

The Journey of Conversion and Healing in RCIA (The Prodigal Son Retreat)

Introduction

Today we are reflecting on something very important: **how RCIA becomes a place of conversion and healing**. Not merely a classroom. Not merely a syllabus. Not merely a pathway to receiving the sacraments. But a sacred journey in which Christ meets people, the Gospel is proclaimed, hearts are awakened, wounds begin to heal, and lives are gradually turned toward God.

This is exactly where this talk sits in the retreat programme. It comes after the session on spiritual accompaniment and before formation in accompaniment and healing prayer. That placement is very meaningful. It tells us that conversion and healing in RCIA do not happen by information alone, but through proclamation, accompaniment, prayer, and grace.

And the Prodigal Son retreat (Topic 29 in the new Syllabus) itself is designed in that same spirit. It is not just a Bible sharing session. It is meant to lead participants into prayer, silence, self-recognition, encounter with the Father's mercy, honest reflection, spiritual accompaniment, and concrete response.

So I would like to share this talk in four movements:

1. **Conversion and healing in the whole RCIA journey**
2. **Why the Prodigal Son retreat belongs in Lent and near the scrutinies**
3. **Key insights from the Prodigal Son story from Topic 29**
4. **Why catechists themselves need ongoing healing and conversion**

1. Conversion and healing in the whole RCIA journey

RCIA is not first about content. RCIA is first about **encounter**.

People come to RCIA carrying many things. Some come with sincere faith. Some come with curiosity. Some come because of marriage. Some come because of a crisis. Some come because life has failed them. Some come with hidden wounds, shame, family pain, addictions, confusion, grief, and spiritual hunger.

If we treat RCIA only as doctrinal instruction, we will teach truths, but we may miss persons.

The whole process of RCIA is meant to be a journey of:

- hearing the Gospel,
- turning toward Christ,
- being freed from sin and false identities,
- entering the life of the Church,
- and growing into discipleship.

That is why **conversion and healing belong to the whole RCIA**, not just to one retreat.

The kerygma is the center

At the center of this whole process is the **kerygma**:

- God loves you.
- You were made for Him.
- Sin has wounded and distanced us.
- Jesus Christ died and rose to save you.
- He now calls you to repent, believe, and receive new life in the Holy Spirit.
- In the Church, you are brought into communion, healing, and mission.

Without the kerygma, RCIA becomes information.

With the kerygma, RCIA becomes invitation.

Without the kerygma, we may explain the faith.

With the kerygma, we announce salvation.

Without the kerygma, people may admire Christianity.

With the kerygma, they can surrender to Christ.

So when we speak about conversion and healing, we must begin here: **the deepest healing begins when a person hears the Gospel as good news for them personally.**

Healing is not separate from conversion

Sometimes we make a mistake.

We think conversion is one thing, healing is another thing.

But in Christ they belong together.

Because what is conversion?

It is not merely “becoming more moral.”

It is a turning of the whole person back to God.

And what is healing?

It is not merely “feeling better emotionally.”

It is the restoration of the person in truth, grace, dignity, and communion.

So real conversion heals.

And real healing converts.

A person who knows the Father’s mercy can repent without despair.

A person who faces sin honestly can begin to heal deeply.

A person who encounters Christ no longer needs to live under shame, slavery, resentment, or false identity.

This is why RCIA must use not only talks, but also rites, prayer, Scripture, silence, testimony, accompaniment, and retreats. The retreat notes themselves are built this way: proclamation of Luke 15, journaling, reflection before the image, small-group sharing, guided meditation, spiritual accompaniment, breaking-chain prayer, surrender before the crucifix, and a final movement toward mission and witness.

So the question is not: “Does RCIA include healing?”

The real question is: **How can RCIA fail to include healing if it truly proