch’s observations concerning ontological change: one is not the same after a rite of passage, as compared with before.\textsuperscript{13} We now begin to explore the nature of such change in the RCIA, firstly through spiritual experiences of death and new life, which contribute towards the new ‘transcendental identity’ that Bloch identified.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{‘Transcendental Identity’}

The in-between period in the RCIA is paradoxical: the RCIA is difficult and challenging, yet these challenges prefigure a sense of potential and of new life. Participants described this in terms that highlight the paradoxical nature of the process. In participants’ own words, the RCIA was a time that was simultaneously ‘weird’ yet also treasured; it was an experience of internal ‘limbo’ yet also transformative; the group sharing was ‘tragic’ but nevertheless ‘wonderful’; the RCIA marked a period of waiting alongside learning and apprenticeship. These seeming paradoxes reveal the nature of the prospective growth that took place during

\textsuperscript{11} Victor Turner, ‘Passages, Margins and Poverty’, p. 255; see chapter four, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{13} Bloch, \textit{Prey into Hunter}, p. 16; see chapter four, p. 127-128.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 6; see chapter four, p. 127.
this time. The potential that Turner predicted as essential to the liminal state was therefore an integral aspect of participants’ liminal experience.

As we have seen, participants’ experience often revealed a sense of closure to a former way of life, of worship, of beliefs, of faith community and even of identity. Crossing the threshold into the liminal space of the RCIA involved the death of what came before. The process resulted in experiences of new life: moving from the realms of the hidden into the realms of the seen or known, or moving from darkness into light (to use the imagery that Peter employed in his interview). As the section on *communitas* demonstrates, the positive aspects of the RCIA experience helped participants through this process.

Personal renewal through death and new life experiences demonstrated an awareness of transcendental experience; participants experienced a sense of growth and movement towards God. Given that Turner observed that the relaying of myth and sacred narrative opens up experiences of the transcendent for participants, and that Bloch highlights the acquisition of a ‘transcendental identity’ during rite-of-passage transition, the following are examples of how this was observed at various points in the data. Often, personal prayer revealed such moments of encounter. For example, Maria describes how her faith grew during the week of guided prayer in the midst of her preparation for being received. She described becoming closer to Jesus through prayer and gaining a sense that ‘Jesus is in us’ and that Jesus is ‘always with me’. Other references to prayer, included the importance of imaginative prayer and how prayer formed an integral part of the RCIA group, p. 80. Serena’s joyful description of how she felt after the Vigil (her anticipated sense of heaven and experience of God’s presence, see p. 101) encapsulates how the liturgy could also inspire existential experience, and this is given further attention in the section on ritual.

These examples of a deeper or newfound appreciation of faith not only express a new spiritual identity but also contribute to a new *habitus*, a practical way of living and interpreting life. For example, participants came to understand personal suffering in the light of the paschal mystery. They could relate to Jesus through his suffering, and understand their own sufferings through his. Pamela could relate to the image of
Mary holding the body of Jesus as she had experienced the death of her own young child. A newfound ‘transcendental identity’ was particularly experienced through participation in the Easter liturgies and this is explored in the section on ritual below. This sense of ‘transcendental identity’ contributes to what we may term a threshold-spirituality. This crucial component of participants’ liminal experience will be taken forward into the theological reading: i.e. how dark, difficult experiences may be interpreted as vital within the spiritual journey. Consequently, the theological reading presented in the next chapter will be used to interpret these events and examples of liminal transcendence as graced (mystical) experience, thus providing a theological reading of the heightened mystical or transcendental experience which Turner insisted is characteristic of the liminal state.

Aspects of Personal Change

Participants described various aspects of transformation. They were acutely aware of how they had changed on an affective level, including becoming calmer and more at peace, for example. The affective changes are focused upon in the section on communitas below.

On an intellectual level, participants gained new knowledge during their RCIA sessions. Through accumulating knowledge, their relationship with God and Jesus deepened. As demonstrated above, spiritual and philosophical questions, such as belief in the afterlife, were grappled with. This increased personal knowledge often involved a heightened faith-consciousness which was either in continuity with former inter-denominational faith expressions or marked a completely new faith identity. Turner’s stress on embodiment and the transmission of aspects of faith through the senses de-emphasizes the purely cognitive transfer of knowledge during this RCIA. This need for holistic catechesis in the RCIA was reinforced by the fact that participants did not discuss the informational content of the RCIA to any great extent. There was a broader cultural dynamic in operation. This involved embracing the transformative spiritual paradigms through engagement in ritual, and especially its embodied dimensions, which are discussed in further detail on pp. 178-180.
Participants also experienced personal change on a moral level, hence engaging in the ‘moral self-critique’ that Turner identified.\textsuperscript{15} This was evident in descriptions of heightened conscience and an examination of daily actions and their consequences within a new moral mindset. The data also revealed a broader, multi-dimensional ‘self-critique’ that not only included self-examination of personal moral values but also increased self-awareness of faith in everyday life. Turner also explained how the liminal state facilitates the dynamics of identity formation. This has a moral element involving a ‘test of moral being’ (as discussed below).

In summary, an anthropological reading of the data reveals that experiences of liminality within the RCIA form a dominant motif articulating a contemporary phenomenology of liminality. This anthropological interpretation throws participants’ liminal experience into sharp relief. The rite-of-passage experience so far analyzed concerns personal change and transformation. Themes related to the transcendental continue to be explored in the sections on \textit{communitas} and ritual. Transitional experience – including participants’ sense of the numinous and transcendent – will be reflected upon theologically in chapter seven. Anthropological interpretation therefore acts as a gateway to a more explicit theological reading.

\section*{II. \textit{Communitas}}

\textit{Communitas}, the deep bonding and mutual reciprocity that occurs between those engaged in a rite-of-passage experience, was an evident theme in participants’ RCIA experience. Similarly, the model of sociality inherent in the Turnerian theory of structure and anti-structure provides a way of interpreting the social dynamics of the RCIA group process within the broader context of joining the Church.

\textit{Communitas: Relational and Spiritual Experience}

Rich descriptions of \textit{communitas} are evident within participants’ RCIA experience, manifested through the poignant sharing of life experiences, friendship formation and sense of community. In fact, prior experiences of friendship and welcome from

\textsuperscript{15} Victor Turner, ‘Morality and Liminality’, p. 136; see chapter four, p. 136.
Church members may be interpreted as influential *communitas* experiences that encouraged participants to join the Church. Some participants were particularly attracted by such experiences, and in joining expressed a desire to be part of the community and engage in relational encounters with others. A *communitas* experience of bonding and mutuality therefore often provided an entry point into the faith community.

Paula described the typical dissolution of structure and hierarchy within her group, as all participants were from ‘different backgrounds’ but ‘all had one common goal’ in the exploration of their faith. The priest leading this particular group also participated in it as an equal rather than as an expert. Usual social, secular norms were replaced with a dynamic of open exchange, involving a lack of inhibition in sharing life experiences (see pp. 78-80). This example reflected the experience of many participants; members of the RCIA group related to one another as equals, despite the diversity in the group.

The sense of equality and mutual respect in certain groups enabled their members to share with one another at a profound level. Beverley described such encounters in terms of imaginative contemplation, in which ‘you would actually put yourself into the situation’. This resulted in an encounter with others in the group at a deep level of understanding; she commented that participants shared experiences that they perhaps would not even have shared with their spouses. Pamela indicated that the empathy within the group was so heartrending that the sharing of participants’ sorrows within the group almost brought her to tears. In some cases the group was described as a living body or entity. For Jack, for instance, if someone were missing from group sessions it felt like the body was torn apart, akin to losing a limb. These examples display how *communitas* was experienced as a living encounter: as Siobhan stated, the group involved ‘really living’ the whole experience, which was not just about informational learning (see p. 82). This had an embodied dimension, as the group *communitas* dynamic was likened to a physical body. These examples of friendship, empathetic sharing of faith issues and personal concerns, and equality with others in the group, demonstrate the *communitas* dynamic in the characteristic I-
Thou sense. They also demonstrate a sacred encounter with ‘the other’, which as shown in the last chapter is an important dimension of embodied encounter.\textsuperscript{16}

Examples of \textit{communitas} were often stronger in the extended group process; however, the length of the process did not exclude \textit{communitas} experiences. As well as \textit{communitas} encounters which occurred over a period of time there was also reference to the fleeting nature of such \textit{communitas}: as one participant expressed it, some faith experiences were a ‘flash of feeling close’. As Turner describes, \textit{communitas} may occur between two or three people, and reminds these individuals that they are connected to the larger human family or sense of the divine.\textsuperscript{17}

The RCIA group provided participants with a sense of being in a sacred space and time, opening up possibilities for spiritual encounter. Participants’ subsequent personal encounters, relating to the deepening of their faith, may also be interpreted as \textit{communitas}, I-Thou encounters. This was evident in personal experiences of growing closer to Jesus and God and was expressed in various ways, including coming to an awareness of God’s sustaining presence in darkness, a deeper recognition and realization of the person of Jesus Christ, and coming to understand personal suffering in the light of the paschal mystery. Pamela’s account of her relationship with Jesus – ‘He is love in’t He? (sic), and nothing else but love’ – correlates with Edith Turner’s description of \textit{communitas} as an expression of ‘unconditional love’.\textsuperscript{18}

As mentioned above participants could relate to Jesus through his suffering, and understand their own sufferings through his. Such interpersonal \textit{communitas} encounters contributed to the formation of a personal faith practice or \textit{habitus} which led to appropriation of personal trials through Christ’s suffering. Embodiment, suffering, and \textit{communitas} are therefore important themes which will be interpreted theologically in the light of the paschal mystery in chapter seven.

\textsuperscript{16} Davies, \textit{Emotion, Identity, and Religion}, p. 52; see chapter four, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{17} Victor Turner, \textit{From Ritual to Theatre}, p. 47; see chapter four, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{18} Edith Turner, \textit{Heart of Lightness}, p. 93; see chapter four, p. 131.
Communitas: An Alternative Contrasting Experience

The RCIA group experience may be interpreted as an experience of anti-structure, i.e., participants felt they were stepping out of their normal existence for a time. Although participants were not secluded in the indigenous, rite-of-passage sense, the RCIA group marked entrance into a different spiritual and social space. Some participants described the relaxed dynamic of their RCIA group, in which they felt safe and protected. For example, Beverley described the group as being like a ‘warm bubble’, which tallied with Turner’s description of the liminal time as likened to being in a ‘capsule’ or ‘pod’. For Victoria, the group dynamic was like a ‘sorority session’, which to some extent suggested an exclusive and elite membership. That some participants described feeling ‘special’ in this time, and that their parish community or members of the diocese welcomed them and congratulated them, highlighted their dignified status as new members of the community.

Where participants had experienced an especially acute liminal experience, as seen, for example, in Peter’s story, they often noted that they had received little accompanying social support and reduced communitas experience within the group. It would seem that communitas, which Turner described as an essential human social need or ‘generic human bond’, is necessary to help counter some of the negative liminal effects that occur during the process. This finding recognizes that communitas and its communitarian ethic cushions the negative effects of liminality; positive binding experiences which enhance a sense of group identity help to facilitate the personal transition. This experience extends beyond the immediate group setting. In this study, friendship between participants and sponsors provided experiences of mutuality and support, as did the welcome given by parishioners at celebrations after the Easter Vigil. These broader communitas experiences also had the potential to help ease the crossing of numerous personal thresholds during the RCIA.

The RCIA may also be considered an anti-structural experience, in contrast to the ‘structural’ aspects of parish life. Entrance into parish life after the RCIA often marked a return to ‘structure’. Siobhan described the challenging nature of leaving
the RCIA (like swimming without arm bands), which suggests a sense of surviving on her own without the security of her group. One of the striking aspects of the return to structure, or everyday parish existence, was the perceived lack of communitas experience outside of the RCIA group, in the wider parish. Some respondents were disappointed that the intensity of friendship experienced in the RCIA group was not maintained beyond group participation, and this was expressed in an explicit desire for an ongoing form of communitas. Certain participants experienced a strong relationship or communitas encounter with their sponsor, and this helped them to cross the threshold from the security of the RCIA group into wider parish life. (As a point to be considered for the future, fostering communitas experiences between new members and the rest of the parish may help participants assimilate into the parish.)

The critical function the anti-structure experience was evident in Richard’s description of the lack of response from the parish both as regards the RCIA and more generally (see p. 84). He made the interesting observation that the Church could learn from RCIA participants, and specifically observed that the Church itself did not effectively reach out to understand the wider (non-Church) community. Other participants expressed disappointment concerning the lack of integration of the group into parish life. These remarks, reflecting the main critique arising from the data, were made from the standpoint of anti-structure, a position of increased perception. This echoes with Turner’s comment that liminal groups are in a position to empower or ‘oxygenate’ the Church or ‘mystical body’ through their experiences, and are thus an important voice. In this sense it would seem that RCIA participants may provide an important, somewhat prophetic voice to guide the Church. (The prophetic liminal nature of RCIA participants is reflected upon in chapter seven, see pp. 260-262.)

**Dynamics of Identity Formation**

The alternating between structure and anti-structure in the liminal process mirrors an oscillation between identity and non-identity. Turner determined that during the liminal phase participants experience a sense of non-identity in contrast to their usual
social conformity. \textsuperscript{19} Similarly, during the in-between phase of the RCIA, some participants described painful experiences of uncertainty and loss of identity. This notion of ‘non-identity’ was evident, for example, in Peter’s heightened sense of anticipation, waiting to receive the Eucharist, although he did feel supported by God during this time. It may also be observed in Abigail’s experience as she described wanting to enter the Church and be ‘one of the masses’ or conform to social roles and norms rather than remain in an uncomfortable in-between place. Both accounts reveal levels of frustration caused by the liminal state. These examples reveal how the liminal time, as Turner predicted, is a ‘test of moral being’. Yet it is this experience of ‘non-identity’ that heightens the new sense of identity on being received into the Church. There were hints of this in the descriptions of those attending the Rite of Election at their respective diocesan cathedrals. Participants’ wonder and surprise at seeing all the other people becoming Catholic at the Rite of Election gave them a sense of solidarity and \textit{communitas} with all the others going through the same experience. Where participants did experience a sense of non-identity, this was somewhat counteracted by \textit{communitas} experiences in the group and during diocesan liturgies.

Entrance into the Catholic community at Easter, and the accompanying re-integration into the community, provided a new sense of identity. Beverley’s account of \textit{communitas} at the Easter Vigil captured her sense that she belonged to a large global family. Celebrating the ceremony connected her to all the others going through the experience around the world; and she likened this to a family united across time and space. This universal level of \textit{communitas} expressed something of the timeless quality that Turner attributed to it and also echoes Rappaport’s feeling of oneness with oneself, others and the cosmos.\textsuperscript{20} Thus a meta-level of \textit{communitas} radiated beyond the RCIA group setting.

In summary, expressions of \textit{communitas} were evident at multiple levels: the small group, the parish and diocese and within personal faith experiences. Given the

\textsuperscript{19} Victor Turner, ‘Morality and Liminality’, pp. 141-142; see chapter four, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{20} Rappaport, \textit{Ritual and Religion}, p. 220; see chapter four, p. 140.
importance of such *communitas* encounters in the RCIA (reflecting an essential human social need to belong), exploration of the theological notes of *communitas* will reveal the theological dimensions of this aspect of the RCIA. In theological terms, these opportunities were experiences of *koinonia* (an experience of *communio* of Christian living, see chapter six, p. 209) and were instances of a graced encounter with God. Turner himself made the connection between *communitas* and grace: ‘This is the experiential basis, I believe, of the Christian notion of “actual grace.”’ Thus, in the workshop, village, office, lecture-room, theatre, almost anywhere, people can be subverted from their duties and rights into an atmosphere of *communitas*.21 The *communitas* theme marks an important segue between participants’ experience and anthropology and theology, a mutually supportive transition, which will be referred to in the theological reading to follow.

### III. Ritual

Turner outlined how it is that ritual frames and gives expression to the liminal state.22 The last chapter outlined the various paradigmatic functions of ritual, including its capacity to help foster ‘transcendental identity’ and ontological change. These observations were framed within an ‘embodiment paradigm’ which acknowledges the importance of the human body in ritual. These themes are now used to interpret participants’ ritual experience in the RCIA, including the agency of the human body in ritual experience, ahead of a more detailed theological interpretation of the sacramental and liturgical experiences of participants (to be set out in chapter seven).

*‘Paradigmatic Function’*

The central paradigm of the RCIA process concerns conversion to the person of Jesus Christ. For Turner, Christ’s sacrifice and the paschal mystery are opened up within Christian ritual in a lived experience, during which the whole person ‘is

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21 *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 45; see chapter four, p. 132.
impregnated with a single message through all the channels of communication available to him’, and lives ‘what is being communicated’. 23

It was perhaps the paradigmatic function of the whole RCIA process, not just its ritual elements, which initiated participants into the mystery of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, including conversion through scriptural catechesis and prayer. Indeed participants engaged with ‘paradigmatic scenes’ from scripture which enabled them to reorient their lives and align themselves with Christ. 24

Nevertheless, the liturgies that our participants engaged in were extremely important and were described as lived experiences. Participants used emotive terms to capture their anticipation and nerves, their joy and sense of awe and wonder when being received. In particular, the liturgies also spoke to participants on a somatic level (discussed below). Participants did ‘live what is being communicated’ in ritual through coming to terms with their personal sorrows and hopes through a deeper understanding of the paschal mystery. For some, the paschal mystery helped them to come to a deeper intellectual understanding of their faith, especially in terms of grasping the mystery of death and the afterlife. Sarah, accepting forgiveness of sin through redemption in Christ, marveled at Christ’s sacrifice for her. As Turner suggests, ritual anticipated change in the minds and hearts of participants, 25 as their lives were changed as a result, through intellectual, moral and affective conversion: a life of Christian discipleship. The paradigmatic function of the liturgy also concerned initiation into a new way of sacramental living, one which inspired personal transformation. Encounter with Christ in the liturgy and resultant sacramental living, both examples of habitus – newfound practical ways of living - will be explored in the theological reflection in chapter seven.

**Embodied Experience**

Ritual prompted distinct somatic experiences for many participants. Such heightened physical experiences, often beyond words, had the effect of grounding sacramental

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23 Victor Turner, ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic,’ p. 510; see chapter four, p. 139.
25 Victor Turner, ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic,’ p. 506; see chapter four, p. 139.
experience deep within the psyche, heart and bodies of participants. As Turner states: ‘we discover in this stage a crucial anchoring of ideas and symbols in the human body and in its somatic processes’. 26 Embodied experience did indeed play an important role in grounding the sacramental experience within participants. For example, Natalie’s experience of being baptized, during which she felt a sensation of ‘something’ going through her body, led her to describe feeling changed. Her description demonstrates that sacramental initiation was a numinous experience beyond words. This is a powerful example of both the newfound ‘transcendental identity’ and ontological change that Bloch reveals. Participants often described feeling a sense of personal transformation after having experienced sacramental initiation:

Like a change, a very big change…honestly I can’t explain it but, something really happened to me that night…

Natalie, former Muslim

Turner’s encouragement that we should pay attention to somatic processes is an important acknowledgement of the role of the body in initiatory experience. That the body both mediates and anchors the sacramental is directly expressed by Abigail: ‘I think you need a body for these sacraments’. These examples demonstrate how participants engaged in ritual through ‘somatic modes of attention’, that is ‘attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others’, or as Csordas states ‘paying attention with one’s body’. 27

Participants’ experience also demonstrates how, as Levin illustrates, the body is a locus of wisdom – an ‘ontological gift’. 28 Nevertheless participants not only struggled to define somatic experience but also sometimes discounted it. When participants did listen to such wisdom, appropriating it within their own experience - trusting their ‘bodily felt-sense’ (to use Gendlin’s term) 29 - it led to an embodied knowing. Such participants ‘knew’ through their bodily experiences: for example, 30

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27 Csordas, Body/ Meaning/ Healing, p. 244; see chapter four, p. 143-144.
28 Levin, The Body’s Recollection of Being, p. 50; see chapter four p. 142.
29 Ibid., p. 53; see chapter four p. 142.
Pamela ‘knew’ on being confirmed that she had made the right decision and was on the right spiritual path. For Brian, ‘physically feeling the memory’ reminded him of his own reception into the Church. This knowing through embodied sacramental and liturgical experience was a powerful finding in the data. The body itself is an important threshold for experiencing or mediating the divine; it is an important conduit for receiving divine truths. Levin in particular notes the importance of the liturgical text in imparting wisdom to the individual as ‘sacred language is woven, is insinuated, into the very fibers and bones of the body’.  

For RCIA initiands participation in liturgical worship, in addition to engagement with scriptural texts in prayer, involved an experience of receiving sacred wisdom. The wisdom of the body as experienced through liturgical and sacramental experience is a fascinating theme that is taken into the theological reading of participants’ experience, and such encounters will be reflected upon in theological terms (see pp. 257-259).

Embodied experience, which includes the somatic and affective, contributes to a heightened sense of reflexivity. This includes the positive emotive descriptions of being received into the Church. There are clear examples of Turner’s description of ‘flow’ (which enables an ‘exalted state of reflexivity’) in the data, and Rappaport’s observations that ritual experience is ‘time out of time’.  

For example, Serena described a sense of timelessness or suspended animation on commenting about how joyful she felt on being received:

I don’t think I’ll get such a marvelous feeling until I’m in my coffin…It’s like you’ve died and gone to heaven and you know God’s all around you, that was how it felt. It was just so wonderful.

Serena, former practicing Anglican

This example also demonstrates a sense of existential communitas but with explicit eschatological overtones. For others this sense of ‘flow’ continued after they were received, as participants experienced a sustained high for some time afterwards.

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30 Ibid., p. 215; see chapter four, p. 143.
Ritual as Cultural Critique

Turner’s definition of ritual marks it as sacred space and a unique realm where tradition is passed on. It has an innate capacity to invoke change both in the individual and in society. On a personal level, the ritual ‘cultural realm’ helped participants navigate various ecclesial, faith and cultural changes. This dynamic demonstrates the social function that Turner ascribes to ritual. The momentum of ritual, in this case the liturgical year culminating at Easter, also provided an anticipatory focus for participants even though they could not fully participate in all liturgies.

There was little evidence of ritual experience prompting a critique of the wider society, which most likely reflects the self-directed concerns of most participants and their respective parishes. (As mentioned above one participant did criticize the inward-looking nature of parish life.) Participants did, however, describe change in how they related to others, including relationships at the workplace, and in becoming more socially conscious. The prophetic nature of the liturgy and its capacity to challenge participants is reflected upon in chapters six and seven.

In considering the change that ritual inspires both individually and socially, it is appropriate to explore participants’ experiences in light of Bloch’s concept of ‘rebounding conquest’. Bloch illustrates how participants encounter an increased sense of vitality after their rite-of-passage initiation through experiencing a symbolic death and subsequent new life. During sacramental initiation, specifically baptism, RCIA participants share in Christ’s mystical death and resurrection. Participants symbolically die with Christ and rise to new life with him, to then become Christ’s presence in the world. Examples of such vitality are found in participants’ stories. As Sarah stated, she felt Christ’s presence within her after receiving the Eucharist and this helped her deal with the challenges of life (see p. 100). A few participants

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32 See various references to Victor Turner’s work on p. 145, chapter four.
33 Bloch, Prey into Hunter pp. 4, 19, 21, 24; see chapter four, p. 128.
34 RCIA, no. 206, p. 119.
35 As Davies notes this is an example of ‘rebounding conquest’, Anthropology and Theology, p. 138; see chapter four, p. 129.
were so enthusiastic about their experience of becoming Catholic that they went on to encourage other members of their immediate and extended family to join the Church. Others discussed how they lived out their faith in the workplace.

If (as Bloch maintains) the whole community gains vitality and life through the initiation experience, it follows that the whole parish community should experience a sense of regeneration through the RCIA. (Parish community regeneration is a theme recognized in contemporary literature and practice concerning the RCIA. Yet several of our participants mentioned the lack of warmth in parish life in comparison with their RCIA group experience. The difficulty concerning integration into the parish is perhaps an example of the ‘violence’ that Bloch identifies and illustrates the challenge of societal integration after the rite-of-passage experience. This may perhaps be accounted for given the fact that the majority of parishioners will not have participated in the RCIA and therefore themselves cannot perhaps thoroughly appreciate the intensity and vitality of the process. We return to this theme in chapters seven and eight when we consider how RCIA participants may be a liminal symbol for the whole community. This in turn challenges the rest of the parish to embrace their own personal experiences of liminality (see pp. 262-263; 280-281).

In summary, ritual acts as a paradigm and sacred frame by which faith is transmitted, especially through heightened embodied experience. Ritual inspires change on both personal and social levels. In terms of the RCIA this encourages and enables a critique of a parish community’s initiatory practice for the welcoming of new members.

IV. Anthropology in Service of Theology

An anthropological reading of the RCIA experience in this chapter has revealed that liminality and communitas are dominant motifs within participants’ experience. This study did not set out to test Turnerian theory in a deductive fashion; however, the

37 Bloch, *Prey into Hunter*, p. 6; see chapter four p. 128.
38 Reasons for the sometimes lukewarm reception of RCIA participants into parish life are an area for future research.
interpretation of RCIA experience in this chapter uniquely illustrates the foresight and sheer perceptiveness of the Turners’ work. In the light of the anthropological interpretation in this chapter, the question of how anthropology may be of service to theology is explored through the three observations made by Chauvet (as alluded to previously, in chapter two). Anthropology may be of ‘considerable service’ to theology in three distinct senses: ‘critical’ service, ‘epistemological’ service and ‘theological’ service.39

Critical Service

Chauvet maintains that anthropology can be of ‘critical’ service in the theological exercise

…because it flushes out their [theologians’] prejudices and even forces them to renew their paradigms. We know that this is true for all scientists and is difficult for all of them. But it may be particularly so for theologians, by reason of the confessional, and thus implicating nature of their discipline.40

The use of Turnerian theory, as it has been set out in this chapter, is of ‘critical service’ to the practical theological exercise in the following ways.

Firstly, Turnerian theory has provided a particular interpretive lens or hermeneutic by which to view RCIA experience. This interpretive framework, when applied to participants’ RCIA experience, reveals the unique phenomenology of the liminal nature of the RCIA based on participants’ lived experience and consciousness of the process. In particular, Turnerian theory has been of ‘critical’ service to theology by providing a tri-partite structure within which to understand the process and dynamics of a rite-of-passage experience. It also provides a critical structure for examining what is occurring in ritual.

39 Chauvet, ‘When the Theologian Turns Anthropologist’, in Keeping Faith in Practice, edited by James Sweeney et al., p. 159. Chauvet makes these observations after critical appraisal and expressing caution concerning three anthropological themes: the theme of the sacred (with specific reference to Eliade’s work), the theme of magic and the theme of sacrifice (with reference to Girard’s work); see pp. 149-159. Chauvet does not mention the work of Victor Turner in this chapter; however, he uses Turner’s work in his own sacramental and liturgical theology – see for example Symbol and Sacrament. In this sense Chauvet is familiar with how Turner’s work may be of service to theology.
40 Ibid., p. 159.
Secondly, in this context the anthropological framework helps the theologian to gain a broader perspective on the RCIA process. This involves a more objective appreciation of the RCIA experience as it is placed within a broader anthropological understanding of religious rites of passage. A broader perspective also reveals various cultural and social patterns in the data, which are applicable to all rites of passage experience across all religious traditions. As stated in *On the Way to Life*, anthropology helps to map the ‘social and cultural coordinates’ of the RCIA experience.\(^41\)

**Epistemological Service**

Anthropology may be of ‘epistemological service’ to theology

…because insofar as anyone advances in the mastery of whatever touches on anthropology it becomes clearer that the object of theology, that is to say God revealed in Jesus Christ, can never be the end of any anthropological behavior whatsoever; which is not to say that theologians might not entertain some formal connivance or other with it.\(^42\)

Chauvet’s observation maintains the line of argument that anthropology may only take one so far in terms of reflection on faith and belief; that theological interpretation, given its confessional nature, is necessary to help interpret the subjective workings of faith within the RCIA experience. The dialogue between anthropology and theology brings this unique role of theology into sharp relief.

A prior anthropological reading has highlighted the dark, difficult aspects of the RCIA experience. The Turners’ work implicitly acknowledges the apophatic nature of the liminal phase, and the Turners were cognizant of their own liminal and ‘dark-night-of-the-soul’ experience. Only a theological framework can bring these spiritual themes to fruition, by offering the means to explore apophatic experience in theological depth. Rahner, on distinguishing between secular anthropology and theological anthropology, states that theological anthropology is ‘the apophatic,\(^41\)


radical form of secular anthropology’. Theology enables the exploration of indefinable, mysterious spiritual experience.

**Theological Service**

Anthropology may be of theological service to the discipline of theology:

Lastly, it can properly speaking be of theological service, insofar as practising or frequenting anthropology requires them [theologians] to rethink from scratch a certain number of classical questions within theology. In short, theologians cannot emerge from such frequentations scot-free; as Bouillard used to recognize, it brings with it ‘a new way of practicing theological reflection’.

Chauvet continues that being a professional theologian, or being a believer during the anthropological exercise, is to be seen as an ‘opportunity when one takes religions as one’s object of study’ rather than being a ‘source of inconvenience’.

Anthropology’s ability to challenge theology, in this manner of re-thinking the fundamental theological questions, is evident in the following example. On the one hand, anthropological interpretation helps to illuminate the importance of somatic experience within the ritual or liturgical setting, an experience which participants often struggled to describe. In Turnerian terms, this experience is contextualized as common to the liminal state, when this way of experiencing reality is in fact accentuated through such ‘somatic modes of attention’, to use Csordas’ term.

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45 Chauvet proceeds to explain this last point with reference to religion as being a form of ‘language game’ in the sense attributed to it by Wittgenstein. ‘This means particularly that, no more than any other, can this language game be reduced to its purely verbal form: it is intrinsically linked to a specific “life form” […] If therefore the “reasons” for believing are inseparable from a certain “way of life”, would not the fact of being a believer, and therefore of sharing in this way of life, beyond all the empirical differences that make religions specific, obviously with a reinforced critical vigilance, constitute an opportunity rather than an obstacle in the domain of the science of religion?’. Chauvet then goes on to discuss the idea that theology has ‘some service to render to anthropology’, Chauvet, ‘When the Theologian Turns Anthropologist’, in *Keeping Faith in Practice*, edited by James Sweeney et al., ibid., p. 160.
On the other hand, the theme of embodiment has been somewhat neglected in theology. Colleen Griffith draws attention to the fact that the role of the body in Christian worship has been a neglected theme in the history of the Christian tradition and it is not something that individuals are always comfortable discussing. She calls for ‘a greater sense of bodiliness as the location of our spirituality’. Turnerian anthropological interpretation brings this somewhat elusive somatic experience, along with the general theme of embodiment, into sharper focus ahead of the theological reading. Embodiment becomes an important theme to return to in the theological reflection; without a prior anthropological reading, the physical dimensions of participants’ experience might have remained embryonic and not fully realized ahead of a theological reading. Chauvet incorporates aspects of Turner’s theory on liminality in his writing on the embodied nature of sacramentality and this is referred to in the next chapter.

The theme of ‘theological service’ demonstrates how anthropology, as Edith Turner states, may open up an entire vista for theological interpretation (see chapter two, p. 51). The anthropological reading provides signposts and prompts specific questions for theological investigation. This echoes the observation made in chapter two, that in the context of this study the Turnerian reading itself occupies a liminal position as it stands between the presentation of participants’ experience and the theological interpretation of that experience. This accents the prophetic nature of anthropological reflection, its ability to prompt and challenge theology. This liminal position brings with it various characteristics; it is at once a place of possibility and creativity, and it is even anti-structural. It is also challenging, and puts the theologian in a somewhat uncomfortable position, as the noted tension at the beginning of this study exposed – why does theology have to resort to anthropology to reflect on its own liturgical and initiatory practices? Such collaboration may at first seem threatening, but is also one of great potential for both disciplines.

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Parallel themes

The above section demonstrates how anthropology may be of service to theology. The thesis also addresses the question, as posed by Chauvet, of how theology may be of service to anthropology. In anticipation of this latter question, a series of parallel themes existing between anthropology and theology are identified, based upon the interpretation of participants’ experience in this chapter. These themes, which have been highlighted through this prior anthropological reading, are listed here:

- Transcendent spiritual experience in the RCIA, a key liminal characteristic (as expressed in this chapter through the concept of ‘transcendental identity’), will be interpreted through the lens of graced, mystical experience. The theme of Christian mysticism as particularly expressed in Rahner’s theology and implicit in the Turners’ work, becomes an important hermeneutical bridge between the two disciplines.
- The distinct dynamics of rite-of-passage transformation (for example initiation through myth, *sacra* and moral change) are transposed into the language and dynamics of Christian conversion.
- In particular, participants’ transformative or conversion experience will be interpreted in the light of the paschal mystery.
- *Communitas* will be interpreted through the theology of grace and the theme of *koinonia*.
- The role of the body in initiatory experience and experience of ontological and existential change will be examined through the theology of grace and sacramental theology.
- The Turnerian emphasis on process will be examined through the theme of mystagogy.

These themes above connect theology and anthropology, and their theological richness will be explored in chapter seven. This exploration will help to determine how theology may be of service to anthropology and will sharpen the sense of encounter between the two disciplines, whilst highlighting the distinct roles of each –
for example, by showing how the confessional nature of theology facilitates the interpretation of personal faith experience, in contrast to anthropology’s more objective framework.

**Conclusion**

As cited in the previous chapter Edith Turner describes the peculiarity of liminality as like a ‘kind of crack between the worlds’, and she compares liminality to the fictional world of *Alice in Wonderland*.\(^{47}\) Entering into the strange realm of the liminal is ‘like the looking glass world of Alice, where animals and chessmen speak – and reprimand the visitor’. This same literary reference is used by a practitioner and author to describe the demands of the RCIA process:

James Fowler describes faith as a way of “leaning into life” […]. The first time I heard that, a picture popped into my mind of Alice (of Wonderland fame) leaning through the looking glass. Had it not been for her eagerness to see where barely-viewed passages might lead, and what lay hidden behind things in the Looking-glass House, she might never have discovered the mystery and life beyond that glittering reflection of her ordinary world. From the sitting room, the Looking-glass House seemed to repeat all that she presumed about life. But when she leaned into the looking glass, Alice found herself face to face with an entirely new dimension of reality. As it turned out, all her values were reversed, and she discovered a whole new way of being that frequently caught her by surprise, and of which she was never quite in control. Faith and conversion are like that-leading us into a world of topsy-turvy values and the possibility of the Other.

Anyone involved in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults should beware. There ought to be a caution label on the cover of these rites: “Warning! This is a journey into mayhem and mystery. It may be dangerous to your status quo!” Those determined to proceed should have a bit of Alice in them. For without that willingness to lean through material order into the messiness of mystery, it is difficult to discover for oneself or to lay open to others anything except the image of one’s own world mirrored back. I write this book for those RCIA team members and ministers, and for all who are struggling to be Alices, but haven’t quite leaned through the looking glass.\(^{48}\)

\(^{47}\) Edith Turner, *Heart of Lightness*, pp. 263-4; see chapter four, p. 123.

The Turners’ theory has opened up new vistas in the exploration of the RCIA conversion process; it has provided descriptive concepts and terms, and their application yields insight into the RCIA initiation process. This has presented a unique way of interpreting this process: both new and hidden dimensions of the reality of the RCIA have emerged as the above quotation highlights. Providing an anthropological reading has shown that the liminal is a universal theme which helps reveal the basis for human transformation within a rite of passage. In particular, the anthropological interpretation offers a unified notion of transformation which addresses the spiritual, personal and social aspects of transformation in the RCIA. Participants’ liminal experiences will be given explicit theological interpretation in chapter seven. Ahead of this, the following chapter sets out the theological framework that will be used for such interpretation. Later, theological reflection upon RCIA liminal experience will involve bringing the embedded theology of RCIA experience and the anthropological frame of interpretation into critical engagement with the theological tradition of Christianity. To that end, the next chapter explores the theological anthropology of Karl Rahner and the theology of the Rite before providing a theological reading of the RCIA liminal experience.
Chapter 6: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Grace and Other Themes – a Theological Framework

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*, III, 28

The gate of heaven is everywhere.¹

Thomas Merton

This study provides an empirical exploration of the RCIA, focusing upon the *experience* of participants. The framework set out in this chapter establishes the structure for a theological exploration of such experience. At the foundation of this enquiry is a theological reflection upon the RCIA as an experience of grace. The theology of grace forms the main theme of this chapter, followed by life in Christ, sacramental initiation and mystagogy, all of which mark the continual process of moving into graced experience. Given that the focus of this study is on the liminal nature of the RCIA, the theological framework presented within this chapter also establishes the theological contours for the interpretation of such liminality.

These four themes also reflect the stages of the RCIA process itself as it involves an initiation into Christian living. The first stage of the RCIA introduces participants to the Christian story of God’s love, and is a period of evangelization and initial conversion to Christ. The second stage, the catechumenate, concerns deepening conversion. The sacraments of initiation are the highlight of the process and introduce participants into a new way of sacramental living. The fourth and final stage, mystagogy, involves reflecting upon the initiatory experience and participating further in the life of the parish.

I. Christian Initiation as Insight into Grace

An emphasis on human experience as having a central role in theology marked a new direction within theology. The theologian most associated with this ‘anthropocentric’ view is Karl Rahner. Rahner’s theology emphasizes the idea that human experience itself is a source of theological authority. This is such an essential component of Rahner’s theological method that he describes all theology as anthropology and all anthropology as theology:

If God himself is man and remains so for all eternity; if therefore all theology is eternally anthropology; if it is forbidden to man to think little of himself because he would then be thinking little of God; and if this God remains the insoluble mystery: then man is for all eternity the expression of the mystery of God which participates for all eternity in the mystery of its ground.

Rahner views all human experience as interpenetrated with experience of God. The opening section of this chapter thus seeks to explore how one becomes aware of this graced experience, which is essentially an experience of God’s love. The next section explores how Rahner establishes a structure for elucidating the awareness of graced experience. This is established within the broader context of Rahner’s theological vision, revealing how his particular understanding of human nature and God’s grace makes such awareness of graced experience possible. A following section specifically explores initiation into an awareness of grace, including Rahner’s accent on mysticism. The final theme establishes the nature of graced conversion in the RCIA.

i. Recognition of Graced Experience in Rahner’s Theology

The presentation of the interviewees’ experience in chapter three revealed that experience of God was not always easy for them to define; their experiences were sometimes even vague and difficult to articulate or understand. For Rahner,

2 Karl Rahner, ‘Theology and Anthropology’, in Theological Investigations 9, pp. 28-45 (p. 28). Rahner is not referring to the secular discipline of anthropology, but to theological anthropology.
humanity’s experience of God is often expressed in mysterious, apophatic terms, and although God cannot be seen, the human person is in questioning, ‘dark, loving contact’ with God. Rahner specifically draws upon Bonaventure’s notion of ‘spiritual touch’ to describe such experience. This acknowledges that God is encountered in the depths of one’s being, and that this is different from a clear vision of God and from relating to God on an intellectual level. Rahner describes this as the ‘immediate experience of God’. However, this in itself needs qualification: rather than implying instant recognition of experience of God, it refers to how one gradually appropriates and come to terms with God’s presence over time.

Such a gradual acknowledgement of God involves specific occasions of recognition of graced experience. The data in chapter three exposed those moments where participants became more aware of their experience of God; participants described ‘aha’ moments, instances of deeper recognition which contrasted with their prior indistinct, hidden experience. Rahner recognized that experience of God may be taken to a new level of consciousness beyond the aforementioned dark contact,

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7 Endean, *Karl Rahner*, pp. 27-30. In everyday English ‘immediate experience’ suggests something clear, distinct and unambiguous. Rahner uses the German word for experience, Erfahrung, which conveys a process of gradual reflection rather than a brief instance of illumination. In this sense, God’s presence is one that we gradually appropriate and come to terms with; see Endean, *Karl Rahner*, p. 30 (note the similarities here with the Turnerian emphasis on ‘processual’ experience over time – see pp. 146-148 chapter four). For Rahner’s account of Bonaventure’s notion of ‘spiritual touch’, see Karl Rahner, ‘The Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses in the Middle Ages’, in *Theological Investigations 16: Experience of the Spirit, Source of Theology*, translated by David Moreland (London: DLT, 1979), pp. 104-134. Rahner revealed in later interviews that the spirituality of St. Ignatius had been the strongest influence upon his theological writings (see Endean, *Karl Rahner*, p. 5). Endean provides a detailed critical exploration of this claim. He reveals that the patristic and medieval theologians, and especially Evagrius, Gregory of Nyssa, Bonaventure as well as Ignatius, were of particular influence upon Rahner, see p. 13 and chapters two and three in Endean, *Karl Rahner*. 
reaching explicit instances of recognition that demonstrate a conceptual knowing of God’s loving grace. He refers to this process as ‘transcendence becoming thematic’.

Philip Endean traces the use of this concept in Rahner’s writings on the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises:

In the Ignatian Exercises, therefore, Rahner saw a process of discovery essential to Christian discipleship…the self can be led to focus on its ‘transcendence’, and the basic features of consciousness which are normally just the tacit accompaniments and enabling conditions of particular mental acts can become ‘thematic’. The Exercises foster such moments. The effect can be to transform our reflective self-understanding, and the patterns of significance and value that shape our perceptions – a transformation with practical consequences.

Endean, aware of the limitations and contingencies of Rahner’s Ignatian sources, accentuates the self-reflective dynamic of the Ignatian process. This emphasizes growing, conscious graced awareness, as prompted by significant graced experience. Put succinctly: ‘the key Ignatian experience is one in which the dark contact with God present in all experience emerges into reflective awareness’.


Endean, Karl Rahner, p. 103. Endean describes how the process of ‘transcendence becoming thematic’ is based on discernment in the Exercises, a period of ‘experiential testing’ to see if an initial, tentative decision is compatible with a ‘fundamental directedness of the mind’ towards God. Such ‘directedness’ becomes a ‘focus of awareness’ which otherwise would have remained as tacit awareness. See Endean, Karl Rahner, pp. 114-115, here quoting Rahner ‘The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola’, 1956, pp. 161-2.

The Ignatian influence can be traced throughout Rahner’s work, but it becomes apparent that Rahner’s writings on Ignatian spirituality were few – certain translations of Ignatian texts (by Rahner’s brother) often had a theological bias – and the reliability of Rahner’s claim concerning Ignatius’ influence upon him is questionable. Endean argues that, despite this scrutiny, the importance of the Ignatian influence upon Rahner has implications not only for how the concept of grace is understood in Rahner’s theology, but how the spiritual dynamic of the Exercises is important for Christianity as a whole see Karl Rahner, p. 103.

Endean, Karl Rahner, p. 133.
a ‘human Thou’ in a transcendent relationship with ‘the absolute mystery of God’ - the absolute Thou.\textsuperscript{12}

In light of this, it can be observed that the Spiritual Exercises are important for Christianity as a whole. Endean highlights how Rahner’s theology of graced experience (‘transcendence becoming thematic’) challenged customary approaches to different issues, including discerning vocation to the priesthood and religious life, the role of natural law in moral theology and the dynamics behind the decision to believe in Christianity.\textsuperscript{13} This latter point makes apposite connection between Rahner’s theology and this study. The Ignatian process presents a challenge, as it demonstrates that instances of recognition of experience of God, and coming to an understanding of one’s identity before God, provide an ‘existential logic’.\textsuperscript{14} This logic may also be applied to other decision-making situations. This includes committing to Christian revelation and making a fundamental decision for God, Jesus and the Church. The process helps to bridge the gap between commitment to faith on the one hand and the relative uncertainty about such faith – the human propensity to doubt – on the other. Experience of God within the depths of one’s being, and reflective awareness of this, provides transcendental knowing and reassurance in one’s spiritual commitment to God, Jesus and the Church. As such, Rahner’s theology of graced recognition is of vital significance for the whole of Christianity.\textsuperscript{15}

Furthermore, such transcendental awareness is not restricted to those completing the Exercises; these instances are potentially available to all. Endean’s reference to the biblical story of the prodigal son illustrates this: the son has a moment of recognition in the pigsty, he ‘comes to himself: the nature of his own identity becomes the focus


\textsuperscript{13} Endean, \textit{Karl Rahner}, p. 103. Ignatius defined any activity that frees a person from attachments and helps them seek God’s divine will as a ‘spiritual exercise’, ibid., p. 101.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 112-113, here citing Karl Rahner, ‘Die gewandelte Ekklesiologie und die Jesuiten heute’ (archival material: a duplicated typescript of a talk from Jesuit meeting October 1968), see Endean, \textit{Karl Rahner}, p. 272.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 112-113. This is referred to as the \textit{analysis fidei} in fundamental theology.
of his awareness; he begins to recognize...that he is made for something different".\textsuperscript{16}

This is an example of recognition of true identity, an acknowledgment of a graced existence that has always been there: ‘Particular situations trigger moments of self-awareness in us – moments when we recognize our identity as temples of grace’.\textsuperscript{17}

All situations in life may be sources of recognition of God’s loving grace:

…and so in its laughter and its tears, in its taking of responsibility, in its loving, living and dying, whenever man keeps faith with the truth, breaks through his own egoism in his relationships with his fellows, whenever he hopes against all hope, whenever he smiles and refuses to be embittered by the folly of everyday pursuits, whenever he is able to be silent, and whenever within this silence of the heart that evil which a man has engendered against another in his heart does not develop any further into external action, but rather dies within this heart as its grave – whenever, in a word, life is lived as man would seek to live it, in such a way as to overcome his own egoism and the despair of heart which constantly assails him. \textit{There} grace has the force of an event.\textsuperscript{18}

In summary, recognition of graced experience, the experience of God’s love, occurs gradually – it is a process of becoming that involves moving from an uncertain, tacit experience of God to a clear awareness of God’s presence. An experience of God’s love can be expressed through distinct \textit{moments of recognition}, including recognition of one’s graced identity. Furthermore, these experiences are accessible to all; everyday experience is also graced experience.

How is such graced experience possible? What are its conditions, both in the human person and in God? What is the relationship between human nature and God’s grace? Rahner’s theology of grace challenged conventional theology in this regard. A brief review of this follows.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 134.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 133-134.
\textsuperscript{18} Karl Rahner, ‘Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event’, in \textit{Theological Investigations 14: Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World}, translated by David Bourke (London: DLT, 1976), pp. 161-184 (pp. 167-168).
ii.  **God’s Self-Communication**

Grace, the gift of God’s love, is central to Christian experience. It forms the most fundamental ground of belief. Grace is God’s self-communication:

> God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love which he himself is. That is the first and last of his real plans and hence of his real world too. Everything else exists so that this one thing might be: the eternal miracle of the infinite Love. And so God makes a creature whom he can love: he creates man. He creates him in such a way that he *can* receive this Love which is God himself, and that he can and must at the same time accept it for what it is: the ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift.\(^\text{19}\)

Grace lies profoundly at the heart of Christian identity: ‘[the first principle of Ignatian discernment] the immediate presence of God in our experienced subjectivity – is to be understood, not as one empirical reality among others, but as a principle shaping all possible experience’.\(^\text{20}\) This reflects an intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, understanding of grace. In other words, God’s graced presence is integral to human existence and experience, rather than extra to or above human nature.\(^\text{21}\) As Endean illustrates, God’s very self and graced human creatures are totally united, there is no separation or division.\(^\text{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) See Karl Rahner, ‘Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace’, in *Theological Investigations 1*, pp. 319-346. This seminal essay of 1950 reformulated the scholastic understanding of grace based on scripture and Thomist theology. Rahner’s emphasis on human experience as an authoritative source for theology radically challenged the prevailing neo-scholastic theology of the time. The scholastic concept of ‘created’ and ‘uncreated’ grace understood the human person as first transformed by God (‘created’ grace) in order to then be worthy of God’s presence dwelling within the human person (‘uncreated’ grace). For Rahner, first and foremost, God is present within the heart of each human being (as ‘uncreated’ grace), which makes possible subsequent experiences of human transformation (‘created’ grace). Rahner termed this ‘*quasi-formal* causality’ (p. 330), author’s emphasis. The article was a compromise, given its particular theological and historical context: see William Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London: Chapman, 1992), pp. 32-39 and Stephen Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 295-303.

\(^{22}\) Endean, *Karl Rahner*, p. 46.
Grace is God’s gratuitous and unmerited self-gift to humanity; it is self-giving on behalf of a ‘God who wants to give himself in Love’. God’s Grace is offered in freedom to humanity. It is an act of God ‘opening himself in ultimate intimacy and in free and absolute love’. Humanity is called upon to respond in freedom to God’s generous gift of grace, and this freedom in turn has its origins in God. It follows that every human person, constitutively and in the unfolding of their life, is an ‘event’ of God’s self-communication, although they have the freedom to accept this or not. Grace, an expression of God’s love, is at the centre of human identity.

It is both terrible and comforting to dwell in the inconceivable nearness of God, and so to be loved by God Himself that the first and the last gift is infinity and inconceivability itself. But we have no choice. God is with us.

Rahner uses the term ‘supernatural existential’ to define the (supernatural) gratuitous nature of God’s grace, positing that human awareness of or response to grace is a fact or ‘existential’ aspect of human consciousness. Even if the human person rejects God’s offer of grace they are still in some way related to this supernatural dimension. Grace is therefore universally and permanently present and offered to all humankind; there is no distinction between believer, unbeliever or sinner. Grace exists without qualification and appeals to the existential nature of all humanity.

Rahner’s interpretation of the theology of grace, as it reformulated the scholastic understanding of grace, shifted contemporary theology into a new key. The influence of Rahner’s work has reverberated across the contemporary Church.

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23 Grace is God’s self, God’s communication, in which he gives himself to the human person as the divinizing gratuitousness which he himself is’. See Karl Rahner, ‘The Theology of the Symbol’, in Theological Investigations 4: More Recent Writings, translated by David Bourke (London: DLT, 1966), pp. 221–252 (p. 223).
25 Ibid., pp. 127-128.
29 Duffy, The Dynamics of Grace, p. 292.
Rahner was an influential figure at the Second Vatican Council, and his theology is very much evident in the post-Vatican II Church.

**iii. Initiation into Awareness of Graced Experience**

The RCIA process is initiation into the Christian way of life. Deeper appropriation of God’s love and how this affects Christian identity and living are central to the RCIA experience. Ignatian discernment and the ‘assent of faith’ – in this case, the commitment made through the RCIA process – may be treated as similar processes that lead to finding God in all of human experience:

Ignatian discernment, therefore, and the assent of faith involve the same kind of process: the discovery of a congruence between a particular historical option and our sense of self under God. The making of a specific choice becomes the condition of our being able to find God’s grace in all our reality and experience [...]. Grace, the divine self-gift, is not a datum for us to look at and observe. If it were, then we could not reconcile its omnipresence and its guaranteed triumph with the claim that certain particular options on our part are decisive for its unfolding. Grace, rather, denotes the deepest principle of our identity. Its unavoidable presence and the promise it represents do not depend on our appropriation, but nevertheless demand it. As we grow we ‘come to ourselves’. This process occurs through specific choices, through acknowledgments that certain definite commitments correspond to our deepest nature, and free us for authentic relationship with all that exists. Yet these choices are not fixed points, but rather crucial transitions in a lifelong process. In Christ, we see God’s pattern and promise for the whole of creation; in a properly made vocational choice, we shape our life, as far as within us lies, in such a way as to open us most fully to God’s ongoing self-gift in and through all our experience.30

The RCIA, whilst not a discernment exercise in the Ignatian sense, is an initiation into, and apprenticeship in, Christian living. This ultimately involves coming to deeper realization of God’s loving presence, focusing on conversion to Christ and entering into the Church community through sacramental reception. Most participants in this study had already decided to become Catholic before joining the RCIA, and some were already Christians; even still, part of the transitional element

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of the process involved embracing a new identity, or deepening an existing Christian identity shaped by an understanding of God’s loving grace. The process is transformative in the sense that life is to be understood in a different way than before; it is interpreted through recognition of graced experience.

Moreover, initiation into an appreciation of God in all things is, for Rahner, initiation into mysticism.\(^{31}\) Mystical experience is an indispensable aspect of faith experience:

It’s not that the mystics are one step higher than those who believe; rather, the mystical at its actual theological heart is an intrinsic, essential aspect of faith (not the other way round).

If you think about these things, then you have to say that initiation into Christianity is ultimately initiation into the mystical – to use biblical language, from Galatians for example, initiation into the experience of God’s Spirit. The mystical is not a special event.\(^{32}\)

Rahner superseded conventional distinctions between mysticism and grace by defining grace as an experiential reality, rather than as an elite experience beyond everyday realities:

When I say that one can meet God immediately in your time too, just like in mine, I mean really God, the God past all grasp, the mystery beyond speech, the darkness that is light only to those who let themselves be swallowed by it unconditionally, the God who is now beyond all names. But equally it was just this God, no other, that I experienced as the God who descends to us, who comes near to us, in whose incomprehensible fire we do not in fact burn up, but rather come to be for the first time, and are equally affirmed. The God beyond speech speaks himself to us; in this speaking of His unspeakableness we come to be, to live, we are loved, we are affirmed.\(^{33}\)

Rahner recognized the mystical nature of Christianity and stated that the ‘Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all, if by mysticism we mean...a

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 48.
\(^{33}\) Karl Rahner, ‘Ignatius Speaks to a Modern Jesuit’, pp. 17-18, in Endean, Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings, here p. 81. In this text Rahner transposes mystical concepts to a broader theology of the human person. In this later work Rahner uses the terms mysticism and grace interchangeably, see Endean, Karl Rahner, pp. 30-31.
genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence’. The RCIA, with its focus on introducing participants to God’s love and providing a supportive presence in their lives, thus has a mystical dimension which fosters a mystical and graced consciousness among participants.

iv. Everyday Mysticism

For Rahner, mystical experience is not the preserve of the elite. The mystics instead point to an experience of God which is available to every Christian. Mystical experiences:

…are certainly not occurrences lying completely outside the experience of an ordinary Christian; that what the mystics talk about is an experience which any Christian (and indeed any human being), can have and can seek, but which is easily overlooked or suppressed. But in any case it is true that mysticism exists and is not as remote from us as we are first tempted to assume.35

Mystical experience is not to be understood as remote or distant, ‘an account of a country that we ourselves have never entered’.36 Rather, everyday actuality ‘becomes itself a pointer to this transcendental experience of the Spirit, which is always present silently and apparently facelessly’.37

Consequently, everyday experience, including both its joys and sorrows, is mystical:

...the greatness and glory, goodness, beauty, and transparency of the individual reality of our experience point with promise to eternal light and eternal life [...] where the definable limits of everyday realities break down and are dissolved, where the decline of these realities is perceived, when lights shining over the tiny island of our ordinary life are extinguished and the question becomes inescapable; whether the night that surrounds us is the

36 Ibid., p. 195.
37 Ibid., p. 199.
void of absurdity and death that engulfs us or the blessed holy night already shining within us is the promise of eternal day.\textsuperscript{38}

Rahner states that it is life’s calmness and also restlessness, experiences of light and darkness, the \textit{via positiva} and the \textit{via negativa}, that disclose graced mystical experience. In fact, they are ‘but two aspects of one and the same experience, even though […] it is right for the sake of clarity to stress particularly the \textit{via negationis}'.\textsuperscript{39} Rahner lists the types of mystical experiences he is talking about. These include:

- When someone tries to forgive, although he or she gains no reward for it;
- When someone tries to love God, although there appears to be no response from God;
- When someone does his or her duty whilst at the same time denying themselves;
- When someone is good to another person without his or her deeds being reciprocated;
- When someone who is utterly lonely does not run away from the loneliness but endures it with an ultimate hope;
- When someone accepts his or her responsibility;
- When someone accepts the disappointment of everyday life and places his or her trust in God;
- When an experience of falling instead becomes one of standing firm;
- When someone accepts death with resignation, placing hope in God.

In all these experiences, ‘\textit{then} God is present with his liberating grace’.\textsuperscript{40} Mystical experience does not therefore concern private experiences or a personal interiority; rather, mystical experience has practical daily consequences. The highest assent of the mystic is to be respected, although Rahner reminds us that the New Testament is certain that the ‘unsurpassable salvation in the self-communicating Holy Spirit of

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., pp. 199-200.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 200.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., pp. 200-203.
God can take place even when apparently all that happens is the observance of the harsh duty of ordinary life and the resigned acceptance of death”.41

v. **God’s Call and Participants’ Response: A Conversion Process**

The dynamics of grace in Rahner’s theology enlighten RCIA practice by forming a framework for the recognition of graced experience, including mystical experience. How does this structure illuminate the theology of the Rite? How does the Rite itself contribute to a graced theological framework? The themes examined here, which are central to the Rite, demonstrate how the recognition of graced experience may occur.

Grace is a central theological anthropological theme in the Rite. This is expressed through a call and response dynamic that is consistent with Rahner’s theology of grace: God calls participants into a deeper intimate relationship with God, and participants have the opportunity to respond in freedom.42 The call-and-response dynamic expresses the relational nature of God’s grace: the Rite assures participants of God’s faithful love and support throughout the process, while acknowledging that the process is a ‘difficult journey’.43 The language and symbolic action of the various liturgies and minor rites further illustrate this reciprocal dynamic: God desires to outpour God’s love, and in turn participants desire such love.44 Participants also experience God’s love and support through those accompanying them in the process.

The Rite emphasizes ‘co-operation’ with God’s grace through a process of conversion. In particular, this involves entering into more profound loving relationship with God through turning away from sin.45 If this emphasis on sin is read in the light of God’s loving grace, reflection on one’s sinful nature becomes an

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41 Ibid., p. 208.
42 RCIA, no. 1, p. 3, ‘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 enters their hearts’.
43 RCIA, no. 95, p. 48.
44 RCIA, no. 41, p. 17; see also no. 97, pp. 48-51.
45 The Rite adopts a particular penitential focus in the period leading up to Easter. The scrutinies and minor exorcisms stress the liberating effects of God’s grace when participants turn away from sin (see nos. 137-171, pp. 73-106, and nos. 90-94, pp. 42-47). In particular, baptism is described as offering redemption from sin, leading into Trinitarian relationship with God, see RCIA *Christian Initiation*, General Introduction nos. 1-2, p. xii.
opportunity for experiencing God’s forgiving and healing love. Recognition of human weakness and fragility provide occasions of graced recognition that one’s redemption lies in God. Roger Haight outlines how the effects of grace may be recognized in moments of healing, forgiveness, elevation (such as sharing in divine nature, and entering the body of Christ), and freedom, where freedom is ‘the most all embracing effect of grace’. He chooses the symbol of liberation for interpreting experiences of grace. These include liberation from oneself, from sin, from fear of the world or from death, as well as liberation through loving one’s neighbour.\(^\text{46}\) Response to God’s grace results in change not only within the person but within their actions and dealings with others.\(^\text{47}\) Recognition of God’s love and a desire to move deeper into that love requires response and transformation. This manifests itself through moments of conversion, reinterpretation and change.\(^\text{48}\)

Conversion itself therefore involves recognition of the gift of God’s grace, recognizing the presence of God throughout one’s life story, even prior to Christian conversion:

Conversion, therefore, is not to be seen as a transition from grace’s absence to grace’s presence […]. Conversion consists in an acceptance of the grace already and inescapably given. Even the person who rejects grace or finds the concept meaningless nevertheless receives it as an offer shaping their identity. Thus, given Rahner’s correlations between the theology of grace and mysticism, it is not just that the ‘immediate experience of God’ is accessible to everyone: it is present at all stages of everyone’s life.\(^\text{49}\)

This provides a challenge to the RCIA process, because it emphasizes God’s presence to the individual ahead of any conversion process that takes place in the


\(^{49}\) Ibid., p. 48.
RCIA. Transformation through grace is an ongoing process; the human person is in a process of becoming.  

The Rite acknowledges that God’s action within participants’ lives has manifold expression: it refers to a ‘spiritual journey of adults that varies according to the many forms of God’s grace’.  

God’s grace works in pluralist fashion, both within individual participants and through their particular life choices. This emerges in diverse ways in individuals’ lives as each person uniquely responds to God’s love. Christians are called to live out the expression of their faith in myriad ways. The exploration of Rahner’s theological anthropology has revealed that the structure of graced experience follows that of mystical experience, but, crucially, the understanding of grace in the Rite does not overtly reflect Rahner’s emphasis on mysticism. The one reference to it in the introductory material concerns how baptism involves a ‘mystical sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection’. The explicit mystical dimensions of Rahner’s theology of grace therefore provide a distinctive, original outline for the reading of participants’ RCIA experience.

In summary, the first section of this theological framework has explored Rahner’s theology of grace, and provided a framework for identifying and interpreting experiences of grace. The movement of grace may be identified through dark, apophatic experience; one comes to a gradual appropriation of experience of God over time. It also involves explicit instances of recognition of grace through an event or happening, including observation of one’s ‘graced identity’. Grace is also revealed through particular processes such as the Spiritual Exercises. These observations provide the contours for reading participants’ RCIA experience: within

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50 One image that Rahner uses to describe humanity’s yearning for God (the Vorgriff au esse) is that of light: ‘Indeed the statement that we have to do with God in his own self and in absolute immediacy bids us give ourselves over unconditionally to the nameless One, to the unapproachable light which has to appear to us as darkness, to the holy mystery which appears and remains all the more as mystery the nearer it comes […] Indeed this statement bids us surrender ourselves to the ineffable and holy mystery and to accept it in freedom, the mystery which becomes ever more radical for us the more it communicates itself, and the more we allow this self-communication to be given to us in what we call faith, hope and love.’ See Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, p. 125.

51 RCIA, no. 5, p. 4.

52 Endean, Karl Rahner, p. 118; p. 183.

53 RCIA, no. 206, p. 119.

54 Ibid., p. 207; p. 134.
the RCIA process there are opportunities for heightened awareness of God’s grace, and acceptance of the gift of God’s self-giving love.

The theme of mysticism provides a link to Turner’s observation, and Bloch’s later development, that the liminal rite-of-passage phase involves openness to the mystical and transcendent dimensions of human experience. Rahner’s graced mystical theology will thus be used to interpret this aspect of Turnerian theory alongside the implicit theology in the Turners’ work and reference to their own mystical experience.

This section has explained how recognition of graced experience involves explicit awareness of God’s loving presence in all experience. This recognition may occur in individual moments; it is also process-oriented and manifested in particular experiences like the RCIA. Recognition of God’s grace in Christian experience is a central theme of this framework, and the following sections examine how specific recognition of graced experience may be realized in personal encounter with Christ through the Gospels and through sacramental immersion into the paschal mystery.

II. Life in Christ

The second element of this framework concerns how graced experience is recognized through personal encounter with Christ and by interpreting life through the paschal mystery. The theological anthropology of the Rite situates human transformation in relationship with Christ and the mystery of His life, death and resurrection. This fundamentally orients the RCIA process: ‘The whole initiation must bear a markedly paschal character, since the initiation of Christians is the first sacramental sharing in Christ’s dying and rising’. 55 This section also reviews the nature of conversion in the RCIA and establishes how Christian life embodies liminal qualities.

55 RCIA, no. 8, p. 5.
Initiation into an understanding of life as graced experience involves learning to interpret life by acknowledging and reflecting upon God’s loving presence and guidance. The previous section on grace described how God calls humanity to believe and engage in loving encounter with God, and explained that human nature is oriented towards this through the supernatural existential. God’s love is particularly expressed through the incarnation, which is part of the divine plan and marks a culmination point in God’s self-communication to the world. God’s self-communication is uniquely embodied in Christ who is the definitive expression of God’s grace. Through the person of Jesus Christ, the ‘absolute saviour’, God makes an ‘irrevocable’ offer of Himself to humanity. The gift of God’s loving grace is offered to all of humanity through Jesus Christ.

Today in Christianity subsequent to Christ’s birth, we cannot say anything true, authentic, and specific about God without professing faith in God as Emmanuel, as God-with-us, as the God of our flesh, as the God of our human nature, as the God of our human signs in the sacrament, as the God of our altars, as the God who has been born here from the Virgin Mary and so, as a human being among us, is a human being and God in one person. Because this human being is the true, acting living God, then within the sphere of faith and theology about God the face of a human being shines out.

The process of Christian conversion involves recognizing God’s grace offered through the person of Christ. Christ ultimately reveals God’s transforming love through his suffering, death and resurrection, which as witnessed by the disciples signifies a new form of life that all Christians are called to share. Christ’s dying and

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58 Ibid., pp. 201-202. The relationship between grace and nature is ultimately demonstrated through the incarnation, in God becoming human. To describe this briefly, Rahner maintains that the human and divine natures of Christ (held together in the Hypostatic Union) reflect the inseparability of the relationship of nature and grace. See Rahner *Foundations of Christian Faith*, pp. 199-200.

rising is therefore an assurance of God’s grace for Christians that death is not the final end and that one will continue to live in God’s presence and experience God’s grace. In this sense it may be said that Christ ‘guarantees’ graced experience, God’s self-gift. The vulnerability evident in Jesus’ suffering in Gethsemane and subsequent trial and death is transformed through the resurrection. This is an experience of vulnerability that Christians can relate to knowing that they too will share in Christ’s resurrection. To paraphrase Rahner, coming to faith in Christ allows one to search for Christ, and in this search to come to understand what one has already found in Jesus of Nazareth.

ii. Conversion in the RCIA

Conversion to Christ during the catechumenate, the central part of the process, is fostered through the four dimensions of catechesis, which, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, are the Word, community, liturgy and mission. The process marks an apprenticeship in Christian living.

Participants come to know Christ through the Gospels as scriptural catechesis is delivered over the course of the liturgical year with appropriate celebrations of the Word. Coming to Christian faith involves learning to interpret and experience one’s life story through the paschal-mystery paradigm. For example, the Johannine texts used in the celebration of the three Lenten scrutinies are key texts in this regard as they encourage encounters with Christ the Redeemer, who is the living water (Gospel of the Samaritan woman), the light of the world (Gospel of the man born blind) and the resurrection and the life (Gospel of Lazarus). In the minor exorcisms

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60 Endean, Karl Rahner, p. 198.
61 Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, p. 212. The Rite also acknowledges the ‘searching for Christ’ that takes place during the RCIA and encourages the parish community to help participants as part of the community’s apostolic vocation. See RCIA, no. 9, p. 5. Rahner set out the concept of the ‘anonymous Christian’, which means ‘that whether people are aware of it or not, they are dealing in their lives with the God of grace’. For Rahner, ‘Christ is the ultimate key to both grace and revelation’, see Daniel Donovan, ‘Revelation and Faith’, in The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner, pp. 83-97 (p. 88).
62 RCIA, no. 75; see chapter one, p. 15.
63 Ad Gentes no. 14; see chapter one p. 15.
64 RCIA, no. 130. These texts demonstrate how individual characters within the story experience graced recognition concerning Christ’s identity. Bearing in mind their use in the RCIA these texts are
participants receive strength in the midst of their spiritual journey and encouragement to open their hearts to receive the gifts of the Saviour.\textsuperscript{65}

Encounter with Christ through scripture thus involves coming to know Jesus personally:

Because Christian faith is a personal acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth and the God revealed in him, because it is essentially a friendship, it involves the whole range of knowledge, feeling, sense perception, imagination, and affectivity – with each of these elements conditioning each of the others.\textsuperscript{66}

Such personal friendship has transformative effects:

Growth in grace, however, is more than just ordinary human development; Christians believe that it is a growth “into Christ.” A deepening friendship with the risen Lord that itself leads to increasing personal relatedness to God and increasing personal transformation, that is, growth in the life of grace.\textsuperscript{67}

This personal engagement with Christ involves continual transformation as part of an ongoing journey: ‘A person is always a Christian in order to become one, and this is also true of what we are calling a personal relationship to Jesus Christ in faith, hope and love’.\textsuperscript{68} Part of this transformation and encounter with Christ is that participants are called to become revelations of God’s word, as Dunning states:

God’s word-deed speaks and acts especially in those created in God’s image and likeness, humans who in healing and caring, liberating and reconciling, loving and peacemaking are little words of the Word. God does not speak empty words. God is so fully present in those words that they become images into whom God pours real presence. Therefore, when humans become dabar, [Hebrew: word-deed], when our words say who we really are as images of a

specifically explored by Sandra Schneiders in Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (New York: Crossroad, 2003); see p. ix. Schneiders highlights the process of ‘believing into’ in John’s Gospel and the theme of ‘knowing’ Jesus, both of which echo the process of coming to graced recognition, see Schneiders, pp. 52-53.
\textsuperscript{65} RCIA, no. 131, see appendix two.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 227.
\textsuperscript{68} Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, p. 306. This is outlined in three appeals: to love one’s neighbour and hence love Christ, to be ready for death and to hope for the future. See Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, pp. 294-297.
healing, caring, liberating, reconciling, loving and peacemaking God, we are revelations of God’s word.⁶⁹

The RCIA also involves an experience of Christian living, or koinonia, which refers to ‘communion amongst believers or between believers and the Holy Spirit (e.g. Acts 2.42; Gal. 2.9; Phil 2.1)’. ⁷⁰ Participants’ experience of the RCIA group, the friendships formed and support received, as well as the support of the whole parish, potentially provide an experience of Christian living. Experience of communitas may also be interpreted as instances of koinonia: ‘theologically speaking, koinonia is a sacrament of Trinitarian love, and communitas a natural sacrament of koinonia’. ⁷¹ Bernard Cooke states that Christ’s Spirit is given to the Christian people as a group; it is not just possessed on an individual basis, it is experienced by sharing in the Christian community. ⁷²

Participants are also called to involve themselves in the missionary life of the community and to become disciples of Christ. As Cooke states: ‘This, then, is the deepest level of communio in Christianity. To be a Christian, a disciple of the risen Jesus, is to be a “Spirit-ed” person, to live already to some extent in that new Spirit-way of being human, which is risen life’. ⁷³

The Rite recognizes that participants share and reflect upon the paschal mystery and focus on conversion to Christ throughout the process, however it also incorporates anticipation of the celebration of the paschal mystery through sacramental initiation. Baptism is an initial doorway or entry point into the ‘mystery of the Lord’s passion and resurrection’:

Those who are baptized are united to Christ in a death like his; buried with him in death, they are given life again with him, and with him they rise again.

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⁶⁹ Dunning, Echoing God’s Word, pp. 32-33.
⁷⁰ Davies, Anthropology and Theology, p. 127. Koinonia ‘becomes the defining attribute of the earliest Christian groups whose integrity is grounded in the mutual fellowship of believers (1 John 1. 3-7)’, Davies p. 126.
⁷¹ Ibid., p. 129.
⁷² Cooke, Sacraments and Sacramentality, pp. 132-133. ‘Communio’ is a Latin term and is here used by Cooke to capture an active sense of koinonia or communing: ‘Christian communio is a very distinctive kind of sharing, setting Christianity apart from other human groups. Each of these groups, to the extent that it is a genuine community, has its own distinctive communio’. Ibid., p. 124.
⁷³ Cooke, Sacraments and Sacramentality, p. 129.
For baptism recalls and makes present the paschal mystery itself, because in baptism we pass from the death of sin into life.\textsuperscript{74}

The baptismal immersion is ‘a mystical sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection through which those who believe in his name die to sin and rise to eternal life’.\textsuperscript{75} The paschal mystery becomes the framework for interpreting the whole of the Christian life. This involves moving deeper into this mystery through understanding experiences of personal suffering and loss, and beginning a new life as sharing in Christ’s death and rising to new life with him.

This new life in Christ is contextualized through the themes of communion and mission. Initiation into the paschal mystery demands reflection along with the rest of the parish community, specifically during the period of mystagogy. The paschal mystery is to be a lived experience integrated into everyday life through celebrations of the Word and Eucharist and ‘works of charity’, the latter emphasizing a mission-oriented focus.\textsuperscript{76} The task for the community is to be a ‘place of encounter’ and in transmitting faith to witness effectively ‘in word and deed to the reality of Christ’.\textsuperscript{77}

Conversion to Christ, in the context of the group experience and through liturgical and sacramental participation, thus manifests itself in personal transformation. Donald Gelpi outlines the nature of conversion as ‘the decision to pass from irresponsible to responsible behaviour in some distinguishable realm of human experience’. He outlines a typology of conversion in the RCIA process: affective, intellectual, moral, religious and socio-political. ‘Religious conversion’ involves turning from opposition to or ignorance of God to faith – acceptance of ‘some historical, revelatory self-communication of God and its consequences’. ‘Affective conversion’ concerns confronting one’s emotional life, moving towards a more balanced and aesthetically sensitive emotional life. ‘Intellectual conversion’ involves growth in understanding dogma, truth and revelation. It marks a decision to commit to one’s personal beliefs within a particular frame of reference whilst remaining in

\textsuperscript{74} RCIA, no. 6. Candidates for reception who have ‘already been justified by faith and incorporated into Christ’ become full members of the community, RCIA, no. 419, p. 238.
\textsuperscript{75} RCIA, nos. 201-206, pp. 117-119.
\textsuperscript{76} RCIA, no. 4; no. 234.
dialogue with other frames of reference. ‘Moral conversion’ is based upon the radical nature of the Gospel, and marks a decision to turn away from what is selfish and towards making informed ethical and selfless choices. ‘Socio-political conversion’ is closely linked with moral conversion and involves standing on the side of the oppressed and engaging in social issues.\textsuperscript{78}

This typology provides an outline of the conversion process. It is by no means definitive, (in fact the interpretation of participants’ experience in the next chapter reveals important embodied and mystical dimensions of conversion which seem to be absent from Gelpi’s theory). These aspects of conversion mirror the nature of transformation in the rite–of-passage experience as expressed in Turnerian theory, i.e. being initiated through sacred myth and narrative and experiencing affective and moral transformation. Such a comparison also reveals that ‘socio-political’ conversion is a dimension that is perhaps absent from Turnerian theory, although it may be argued that the anti-structural position provides the vantage point from which to critique such issues and heightened personal perspicacity may reveal a deeper social conscience.

\textit{iii. Christian Life and Liminality}

Graced experience in Christ provides an important theological reference point for the reading of liminal experience. An experience of liminality often involves and discloses vulnerability, and this may be interpreted through Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Richard Rohr encourages Christians to welcome the pain and suffering that accompanies liminality and to endure it for as long as possible. The symbolic death involved in liminal experience and understood in the light of the paschal mystery will result in transformation, a resurrection experience beyond the tomb: ‘although the dark nights that accompany liminality feel like dying, ultimately it is

\textsuperscript{78} Donald L. Gelpi, \textit{Committed Worship: A Sacramental Theology for Converting Christians Adult Conversion and Initiation} 3 vols, vol. 1 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 17. These five types are based on normative reflection upon the process rather than any specific empirical investigation.
As Christ mediates God’s grace, so Christ Himself may be viewed as a liminal figure:

…all religious ritual is an invocation of divinity which draws its meaning from the presence of a mediator between man and God – a mediator whose suffering symbolizes the pain humanity must inevitably endure as the price of its initiation, into Godhead. For us, Christ is the one who “stands between,” and the position cannot be other than mortally agonizing.

If we interpret the Incarnation as a form of liminality then by extension, the ‘theological idea that in Christ God assumes human nature can be viewed as an act of communitas. Oneness, solidarity, and the opposition to hierarchy all betoken the love expressed in Jesus’.

That Christ may be viewed as a liminal figure helps interpret the liminal quality of Christian life and the sense of being ‘in-between’. The paschal mystery thus provides a matrix that helps interpret liminal experience and in itself echoes the liminal.

The Christian lives in this too between the already and ‘not yet’ – the aporia of Gethsemane. Christian existence in history has the quality of the Easter vigil, recalling the great narrative of salvation in time by the light of Christ, knowing that all time and all the ages belong to Him, waiting for the full glory of the Easter dawn. This faith distinguishes it from the world while placing it at the world’s service. In its very distinction from the world, the Church is more deeply inserted into it and only in this way can the Church be an effective mediation of Christ and guarantee that in ‘this place’ He is to be found. The Church’s teaching on Christ’s ‘real presence’ is a doctrine of ecclesiology as well as the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Church’s entire mission follows from this.

In this sense the Church may also be said to have its own ‘liminal vocation’ as it occupies an anti-structural position in society; distinguished from the world, yet at

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80 By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation’. Dei Verbum, no. 2.
82 Davies, Anthropology and Theology, p. 128.
the world’s service. The Church (as a liminal entity) mediates the presence of Christ to the world.

III. Sacramental Initiation

The third theme of the theological framework set out at the beginning of this chapter concerns the tangible expression of God’s love through the celebration of the sacraments. The word ‘sacrament’ is a Latin translation of the Greek word for mystery (mysterion), which is a reminder that the sacraments are at their core mysteries which reveal God’s saving presence. Bearing in mind that this framework is intended to enable the interpretation of participants’ experience, accent is here placed upon the experiential nature of the sacramental process in the RCIA rather than on presenting a detailed theology of the sacraments of initiation. This theme is presented in three sections: threshold experience; Easter Vigil experience and the embodied nature of sacramental experience.

i. Threshold Experience

The RCIA process consists of four continuous periods punctuated by liturgical celebrations or ritual thresholds. The various liturgical stages are referred to in the Rite as passing through doorways and ascending to higher levels in the initiation process, so building a sense of anticipation for the reception of the sacraments. This encourages a threshold-spirituality, a time of waiting and expectation, as one stands on the verge of full membership of the Church. This also fosters a mystagogic consciousness, the dynamic of moving into graced experience ahead of actual

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84 The term ‘liminal vocation’ is found in the work of Duncan Fisher, tracing its evolution throughout the early and medieval Church, with special reference to the monastic orders. His basic premise is that the early Church remained separate from society, in an anti-structural way. When the church became part of mainstream society, this anti-structural dimension mutated into the desert spirituality practices. The religious orders – Benedictine, Cistercian and Carthusian – all adopted liminal spiritual practices through their use of desert spirituality, which in turn is based on the Exodus narrative. See Duncan Fisher, ‘Liminality: The Vocation of the Church (I)’ Cistercian Studies 24, 3 (1989), 181-205; and ‘Liminality: The Vocation of the Church (II): The Desert Image in Early Medieval Monasticism’, Cistercian Studies 25, 3 (1990), 188-218.

85 RCIA, no. 6, p. 4. The Rite refers to the RCIA as a ‘rite of passage’; see no. 21, p. 9; and nos. 33.6 and 33.7, p. 11.
initiation at the Easter Vigil. These liturgies also challenge the whole community. As Daniel Benedict states:

…the Scrutinies are a deep searching of the heart in prayer and dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit that renews “the entire community along with those being prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery” [RCIA, 138; see also 141-146]. The rites of initiation, as does all ritual, displace and disorient us in order to reorient us to the one who goes before us to Galilee – the places of ministry.86

The Vigil itself may be described as a threshold event, as it stands between Good Friday and the celebration of the resurrection on Easter Sunday.87 During the Vigil the Hebrew Biblical account of the Exodus is recounted. As Jill Crainshaw observes, the narrative describes the biblical themes of wilderness and exile, a ‘metaphorical movement from orientation to disorientation to reorientation’. This movement correlates with the dynamic of suffering and hope central to both Jewish piety and the Christian paschal mystery.88 It also echoes the liminal model of separation, liminality and re-aggregation. God’s grace leads and sustains God’s people though paradox and uncertainty.89

The themes of wilderness and exile within scripture may be used to interpret threshold or liminal experiences and an apophatic searching for God through darkness. As Rohr states: ‘Much of the work of the biblical God and human destiny itself is to get people into liminal space and to keep them there long enough to learn

89 Franks and Meteyard, ‘Liminality: the Transforming Grace of In-Between Places’: ‘For many, the idea that God may lead through periods of profound uncertainty, deconstruction, and questioning is foreign and inherently difficult to understand, yet the Biblical narratives are infused with individual stories and metaphors which reveal this experience’, p. 218.
something essential and genuinely new. It is the ultimate teaching space”.\(^90\) During the RCIA participants may engage with their own sense of wilderness and exile. The scripture narrative encourages a ‘mystagogy of lament’, a moving into the pain and disappointment as presented in scripture.\(^91\) This is set within the context of future promise, expressed in a biblical passage that the Rite quotes at the beginning of the section of the catechumenate: ‘Leave your country and come into the Land that I will show you’.\(^92\) The ups and downs of life are to be understood through a sense of God’s sustaining presence throughout all experience.

The sacraments are an ongoing threshold experience for all participants, not just those experiencing reception into the Church. Joseph Martos describes both the overt and the covert prophetic nature of sacramental worship; how it challenges what those in the Church are called to be:

Overtly we are sometimes asked in the sacramental rites to publicly assent to what the sacraments symbolize, and we often pray for the grace to be what we are supposed to be as Christians. But more subtly, the rituals proceed on the assumption that those who join in them are already a faithful, loving, hopeful, serving, healing and reconciling people. And so we find ourselves facing an existential gap between what we are presumed to be if we call ourselves a church and what we know we actually are. But if we allow ourselves to be pulled into that gap, we suddenly find ourselves attracted and stretching toward the other side, the side of what we are not yet but ought to be. And it is in that liminal moment that we hear most clearly God’s prophetic call to self-transcendence.\(^93\)

The sacramental liturgy therefore has a liminal dimension in an ongoing sense, beyond initiation. The sacraments are transitional in a continual sense as they challenge all participants to reflect upon the interstice between reality and the ideal, prompting them to live up to their Christian vocation in the world.

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\(^{92}\) RCIA, p. 37.

ii. **Easter Vigil Experience**

The Easter Vigil scriptural narrative recounts God’s saving work through history, culminating in the Gospel story of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. The Vigil marks the ultimate liturgical expression of the paschal mystery, the holiest night of the Christian year. The sacraments themselves have a threshold quality:

…the Christian sacraments can be plainly seen to be rites of passage. That is, they either signify the attainment of important stages in a person’s experience as a member of the Church, vital thresholds crossed in his or her progress through life, or they give him or her essential support of a continuing kind on the hazardous journey that all human beings must make. And in fact, each of the Christian sacraments is organized around a single theme: the death and resurrection of Jesus. This, the heart of all Christian worship, what you might call the “semantic core” of the Christian message, is essentially a liminal symbol – a doorway into the kingdom of heaven.\(^{94}\)

The various liturgical thresholds of the RCIA journey culminate in sacramental initiation, marking full membership in the Church and deeper participation in the paschal mystery.\(^{95}\) We are reminded of van Gennep’s image of society, leading participants across the threshold of a house and into its various rooms and corridors, and thereby helping individuals to navigate the social changes of life.\(^{96}\) In similar vein the Church also leads participants through various initiatory stages and liturgical thresholds as participants seek full membership and deeper spiritual commitment.

The sacrament of baptism receives most emphasis in the Rite, highlighting the importance both of catechumens’ new forthcoming baptismal identity and the baptismal status of candidates. Baptism is a Trinitarian process, as one is baptized and integrated into the Church through God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It involves immersion in Christ’s own death and resurrection; it marks a new identity in Christ through ‘being joined to Christ’, a ‘mystical’ sharing in the paschal mystery through the pouring of baptismal water.\(^{97}\) Rahner’s theology of baptism is consistent

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\(^{95}\) Although the Vigil is the main occasion for adult receptions into the Church they may also take place at other times suitable to the liturgical year.

\(^{96}\) Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, pp. 25-26; see chapter four pp. 116-117.

\(^{97}\) RCIA, no. 206, p. 119.
with that of the Rite: baptism is the ‘first sacrament’ of the forgiveness of sins, of God’s grace and ‘the interior and permanent capacity to believe, to hope and to love God and man’.  

It also has a strong social dimension: ‘In baptism a person dies into the death of Christ in a sacramental, social, and tangible way in time and space’. It marks entry into the social entity that is the people of God, and the community of the Church ‘who believe and profess God’s salvation in Christ’.

Whilst the Rite places most emphasis on baptism, which marks entry into the Church and is the gateway for the other sacraments of initiation, all three – baptism, confirmation and Eucharist – are referred to in unity and involve immersion in the paschal mystery. Confirmation is ‘intimately connected with baptism’, and the initiation process culminates in participation in the Eucharist. Confirmation expresses the social and missionary nature of baptism, as through it participants are empowered by the Holy Spirit. Confirmation demands that the participant bear witness to the gift of faith and the grace of the sacrament itself strengthens the participant for the task of embarking on their own particular mission to the world.

Initiation is set within an eschatological context: participants ‘are led by the Holy Spirit into the promised fullness of time begun in Christ and, as they share in the Eucharistic sacrifice and meal, even to a foretaste of the kingdom of God’.

Thus, although participation in the Eucharist marks a culmination of the RCIA process, it is of course simultaneously a new beginning. As Maxwell Johnson observes, conversion, in the Gospels, arises from initiation into table-fellowship with Jesus – participation in the sacral meal marks a new beginning:

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99 Ibid., pp. 416-417. For Rahner, the Church is the basic sacrament through which Christ is present to humanity. God continues to offer himself to humanity through Christ and through the ‘sign’ of the Church. The seven sacraments are thus ecclesially oriented; they are understood in reference to the church as sacrament. Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, pp. 412-413.
100 RCIA, nos. 206-210, pp. 119-120 and no. 419, p. 238-239.
101 Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, p. 417. For Rahner, the Eucharist is not solely viewed as one of the seven sacraments; it has key ecclesial and soteriological significance: ‘However much it involves the individual and brings him time and time again into the community with Christ, it is nevertheless the sacrament of the church as such in a very radical sense. It is precisely the institution of the Lord’s Supper which is of decisive importance for the founding of the church and for the self-understanding of Jesus as the mediator of salvation’. See Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, pp. 424-425.
102 RCIA, no. 198, p. 117.
Regarding “initiation” into such a diverse and inclusive “table companionship” in the historical ministry of Jesus, it is important to underscore the fact that nowhere do the gospels record anything specific about rites of entrance or preparation for this meal sharing with Jesus. Rather, to use our own now traditional sacramental language, the meal itself was not the culmination of initiation but appears rather as the inception, the very beginnings of initiation, the “sacrament” of initiation, if you will, the rite of incorporation into Christ. Nothing, not even baptism, and certainly nothing like confirmation, was required as preparatory steps. Entrance to the meal of God’s reign, anticipated and incarnated in the very life, ministry and meals of Jesus of Nazareth was granted by Jesus himself and granted especially to those who were not prepared and not (yet) converted, to the godless and the undeserving, to the impure, and the unworthy.

Johnson suggests that initiation, at whatever stage and at whatever level of prior preparation and understanding, is initiation into nothing other than Jesus’ table-companionship. He recognizes this in terms of the theological underpinning of the introductory statement in the Rite: that during the Eucharist ‘the newly baptised reach the culminating point in their Christian initiation’. 103

God’s grace is thus mediated in its fullness through the person of Christ, through the sacramental reality of the Church and through the historical and material aspects of human life. 104 Initiation marks entrance into what Chauvet terms the ‘triple body’. This involves initiation into the ‘social’ body of the community, the body of ‘tradition’ (the practices and teachings of Church) and the ‘cosmic’ body of nature and the universe. 105 This highlights the embodied nature of sacramental worship which is now addressed.

103 Johnson, The Rites of Christian Initiation, pp. 5-6.
104 Rahner refers to the historical and material aspects of human life as the ‘categorical’.
105 Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament, p. 152. Initiation into the ‘cosmic’ body enables theological interpretation of Victor Turner’s observation that, ‘The body (with its unconscious rhythms and orectic processes) is viewed as the epitome or microcosm of the universe’, ‘Myth and Symbol’, pp. 579-580; see chapter four, p. 124. As Bruce Morrill explains: ‘The body is natural in its physicality, sharing in its rhythms of the entire physical universe. In this sense, the human body is cosmic, for each person continuously projects oneself into the universe as a macrocosm of one’s own physical bodiliness, while also introjecting that universe within oneself as a microcosm of the world’. Bruce T. Morrill, ‘Initial Consideration: Theory and Practice of the Body in Liturgy Today’, in Bodies of Worship, pp. 1-15 (p. 12).
iii. The Embodied Nature of Sacramentality

Initiation into the paschal mystery through participating in the sacraments involves an embodied encounter. As Chauvet states, ‘one becomes a Christian only by entering an institution and in letting this institution stamp its “trademark,” its “character,” on one’s body’.\(^{106}\) Emphasis was placed upon the role of the body, memory and heart within Christian initiation by the early Church Fathers.\(^{107}\) In the contemporary context of the RCIA process, Christian identity is transmitted not only through intellectual learning – although catechetical teaching is a valuable and necessary component of it – but also somatically. As Chauvet illustrates, Christian initiation (like all initiation) can only be effective as a holistic process involving all aspects of mind and body. On a collective level this facilitates the transmission of faith with the wider Church, both of today and yesterday. Initiation may be described in visceral terms, as being ‘gripped from within’:

…one has only understood when one has oneself been gripped from within, involved. There is no other way of entering into the mystery of Christ than to allow oneself to be grasped by it. To be initiated is not to have learned ‘truths to believe’ but to have received a tradition, in a way through all the pores of one’s skin. Initiation comes about through a process of education which is like life: it is not the end of a simple intellectual course (indispensable though such courses may be today), but originally an identity.\(^{108}\)

Entering the paschal mystery in this way demonstrates that graced experience may be mediated through the body. As an individual cognitively reflects on the process, they engage their memory – a physical as well as an intellectual process. Grace may be recognized though the experiences of the heart or affective transformation, as expressed in the Emmaus story, ‘did not our hearts burn within us?’ (Luke 24.13-27). Grace may be recognized through a visceral, physical experience which leaves one awestruck and captivated.

\(^{106}\) Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, p. 155, author’s emphasis.

\(^{107}\) Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, p. 63; p. 374. Harmless is here referencing John Chrysostom and Augustine.

The human body is therefore a conduit for graced experience and the body is itself both a symbol of and vehicle for God’s grace. For Rahner, the body is an expression of the soul, or rather mediates the soul, thereby expressing the inner nature of the human person.\(^{109}\) Initiation into the paschal mystery involves embodying it, experiencing an affective dying and rising with Christ in the context of one’s personal lived experience. This then becomes a lived hermeneutic by which to interpret life. In this sense, given that Jesus is symbol and assurance of God’s grace, ‘our life choices may, like his life, death and resurrection, truly symbolize the gracious presence of God, but in a derivative, responsive mode’.\(^{110}\)

Rowan Williams reminds us that reflection on the body ‘is itself a theologically significant business. To become aware […] of my fleshiness and mortality is to see this mortal flesh as “desired by grace”’.\(^{111}\) Furthermore, the embodied nature of Christian initiation marks initiation into the body of Christ and through this the Church ‘mediates relation with the God of Israel as Abba’ or Father:

What is more, the Christian adds to this general acknowledgement the conviction that mortal flesh has become the carrier of divine meaning without reserve, in the history of Jesus Christ; to appropriate one’s identity ‘in the flesh’ is also to appropriate an identity in Christ. That is to say, the complex of relations and acts (social and material) which binds us to Jesus will tell us who we are – not in virtue of our belonging in a visible institution, but in virtue of the way in which that institution, with appallingly uneven success, mediates that relation with the God of Israel as Abba which grounded the

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\(^{109}\) Karl Rahner, ‘How to Receive a Sacrament and Mean it’, *Theology Digest* 19 (1971), 227-234 (p. 232). Rahner also states that ‘all beings are by their nature symbolic because they necessarily ‘express’ themselves in order to attain their own nature’. See Rahner ‘The Theology of the Symbol’, p. 224, pp. 227-34. Morrill, in continuing to reflect on Chauvet’s concept of the ‘triple body’ states: ‘Each human subject as body constructs meaning for one’s life, uniquely according to one’s own desires, through a myriad of symbols. Thus, the body is the fundamental functioning symbol of all human experience, shaped through each one’s participation with others in the symbol systems of culture’, see ‘Initial Consideration: Theory and Practice of the Body in Liturgy Today’, p. 13.


\(^{111}\) Rowan Williams, ‘Lear and Eurydice: Religious Experience, Crisis and Change’, *The Way Supplement* 92 (1988) 75-84 (p. 82). Williams’ description of the body itself has a liminal quality: ‘The body is, for the Christian, precisely the place ‘between’ the externality of performance, the satisfying conditions for acquiring or maintaining a ‘proper’ identity, and the interior of fantasy and privacy’; see p. 82. Chauvet also acknowledges the liminal nature of the body; see *Symbol and Sacrament*, p. 147.
human identity of Jesus, the relation in the light of which all other criteria by which human identities are shaped will be judged.\textsuperscript{112}

RCIA participants function as important symbols for the whole community as they remind individuals of their baptismal commitment and identity. As McKenna puts it: ‘People would thus be among the most important symbols – of the catechumenate for example – and the symbols would “re-invite” all of us to experience the realities within them, to “re-alert the dulled sense of life”’.\textsuperscript{113}

The sacramental identity bestowed by the sacraments of initiation therefore also involves sharing in the corporal identity of the wider Church. Being part of the ecclesial body of Christ and immersing oneself in the paschal mystery involves outward expression of one’s faith in the world. The participant ‘receives the mandate really to appropriate this function by a personal decision and to exercise it throughout his entire life. He is appointed by baptism to be a messenger of the word, a witness to the truth, and a representative of the grace of Christ in the world’.\textsuperscript{114}

Rahner describes the ‘social and ecclesiological effect’ of the Christian community as being not just a ‘sign’; ‘but rather is the tangibility and the permanence of this grace and this salvation’.\textsuperscript{115} The Christian community, through becoming the body of Christ, demonstrates God’s grace actively working in the world:

\textit{…insofar as the Eucharist is the sacrament of the most radical and most real presence of the Lord in this celebration in the form of a meal, the Eucharist is also the fullest actualization of the essence of the Church. For the church neither is nor wants to be anything else but the presence of Christ in time and space.}\textsuperscript{116}

IV. Mystagogical Consciousness

The awareness and recognition of graced experience is multi-faceted. Particular spiritual experiences such as the RCIA process act as a medium for God’s grace,
during which God’s call and the appropriate response are revealed gradually, through a process of extended living and reflecting. It is also possible to identify specific moments of encounter: of heightened awareness of graced experience and a deeper understanding of graced identity; gestalt moments that lead to conversion and demand change within a person.

To transpose this into a slightly different key, recognition of graced experience, in its gradual appropriation, through the making of specific choices and in its surprising revelatory moments, is essentially what happens during the process of mystagogic reflection. A mystagogic consciousness expresses recognition of graced experience. Mystagogy refers to an all-encompassing dynamic of transcendental reflection upon faith experience in general. However as stated in chapter one (pp. 9-10), mystagogy also describes a specific stage in the RCIA process, where one reflects on the experience of sacramental initiation.

The latter two contrasting understandings and uses of mystagogy are reflected in the writings of various theologians. Two overlapping dimensions to the reflective process of mystagogy may be traced: on the one hand a sacramental mystagogy echoed in the work of liturgical scholars, and on the other a transcendental mystagogy, often based upon Rahner’s theology. Both of these uses of the term will be examined here, prior to exploration of a model based on the recognition of graced experience.

i. Sacramental/Liturgical Mystagogy

The importance of mystagogic reflection upon liturgical experience is highlighted by various liturgical scholars. Benedict XVI uses the term in a mystagogical, catechetical context in relation to the celebration of the Eucharist, encouraging active participation in the liturgy.\footnote{Benedict XVI, \textit{Sacramentum Caritatis}, no. 64.} Kathleen Hughes provides a model for mystagogy based upon reflection on the celebration of all the sacraments rather than just the sacraments of initiation. This encourages participants in the liturgy to become contemplative and to ‘pay attention’ to moments of insight and transformation and to
Rather than stressing retrospective reflection upon liturgical experience to the exclusion of increased awareness during the actual process, Edward Foley stresses that mystagogy does not follow a chronological pattern and can take place before, during or after a liturgical celebration or ‘event’. Here he develops Enrico Mazza’s work and argues that mystagogy is a way of ‘doing’ theology. Such an understanding helps situate the RCIA experience: ‘A group of adults who have passed through a powerful, communal symbolic experience seek, with the help of a mystagogue, to integrate that experience as a “hinge point” for all their past and future experiences’. David Power, basing his understanding of mystagogy on traditional sources, develops a contemporary framework again rooted in liturgical experience and the life of the community. For these scholars, mystagogical reflection is centred on and flows from sacramental celebration and its appropriation of life experience within the liturgy of the Word and sacrament, and some of them adapt early Church usage of this concept. It takes place within the community, encouraging a social mystagogy based on the nourishing of faith experience within the community and the missionary nature of the celebration of the sacraments, and responds to the call to move into a life of service for the kingdom of God. For such scholars, the liturgy is often viewed as a transcendent reality, something that is beyond full comprehension or measure.

ii. Transcendent Mystagogy

The transcendental, as distinct from the liturgical mystagogic approach, reveals various themes. Jon Sobrino adopts a transcendent application of the term to describe

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118 See Hughes, Saying Amen, pp. 17-32.
120 Frolich, ‘Toward a Modern Mystagogy’, p. 57.
123 See for example Hughes, Saying Amen, p. 2.
the nature of insertion into the mystery of God: ‘A theologal theology must be a mystagogy – an introduction into the reality of God as God is; transcendent mystery, utterly resistant to manipulation, and yet our Father, near at hand, good and saving’. Sobrino prefixes his understanding of mystagogy with the term ‘theologal’, by which he means directed toward God. 124 Rahner himself noted the importance of mystagogy but states that he did not develop this fully in his writings. 125 Although some theologians have sought to develop Rahner’s position, there seems to be no successful systematic, theological model that incorporates reflection on liturgical participation with mystagogic reflection on the transcendental nature of one’s whole faith journey. James Bacik, in Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery bases his interpretation on Rahner and defines two models ‘categorical’ and ‘transcendental’ mystagogy which serve the role of the contemporary Christian as an apologist. His ‘categorical mystagogy’, which concerns the connecting of experience with Christian tradition and doctrine, is independent of his ‘transcendental’ mystagogy, the process of engaging with mystery. 126 David Regan provides perhaps the most thorough, systematic exposition of a theology of mystagogy, 127 acknowledging the mystagogy dimension stressed in the practice of the RCIA, and criticizing the Rite for being too timid in its introduction of mystagogy to contemporary practice. However, his work has not been much utilized or developed, and in general it would seem that the potential of a mystagogic theology remains somewhat latent.


126 Frolich highlights that Bacik’s ‘transcendental’ mystagogy, which she states is not strictly dependent on Christ, can be criticized as mystagogy in only a ‘derived sense’. See Frolich, ‘Toward a Modern Mystagogy’, p. 57. Declan Marmion outlines a mystagogy based on the experience of the Spiritual Exercises, but does not seem to combine this with a liturgical mystagogy. See Declan Marmion, A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner, Volume 23 of Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1998).

127 David Regan, Experience the Mystery: Pastoral Possibilities for a Christian Mystagogy (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1994).
iii. **Towards a Mystagogical Model**

The model of mystagogy so far implicit within this theological framework is based upon the *recognition of graced experience*. This model, which acknowledges the liturgical phase of mystagogy, sets out a transcendental mystagogy which accentuates ‘becoming’; the *moving into* a deeper faith experience, of insertion into the paschal mystery, and of moving into the mystery of what it means to be human, especially as expressed through sacramental and everyday mystical living. This has a mystagogical cadence, a sense of *movement into* deeper mystery over retrospective reflection. It acknowledges graced experience prior to conversion and liturgical experience and moves towards an integrated mystagogy. Theological interpretation of the data in the next chapter will involve reflecting upon moments of personal ‘becoming’ in a graced sense – the recognition of graced encounter. In so doing it will incorporate the personal mystagogical ‘grammar’\(^{128}\) of faith experience into the theological interpretation.

In the Introduction to Bacik’s *Apologetics of Mystery*, Rahner takes the opportunity to comment on the relationship between his own theology and ‘political theology’. (This is in answer to Metz’s critique that his theology does not adequately engage with the societal and the political, that it is lacking in Christian praxis.) Rahner asserts the position that a transcendental mystagogy also needs to engage with the practical, the here and now:

> If one not only sees and takes seriously these necessary mediations of transcendental experience but also fills it out in a concrete way, then one already practices in an authentic way political theology, or, in other words, a practical fundamental theology. I gladly recognize that a concrete mystagogy must, to use Metz’s language, be at the same time “mystical and political”.\(^{129}\)

Rahner advocates a mystagogy based on an everyday mysticism:

> In the first place a mystagogy (if we may use the term) of the mysticism of ordinary life is necessary; it must be shown that he whom we call God is always present from the very outset and even already accepted, as infinite

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\(^{129}\) Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery*, pp. ix-x.
offer, as silent love, as absolute future, wherever a person is faithful to his conscience and breaks out of the prison walls of his selfishness. With these people such a mystagogy is a necessary presupposition for an understanding of the Church’s worship. If this understanding is to be awakened, then they must be shown that worship is the explicit celebration of the divine depth of their ordinary life that what clearly appears in it and consequently can be more decisively accepted in freedom is what occurs always and everywhere in the ordinary course of life. These people must be helped to understand that the very fact that God is worshipped in spirit everywhere (and not only in Jerusalem) is itself made explicit and celebrated in the worship of the Church.130

Mystagogy therefore is rooted in personal faith experience and takes one beyond oneself; faith is not just about a private interiority or spiritual experience, mystagogy prompts a missionary dynamic. A mystagogical lens becomes important for this theological framework not only for interpreting the data of participants’ experience set out in the next chapter, but also for demonstrating the role of mystagogy in the practical theology exercise – a role that is at once both mystical and practical.

**Conclusion**

This chapter establishes a framework for the exploration of the RCIA as a journey into graced mystical experience. The central theme - *recognition of graced experience* - has been outlined here in terms of a relationship with God, immersion into the paschal mystery, sacramental encounter and mystagogic reflection. The four themes of this chapter provide the theological reference points for the interpretation of participants’ experience, including instances of liminal experience. Mystagogy, although presented here as a final theme, is integral to the whole theological framework. Mystagogic reflection involves a developing consciousness, a process of becoming or *moving into* a deeper realization of God’s grace. Theological interpretation of mystagogic experience of participants aims to disclose God’s action within their lives, emphasizing, along with Rahner, the importance of experience for

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theology. Such experience may also be described as ‘flow’,\textsuperscript{131} moments of activity (for example aspects of liturgical experience) that are completely absorbing, leading to a sense of deep joy, where the human encounter with the divine becomes seamless and endless with possibility.

\textsuperscript{131} Victor Turner, ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic’, p. 520; see chapter four, p. 138.
Chapter 7: Theological Interpretation

Here the Thou appeared to the man out of deeper mystery, addressed him even out of the darkness, and he responded with his life.

Martin Buber\(^1\)

I have said therefore the shell must be broken through and what is inside must come out, for if you want to get at the kernel you must break the shell. And also, if you want to find nature unveiled, all likenesses must be broken through, and the further you penetrate, the nearer you will get to the essence. When the soul finds the One, where all is one, there she will remain in the Single One.

Meister Eckhart\(^2\)

The analysis in this chapter is structured by the four themes derived from the theological framework (as set out in the previous chapter). This interpretation of respondents’ experience brings the embedded theology of RCIA practice into sharp, explicit focus. Moreover, participants’ experience enriches these theological themes from the position of lived experience. This chapter also provides a theological interpretation of the lived experience of liminality and communitas. These concepts are brought into dialogue with theology, and the chapter concludes by discussing how theology may be of service to anthropology.

The theology of grace, the first theological framework theme, will now be used to interpret participants’ faith-stories and, in particular, their recognition of graced experience within the entire conversion process. The ensuing discussion of paschal living and sacramental and mystagogic consciousness further enlightens this graced dynamic.

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\(^2\) As quoted in Harmless, *Mystics*, pp. 127-128, emphasis in the original.
I. Christian Initiation as Insight into Grace

The conversations with participants were saturated with rich descriptive accounts of graced experience, an experience of God’s self-giving love. When these conversations are given an explicit theological reading the various theological dimensions of such graced experience are brought centre-stage.

We begin with the theme of the recognition of graced identity, which charts the recognition of grace prior to participation in the RCIA. This is followed by reflection upon how the RCIA process itself enables experience of grace, the graced nature of liminal experience and the mystical nature of participants’ experience.

Gradual Recognition of Graced Identity

This theme explores participants’ awareness of the graced presence of God in their lives ahead of joining the RCIA and the Church, even if this awareness was not fully articulated or expressed.

As previously stated the theological concept of grace articulates how God’s grace is universally and permanently present and offered to all humankind; there is no distinction between believer, unbeliever or sinner. Grace exists without qualification and appeals to the existential nature of all humanity. Recognition of this involves an acknowledgment that God’s graced presence has always existed, even though such awareness may be implicit:

…the awakening of such divine experience is not in fact indoctrination with something previously completely absent from the human person, but rather more the explicit coming to the reality of the self, the free acceptance of a reality of the human constitution – a reality which is always there, mostly

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3 See Rahner, ‘Nature and Grace’, pp. 180-181: ‘…grace is given prior to an existential decision, as ‘offer’ and ‘possibility’ (i.e. of a free salutary act)’, p. 180; see chapter six, p. 197.
buried and repressed, but an inescapable fact. Its name is grace, and God’s own self is there, directly.⁴

When this theme is applied to participants’ stories it is fascinating to see how faith came to gradual fruition, sometimes over a period of many years. Participants shared examples of the tacit, unstated nature of graced experience; their own yearnings reflected the gentle promptings of God’s love which led them to explore faith in the Catholic Church.

The following example is a perfect illustration of the ‘awakening of such divine experience’. Siobhan, who was brought up as a member of the Church of Ireland and had strong childhood memories of faith, became agnostic at university. She described her deeper appreciation of God in adult life. She initially identified an awareness of an implicit underground process spanning several years:

…there was something going on underground all those years.

Siobhan, Church of Ireland background

These implicit stirrings of faith, which were not fully articulated, reached a point where she recognized a deeper yearning:

I slowly began to think there was something here that I was missing.

Siobhan

Siobhan’s description of personal awakening is in line with Bonaventure’s ‘spiritual touch’, to which Rahner refers – a real experience of God, albeit vague and indirect. Her admission that there was something going on ‘below the surface’ expressed a sense of being in ‘dark, loving contact’ with God.⁵ She acknowledged the gradual nature of this awakening, which was eventually realized through her desire to become Catholic. She also recognized distinct moments of realization which were ‘quite dramatic’, where ‘something awoke’ prior to the explicit desire to explore her

⁵ Endean, Karl Rahner, p. 92; p. 130; see chapter 6, p. 192.
faith. Becoming a parent was a particular catalyst for Siobhan, or at least marked an especial deepening of this desire. This sense of God’s loving grace was heightened in the RCIA process and ensuing sacramental reception and ecclesial membership. Her experience highlights the continuum of grace working throughout a person’s life span; the gradual unfolding of a life lived within God’s love involves a constant process of appreciation over time. For Siobhan, her deeper conversion occurred through acknowledging the inner promptings of God’s love and attending to them. Through this act of recognition, her faith came to a distinct awareness.

Other participants described more dramatic occurrences of spiritual awakening or of coming to explicit recognition of God’s grace, and these testimonies also reveal how participants were in ‘dark, loving contact’ with God. For Peter it was a disturbing personal crisis that led him to a deeper faith search and to appeal directly to God for help. He alluded to a personal situation during which he felt abandoned by God, yet he still cried out to God. This was a dark experience, and, as outlined in chapter three, one that was equivalent to ‘wrestling with God’:

The only thing I liken it to now is that God removed his hand from me, like a protection.

Peter, former practicing Anglican

Peter pleaded with God to assist him. His subsequent description of God helping him through this difficult situation portrayed a dependency on God. He came to a realization that his own life and identity existed within God: ‘the only person who could help me was God’; ‘there was nowhere else for me to go’. He had a distinct recognition of graced identity in God, even despite God’s seeming initial absence. Being personally helped by God was a seminal moment in his faith journey: it prompted his return to practicing his faith in the Anglican Church (prior to becoming Catholic); it also continued to provide a sense of consolation and helped him to navigate other difficult challenges in his life:

6 Ibid.
And obviously, one of the things I have found since then is that when He does let me go through these experiences, He’s ever watchful, He’s ever close because He won’t let me fall.

Peter

Ultimately, as the last chapter illustrated, conversion involves recognizing the presence of God throughout one’s life story (see p. 203). This provides a challenge to the RCIA process because it emphasizes that God is present to the individual ahead of any conversion process that takes place in the RCIA. The two examples related here attest to the fact that God’s grace actively works prior to the RCIA; as such, the RCIA becomes a distinct moment in the life of grace, but not the whole story. In fact, most participants had already decided to become Catholic before approaching the Church to join the RCIA, which is testament to the hidden workings of God’s grace in their lives ahead of the process. One of the important tasks of catechesis in the RCIA is to highlight that grace is a gift already given.

These examples from Siobhan and Peter’s stories parallel the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son mentioned in the last chapter, who has a moment in the pigsty where ‘he comes to himself’ – that is, becomes more aware of his own identity, realizing that he is made for something different. A similar moment of clarity for participants, of identity coming into sharper focus, and a moment which was instrumental in their decision to join the RCIA group, can be expressed thus: ‘Particular situations trigger moments of self-awareness in us – moments when we recognize our identity as temples of grace’. Participants’ ‘moments of self-awareness’ expressed a desire for deeper faith and the explicit recognition of God’s call and God’s presence.

Liminal Encounter as an Experience of Grace

Participants’ tacit (or unthematic) experiences of God came to consciousness (became thematic) through various life events. These included traumatic crises and testing experiences of a liminal character. As we have seen, instances of

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7 Endean, Karl Rahner, p. 134; see chapter six, pp. 194-195.
8 Ibid., pp. 133-134; see chapter six, p. 195.
9 Ibid., p. 103 and see chapter six pp. 192-193 for a definition of Rahner’s term, ‘transcendence becoming thematic’.
participants’ graced identity coming into sharper focus, fostering a desire in them to join the Church, were often prompted by prior liminal occurrences – of bereavement, suffering, loss, displacement, of being in-between, or the charting of new personal territory such as parenthood and retirement; these acted as catalysts for seeking out deeper relationship with God and Church membership. For example, Natalie, a former Muslim, described how a ‘vague’ Christian influence (she had attended Christian Churches as a child in Africa) culminated in her RCIA journey (see p. 88). She had deliberately sought out membership in the Catholic Church after the death of her mother.

These liminal experiences, especially those involving personal anguish or suffering, were often occasions of spiritual awakening, and offered further examples of how some situations ‘trigger’ recognition of graced identity and prompt the desire for a deeper expression of faith. Such prior liminal occurrences were, in theological terms, graced encounters, as participants turned to their faith in God to help them through particular situations. For Maria, multiple liminal transitions prior to the RCIA were in fact cumulative graced experiences. She later understood these events as examples of God preparing her for a deeper appreciation of His love in the RCIA: ‘I thought my heart was being stretched… [Laughs]’ (see p. 76).

In this we can see how the process of coming to a deeper recognition of grace – whether it occurs over time or in dramatic moments – helps to read the dynamic of the liminal experience. Liminality, as the Turners observed, is a transformative experience, which is to be theologically understood as graced. The heightened liminal self-consciousness of RCIA participants, theologically speaking, involves them coming to a greater awareness of their graced identity.

**RCIA Experience as Insight into Grace**

The RCIA initiatory process defines a particular phase in the life of grace, as it provides opportunity for reflection on faith and a growing awareness of graced identity. The RCIA group fosters the locus and environment for graced encounter, the space for the experiential graced moment to occur; it enables a heightened
awareness of grace, where graced identity can continue to come into view. This was true for catechumens and candidates alike. The dimensions of this graced reality are now explored.

Through participation in the RCIA, as participants responded to God’s call they explored a deeper awareness of their graced identity. The dynamic of grace, manifest in the gradual recognition of graced experience over time, was also reflected in participants’ accounts of ongoing personal change during the RCIA. As Victoria stated it was:

…a very gradual kind of change. I didn’t have any one moment where I thought, ‘Wow, I’ve flipped and totally changed’. I found it was quite a gradual process and a kind of realization.

Victoria, non-religious background

Others echoed this sentiment. For Timothy there was no ‘Damascene conversion or flash point’; instead, faith transformation was steady and measured. His coming to deeper recognition of graced experience was likened to the image of seeing ‘through a glass darkly’ (see p. 88).

Graced transformation was often triggered by specific encounters in the group. For example, Liam, prompted by a particular group scriptural reflection, realized his need for affective conversion. He described an awakening in terms of personal development:

…there was a different level of learning that I needed to do as a human being; that it wasn’t just about learning about the Catholic faith…but that just as a human being there were parts of myself that I wasn’t accessing as perhaps as readily and everything as I should.

Of course, examples of communitas within the group also capture the poignancy of such graced moments, and these are reflected upon in section II.

The effects of both gradual change and specific graced moments were really profound. Theresa described the process as ‘like a realization’ which prompted the integrated and all-embracing nature of her faith:
…that’s what I see now; it has an impact on every part of my being, every day.

Theresa, Church of England background

Transformation through God’s love, together with a deeper awareness of such love, enabled participants to flourish on a personal level. When interpreting participants’ experience through the theological perspective of grace, it is possible to understand how their sense of change during the process (prompted by a deeper experience of God’s love) enabled them to turn away from sinful behaviour. For example, participants recounted how they became better people, more oriented to the needs of others and less selfish, and they developed a more informed conscience. This affected their sense of self and their everyday interactions with others. Becoming more forgiving was a key element in the conversion process. This was not without its demands, with several participants citing forgiving other people as being especially challenging, although this was also often acknowledged as the deepest point of change. Through self-examination and reflection upon their actions, participants experienced a sense of personal liberation from previously limiting behaviours. In addition to providing descriptions of change in attitude and deed they underwent changes in belief. A minority of participants described becoming more socially aware, and they participated in voluntary work. One participant indicated that the focus of his RCIA group on the ‘Living Simply’ campaign helped him to reassess the way he lived his life from a material point of view (see p. 109).

The above examples, demonstrating how participants changed on many levels, provide insight into the active working of God’s grace, examples of the practical lived results of the RCIA. Participants described explicit occasions of coming to graced recognition, where they became aware of the need for change and re-direction and recognized their subsequent transformation. In this way they responded to God’s call to a deeper life of grace. Change on an everyday level as a result of the process marked a new way of Christian living or – for those already Christian – a deeper experience of Christian living.
Enjoyed Mystical Experience

Rahner understood that graced reality, the experience of God’s love, is in essence mystical encounter. Consequently, the RCIA process, as a locus for graced experience and initiation into a deeper appreciation of God’s love, also marks a deeper initiation into such mystical encounter. Theological reflection on participants’ faith-stories gives rise to two aspects of lived mystical experience. Firstly there is apophatic consciousness, as the RCIA process – and especially the experience of being liminal – led some participants to get in touch with the spiritual senses, or an appreciation of God through dark experience. Secondly, participants’ transformation in the process marked initiation into an everyday mysticism. The mystical dimensions of graced experience also become important coordinates for the interpretation of liminal experiences.

i. Apophatic Consciousness

Participation in the RCIA process explicitly inspired an apophatic consciousness in some participants. That is, their experience of the RCIA entailed appreciating God’s presence in difficult and dark times. This is neatly summarized by an example from Peter’s story. As described in chapter three, for Peter the RCIA was a marked time of waiting to receive the Eucharist. He compared the RCIA to entering a dark tunnel (a defining liminal image within the data):

I often liken it to going through a big, dark tunnel and you didn’t know where the end was, until Easter Sunday night when you were actually received in and you’d got a new dawn and everything was fine.

Peter, former practicing Anglican

Paradoxically, God’s loving contact was still accessible in the midst of seeming darkness; Peter expressed awareness that God was with him during the wait, as he acknowledged being spiritually fed during that time, despite not being able to receive the Eucharist. Despite his ‘real feelings of darkness’ he still felt nourished by God’s presence and transformed through God’s loving grace:

We couldn’t receive sacrament here (sic), we just used to sit and watch the Mass but at the same time we knew we were being fed interiorly. We weren’t left alone in this tunnel; we were fed every time at Mass, I felt, even though we weren’t actually receiving it physically.

Peter

His sense of liminal isolation reached resolution during reception at the Easter Vigil, which he compared to ‘entering the light again’. For Peter, an increased awareness of graced identity came into focus during this time and through subsequent sacramental reception.

This classic case of the dark side of liminality, in Turnerian terms, can also be seen as an apophatic consciousness, in theological terms – i.e. an encounter of waiting on God, in this case a movement from darkness into light. In this instance, when liminal experience is transposed into a theological key, it may be described as a graced mystical encounter; it disclosed an experience of God’s love whilst the participant patiently waited for sacramental reception. Christian initiation therefore leads to or heightens an apophatic consciousness; embracing the dark moments of life as revelatory, in which God is present. Entering into such apophatic consciousness is also anti-structural, in the sense that it involves giving up the personal need for control, which was captured by Peter’s comment that he did not know when he would come out of the ‘darkness’. Such situations enable one to realize one’s dependency on God, to recognize the blessings in the situation, similar in fact to the blessing Jacob received when struggling with the angel (Gen 32.22-31). Given that Peter was already a practicing Christian, this example captures his continued journey, coming to a more profound appreciation of God’s love and a deeper initiation into an apophatic way of being.

Apophatic experience, which led some participants to explore their need for an explicit faith identity and ecclesial membership in the first place, therefore often became a characteristic theme during the RCIA process itself. In addition, as participants came to a deeper consciousness of the apophatic dimensions of faith they also experienced a stronger certainty in their faith. This sense of assurance was
echoed by catechumens as well as candidates, as they navigated challenges beyond the RCIA and throughout their faith journey. Participants’ accounts of their personal faith in situations of adversity revealed the depths of their faith; some articulated a sense of the unshakeable quality of their faith as they grappled with distressing situations. The strength of Serena’s faith – for instance, the assuredness of her relationship with God and awareness of God’s presence – sustained her through further liminal difficulties, as she was literally cut off from the Church after being received due to opposition from her husband:

It was the knowledge that, although I didn’t go to church, and I was still carrying on, but deep in my heart that I had God with me.

Serena, former practicing Anglican

These above examples of apophatic consciousness demonstrate how a more profound experience of God occurs in moving from unknowing into a deeper knowing, a sense of God’s faithful presence. This sentiment of graced knowing and certainty was further confirmed by participants’ conversion to Christ and by sacramental initiation and will be explored further in this chapter. (The theme of ‘unknowing’ will be developed in section III of this chapter.)

A striking element of participants’ faith-stories concerns how deeper knowing of God and the acknowledgement of graced encounter acted as a bedrock for subsequent life experience. Here we may make comparisons between the dynamic of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and the RCIA process. As the last chapter highlighted, the Spiritual Exercises reveal a self-reflective dynamic (an ‘existential logic’), which is of potential importance for Christianity as a whole.¹¹ In this sense the RCIA process, as it fosters and encourages such graced certainty, enabling participants to surpass the normal doubts about faith and the Church, (and even opposition from other people to their faith), is an illustration of how Rahner’s theology of graced recognition is of vital significance for all Christians.

¹¹ Endean, Karl Rahner, pp. 112-113; see chapter six, p. 194.
ii. **Everyday Mysticism**

The preceding discussions, describing a growing awareness of graced identity and initiation into Christian living as a life of grace may be interpreted, in the light of Rahner’s theology of grace, as mystical experience. It therefore follows that the RCIA is an initiation into awareness of everyday mysticism.

Rahner’s interpretation of mystical experience does not advocate a spiritual piety that is focused on personal interiority. Instead, it points to a practical, lived faith that incorporates the vicissitudes of everyday life. As stated in the previous chapter, such mystical encounter exists at all stages of a person’s life; it is not an elite experience.\(^{12}\) The earlier described transformation, such as affective conversion, the heightening of conscience and the process of becoming more forgiving: all are testament to the practical nature of graced mystical conversion.

A brief review of participants’ experiences before, during and after the RCIA, including parallel liminal occurrences, provides a list of graced events comparable to Rahner’s list of everyday mysticism as set out in the last chapter.\(^{13}\) Participants described various circumstances: taking on the responsibility of a sick parent with a sense of duty, love and appreciation; not being embittered at the extreme resistance of one’s spouse to one’s decision to become Catholic; accepting marital breakdown; mourning the loss of a child with strength; losing one’s job, yet not despairing; accepting suffering and ill health; coping with loss and bereavement by gaining strength from Jesus’ death and resurrection. These circumstances, as highlighted by participants’ growing apophatic consciousness, describe coming to an awareness of God through life’s difficulties, a *via negativa.* They are poignant examples of graced mystical encounter illustrating that, even in the depths of despair, God is present. These examples, as Rahner suggested, may be considered as the work of the Holy Spirit.\(^{14}\) These experiences of everyday mystical living were born of pain and

\(^{13}\) Ibid., pp. 200-203; see chapter six, p. 201.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 208; see chapter six, pp. 201-202.
suffering, and theologically speaking, may bear witness to the power of Christ’s Spirit working within participants’ lives.

What was impressive about participants’ experience of everyday mysticism (in this Rahnerian sense of the term) was the humility with which they shared their stories. This was in an unassuming, modest way, yet couched in a profound sense of wonder and awe at the goodness of God. Such interpretation of participants’ faith-stories enables a humble, implicit everyday mysticism to emerge, one which was grounded in real, often harsh, down-to-earth reality. Mystical experience was evident in the graced transformation of confusion, darkness, tragedy and vulnerability. As the opening quotation to this chapter from Meister Eckhart portrays, this involved being broken open and experiencing God’s grace at the innermost depths of one’s being.  

As mentioned in the last chapter, Rahner points out how the darkness and the light, the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*, are two aspects of the same experience: both lead one to God. The previous section described how the RCIA involved initiation into an apophatic consciousness. This initiation into the lifelong spiritual journey also concerns the kataphatic dimensions of faith or the *via positiva*. Faith experience involves a cyclical movement in and out of apophatic and kataphatic experiences as places of graced realization and learning. As Pamela commented, apophatic encounter had a cathartic quality which demonstrates how the darkness and the light are aspects of the same spiritual experience. She recognized her own ‘dark-night-of-the-soul’ encounters through reading the writings of the mystic St. John of the Cross. However these encounters acted as a reorientation process as in her words, after going through them, ‘then you’re sort of re-converted again’ (see p. 90).

Although participants did not explicitly describe their encounters as mystical experience, a theology of graced mysticism does act as an integral reference point. In effect, some participants were often self-effacing concerning their own personal worthiness and the significance of their spiritual experiences. Timothy described his engagement with God as sometimes involving a ‘flash of feeling close’, which he

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felt was a pale comparison, or only a glimpse of what those in religious orders encounter (see p. 91). Pamela was honest about how she struggled with the ongoing challenge of coming to terms with the pain and suffering of those she loved. Participants embodied a deep personal wisdom as a result of their everyday mystical experiences, which were lived and practical. These encounters were fostered by the RCIA, enabling a sense of liberation, growth and change. Those new to Christianity were being initiated into Christian living in terms of an everyday life of grace. For those who were already Christian, the RCIA involved the further appropriation of graced reality.

In summary, theological reflection has so far identified how the RCIA process facilitates insight, a deeper appreciation of grace. The recognition of grace is essential to the conversion process, a process which is ongoing throughout life. Reflection on participants’ stories also reveals a lived, graced theological anthropology that is integral to RCIA practice and this will be further explored throughout the remainder of this chapter.

II. Paschal Living

The RCIA involves being initiated into an experience of the paschal mystery and allowing that encounter to transform and reorient one’s life. Participants’ stories revealed how the movement into a life of grace occurs through conversion to Jesus Christ and the lived reality of the paschal mystery. Participants came to know the person of Christ in the RCIA, and for those already practicing Christians, their relationship with Christ deepened. This section reflects upon encounter with Christ during the RCIA; the experience of personal redemption; the interpretation of life through the paschal mystery and the graced encounter in the RCIA group as an experience of Koinonia.

17 RCIA, no. 8, p. 5; see chapter six, p. 205.
**Encounter with Christ**

The process of Christian conversion involves recognition of God’s grace offered through the person of Christ. God’s love is principally expressed through the incarnation. One of the four dimensions of catechesis in the RCIA focuses on the Word, encountering Christ through scripture.\(^{18}\) Although participants did not generally discuss the nature or content of scriptural catechesis during the RCIA in any great depth, descriptions of interpersonal relationships with Christ were striking.

Friendship with Christ was a fundamental feature of participants’ RCIA conversion experience. As described in chapter three (pp. 92-93), participants commented that they related to the human nature of Christ through His qualities and emotions, as portrayed in the Gospel narrative. Participants described Him as a brother and teacher, a friend that one could talk everyday problems over with. A prominent element of this friendship was the trust and faith placed in Christ. Some described appealing to Him for personal direction, and in response felt directly led and guided. Others described being carried through difficult circumstances, of Christ’s all-knowing presence concerning personal trials. Relationship with Christ was a living, profound encounter. The constant presence of Christ was acknowledged, including His living presence in the here and now:

\[
\text{It’s as if He’s stood before you, as if He’s you [referring to the interviewer’s close proximity to Peter], and it’s amazing.}
\]

Peter

Friendship with Christ was therefore characterized in personal, relational and embodied terms. This echoes Cooke’s description:

Because Christian faith is a personal acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth and the God revealed in him, because it is essentially a friendship, it involves the whole range of knowledge, feeling sense perception, imagination, and affectivity-with each of these elements conditioning each of the others.\(^{19}\)

\(^{18}\) RCIA, no. 75.1, p. 37; see chapter six, p. 207.

\(^{19}\) Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, p. 142; see chapter 6, p. 208.
Some of the most poignant examples from conversations with participants concerned the love that was encountered through this relationship. As Pamela summarized, for her Jesus is the embodiment of love:

…well He is love in’t He? (sic), and nothing else but love.

Pamela, former practicing Methodist

Maria participated in an Ignatian Retreat in Daily Life as part of her RCIA journey, during which she prayed with the text of John 14 (concerning the response of Thomas’ question, ‘how do we know the way?’). Praying with this text prompted a personal epiphany:

I just felt this love, I just felt this love, really, bubbling through me from right [pause]. It just came straight through me from everything, completely, so much that it was pain…incredibly painful. Just so much love.

Maria, former practicing Anglican

Although she at first struggled with the encounter, as it was so overwhelming, Maria came to recognize that this was an experience of God’s love, a gratuitous gift, not something she had earned or achieved (see p. 96). Encounter with Christ therefore revealed God’s love made manifest through the incarnation. As Rahner states:

Today in Christianity subsequent to Christ’s birth, we cannot say anything true, authentic, and specific about God without professing faith in God as Emmanuel, as God-with-us, as the God of our flesh, as the God of our human nature […]. Because this human being is the true, acting living God, then within the sphere of faith and theology about God the face of a human being shines out.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Redemption in Christ}

As stated in the last chapter, Christ ultimately reveals God’s transforming love through His suffering, death and resurrection. His resurrection signifies a new form of life that all Christians are called to share. Christ’s dying and rising is therefore an

\textsuperscript{20} Rahner, ‘Mary, Mother of the Lord’, p. 105; see chapter six, p. 206.
assurance of God’s grace for Christians that death is not the final end and that Christians will continue to live in God’s presence and experience God’s grace.21

The sense of assurance obtained through Christ’s death and resurrection is particularly evident in Sarah’s story. During both interview conversations with Sarah (a former practicing Hindu), she described her joyful appreciation of her personal redemption through Christ (see p. 110). She recounted how being introduced to Christianity involved an extensive reorientation of her life. Her conversion process was a marked, liminal transition of moving between two world faiths, navigating the different theological anthropologies of Hinduism and Christianity. She shared her memories of this transition, her initial amazement that Christ could forgive her sins:

How can the Christian faith teach that? How can Jesus Christ forgive me for things I’ve done?

Sarah, former practicing Hindu

She expressed her gratitude for how Christ had led her through some very difficult situations and provided a sense of unconditional acceptance. Her assuredness of her personal salvation and confidence in Christ arose from personal encounter with Him. Christ’s resurrection and her personal sense of new life in Christ became a defining hermeneutic, one which enabled her to interpret the difficulties and challenges of life:

The renewal, Jesus Christ, the resurrection, is a renewal in so many aspects of our lives. It could be marriage, divorce, a renewal. It could be the death of a child, a renewal [...]. Hope in life; the resurrection is hope.

Sarah

In response to her experience of God’s forgiving love, she decided to become more forgiving and embraced the challenging Gospel message of forgiveness.

A deeper appreciation of the paschal mystery is an ongoing aspect of Christian life; participants’ graced identity continued to come into sharper focus throughout their lives. Sarah observed how this understanding took a while to mature. For other

21 Endean, Karl Rahner, p. 198; see chapter six, p. 206-207.
participants, awareness or experience of Christ’s presence also manifested itself gradually. Patricia, from a Church of England background, moved from viewing Jesus as a ‘vague identity’ to becoming a ‘positive presence’ which culminated in her saying ‘I know he’s here’ (p. 95). This speaks to the growing recognition of grace over time; moving from tacit experience of ‘spiritual touch’ to distinct awareness of God, or in this case coming to distinct awareness of Christ’s transcendental presence. For this participant, what was once an unspoken awareness of Christ was transformed into a realized relationship with Him.

Coming to realization of the role of Christ in salvation was also the experience of those who had been practicing Christians prior to the RCIA. Maria, a former practicing Anglican, who was extremely articulate about her faith, illustrated how the RCIA was still a profound journey of discovery concerning the person of Christ. During participation in her Retreat in Daily Life, she experienced a startling discovery of the truth of the Gospel narrative; she experienced through prayer that ‘it’s all true, completely and utterly true’. She came to an understanding that:

Jesus is in us and that our development is in […] the pattern of Jesus because we are in the image of God.

Maria

For Maria, Jesus empowered an understanding and experience of God’s grace through His divine indwelling presence within her. This revealed her deeper recognition of the felt presence of Christ, and how an assurance of God’s grace through the person of Christ may happen at any stage of the faith journey.

**Interpreting Life through the Paschal Mystery**

The RCIA process involved initiation into the paschal mystery for those who were not baptized and encouraged a more profound sense of paschal living for those already Christian: a deeper fulfilment of their baptismal identity. Such an initiation encourages participants to interpret life through the paschal mystery. This involves

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22 Endean, *Karl Rahner*, pp. 27-30; see chapter six, p. 192.
23 Baptism is ‘a mystical sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection through which those who believe in his name die to sin and rise to eternal life’. RCIA, no. 206, p. 119; see chapter six, pp. 204; 210.
understanding personal suffering, loss and new life as sharing in Christ’s death and rising to new life with Him.

Participants’ liminal experience may specifically be interpreted as a sharing in the paschal mystery. Liminal experience during the RCIA presented various challenges: loss of former ecclesial or religious identity, isolation, including waiting, segregation and ordeal, opposition from friends and family and personal upheaval. Participants also experienced other transitions or parallel liminal-like states, including loss and bereavement, which were concurrent with their RCIA journey. These examples disclose the fragile and vulnerable side of human life. Navigation of in-between transitional space, and associated apophatic or dark experience, proved a difficult and testing encounter for various participants.

These dark liminal encounters involved dying to the self on some level: death to a former way of life and identity. Interpreted theologically, they marked initiation into an experience of the paschal mystery, or were access points for a more far-reaching experience of it. They marked moving into a profound realization of grace through a sharing in Christ’s own death and resurrection. As Rahner states: ‘One has only found Jesus fully, and in Him God’s own self, when one has died with Him’. 24 Liminal experience in the RCIA may therefore be equated to dying with Christ, following Christ into the tomb and subsequently sharing in His resurrection. Liminal disorientation is resolved in a catharsis, a new orientation and way of viewing and participating in life. Participants move beyond the chrysalis-like nature of the liminal state into new life in Christ, a life of everyday discipleship. Liminality in the RCIA is therefore transformative; the RCIA is a graced place of encounter, and conversion occurs through movement from death to new life.

Participants’ experience of the paschal mystery also helped them to reorient their understanding of suffering. Echoing the above excerpt from Sarah’s interview on p. 244, concerning how the resurrection may transform difficult experiences in life, other participants also shared how embracing the paschal mystery paradigm enabled

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the recognition of the presence of God’s grace even in life’s darkest moments. Pamela poignantly described coming to terms with the death of her young son, which had occurred many years before she joined her RCIA group. This provides an example of how a ‘paradigmatic’ scene from scripture may be inspirational in the reorientation of one’s life and faith experience.²⁵ She particularly related to the image of the Pietà, of Mary holding Christ’s dead body after it had been taken down from the cross:

[...] I think growing closer to Our Lady, growing closer to Mary, you know, and how she felt when Jesus died, and I don’t know if whether you ever watched ‘Jesus of Nazareth’? Robert Powell, you know. And she was cradling Him and rocking Him like a baby, and when you’ve seen your own little boy…you know, and you can relate to that, you know, so really growing closer to her, and her suffering and her sorrow in that way. Always a closeness to Jesus, always…

Pamela, former practicing Methodist

Whilst there is no direct reference to this image in scripture (although it is a famous image in art, film and popular piety, and she refers to the use of it in film), it nevertheless allows Pamela to express how, through aligning her suffering with Mary’s loss of her own son, she embraced the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. Deeper immersion into the paschal mystery enabled her to interpret an utterly tragic bereavement that had happened many years before her RCIA involvement. In addition to providing an example of everyday mysticism, this demonstrates the ongoing movement into mystagogy, further appreciation of God’s loving grace. This is a salient example of the transformative nature of the paschal mystery: God’s love made manifest through the embodied nature of the incarnation. Christ’s life enables an experience of

Emmanuel, as God-with-us, as the God of our flesh, as the God of our human nature, as the God of our human signs in the sacrament, as the God of our altars, as the God who has been born here from the Virgin Mary.²⁶

²⁵ Davies, Emotion, Identity, and Religion, p. 47; see chapter four, pp. 144.
²⁶ Rahner, ‘Mary, Mother of the Lord’, p. 105. Rahner continues: ‘This is why Mariology is not just apart (sic) of the private biography of Jesus of Nazareth, in the end of no significance for our
Siobhan, on experiencing the death of her mother, spoke of her own personal transformation through coming to see the image of the cross as a sign of hope rather than sorrow or grief (p. 94). This occurred many years after her participation in the RCIA, which demonstrates the deepening of faith through the paschal mystery.

Encountering the paschal mystery prompted participants to engage in a process of self-confrontation and turning away from sin. Collectively this involved confronting personal selfishness, greed, consumerism and judgmental attitudes. Change in attitude and personal outlook marked a new beginning, a new life in Christ. These examples of paschal living demonstrate how the RCIA prompted an everyday discipleship. However the presentation of participants’ experience in chapter three revealed a lack of explicit mission-oriented or *ad extra* faith expression. Despite this, participants’ stories were often powerful testaments to the Spirit of Christ’s resurrection within their lives. As Cooke states, this ‘is the deepest level of *communio* in Christianity. To be a Christian, a disciple of the risen Jesus, is to be a “Spirit-ed” person, to live already to some extent in that new Spirit-way of being human, which is risen life’.27 Having interpreted their own experiences of death and new life through the paschal mystery, RCIA participants, even if in very unassuming and understated ways, went on to become witnesses to Christ in their lives and in the world. Given the humility with which participants’ stories were told, the embodiment of the paschal mystery was clearly present and active in their lives in ways that they themselves may not have realized.

**Graced Encounter in the RCIA Group**

The RCIA group initiated participants into an experience of Christian living. The group provided a unique ground for sharing faith and reflecting on the Word of God, learning about Catholic customs and teaching, and building trust and support through companionship. Personal graced conversion encounters were fostered within the structured environment of the group, and the group dynamic emphasized an

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27 Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, p. 132; see chapter six, p. 209.
important social dimension to the transmission of faith. Cooke states that Christ’s Spirit is given to the Christian people as a group; it is not just possessed on an individual basis, it is experienced by sharing in the Christian community.\textsuperscript{28} The RCIA group therefore was a specific place of graced encounter.

A sense of revelation was discernible in the group setting as participants described how they supported each other through the process and engaged in a profound sharing and witness of God’s action in their lives:

I mean you talk personally to one another and they share their life’s journey and their heartaches, because we’ve all had heartaches, you know, and you get to know people […] they’ve been through tragedies as well and so, you know, and I could cry with them, Debbie, I could cry with them you know […]. And you miss that, because then all that’s gone, and it’s a wonderful time, really, it’s a tragic time, but it’s a wonderful time; to share with people, you know, and then we would hold hands and have a prayer when someone had spoken like that. It was really a special time because people open up.

Pamela\textsuperscript{29}

In this example we see how the sharing of episodes of suffering and vulnerability – of paschal living – demonstrated a lived experience of koinonia or of Christian living. The sharing of these experiences was also revelatory. Participants became expressions of the Word as they supported each other; as Dunning says: ‘when our words say who we really are as images of a healing, caring, liberating, reconciling, loving and peacemaking God, we are revelations of God’s word’.\textsuperscript{30} For Beverley (a catechumen from a non-religious background), imaginative Gospel contemplation, ‘where you actually put yourself into the situation’, also had this personal revelatory quality, enabling her to share aspects of her life with others in the group in an intimate encounter (see pp. 79-80). This also demonstrates how engagement with liturgical texts enables one to come to know one’s tradition ‘in a way that we could never have known it’ \textsuperscript{31}, which results in the continued creation of a living

\textsuperscript{28} Cooke, \textit{Sacraments and Sacramentality}, pp. 132-133; see chapter six p. 209.
\textsuperscript{29} Certain examples have been omitted from this excerpt to preserve anonymity.
\textsuperscript{30} Dunning, \textit{Echoing God’s Word}, pp. 32-33; see chapter six, pp. 208-209.
\textsuperscript{31} Levin, \textit{The Body’s Recollection of Being}, p. 215, see chapter four, p. 143.
community. These are additional examples of how ‘paradigmatic type’ scenes may help participants to reorient their lives, enabling a newfound Christian practice or *habitus*.\(^{32}\)

Participants often shared powerful descriptions of *communitas* within the RCIA group, an experience of strong bonding with other members. The group had a familial quality in terms of the love, respect and strong reciprocity shared between participants. Friendship and a sense of equality amongst members were common. This was especially so for those going through the longer process and is evident in the excerpt from Pamela’s interview above. These examples of *communitas*, when interpreted as instances of *koinonia* or *communio*, illustrate how conversion occurs through an experience of Christian living. As stated in chapter six, ‘theologically speaking, *koinonia* is a sacrament of Trinitarian love, and *communitas* a natural sacrament of *koinonia*’. \(^{33}\) Experiences of *koinonia* were occasions of graced encounter also highlighting the sacramental nature of friendship within the group.

Chapter five noted how experiences of *communitas* became vital when the RCIA was difficult or isolating; *communitas* often counteracted the challenging liminal aspects of the journey (see p. 174). Positive experiences of Christian living within the group helped participants in their transition. In this sense, these *communitas* or *koinonia* experiences were evidently kataphatic, in that they disclosed an experience of light within the seeming darkness or the challenges of the rite-of-passage situation. Yet, as the above excerpt from Pamela’s interview captures, the apophatic and the kataphatic – both sorrowful and joyful experiences – are co-existent as the RCIA was simultaneously both a ‘tragic’ and ‘wonderful’ time. Since graced mystical experiences, the kataphatic and the apophatic, are ‘two aspects of one and the same experience’, \(^{34}\) theologically speaking it may also be said that aspects of the intertwined experiences of liminality and *communitas* mirror this graced mystical dynamic. In graced mystical terms liminality and *communitas* both have the capacity to disclose an experience of light and darkness.

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\(^{33}\) Davies, *Anthropology and Theology*, p. 129; see chapter six, p. 209.

\(^{34}\) Rahner, ‘Experience of the Holy Spirit’, p. 201.
Participants’ experience enriches theological reflection through its embodied dimensions. This figured as an implicit theme in the group encounter as well as being an essential part of sacramental experience (see section III of this chapter). As the following excerpt captures, the group had the quality of being a living entity:

…if you wasn’t with that group it was like tearing the body apart, if you like; like losing an arm or a leg, you know.

Jack, Christian background (Baptist/ Catholic influences), unbaptized

The RCIA group, an embodied experience of koinonia, may also be interpreted as a mystical expression of Christ’s living body. This embodied encounter helped to initiate participants into a sense of Christian community: for catechumens this marked initiation into a new Christian identity as they moved from a background of no religion or a different religious faith; for candidates a new ecclesial identity as they left their former Christian community. In both cases if former faith identity was nominal, they moved into an active lived expression of their new faith. In both cases the sense of community in the group was a foretaste of a larger parish community and identity.

In general, conversation with participants revealed that there was little contact with the RCIA group and the rest of the parish; participants tended to describe meaningful contact with parishioners only after the celebration of the Easter Vigil. However, experiences of communitas did occur through contact with sponsors, and at the diocesan level through participation in the Rite of Election. Given that the Rite calls for the involvement of the ‘entire community’ in the process, the lack of contact and integration with the rest of the parish reveals a weak aspect of RCIA preparation. This lack of support seemed to highlight a sense of liminal isolation for participants and demarcate the RCIA as a definite experience of anti-structure. Increased contact with the parish community would potentially provide increased opportunity for koinonia to occur.

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35 RCIA, no. 80. p. 39.
In summary, a fundamental feature of the lived theology of RCIA concerns conversion to Jesus Christ. This conversion process manifests itself in various ways. It involves coming to a realization of how Christ assures God’s grace; conversion occurs through engaging in a personal faith-relationship with Jesus; it involves interpreting life, including liminal experience, though the paradigm of the paschal mystery; it involves engaging in Christian living. The paschal mystery thus provides a rich hermeneutic for Christian life.

**III. Sacramental Consciousness**

This section explores how our participants’ experience revealed a growing sacramental consciousness. This consciousness developed as participants were being prepared for reception, through their liturgical experiences and through their subsequent sense of sacramentality in everyday life.

*Growing Sacramental Consciousness*

The RCIA process involves crossing numerous thresholds: approaching the Church to enquire about the RCIA process, joining the group for the first time, and experiencing various liturgical thresholds such as the Rite of Election. As has been mentioned in chapter three, whilst participants were poised on the threshold of Church membership they often described a sense of liminal disorientation as they experienced a phase of waiting and suspense, even uncertainty over ecclesial identity (see pp. 66-69). For some, as Abigail stated, the RCIA was an ‘uncomfortable place to be’. It was:

…the worst time because you know you don’t know what you’re doing, and who you are, and you’re conscious of it.

Abigail, former practicing Anglican
This example captures a sense of the dying to oneself that occurs in liminality, as the quotation from Eckhart at the beginning of the chapter emphasizes: ‘the shell must be broken through’ for new life to occur.36

One of the gifts that this threshold journeying inspired, in catechumens and candidates alike, was an increasingly strong anticipation for sacramental reception. As a result, a growing sacramental consciousness emerged, one that was initially characterized by a sense of waiting and anticipatory hope, an expectant sense of belonging and a profound longing for a sacramental identity and spirituality. This excitement and hope often contrasted with the sense of disorientation that was part of the process, helping participants manage their sense of suspense. It was often candidates who were formerly practicing Anglicans who struggled most in terms of waiting to receive the Eucharist (see p. 70 and p. 73). Yet waiting on the threshold, despite its difficulties, was a poignant graced moment, an experience of God’s presence and love. As Peter described he could not fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist but he knew he ‘was being fed interiorly’. Through this expectant consciousness, (an expression of the subjunctive liminal mood), participants were anticipating and imagining a life reoriented by sacramental initiation.

The Easter Vigil, the ultimate liturgical threshold, marked a reorientation for participants, some of whom described it as a ‘crossing point’ or ‘turning point’; others stressed a sense of arrival or ‘coming home’. Reorientation was informed by a sense of belonging and a new sacramental identity. The initial anticipatory hope, a growing sacramental consciousness, became part of the process of graced realization. For catechumens, baptism marked a new Trinitarian identity, as Sarah stated:

Being baptized was the greatest, greatest thing for me. Having that water being poured onto my head […] and then having the oil of chrism anointed on my forehead. For me, at that point, signified that I had become a Christian […]. And then being able to partake of the Eucharist. That really was the greatest turning point in my life.

Sarah

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36 As quoted in Harmless, Mystics, pp. 127-128. See also Victor Turner’s definition of threshold, Victor Turner, ‘The Anthropology of Performance’, p. 198; see chapter four, p. 121.
For candidates, who also shared the same excitement, the Eucharist marked the long awaited communion at the Eucharistic table; confirmation was a profound experience of God’s powerful presence (see the example from Abigail’s interview p. 102). The entire encounter marked a return to the light for Peter (as stated earlier); for Serena it was:

like you’ve died and gone to heaven and you know God’s all around you. It was just so wonderful.

Serena, former practicing Anglican

This particular comment captures how the Eucharist is a ‘foretaste of the kingdom of God’. Participants’ initial anticipatory sacramental consciousness therefore prefigured a deeper eschatological hope, which some participants explicitly recognized whilst they were being received. The above excerpt is a particular example of existential, spontaneous communitas as it prefigures a sense of the eschatological. In theological terms all communitas, as true experiences of koinonia and ‘unconditional love’ may be said to prefigure an eschatological promise and hope which will be realized in the kingdom of God.

Receiving the sacraments was an event that helped participants to further appreciate their growing graced identity, an identity which became clearer throughout the entire process. The various thresholds that punctuated the whole experience were graced thresholds, opportunities for a deeper realization of God’s love. Reception of the sacraments was an experience of God’s loving presence, which informed a new sacramental identity and a new beginning. Yet even though sacramental reception marked a significant highlight, it was not an isolated event to the neglect of the whole process; it marked the culmination of a long journey, and certain participants commented that it marked a new beginning rather than a completion point (see p. 99). Such realization emphasized the ongoing nature of sacramental consciousness; a constant mystagogic movement into a deeper appreciation of the sacramentality of life.

37 RCIA, no. 198, p. 117; see chapter six, p. 217.
38 See chapter five, p. 180.
39 Edith Turner, Heart of Lightness, p. 93, see chapter four, p. 130.
Embodied Experience

Participants’ experience undoubtedly brings the embodied nature of initiation to the fore. As mentioned in chapter five, Griffith draws attention to the fact that the role of the body in worship is not something that individuals are always comfortable discussing, and this has been a neglected theme in the history of the Christian tradition. She calls for an awareness of how ‘bodiliness’ is the location of spirituality. The embodied nature of sacramental initiation is a significant and evocative example of how participants’ lived experience may enrich theological reflection upon the practice of the RCIA.

Several participants were, to quote Chauvet, literally physically ‘gripped’ during initiation. This involved the imagination, memory and understanding, emotional affective experience and physically felt bodily experience. This echoes the early Church’s observation that initiation appealed to the body, heart and memory. For example, participants imagined a life re-oriented by sacramental initiation, and developed a growing sacramental consciousness. Being received invoked strong emotional and powerful bodily experiences. As Abigail stated:

But the laying on of hands, there was a power. There definitely was a power there.

A few participants described being ‘sealed’ by the sacraments which accentuated a sense of arrival and belonging. This echoes Chauvet’s observation that ‘one becomes a Christian only by entering an institution and in letting this institution stamp its “trademark,” its “character,” on one’s body’. A new sacramental identity was therefore bestowed through an all-embracing embodied encounter.

Accounts of physical and somatic encounter were among the most surprising and powerful elements of participants’ sacramental initiation. These draw attention to

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40 Griffith, ‘Spirituality and the Body’, p. 69; see chapter five, p. 186.
41 Chauvet, ‘The Liturgy in its Symbolic Space’, p. 3; see chapter six, p. 219. Echoing Chauvet’s comment about being ‘gripped’ by the liturgy, Turner states that the paschal mystery is a lived experience, see Victor Turner, ‘Ritual, Tribal and Catholic’, p. 510; chapter four, p. 139.
42 Harmless, Augustine and the Catechumenate, p. 63; p. 374; see chapter six, p. 219.
43 Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament, p. 155, author’s emphasis; see chapter six p. 219.
‘somatic modes of attention’, and show that the body is an ‘ontological gift’, as embodied engagement in the liturgy facilitates the wisdom of the tradition to be passed down to new generations.\textsuperscript{44} Even if participants felt their descriptions to be inadequate testament to the nature of their experience, these responses convey a sense of ontological change, or change at the deepest level of being:

I really felt something change, physically as well as emotionally, mentally and intellectually; whole bodily changing.

Abigail

Like a change, a very big change […] honestly I can’t explain it, but something really happened to me that night.

Natalie, former Muslim

Participants often felt transformed, physically and psychologically, after experiencing sacramental initiation, consciously observing that something in their lives had changed. These examples highlight the ontological transformation that Turner referenced, and later developed by Bloch, which is characteristic of the liminal stage of a rite of passage. These examples also contribute to a sense of ‘transcendental identity’.\textsuperscript{45} In theological terms this may be interpreted as a heightened experience of graced identity, experienced through the body. The physically gripping nature of the initiatory process therefore emphasizes that the human body is the locus for graced experience, a specific conduit for experiencing the divine. Abigail’s statement, ‘you need a body for these sacraments’ (p. 167), captures a sense of her appreciation of how the physical body mediates an experience of God’s grace. Reflecting upon these embodied experiences is part of the challenge of initiation. As Chauvet states participation in the sacraments remind us ‘that the faith has a body, that it adheres to our body. More than that, they tell us that to

\textsuperscript{44} Csordas, \textit{Body/meaning/healing}, p. 244; see chapter four, p. 143; and Levin, \textit{The Body’s Recollection of Being}, p. 50; see chapter four, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{45} Bloch, \textit{Prey into Hunter}, p. 6; see chapter four, p. 127.
become a believer is to learn to consent, without resentment, to the corporeality of the faith’.  

Accordingly, such descriptions of change, and of being engrossed mind, body and spirit in sacramental experience, marked an especial appreciation or recognition of a graced identity; a sense of being changed through graced sacramental encounter. However, these bodily experiences, even as they expressed a sense of change, were reminders of a graced identity already present in the human person. As Chauvet states: ‘Our existence is Christian insofar as it is always-already structured by sacramentality, better still, as it is always-already inscribed in the order of the sacramental. It is thus impossible to conceive of the faith outside of the body’.  

On the one hand, therefore, the body is liminal. As stated in the previous chapter, the body is between external appearance or ‘proper’ identity and interior privacy. Yet the body, in its liminal state, is also the unique place for coming to deeper graced realization: ‘To become aware in this context of my fleshiness and mortality is to see this mortal flesh as “desired by grace”’. Furthermore, the embodied nature of Christian initiation marks initiation into the body of Christ, and through this the Church ‘mediates relation with the God of Israel as Abba’.  

**Language of Knowing and Unknowing**

A fascinating element of participants’ embodied experience was their explanation of these encounters. Embodied sacramental encounters were often beyond words. Participants grappled with trying to adequately explain what had happened. Despite their elusive nature, these experiences had gravitas and poignancy:

I don’t…honestly, I can’t explain it, but something really happened to me that night, that night, yes […]. It was like I’d been touched by some, I don’t know, I don’t know…I just don’t want to say things and I get it wrong, but

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46 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, ibid., p. 153, author’s emphasis.
47 Ibid., p. 155, author’s emphasis.
48 Williams, ‘Lear and Eurydice’, p. 82; see chapter six, p. 220, note 111. Chauvet also acknowledges the liminal nature of the body, see *Symbol and Sacrament*, p. 147.
49 Williams, ‘Lear and Eurydice’, p. 82.
50 Ibid., p. 83; see chapter six, p. 220-221.
something, something…I knew something happened in my life that night…Yes, I felt it physically in my body.

Natalie

Some participants would also start to slightly discount and even question their experiences, but still admitted that they had experienced something important (see p. 102).

Such tentative and ambivalent expressions, whilst capturing the indefinable nature of somatic encounter, also point to an experience of the transcendent and numinous. In theological terms participants’ speech, including its liminal expression, often reflected a mystical ‘language of unknowing’, to use Harmless’ phrase, an ‘apophasis’ or ‘negative theology’. This is reflected in language such as ‘I don’t know’; ‘honestly I can’t explain it’; ‘something happened’ (my emphasis).

However, participants’ speech often also revealed a language of embodied knowing. Receiving the sacraments was a point of liturgical conversion; an inner realization, a moment of graced recognition. For example, Peter described how this distinct sense of knowing and realization dawned on him at the Easter Vigil when he finally received the Eucharist:

You know, there’s a knowing, that it’s God; it’s Jesus Christ that you’ve received […]. It is, and that causes a deep, intimate union with Him because you know it’s God…you know it’s God. That’s when it hit me, that night.

Peter (participant’s emphasis)

Or again, Pamela knew she was on the right spiritual path when she was anointed during confirmation:

*I knew, I knew, you know…I used to think “am I doing the right thing?” But then I knew, then I knew yes, and it doesn’t matter what other people think anyway, does it?

Pamela (participant’s emphasis)

51 Harmless, Mystics, p. 236.
This was a new-found confidence and certainty based on an inner experience of God’s sacramental grace, which acted as an anchor point in the navigation of this participant’s faith journey.\textsuperscript{52} This points to an innate lived wisdom and certainty, as participants explicitly recognized sacramental encounters as graced; an important part of the process of coming to graced recognition. Receiving the sacraments was another example of a personal *communitas* or I-Thou encounter revealing an experience of Trinitarian love. In particular, a dynamic of embodied knowing reflected a powerful confirmation of graced experience. These are also examples of how one may, as the philosopher Levin observes, learn to think with and through one’s body.\textsuperscript{53}

Participants’ mystical speech, in the sense that it reveals an everyday mysticism, may be said to follow the double trajectory that Harmless says is characteristic of mystical language:

\begin{quote}
Mystical speech has a double trajectory. One trajectory veers towards silence. Here words are stripped down and stripped away to let us see the reality that words block us from seeing […]. The other trajectory veers towards an overflowing fullness.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

On the one hand, participants’ language leaned towards such ‘silence’, the mystery beyond words, an ‘unknowing’ (‘I don’t know’; ‘honestly I can’t explain’); on the other hand, it captured an ‘overflowing fullness’ (as demonstrated in the exuberance of the examples from Peter’s and Pamela’s interviews above). Thus embodied sacramental experience marks continued initiation into an apophatic and kataphatic consciousness, an awareness of God through knowing and unknowing, and this embodied encounter contributes to an everyday mysticism. Chapter five highlighted how the sometimes cautious and uncertain expression of participants’ speech (along with the use of various images and metaphors) reflected an iconographic liminal language (see pp. 166-7). However the theological interpretation reveals how the

\textsuperscript{52} Edith Turner also described this sense of certainty and knowing when she became a Catholic, Edith Turner, *Heart of Lightness*, p. 89; see chapter four, p. 153.

\textsuperscript{53} Levin, *The Body’s Recollection of Being*, p. 61; see chapter four, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{54} Harmless, *Mystics*, pp. 237-238. Harmless goes onto cite the writing of the Japanese Zen mystic Dōgen: ‘Dōgen pointed out that mystical speech is liberating speech, that the way past the entanglement of religious words is, paradoxically, through entangling religious words’, p. 238.
language of knowing and unknowing is perhaps the defining example of a liminal language used by participants.

Sacramental Living

The threshold nature of the RCIA journey anticipates the liminal nature of the sacraments more generally. As the previous chapter highlighted, the sacraments embody a threshold or liminal quality. Each sacrament symbolizes the paschal mystery; in turn the paschal mystery is itself a ‘liminal symbol’ as it acts as a ‘doorway into the kingdom of heaven’. As reflection on participants’ lived sacramental encounter has shown the sacraments act as a gateway for graced realization.

Martos states that sacramental worship demands that participants feel uncomfortable, as the liturgy involves ‘facing an existential gap between what we are presumed to be if we call ourselves a church and what we know we actually are’. This challenges the community to face up to its responsibilities: ‘it is in that liminal moment that we hear most clearly God’s prophetic call to self-transcendence’. The liturgy therefore encourages graced recognition to occur in both a personal and a collective missionary sense. The RCIA involves initiation into the liminal quality of sacramental worship; however, the sacraments are perpetual threshold experiences for the whole worshipping community.

Following their reception, participants engaged in sacramental living in this ongoing sense: their growing sacramental consciousness informed their everyday lives. An example from Sarah’s interview captures a sense of the aforementioned uncomfortable nature and prophetic dimension of engagement in sacramental worship. Her baptismal initiation and continued participation in the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation inspired her need to forgive others, especially a family member whom she was struggling to forgive:

55 Grainger, ‘The Sacraments as Passage Rites’, p. 215; see chapter six, p. 216.
56 Martos, p. 229; see chapter six, p. 215.
I became a Catholic, being baptized. Receiving the Eucharist. Again, each time Jesus Christ has forgiven me, I have to forgive.

Sarah

Sarah described how her personal sense of identity resulting from her sacramental reception involved a continual re-appropriation of her life and personal actions. Others participants also elucidated the various challenges of the missionary dimensions of faith, such as the living out of faith in the workplace (see p. 109). Participants therefore described how they had clearly heard ‘God’s prophetic call to self-transcendence’ as sacramental participation prompted them to reorient their lives.

A remarkable element of such transformation was evident in the continuance of a strong sense of sacramentality in adversity or in difficult personal circumstances. After being received, Abigail subsequently married in a registry office; she and her husband then waited for a period of ten years before his annulment came through from his first marriage, allowing them to be married in the Catholic Church. During this time she attended Church but was unable to receive the Eucharist. Yet she retained a distinct sense of sacramental anticipation and hope which sustained her in this difficult, further liminal period. She described how she longed for the ‘reality of the sacrament of marriage’ in the same way that she had longed for being received into the Church:

…it [marriage] was just that reality of another sacrament that I’d longed for. And then the next day, you know, to be able to take communion was just fantastic. I have never, ever […]. And the one thing that’s come out of it is every time I take communion I’ve never taken it for granted. Every time is like the first time for me, since then, because I know what it was to have been deprived.

Abigail, former practicing Anglican

Participants’ sacramental consciousness, as well as reorienting their everyday lives also helped some individuals to navigate future liminal faith transitions.
The potential for RCIA participants to be a liminal symbol for the whole community was also outlined in the previous chapter. RCIA participants, in their personal liminal status, challenge the whole congregation, as they are an implicit reminder of the liminal nature of the Christian journey, of being: ‘between the already and “not yet” – the aporia of Gethsemane’.  

57 The entire parish is called to accompany the catechumens and candidates; the community is reminded by RCIA participants that all members are in a process of graced becoming, all are engaged in the same graced journey and also move in and out of personal, liminal situations.

The RCIA group, as it involves participants in an experience of anti-structure, further demonstrates its capacity to be a liminal symbol. Turner observed that Christianity, through its religious orders, incorporated ‘enclaves of communitas’ within its structures, which oxygenated the ‘mystical body’.  

58 RCIA participants therefore potentially have this same ability to revive the whole community. (This theme of potential regeneration through new members of the community also reflects Bloch’s concept of ‘rebonding conquest’.  

59) In fact, Mick suggests that the religious orders may have been a substitute for the catechumenate during its period of inactivity. He states that Vatican II marks a major shift in the understanding of religious orders through its call to holiness for all Christians (rather than priests and nuns being considered the ‘real’ Christians). The restoration of the catechumenate may be considered as an act that produces an order of the faithful as committed as those in religious orders were previously expected to be.  

60 The anti-structural nature of the RCIA group also reminds the church of its own ‘liminal vocation’ to be a prophetic voice within contemporary society.  

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In summary, interpreting RCIA liminal experience through sacramental themes has highlighted how participants often charted a movement from anticipation about receiving the sacraments to initiation into a graced sacramental identity, to a lived

59 Bloch, Prey into Hunter, pp. 4, 19, 21; see chapter four, p. 128.
60 Mick, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, p. 40.
sacramental faith. A graced sacramental identity was formed and encouraged by embodied experiences which embraced body, mind and heart. Being grasped by the initiation process contributes to a growing sacramental consciousness; a new way of interpreting life and the world.

IV. Mystagogical Consciousness

Mystagogy, as well as specifically referring to the reflective nature of the final stage of the RCIA process, is also used more generally to describe reflection upon faith. Chapter six highlighted how the recognition of grace, in its gradual appropriation and in its surprising revelatory moments, is essentially a mystagogic process. Ultimately, mystagogy involves a process of becoming; it concerns the movement into a deeper realization and appreciation of grace. Consequently, an appreciation of graced experience through mystagogic reflection illustrates how grace and mystagogy are inextricably linked. This final theme of mystagogy brings us full circle. Theological reflection throughout this chapter has revealed this process of becoming, evident in participants’ reflection upon their faith in an act of ‘faith seeking understanding’.

The fourth phase of the RCIA - mystagogy - is often neglected in pastoral practice. This was reflected in the interviews, as participants’ recollection of this period was itself often noticeably absent from many interview conversations, or remained simply implicit; it did not particularly stand out as a highlight of the process. The evolving mystagogic consciousness described in this chapter is therefore based upon participants’ lived experience integral to the whole RCIA process and beyond. The themes act as important signposts for practitioners.

Mystagogy of Lament and Assurance

Participants’ liminal experience gives rise to a ‘mystagogy of lament’ and assurance. As stated in the previous chapter, a ‘mystagogy of lament’ concerns moving into the pain and disappointment evident in scripture, especially the Exodus narrative, trusting that God will bring one through hardship.\(^2\) The process of orientation,

\(^2\) Lathrop, ‘A Rebirth of Images’; see chapter six, p. 215.
disorientation and reorientation within the RCIA process, which echoes the Hebrew scriptural narrative, culminates in reorientation in the person of Christ. Theological reflection reveals how the ‘mystagogy of lament’ becomes, through the process of graced recognition and reorientation, a mystagogy of assurance. This assurance is based on the ‘guarantee’ of God’s grace that Christ represents. The state of lament, and indeed liminality itself, may be a place of learning and growth and involve trusting that God will lead one into fulfilment and transformation.

Part of the RCIA initiatory process involved learning to trust in God in the midst of relative uncertainty. Participants learnt to appreciate a deeper sense of knowing, a trusting of their personal graced experience, which revealed an inner wisdom. A mystagogy of assurance was apparent as participants came to reorient their lives through the paschal-mystery paradigm. This involved reconciling their personal pain with their deepening faith experience. A lived certainty and confidence arose from growth in faith and encounter with Christ, which illuminated their faith journey and sparked personal transformation. A growing sacramental consciousness also revealed a knowing, which furthered this lived practical wisdom. A ‘mystagogy of lament’ and assurance further captures the emotional tone and vocabulary of liminal RCIA experience, providing theological interpretation of this aspect of participants’ stories. Given the variations in participants’ stories, those who did not have a striking liminal experience would still have appreciated a sense of mystagogic assurance as they moved into a deeper experience of graced recognition.

**Liturgical Mystagogy**

As described in the Rite, the fourth phase of mystagogy is a social and relational process, and involves reflection on both the celebration of the Easter sacraments and integration into the community.

As has been illustrated, the RCIA process engages the whole person, resulting in changed behaviour. This has revealed the embodied nature of mystagogy.

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63 Endean, *Karl Rahner*, p. 198, see chapter six, p. 207.
64 RCIA nos. 234-241, pp. 145-146.
Participants’ graced realization, or cognitive appropriation of graced experience, may be described as mystagogical encounter through the mind or memory; a mystagogy of realization. Conversion – through, for example, the somatic – which reveals a deeper knowing of God’s presence, may be described as mystagogy through visceral experience. Instances of affective conversion may be described as a mystagogy of the heart. These examples illustrate an experiential conversion that occurs in the core of the liturgy.

Such liturgical mystagogic reflection occurs, however, as an ongoing activity; mystagogic consciousness is fostered through participation in the liturgical parish body. One participant shared the example of ‘physically feeling the memory’ when seeing participants engaging in the Rite of Dismissal. This invoked his own memories of the process and caused a physical reaction in his body likened to nerves or butterflies (see p. 105). This particular example echoes the broader ethos and ideal of the RCIA, in which parish community members are reminded of their own baptismal and faith commitment when accompanying RCIA participants through the process.

Conversion through mind, body and heart, and the subsequent change in living that this prompts, demonstrate that one moves into more profound mystagogic encounter through lived and embodied human experience. These interconnected dimensions of conversion led to change in behaviour, a new way of living. An embodied liturgical mystagogy does, however, challenge the ongoing missionary expression of faith. The ‘mystagogical impulse’ of faith and the need to integrate the sacraments requires participants to address the corporeal living out of faith in the world.65

**Story-telling**

The interview conversations were a distinct act of remembering; conversations with participants took place after the RCIA, from a retrospective position. Generally the depth of sharing, enthusiasm and wonder within the interview conversations

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demonstrated that they function as powerful exercises in mystagogic remembering. The interviews revealed a mystagogic grammar, the lived language of faith, involving retrospective reflection but also a sense of mystagogy occurring in the present moment. The interviews encouraged participants to delve deeper into their memories and re-live them in the present. Pauses and silences in the conversation were often graced moments of mystagogic encounter as these reflective spaces encouraged moments of insight. The importance of the initiatory process, its gripping and engaging nature, was relived in the present: ‘it [the interview] just made me quite emotional really remembering it because it was a very, very special time’ (see p. 46).

Mystagogy through personal story-telling also has a vital relational dynamic existing within the context of moving into the communal faith story – i.e. the story of the Christian tradition. The narrating of the faith story in conversation highlighted how mystagogy flourishes within a relational context, the interviewer acting as mystagogue, a place ‘where two or three are gathered’ (Matthew 18. 20). Or it may occur within the larger group setting. Experiences of *communitas* or *koinonia* with others in the RCIA group demonstrate the importance of shared faith reflection with others.

In addition to their personal revelatory quality, the interviews provided continual opportunity for transformation through the telling of one’s own story. The narrating of one’s own faith story and the acknowledgement of the transformation that this engendered led to a sense of empowerment for some participants. As mentioned in chapter two (p. 46), Sarah said, at her second interview, that she had kept the transcript of her first interview and continued to read it to remind her of her faith journey and how far she had come. Serena, who had left the Church, stated that she was considering coming back, and the interview helped her relive her experience.

**Reflective Living**

The RCIA initiated participants into an ongoing sense of mystagogic living, involving movement into an experience of everyday mysticism. This involved seeing
with new vision, changing one’s behaviour, and reaching out to one’s neighbour. Participants described the continual challenges of living out their faith after the RCIA process.

The interviews revealed how the mystagogic process, the personal appropriating of faith, involved a constant deeper movement into the mystery of faith. This was by no means a linear progression, or one that was simply retrospective. Rather, the interview conversations provided insight into a more complex practice of engaging in reflection that was rich and spiralling. This reflection upon graced experience concerned the past and the present, and assessing how this also orients the future. The sharing of personal stories was therefore testament to how grace continues to shape identity. As participants reflected upon their faith journey during the interviews, they articulated a mystagogic consciousness that was personally authoritative.

In summary, all of the themes presented here outline the nature of mystagogic living as prompted by the RCIA process. These include reflection upon one’s life journey, through its ups and downs, and how faith experience brings home the reality of God’s loving grace. Mystagogic living concerns ongoing transformation through participation in the liturgy. It requires moving into a deeper appreciation of faith through everyday living. It flourishes in community, as members continue to share the graced nature of their life story. It also demands a missionary focus, as faith is lived out in the world, in everyday life.

V. Coda: Theology in the Service of Anthropology

The final section of this chapter seeks to explore and reflect upon the ways in which theology may be of service to anthropology. As outlined in chapter five, Chauvet highlights the different ways in which anthropology may be of service to theology, and asks how theology may in turn be of service to anthropology. Three responses are now presented.

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• Theological Subjectivity – the subjective nature of the discipline of theology in contrast to anthropology’s more objective nature.

• Theological ‘Verification’\textsuperscript{67} – theology can provide a unique theological interpretation of faith and spiritual experience.

• Comparative Themes – theology provides reflective themes which help interpret liminal and Turnerian methodology.

\textit{Theological Subjectivity}

The first four themes of this chapter have illustrated how theology may be used to reflect upon subjective faith experience. This reflection involved participants’ lived faith encounter also enriching theology. Theology, through its confessional nature, enables the distinct reading of personal faith experience. It is the role of theology to maintain this subjective framework, as Rahner states:

Christian theology must be subjective because it speaks of faith, hope, and love, of our personal relationship to God. It must be subjective because, in the final analysis, it describes and evokes directly or indirectly these personal spiritual relationships of persons with God, because it introduces them mystagogically into those relationships. In other words: theology, even as theology of revelation, is precisely that which transmits God’s invitation to human subjectivity. Where theology no longer manages to do that, where, in the wrong sense of the word, theology becomes objective, it is no longer a good theology, but a bad one.\textsuperscript{68}

Theology enables the subjective exploration of Christian faith experience and the dynamics of faith transmission.

Turnerian anthropological theory, by contrast, provides an objective framework by which to read religious, social and cultural experience. This theory, as presented in chapter four, provides the anthropological reference points for the interpretation and analysis of the rite-of-passage experience across all religions and cultures. Whilst this acknowledges the religious nature of such ritual experience it does so in general

\textsuperscript{67} See definition below, p. 256.

terms. In contrasting theology and anthropology in this way it may be said that anthropology enables reflection upon faith or religious experience from an outsider position. Theology concerns reflection from an insider position. To paraphrase Edith Turner again, the social sciences open a door onto the theological project. One has to cross the threshold into the theological world to fully grasp the workings of faith. The task of theology is to speak of ‘faith, hope, and love, of our personal relationship to God’.  

As the cumulative nature of the thesis illustrates, theology enables the subjective exploration of faith beyond anthropology’s more objective parameters; theology amplifies the faith dimensions of initiatory practice, addressing important questions and themes that anthropology raises, from the position of the Christian faith story:

Christian anthropology, the Christian vision of what human beings are about, assumes a number of things about humanity which shape Christian responses to human existence. It assumes that human beings are summoned to respond to an initiative from God, that human beings are summoned to shape a life that will itself communicate something of God to others, and something of humanity itself to God. It assumes that humanity is called to question fictions about both the society and the human self in the name of some greater destiny or capacity in humanity than most political systems or philosophies allow.

This quotation from Rowan Williams accents an ‘assumption’ of Christian theology; its primary premise or starting point is that of belief, and a call-and-response dynamic, which is also evident in the Rite. Theological reflection upon RCIA liminal experience brought forward the idea that this lived faith reality and its embedded theology – and the anthropological frame of interpretation – must fall into critical engagement with the theological tradition of Christianity. In making this suggestion, a number of complementary themes, such as mysticism, have arisen. This enabled a theological reading of the noted transcendent aspects of liminality and also prompted an original theological interpretation of the spiritual dimensions of the Turners’ work.

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69 Ibid.
70 Williams, ‘Humanities and Divinities’, Borderlands Lecture.
71 RCIA no. 1, p. 3; see chapter six, p. 188.
This position may appear to be a criticism of anthropology given the perceived constraints of the discipline. This is not the intention. Given the various parallels between theology and anthropology, at least in the context of this study, they are by no means incommensurate. They are complementary yet distinct. As Jean-Louis Souletie, commentator on Chauvet’s sacramental theology observes: Chauvet uses both theology and anthropology in his sacramental theology in a ‘mediation that reunites them in sustained distinction’. It is a similar form of mediation that the interdisciplinary nature of this study advocates. Whilst the study is primarily theological, two independent interpretive frameworks are presented and are used in an interdisciplinary dialogue that reunites them in ‘sustained distinction’. Theology works together with Turnerian theory to provide a theological reading of liminal experience. Whilst it is fair to say that in this exercise anthropology is subsumed by theology, given the theological reading of the theory of liminality (and the theological reading of the Turners’ work offered below), this anthropological theory retains its distinct identity. In fact, anthropology challenges theology given its observations of the embodied nature of ritual experience, an area that has been neglected in Christian theology. In this study the two disciplines support each other; their objective and subjective counterparts dovetail in mutual service and dialogue whilst remaining independent.

Theology may also interpret the spiritual themes within the Turners’ work. Exploration of their work in chapter four brought the apophatic dimensions of their anthropological endeavour to light. Edith Turner described how both she and Victor encountered ‘dark-night-of-the-soul’ experiences, which she compared to the poet Keats’ concept of negative capability: ‘It is when one is most in the dark that one is coming to it – which is how negative capability works’. These dark, liminal encounters revealed profound moments of insight and would often occur before a conceptual breakthrough.

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73 Edith Turner, Heart of Lightness, p. 264; see chapter four, p. 153.
A theological reading of these examples highlights them as experiences of graced transformation. Edith’s description of achieving a conceptual breakthrough via ‘coming to it in the dark’ may be interpreted theologically as an example of ‘transcendence becoming thematic’, the moment of graced realization that comes after dark, tacit experience. Other instances, such as Edith describing how she finally understood the Marian pilgrimage site at Knock as a ‘living moment’, and her identifying their pilgrimage work as a ‘quest for spirit consciousness’, also suggests moments of graced recognition and of implicit mystagogical reflection within their anthropological fieldwork.\textsuperscript{74} Theology is here of service to anthropology, as it provides a theological and spiritual view of an anthropological reality.

**Theological ‘Verification’**

Theology, through its subjectivity, is able to provide theological ‘verification’. That is, theology is able to draw out the deeper theological truths and meanings that enable the process of ‘faith seeking understanding’: ‘Thus, it is only at the core of experienced faith that the meaning of the language of revelation can be verified’.\textsuperscript{75} This chapter, through highlighting the process of graced recognition as central to transformation in the RCIA, has demonstrated how such ‘theological verification’ is manifested. It has been a profound and insightful experience to observe the process of ‘theological verification’ within participants’ faith stories – how through a sense of graced certainty, and in some cases a distinct sense of embodied knowing, participants came to a deeper personal faith, and were able to appropriate the ups and downs of the spiritual journey. Furthermore, Endean’s observation that the concept of graced recognition, which is central to the dynamic of the Ignatian Exercises, is important for all of Christianity,\textsuperscript{77} has been proven during the RCIA conversion.

\textsuperscript{74} Edith Turner, *Heart of Lightness*, p. 84, p. 123, p. 135, see chapter four, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{76} Gagey, ‘Pastoral Theology as a Theological Project’, in *Keeping Faith in Practice*, edited by James Sweeney et al., pp. 91-92.
\textsuperscript{77} Endean, *Karl Rahner*, pp. 112-113.
process. Such ‘theological verification’ is of importance in distinguishing the role of theology in an interdisciplinary study. The ensuing ‘theological verification’ becomes a key characteristic of theology, which enables it to surpass some of the objective parameters of anthropology. It also helps to define the role of practical theology:

The verification of truth claimed by the Christian faith, which defines the task of practical theology, is therefore a practical one. The ‘intellectus fidei’ is necessarily a practical intelligence – of the mediations through which faith is embodied in the life of the believing community [...] Within this framework, practical theology has not only to think of how to enact concretely what Christian faith has always (allegedly) known about itself, but to question critically and reinterpret and express anew the self-consciousness of faith.  

*Comparative Themes*

Exploration of the Turners’ theory in chapter four, and the anthropological reading of the data in chapter five, revealed comparative themes linking anthropology and theology. This chapter has transposed the concepts of liminality and *communitas* into a distinct theological key, providing theological reflection on the rite-of-passage experience. In the light of this, the comparative theme of mysticism, alongside the theme of mystagogy is briefly reflected upon concerning their service to anthropology.

Theological mystical themes provide the coordinates for the reading of transcendent rite-of-passage experience. For example, the theological interpretation of participants’ liminal experience in the RCIA, through Rahner’s theology of grace (with its accent on mysticism), has enabled aspects of liminality to be interpreted as graced mystical experience. Classical spiritual themes from the Christian tradition, such as the apophatic nature of spiritual encounter, enable theological reflection upon the liminal state. Exploration of faith through the mystical language of knowing and unknowing helps to reflect upon the numinous aspects of faith. Theology therefore provides the mystical and spiritual themes by which to understand the dynamic of the liminal experience, demonstrating how theology may be of service to

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78 Ibid., p. 93.
anthropology. Theology draws specific attention to how faith is actually transmitted in the RCIA process: the nature of personal revelatory experience; the dynamic of graced encounter. Beyond initiation, Rahner’s theology of graced mysticism also underscores an ordinary mysticism. This provides a subjective hermeneutic for the interpretation of everyday personal faith encounter, rather than transcendent, mystical experience being the preserve of rite-of-passage liminality.

Given the influence of the Christian mystics on Victor Turner I was intrigued to see whether this had any explicit or implicit impact upon Victor as he wrote about liminality. I asked Edith Turner about this and her response was as follows:

Interesting letter! I’m wondering if really everything is mysticism. Everything is holy. Anyway, Vic's recognition of liminality as in one way a crack in “structure” was definitely a call-out of the discipline of anthropology re its doctrine of structuralism-functionalism—that all was NOT utilitarian nor rational. He was able to do that, I think, directly from the padre, Eckhart, Blake, etc., his own being touched by the spirit—even from his mother who was a poet of the acting stage. Muchona taught him it, Muchona's earnestness about the spiritual visitations he had had. So many things. What about you yourself? How do you actually see liminality? As some kind of mystical jogging out of our rut? I don't know what. How do you, actually, get to the bottom of it? Is it indescribable? Students are recognizing liminality more and more. The younger the more so.79

As was described in chapter four, the Turner’s own personal anthropological methodology was at times influenced by and interpreted though mystical themes. In this sense, their faith and insider knowledge was able to provide them with personal insight that transformed their own sense of religiosity. In this sense they themselves sought ‘theological verification’ for their own faith experience and aspects of their anthropological endeavour.

Another comparative point of reflection concerns the Turnerian notion of process (the anthropology of experience) and mystagogy. It was noted in chapter four how the Turnerian emphasis on process through Victor Turner’s adoption of Dilthey’s

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79 Personal email communication, Edith Turner, 21\(^{st}\) September 2010. Muchona was Victor Turner’s African teacher and sage during the Turners’ fieldwork in Zambia.
philosophy was similar to mystagogy, even a secular form of mystagogy. Turner underscores the processual nature of anthropology in Diltheyan terms as a ‘living through’ of a particular event. He calls for a ‘creative act of retrospection’:

Such an experience is incomplete, though, unless one of its “moments” is “performance”, an act of creative retrospection in which “meaning” is ascribed to the events and parts of experience – even if the meaning is that “there is no meaning”. It is also “living through” and “thinking back”. It is also “willing or wishing forward”, i.e., establishing goals and models for future experience in which, hopefully, the errors and perils of past experience will be avoided or eliminated.  

Such a ‘creative act’ also captures Edith’s sense of the ‘living moment’ in anthropological fieldwork.

In theological terms, mystagogy provides a unique way to reflect upon personal faith encounter, again by reflecting upon past experience, appreciating its relevance in the presence and allowing it to influence and change future behaviour and outlook. Moments of the ‘highest pitch of self-consciousness’ are therefore theologically interpreted as mystagogic self-consciousness. The mystagogical hermeneutic therefore reads anthropological insight as well as faith experience. Its importance in this interdisciplinary thesis is reflected upon further, in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter is the culmination of an interdisciplinary thesis that establishes participants’ lived reality of the RCIA (the operant theology of practice), and brings this into encounter with the theology of the Rite (normative theology) and Rahner’s theology of grace alongside the voices of other theologians (formal theology) and anthropological theory (social science theory). This has involved a three-way encounter between experience, theology and anthropology. The theological interpretation has presented a three-tier analysis.

80 Victor Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, p. 18, Turner is here quoting from Dilthey; see chapter four, p. 155.
Firstly, this chapter has involved theological interpretation of participants’ RCIA journey with emphasis on its liminal nature given the prior anthropological reading in chapter five. The embedded theology of RCIA – the lived experience of initiation – has been brought into a distinct theological reading. In response, the lived RCIA encounter illuminated theology, expressed most visibly through the theme of embodiment and the experiential nature of liturgical conversion.

Secondly, during the course of the theological interpretation of RCIA, explicit theological reading was also given to the concepts of liminality and *communitas*. In a reciprocal exercise these concepts have enlightened theology through their didactic and illuminative functions; theology provides an explicit reading of how these concepts shed light on the process of faith transmission and further reflects on them from a theological stance. Theology also provides the coordinates for the subjective reading of faith, and its confessional character has enabled a subjective level of analysis that enlightens ‘faith seeking understanding’. This is in contrast to the objective framework of anthropology, which does not provide the explicit coordinates for the reading of personal faith encounters. Theology and anthropology do, however, share overlapping and complementary themes.

Thirdly, the question of how theology may be of service to anthropology has been explored and several suggestions have been made.

The present chapter has involved an exercise in practical theology that incorporates empirical experience, social science theory and systematic theological themes. Rahner’s theology of grace has been instrumental at every level of the theological analysis. The concept of graced recognition has enabled theological interpretation of the *dynamic* inherent in the conversion process, the liminal experience and the anthropological methodology in the Turners’ work. It has provided an integral theological foundation in an interdisciplinary study.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

From the admittedly poor vantage point of the present, however, I would hazard that this document [the Rite] may well appear to a writer a century from now as the most important result of the Second Vatican Council for the life of the Church. I hazard this, not because of the documents’ ceremonial details but because of the concrete, robust, and disciplined vision it projects of the Church as a community of faith lived in common – a vision it means to be efficaciously enacted over and over again, each year at the center of the Church’s being as it corporately passes, in Jesus Christ, from death to life by the Spirit.¹

Aidan Kavanagh

This thesis, in its interpretation of the liminal nature of the RCIA experience, has disclosed the spiritual transformation that occurs through the RCIA. The interpretation has been cumulative. Participants’ experience was first presented through a grounded-theory reading, and then interpreted in an anthropological framework using Turnerian theory. This demonstrated how, as a contemporary experience of a rite of passage, the RCIA has definite liminal qualities. The phenomenology of the experience was elucidated in chapter five, and the Turnerian framework of interpretation acted as a portal into a theological reading of the faith experience. In the theological analysis in chapter seven, the transformative nature of the liminal RCIA experience was explored using a framework of four theological themes, with a primary emphasis on the theology of grace. The theological interpretation was threefold: drawing out the embedded theology of the RCIA practice, providing a theological reading of the anthropological notions of liminality and communitas, and assessing how theology can serve anthropology.

In bringing the study to a conclusion this chapter offers final reflections and insights from research into the process of spiritual transformation in the RCIA. In doing so some of the questions raised in the introductory chapter relevant to the practitioner are also addressed. This chapter also reflects upon the nature of the study as an exercise in practical theology.

I. Reflections on the RCIA Process

The origins of this thesis lay in questions which arose from my own pastoral experience of the RCIA in parish and chaplaincy contexts. I recognized that the RCIA, a profoundly rich process, and one of personal transformation and conversion, was often also both a struggle and a challenge. The anthropological concept of liminality, which I first heard about whilst on a catechist’s training course, seemed to offer the potential for deeper understanding of the transitional nature of the RCIA process as a rite of passage. The Rite, while it tacitly acknowledges the difficult nature of the process, is relatively silent on the nature of the challenges presented by it. Furthermore, the wider RCIA literature does not in general attend to its liminal aspect. Instinctually I felt there was something more to the process than meets the eye. The thesis was therefore originally framed by various questions: in what ways is the RCIA a liminal process? How does liminality help us to understand the RCIA experience? What would theological reflection on participants’ personal faith experience reveal? What is the nature of the personal faith journey that occurs behind the liturgies? How is it best to support individuals through the process? The various findings from the study have revealed the nature and some of the hidden depths of the spiritual transformation that takes place in the RCIA.

i. Spiritual Transformation in the RCIA

This study has demonstrated, through empirical means, how the RCIA, as a spiritual exercise, enables one to come to deeper recognition of God’s loving grace. Transformation in the RCIA is based on personal change arising from the lived experience of faith. This occurs through the realization of graced identity, personal encounter with Christ, experience of Gospel living and of the Christian community, conversion through liturgical participation and the act of learning to appreciate life in terms of a lived sacramentality. All these dimensions are an occurrence of grace, demonstrating the experiential nature of the RCIA – how it helps participants to flourish as human beings in a holistic sense. As such, the emphasis is very much on process, of moving into a deeper appreciation of grace. The findings underscore the embodied nature of a catechesis, which appeals to the mind, body and heart rather
than the intellect alone. These empirical findings serve as a corrective to the concern over the lack of doctrinal catechesis in the RCIA: intellectual conversion (which the participants in this study did not focus upon in great detail) is but one aspect of the process.

The essence of evident spiritual transformation in the RCIA is that it is transformation in and through the operation of God’s grace; it is the recognition and acceptance of God’s self-gift. Our participants responded to the call of grace and recognized its transformative effects within the unique circumstances of their lives, which fulfills the Rahnerian interpretation of graced experience as mystical experience, an everyday lived mysticism. It follows that the RCIA as initiation into a deeper life of grace is also initiation into a mystical way of living, one which recognizes the graced reality of ordinary everyday life. This graced mystical dimension confirms the aforementioned instinct about the (often unarticulated) spiritual depths of the RCIA journey. Participants became aware of God in the darker moments of life through an apophatic consciousness; they experienced a growing sacramental consciousness as they anticipated sacramental reception; they moved into a deeper realization of grace through paschal and mystagogic living. This highlights the important and vital link between catechesis and spirituality. As the Rite states, the RCIA is a graced ‘spiritual journey’, one that engages participants where they are at, in the unique circumstances of their everyday lives.²

The RCIA is the model for all catechesis, and the understanding that the epitome of conversion in the RCIA concerns the recognition and acceptance of God’s self-gift speaks to the Church’s entire catechetical mission. The RCIA may inspire other catechetical practices that promote a continuously growing and developing Christian life. The RCIA stands as a reminder that at a fundamental level all catechesis concerns a deeper appreciation of the gift of God’s grace and of life lived in the paschal mystery; each sacrament marks a deeper initiation into a sense of graced sacramental living. The findings concerning catechesis and spirituality therefore impact upon all catechesis, and provide a spiritual model for interpreting and

² RCIA no. 5, p. 4.
understanding the nature of initiation into the Church and of the Christian journey as a whole. The spiritual dynamic inherent within RCIA practice is a fluid learning event to be shared and fostered in all catechetical activity. The RCIA journey thus mirrors the spiritual journey of all Christians. All are engaged in the mystagogic living that is fostered in the RCIA process.

II. Liminal Challenges and Possibilities

Exploration of the liminal nature of the RCIA has provided insight into its possibilities and challenges. The participants in this study entered a liminal space, which, although often isolating and difficult, brought them to a new plateau within their spiritual journey. Spiritual transformation occurred in the heightened environment of the liminal space. The experience was the place of graced encounter, an encounter that pushed participants past their ‘comfort zone’. They were stretched on many levels and experienced conversion in a holistic sense, of which intellectual conversion was just one element:

It is impossible for the human intelligence to comprehend God, yet certain places may allow people to experience the necessary risk that opens them, body and soul, to what their minds cannot entertain. God’s places, in scripture and in the history of spirituality, are frequently fierce landscape settings like the storm beaten slopes of Mount Sinai […]. Such liminal places are able, symbolically if not physically, to put people on edge, driving them beyond all efforts to control reality (and even God) by means of the intellect.³

Amongst its possibilities, the liminal nature of the process revealed a heightened self-consciousness, which was defined through its sacramental and mystagogic capacities; experiences of communitas or koinonia became vital experiences to counteract liminal uncertainty. Participants were in a creative liminal space, which resulted in personal transformation, a new or deeper way of Christian living.

The question of how is it best to support individuals through the RCIA process was highlighted at the beginning of this study. An interesting finding concerns how

candidates (those baptized), as well as catechumens (the unbaptized), both experienced a pronounced liminal transition during the RCIA. For catechumens from a different world faith this was marked by their navigation of the different doctrinal and worship elements of Catholicism. This involved immersion in a new Christian theological anthropology, a new way of viewing the human person, faith and life. Candidates, some of whom were practicing Christians in other denominations until joining the RCIA, whilst already familiar within the Christian faith, were initiated into a new ecclesial Catholic culture, a new way of being Church members. Some of the most acute descriptions of liminality came from candidates who were practicing Christians (for example see the excerpts from Peter, Siobhan, and Abigail’s interviews), rather than from catechumens. This was surprising, as one might think that the transition from another world faith to Christianity would be more challenging than the move between Christian denominations, given that candidates were already familiar with the Christian story and way of life.

Acute descriptions of liminality from candidates particularly draw attention to their in-between, liminal status. Sacramental reception completed a journey which may have started many years before, sometimes in childhood. Candidates, especially those who were catechized in another Christian denomination, were therefore especially liminal. A sense of this liminal status is captured by Joseph Favazza, who describes candidates as ‘embodied seasons of Advent’. He identifies how candidates may personify the liminal sense of waiting that all Christians recognize: ‘Something wonderful has already happened, yet we await it afresh. They are the “already but not yet”, incarnated reminders of a world full of grace and yearning for fulfillment’. 4

However, catechumens are also an important symbol for the community, as they remind parishioners of their own graced baptismal identity: ‘Every Lent we are all like catechumens again, coming back to the pascha. All of us are continually being formed in the surprise of grace’. 5 The physical presence of both groups – catechumens and candidates – together in the midst of the worshipping assembly

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provides an important liminal symbol; participants are a physical or embodied reminder of the movement of the Christian life into a deeper experience of grace. Their liminal presence, as they are poised on the edge of Church membership, also acts as a reminder of the sacramental anticipation that all are called to share in their daily lives and express the tension of ‘what we are not yet but ought to be’ in the sacramental liturgy.\textsuperscript{6}

The acute liminal experience of candidates who were formerly practicing Christians in another denomination raises the issue of whether they should be enabled to proceed through the process more quickly. This perhaps points to the need for the more widespread use of the rite of ‘Reception of Baptised Christians into Full Communion of the Catholic Church’,\textsuperscript{7} which may be celebrated at any time of the year. This would mean that candidates who were already catechized, and especially those extremely articulate about their Christian faith, would not have an extended wait before full reception into the Church. This unique status of candidates, and the need to honour their baptismal status, is emphasized by Paul Turner:

\begin{quote}
If baptism is a beginning, the rite of reception is not. It meets people midstream in the Christian crossing. Celebrating the rite of reception with integrity requires a unique spiritual formation distinct from pre-baptismal catechumenate. Preparation for it begins in the middle of life in Christ, not at the beginning. A deeper understanding of the rite of reception will lead to a more meaningful preparation and a more expressive celebration. This rite grasps each candidate by the hand, wherever he or she is in the stream of Christianity, and brings them safely ashore.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

On the other hand, the RCIA process (with its sometimes agonizing wait) clearly did help some candidates in the study to access new spiritual depths, navigate a new ecclesial culture and develop an anticipatory sacramental consciousness. This tension is reflected in the data, as one participant emphasized the need to be formed by the

\textsuperscript{6} Martos, \textit{The Sacraments}, p. 229; see chapter six, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{7} See RCIA, nos. 387-414; pp. 225-236.
process; another thought that it was unfair for participants to have to wait for receiving the Eucharist.⁹

Bearing in mind the fact that parishes currently often prepare catechumens and candidates together in the same group, these examples highlight the need for pastoral awareness of the requirements of both. Candidates require appropriate spiritual support and proper recognition of their baptismal status within the process and liturgies, as noteworthy elements of their journey.

Both catechumens and candidates provided striking accounts of *communitas*, especially those who had participated in an extended RCIA process. It was observed how positive experiences of community had the potential to counteract the negative effects of liminality. (Experiences of *communitas* were noticeably absent from interview conversations with the candidates Peter and Abigail for example, and they suffered the effects of liminality the most.) Given the social nature of mystagogy, the importance of shared storytelling, and the support that participants often gave each other, it would seem that a longer process provides better opportunity for the social nature of the mystagogic process to take root.

**iii. ‘The Church giving Birth to the Church’**

The opening quotation of this chapter highlights the significance of the RCIA for the Church in terms of the vision that it espouses: ‘of the Church as a community of faith lived in common – a vision it means to be efficaciously enacted over and over again’. As Groome and Imbelli outline the process, the RCIA, a prime concern of practical theology, involves the ‘Church giving birth to the Church’. The ‘whole of Christianity becomes an ongoing apprenticeship in discipleship through action and word’. ¹⁰ In its capacity to generate the ongoing genesis of the Church, it has much to teach participants and the entire parish community about Christian living. The RCIA is not just a self-contained matrix. It even has a didactic role in its relation with the whole

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⁹ See chapter three, p. 73.
¹⁰ Imbelli and Groome, ‘Signposts Towards a Pastoral Theology’, p. 135; see chapter one, p. 24.
community, as its apprenticeship outlines and reveals the nature of Christian life more generally.

Conversation with participants did tend to reveal a disconnection in community living, which arose from a lack of integration between the RCIA group and the rest of the parish. The fact that the minor rites and liturgies are often not celebrated means that the visible profile of RCIA participants is minimal, and therefore only truly highlighted at the Easter Vigil. Given that the Rite is primarily a liturgical document, its full impact seems to remain somewhat latent.

Whilst this lack of integration may have accentuated a sense of liminal segregation for participants on the one hand, potentially heightening their liminal self-consciousness and perspicacity, on the other hand this often led to a weak relationship with the rest of the parish community. The RCIA group needs to have more of an integrated presence in the wider liturgical life of the parish:

> But the groups must be turned toward the liturgical assembly, toward the larger, less intimate, more symbol-making gathering […]. The progress of the catechumenal group is ritually marked in the larger assembly, at least by intercessions if not by some form of the ancient handing over of creed and prayer or the ancient blessings, exorcisms or scrutinies. Thus personal feelings and needs are gently received and gently turned toward the task of learning community and a larger order.¹¹

Further liturgical integration would help anchor the RCIA apprenticeship within the life of the wider parish community. In addition, the importance of these liturgies, given their potential for embodied experience, doubly emphasizes their significance for participants. Increased celebration of the Rite of Catechumens, the Rite of Signing, the Rite of Dismissal and the Lenten Scrutinies¹² would ensure the enhanced profiling of participants, as they would be introduced to the parish on a regular basis. In fact, where participants did talk about engagement in liturgies prior to the Vigil – and the diocesan (rather than parish-based) Rite of Election in particular – they did so with so much passion and enthusiasm that need for further integration of the

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¹² See appendix two for an explanation of these liturgies.
liturgies into contemporary practice would seem obvious. Given the potential for experiences of *communitas* within the group setting, this would not seem to take away from the anti-structural element of the process; as has been outlined, liturgical worship involves entering a liminal or anti-structural domain, a ‘matrix’ or ‘transitional space’ as Chauvet calls it.\(^{13}\)

The various liturgies leading up to the Vigil are both challenging and transformative for the whole community; all are called to share in the anticipation that is a common feature of the RCIA. As Daniel Benedict states, the Scrutinies involve a deep searching of the heart through prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit which renews ‘the *entire* community along with those being prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery’ (my emphasis). He continues: ‘The rites of initiation, as does all ritual, displace and disorient us in order to reorient us to the one who goes before us to Galilee – the places of ministry’.\(^{14}\) As chapter six illustrated, the celebration of the sacraments has a liminal dimension as the sacraments confront all participants with the demand that they face the challenges of the living out of faith: the tension between ‘what we are not yet but ought to be’ and the ‘prophetic liminal call to self-transcendence’.\(^{15}\) The whole parish community is called to share in the unsettling and provoking nature of the liturgy – in a word, to become liminal, an unsettling yet also transformative place of encounter.

Part of the prophetic and transformative nature of the liturgy is that it inspires the community to engage in *ad extra* living or mission. The RCIA also has this specific evangelization and missionary mandate, both in how it engages new Church members and how it inspires those members to live a life of Christian witness and discipleship.\(^{16}\)

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13 Chauvet, ‘The Liturgy in its Symbolic Space’, p. 31 and p. 36 respectively.
14 Benedict, ‘Living Amphibiously: The RCIA and the Congregation’, p. 9; here referencing RCIA no. 125; p. 69: ‘In the liturgy and liturgical catechesis of Lent the reminder of baptism already received or the preparation for its reception, as well as the theme of repentance, renew the entire community along with those being prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery, in which each of the elect will share through the sacraments of initiation. For both the elect and the local community, therefore, the Lenten season is a time for spiritual recollection in preparation for the celebration of the paschal mystery’.
16 RCIA no. 75. 2, p. 38.
This theme was implicitly expressed as participants described the living out of faith in their everyday lives. The challenge of bearing witness in the workplace was mentioned, and a minority of participants described getting more involved with social justice concerns. As such, the findings indicate that the RCIA focuses more upon the internal renewal of the Church – the building of community and incorporation of new members – rather than on instilling a sense of mission in participants and encouraging evangelization within contemporary culture. Our study has revealed the intimate connection between catechesis and spirituality, and this leads to broader questions concerning how faith is lived out in the world – how personal spirituality is connected with social justice concerns. This is a challenge and an area of development for the RCIA generally. As Griffith comments, an ‘informed spirituality’ is a necessary goal of catechesis, as this will nourish and support Christians in their missionary activity in the world.17

The RCIA is arguably caught up in the tension between communion – the inward-looking maintenance of the faith community – and mission, a reaching out to the world,18 and this is a tension which must be lived out in every Christian faith community. Here the theme of mystagogy may expose the need for an increased missionary dimension to faith. Mystagogy takes one beyond oneself; faith is not just about a private interiority or spiritual experience, mystagogy prompts a missionary dynamic, and given that this stage of the RCIA is often neglected in pastoral practice, increased attention to this transition during the process might help the integration of faith and life.

II. An Exercise in Practical Theology

The final reflections in this chapter also address the nature of the thesis as an exercise in practical theology.

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i. ‘Practicing Theology’

The ‘practicing’ of theology in this thesis has involved engagement with distinct, yet also overlapping, theological sources: the normative theology of the Rite, the work of formal theologians such as Rahner and the operant or embedded theology of RCIA practice. The inclusion of social anthropological theory further contributed to this kaleidoscopic encounter. The theological interpretation, which was mystagogic in its essence, demonstrated a rich and spiraling process. Empirical faith stories, as they revealed the lived theology of practice, particularly animated this encounter through their experiential and personal nature. However, the encounter came to full fruition through the interaction between the different theological sources.

For example, the theological concept of graced recognition lies at the heart of the theological interpretation. Participants’ faith stories contained myriad examples of graced experience. Reflection upon these through the theology of grace brought graced recognition to full fruition. It has been demonstrated through empirical means how the RCIA enables one to come to deeper recognition of God’s loving grace in one’s life. The process of graced recognition led to a personal ‘theological verification’\(^\text{19}\) within participants’ faith experience, which further outlined how the subjective nature of theology enlightens rite-of-passage experience. The interdisciplinary nature of the thesis is now reflected upon, followed by the hermeneutical structure of the thesis in terms of the theology of grace and mystagogy.

ii. Interdisciplinary Encounter

The interdisciplinary incorporation of the social sciences, appropriating Turnerian theory and using grounded-theory techniques, has been a distinctive way of ‘practicing theology’. Both theological and cultural analyses have been brought to bear on RCIA initiatory practice. The interdisciplinary dialogue has resulted in exploration of how anthropology and theology may be of mutual, critical service to each other, whilst maintaining and respecting each discipline. In the course of this,

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\(^{19}\) Gagey, ‘Pastoral Theology as a Theological Project’, in *Keeping Faith in Practice*, edited by James Sweeney et al., pp. 91-92; see chapter six, pp. 271-273.
Turnerian theory has been incorporated into the theological exercise, demonstrating a ‘theological gestalt’, 20 a framework that is concurrently theological and socially scientific. This presents a unique contribution to the field of practical theology. The use of two interpretive frameworks is not without its challenges, as the data was read through two different hermeneutical structures. Nevertheless, as Chauvet comments, interdisciplinary work in a theological exercise is difficult but worth it. 21 Each discipline inspires and challenges the other.

The Turnerian reading opened up new horizons in the exploration of the RCIA conversion process, contextualizing the experience within broad social anthropological rite-of-passage terms. In addition to illuminating the process through the concepts of liminality and communitas, it also particularly emphasized the importance of the embodied dimensions of the initiatory experience, ahead of the theological reading. Liminality may be applied to understanding the transitional nature of the liturgy and sacraments and the transitional dimensions of the paschal mystery. 22 One may even go as far to say that graced experience may itself be described as liminal. The ‘aha’ moments of recognition, of cognitive understanding of God’s presence and transformation, are in some respects liminal moments. They are ‘in-between’ times, potent expressions of how all of life is imbued with grace. Graced experiences may also express communitas, experiences of deep wonder and connection with God.

Theological reflection has enabled exploration of the subjective faith experience and the theological reading of Turnerian theory and methodology (i.e. the Turnerian accent on process). Theological interpretation may also illuminate the complex methodological hermeneutical structure of the thesis (i.e. the grounded theory presentation of data, the anthropological interpretation, which culminated in theological analysis). It is possible to trace the concept of graced recognition (‘transcendence becoming thematic’) operating at a meta-level in the thesis.

22 See chapter six, pp. 214-215.
Participants’ implicit, tacit faith experience, evident in the grounded theory analysis and the Turnerian reading, was fully revealed, or brought to full fruition, in the theological interpretation. The process of graced recognition is in operation at a meta-level of the thesis.

Yet encounters between theology, anthropology and the social sciences may invoke an experience of what Martin Buber terms ‘holy insecurity’; it takes the theologian out of his or her comfort zone.23 ‘The moments of Thou appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tear us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security’.24 This challenge to security is captured in the following words of Swinton and Mowat:

Can the social sciences really challenge theology at a fundamental level as the implications of this [correlative] method suggest?...How can a system of knowledge created by human beings challenge a system of knowledge that claims to be given by God?25

Describing the interdisciplinary experience as one of ‘holy insecurity’ recognizes the vulnerability in the practical theological exercise. The interdisciplinary, practical theology exercise may open more questions than it answers. However, as Nicholas Lash observes, ‘if Christian theology “makes progress”, it only does so, as Newman said, “by being always alive to its own fundamental uncertainties”’.26 This study therefore contributes to the debate concerning the use of the social sciences within practical theology, but does not provide definitive answers.

24 Buber, I and Thou, p. 34.
iii. Mystagogy

The study has established how mystagogy forms an essential dynamic within theological dialogue; it is a component of the reflective process or ‘practicing’ of theology. In making this connection, this study has contributed to what Rahner defines as the mystagogic dimension of practical theology, the ‘self-actualisation’ of the Church through ‘theological illumination’.27

This practical mystagogy28 is reflected in the lived dimensions that have arisen from this study – its social, embodied and mystical aspects, for example. These provide the contours for a broader mystagogic framework and are of relevance for practical theology more generally. For example, the mystagogy of lament and assurance and the embodied nature of spirituality may all be valuable themes for the work of hospital chaplains as they accompany patients through experiences of suffering. The sharing of one’s own story could be used to explore how mystagogy flourishes in contexts different to the RCIA – within, for example, the dynamics of various faith-sharing groups or communities. Exploration of reflective themes in social justice work would help to develop and make links with mystagogic living and missionary outreach. In all of these instances, the recognition of the graced moment within pastoral practice: the ‘aha’ moment of insight and clarity and the awareness of God’s love and of one’s graced identity are instances of ‘theological illumination’. Research in practical theology will no doubt reveal further dimensions of mystagogy which thrive in different aspects of the Church’s life. Mystagogy is therefore a vital theme for development within the field of practical theology.

The tri-partite hermeneutical encounter at the heart of the theological interpretation, bringing theology, experience and the social sciences together, is also mystagogic. The RCIA experience, itself a journey or process, has been analyzed through a constructivist grounded-theory method which recognizes life as processual. This

27 Rahner, ‘Practical Theology within the Totality of Theological Disciplines’, p. 102; see chapter two p. 59.
28 Karl Rahner advocates a mystagogy based on a ‘practical fundamental theology’; see Bacik, Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery, pp. ix-x; chapter six, p. 225-226.
reflection revealed the embedded mystagogy in participants’ faith experience: how they moved into a deeper life of grace.

Mystagogy also provides the means for a theological interpretation of the ‘processual’ dynamic of the Turners’ work (a secular mystagogic process), the observation of ‘living through’ the moment of anthropological insight or fully entering into fieldwork observation.\(^{29}\) Theologically speaking, this is the moment of graced insight, and enables a theological reading of a central dynamic in the Turners’ working methodology. The theological interpretation was itself mystagogic, as it involved reflection upon participants’ faith experience. From this retrospective position, the role of the researcher may again be summarized as one of mystagogue in relation to the overall mystagogic methodological structure of the thesis.

Reciprocal insights such as these, alongside other mutual themes between the disciplines of anthropology and theology, not only reveal how one discipline may serve another, they also help to demonstrate how theology may engage with the secular and vice versa. Mystagogy, itself a concept borrowed by the early Church from secular culture, in its contemporary Christian usage also speaks to secular culture and the humanities. Mysticism is another such integral theme. As Harmless comments, ‘Apophatic speaking not only crosses the centuries. It also crosses religious traditions’.\(^{30}\) In the case of this study it also crosses interdisciplinary boundaries and so doing also demonstrates its capacity as a theme for discourse with the secular.

The ‘practicing of theology’ through theological and interdisciplinary engagement has revealed a profound ‘I-Thou’ encounter between experience, theology and anthropology. The results of which provide important signposts for practical theology more generally.

\(^{29}\) See chapter four, pp. 154-156.
A Final Word

The year 2012 will mark the fortieth anniversary of the Rite. The practice of the RCIA, still in relative infancy, will benefit from continued theological reflection and dialogue concerning the lived nature of the process of Christian initiation and the spiritual depths of such experience. This chapter has summarized the findings of the thesis in the light of the original research goal: to understand more fully the spiritual transformation that takes place in the RCIA process, especially its liminal dimensions. This study has revealed a theological anthropology integral to the transformation that takes place during the RCIA. While by no means exhaustive, this ultimately reflects a graced understanding of the love of God: ‘Love of God is the only total integration of human existence’.31 The reflections on pastoral practice in this chapter highlight the practical orientation of the thesis, as an exercise in practical theology, as they address issues of how best to support participants in the RCIA as they cross the threshold into the Church. The RCIA is a journey of apprenticeship in a life of ongoing Christian discipleship.

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APPENDICES
Appendix 1: An Outline of the Stages of the RCIA Process

OUTLINE FOR CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS

PERIOD OF EVANGELIZATION AND PRECATECHUMENATE

This is a time, of no fixed duration or structure, for inquiry and introduction to gospel values, an opportunity for the beginnings of faith.

FIRST STEP: ACCEPTANCE INTO THE ORDER OF CATECHUMENS

This is the liturgical rite, usually celebrated annually on some date or dates, marking the beginning of the catechumenate proper, as the candidates express and the Church accepts their intention to respond to God’s call to follow the way of Christ.

PERIOD OF THE CATECHUMENATE

This is the time, in duration corresponding to the progress of the individual, for the nurturing and growth of the catechumens’ faith and conversion to God; celebrations of the Word and prayers of exorcism and blessing are meant to assist the process.

SECOND STEP: ELECTION OR ENROLMENT OF NAMES

This is the liturgical rite, usually celebrated on the First Sunday of Lent, by which the Church formally ratifies the catechumens’ readiness for the sacraments of initiation, and the catechumens, now the elect, express the will to receive these sacraments.

PERIOD OF PURIFICATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

This is the time immediately preceding the elects’ initiation, usually the Lenten season preceding the celebration of this initiation at the Easter Vigil; it is a time of reflection, intensely centred on conversion, marked by celebration of the scrutinies and presentations and of the preparation rites on Holy Saturday.

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THIRD STEP: CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

This is the liturgical rite, usually integrated into the Easter Vigil, by which the elect are initiated through baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist.

PERIOD OF POSTBAPTISMAL CATECHESIS OF MYSTAGOGY

This is the time, usually the Easter season, following the celebration of initiation, during which the newly initiated experience being fully a part of the Christian community by means of both pertinent catechesis and particularly by participation with all the faithful in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration.
Appendix 2: Explanatory List of Liturgical Rites in the RCIA

**Rite of Acceptance:** the first public liturgical rite for those becoming Catholic, marking the transition from the period of evangelization and pre-catechumenate to the catechumenate period (RCIA, nos. 41-47, pp. 17-18). This rite is for catechumens and is usually combined with a rite of welcome for candidates.

**Signing of the Senses:** the ritual act of tracing the sign of the cross on participants’ forehead and other parts of the body during the Rite of Acceptance (RCIA, nos. 54-57, pp. 24-27).

**Dismissal:** RCIA participants are sometimes dismissed after the homily to reflect on God’s Word and do not remain for the Liturgy of the Eucharist (RCIA, no. 44, p. 17; no. 75.3, p. 37; no. 115, p. 57).

**Minor Rites:** a series of rites during the period of the catechumenate. These include: celebrations of the Word of God (RCIA, nos. 81-89, pp. 40-41); minor exorcisms which draw attention to the struggles of Christian life and the need for God’s help (RCIA, nos. 90-94); and blessings and anointing (RCIA, nos. 90-102, pp. 42-47). The blessings ‘are a sign of God’s love and of the Church’s tender care. They are bestowed on the catechumens so that, even though they do not as yet have the grace of the sacraments, they may still receive from the Church courage, joy and peace as they proceed along the difficult journey they have already begun’ (no. 95).

**Rite of Election:** a liturgical rite that usually takes place on the first Sunday of Lent at the diocesan cathedral (nos. 105-124, pp. 55-57). Catechumens sign the ‘Book of the Elect’ which formally names those who will be baptized at the approaching Easter Vigil. Catechumens become known as the ‘Elect’.

**Scrubitions:** The three scrutinies are ‘rites for self-searching and repentance and have above all a spiritual purpose. The scrutinies are meant to uncover, then heal, all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong and good’ (RCIA, no. 141). They are normally celebrated on
the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent, but also may be celebrated on weekdays (nos. 137-143, pp. 73-79; nos. 151-157, pp. 87-93; nos. 158-164, pp. 95-101).

Presentations: the Creed (nos. 144-150, pp. 81-85) and the Lord’s Prayer (nos. 165-171, pp. 103-106) may be celebrated during the week in Lent preceding initiation.
Appendix 3: Details of Interview Participants – Phase One

All names of participants have been changed  * denotes longer RCIA process

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Background</th>
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<th>Interviewed</th>
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Appendix 3: Details of Interview Participants – Phase Two

All names of participants have been changed  * denotes longer RCIA process

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<th>Name</th>
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Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Research Area:

An exploration of the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process in terms of participants’ experiences of transition and personal change.

Invitation to participate:

For this PhD study I aim to interview up to thirty adults who have gone through the RCIA process (including participants who are now not attending church). I have identified six parishes in the country for an interview sample. I have met/been in contact with the catechist/parish priest involved with the RCIA process that you have been through, and they have identified you as a participant who might like to be interviewed for my study.

Overview of the interview questions:

The purpose of the interview is to explore several related issues: how the RCIA might involve a process of transition; what personal change may have occurred in people’s lives in terms of their faith journey; how participants may have experienced a sense of community in that time; and the part that worship played in the process.

Information for interviewees:

- The participant will be expected to be interviewed for approximately one hour. This may be followed up at a later date with a further (shorter) interview at the interviewee’s discretion.

- The interviewee will be free to withdraw from the interview at any point.

- The interviewee will be expected to sign the attached consent form.

- All data from interviewees will be kept confidential. Where they appear in my thesis in the form of quotations from interviews (or, if needed, interview transcripts in an appendix), this will be done anonymously.

- The same anonymous data may be used in future published work and in conference presentations.

- The name of parishes used will be kept confidential in my study.

---

1 Provided to interviewees before the interviewing process.
• This research is being organized by me for my own PhD study at Heythrop College, where I am a research student.

• I work part-time for Heythrop College on the ARCS research project (Action Research Church and Society), which looks at groups involved in evangelization and renewal in the Church. The project is separate from my PhD study; however, the findings from my PhD research may be used or referred to in the work of the ARCS project.

• The research outcomes will be made available to participants.

• The College Ethics Committee has approved my PhD research project.

I would like to express my thanks to the interviewees who agree to be involved in this study, and for the help I have received from the relevant catechist/parish priest in identifying participants from their particular parish.

Contact details for further information:

Deborah Bhatti, Research Assistant, Pastoral Studies Department, Heythrop College, Kensington Square, London W8 5HQ, 020 7795 4232, d.bhatti@heythrop.ac.uk

Date:

2 (‘Deborah Bhatti’ was Deborah Ross’ maiden name, used at the time of interviewing.)
Appendix 5: Consent Form

HEYTHROP COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Informed Consent Form

• I, the undersigned, voluntarily agree to take part in this interview.

• I have read and understood the Information Sheet provided. I have been given a full explanation by the researcher of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study, and of what I will be expected to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on the study and have understood the information given as a result.

• I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers are held and processed in the strictest confidence, and in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved.

• I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.

• I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation and agree to comply with the instructions and restrictions of the study.

Name of interviewee (BLOCK CAPITALS) ........................................................
Signed ........................................................................
Date ........................................................

Name of researcher/person taking consent (BLOCK CAPITALS) .................................
Signed ........................................................................
Date ........................................................

1 Provided to interviewees to gain consent before interviewing process.
Appendix 6: Interview Schedule One

Preliminary Questions:

1. How long ago did you go through the RCIA?
2. What was your background before becoming a Catholic?
3. How long were you in the RCIA for?
4. What attracted you to the RCIA or the Church?
5. Are you still attending church?
6. If not, what might be the reasons for this? How do you feel? Do you still feel as though you are a Catholic?

Main Interview Questions: (Main questions in bold, followed by further trigger questions if needed)

Transition:

1. During your time in the RCIA did you feel like you were in a phase of transition or time of change?
   a. How would you describe this phase in your own words?
   b. Were there any negative aspects? Was it in anyway unsettling or uncomfortable? Was there any sense of loss for you?
   c. Were there any positive aspects? Did you experience a sense of an old way of life ending and a new one beginning? Did it seem like a time of possibility?
   d. At what point would you say that sense of transition started and finished?

2. Had you made up your mind to become a Catholic before entering the RCIA or during the course of it?

3. What sustained you in the RCIA process; what got you through?

Change:

4. How would you say that you personally changed whilst in the RCIA? I.e. were there moments of self-confrontation and healing?

5. What would you say was the deepest point of change or transformation for you?

6. What was your faith journey like in this time?
   a. Did you feel closer to God/ Jesus/ Holy Spirit in this time?
   b. What was prayer like for you in this time?
7. Who did Christ become for you? What change did this involve?

8. Do you think the RCIA gave you a sense of becoming more fully human or living your true potential? In what way?

9. Did the RCIA cause you to look at life and death differently?

10. Did the process give you an increased sense of hope, faith, and love?

Community:

11. What was the RCIA group like socially? Did you form close friendships within that time? Was this an important aspect of the process for you?

12. Did the RCIA group interact with the rest of the parish? What was the relationship like between the two? How do you think the RCIA group makes other people in the parish feel?

13. Do you think the RCIA has the capacity to change the parish in anyway (or as a whole), or even make an impact on the rest of society?

Sacraments & Worship:

14. Were there any moments in the liturgies celebrated that really touched you?

15. What particular aspects of the sacraments and/or specific symbols were especially meaningful for you?

16. Do you think the liturgies you were involved in impacted on the rest of the parish community?

Concluding Questions:

17. What has it been like to reflect upon your time in the RCIA in this interview?

18. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Appendix 7: Interview Schedule Two

Questions addressed to both catechumens and candidates: new interviews and former interviewees. For new interviewees follow preliminary questions from schedule one.

Contemporary Liminal Expressions:

1. (Immigrants only – see question two for others.) **Do you think your own experience, in terms of moving to this country, helped you cope with other transitions such as the RCIA?** [Generally people who have been through a personal change such as moving from one country to another have reported less negative feelings when they went through RCIA.]

2. **OR: Do you think the RCIA** (in terms of going through change/transition) **has helped you cope better with subsequent challenges/changes in life? If so, in what way?**

Sacramental and Liturgical Transformation:

3. What has becoming a full member of the Church meant in terms of your own personal identity?

4. **What might this mean in terms of everyday life?** (Participants so far talk of being received at the Easter Vigil, as a highlight of the process – what about beyond this?)

5. **Some respondents have described bodily, visceral experiences when being received?** (These are often hard to describe but mark a form of religious experience; provide examples if necessary.) **Have you had any of those experiences yourself?** If so, what did they meant to you?

6. **Was the Holy Spirit important in this process for you?** (Looking back, can you see the Holy Spirit as guiding you through?)

Personal Transformation:

7. Participants seem to talk more about community and personal change in the RCIA time rather than what they have learnt through the content of the course/doctrinal teaching, i.e. scripture. Is this a fair summary of your experience?

8. **Did participating in the group dynamic change you in some way?**
9. Generally participants do not describe a strong sense of personal change in regards to social and political issues as a result of their RCIA experience. Was this aspect stressed to you during your RCIA experience? Were you challenged in this way?

Relationship with Christ:

10. How important was your relationship with Jesus Christ in this time? (I’m interested in hearing more about how peoples’ relationship with Jesus may have played a part in the RCIA time.)

11. Most participants don’t tend to cite faith in Jesus Christ as a reason for being attracted to the church; would you say that you were drawn more by other reasons such a sense of community rather than by focusing on the person of Jesus?

12. (Candidates from an Anglican background only) Was the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist an influential/motivating factor for you?

13. Do you personally identify with the paschal mystery (Christ’s life, death, resurrection)? Does it help you reflect on your own life (in terms of losses and hopes/ joys and sorrows)?

Concluding Questions:

14. What has it been like to reflect upon your time in the RCIA in this interview?

15. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Appendix 8: Grounded Theory Diagram
Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, p. 11

Writing the first draft

Integrating memos - Diagramming concepts

Sorting memos

Theoretical sampling - Seek specific new data

Advanced memos - Refining conceptual categories

Data collection - Focused coding

Initial memos raising codes to tentative categories

Initial coding - data collection

Research problem and opening research questions

Further theoretical sampling if needed

Theoretical memo-writing and further refining of concepts

Adopting certain categories as theoretical concepts

Sensitizing concepts and general disciplinary perspectives

Reexamination of earlier data

Appendix 8: Grounded Theory Diagram
Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, p. 11
Appendix 9: Grounded Theory Coding Example

**Examples of abbreviated line-by-line or initial codes**
- ‘prompts’ and ‘catalysts’, i.e. migration
- ‘pregnancy/motherhood catalysts’, ‘gradual decision’

**Prompts/Catalysts**
- Triggering Joining RCIA

**Juxtaposed Experiences**
- ‘something awoke’, ‘inner realization’, ‘gradual process with “dramatic moments”’

**‘Underground Process’**
- Distinctive ‘Special’ Environment

**Category: RCIA - Transitional Experience**
- Initial codes covering bereavement, engagement, pregnancy

**Focused Codes**
- Awareness of God’s Presence

**Negative Expressions**
- Self-consciousness
  - ‘self-consciousness’, ‘exposed’, ‘overwhelming’


**Appendix 9: Grounded Theory Coding Example**
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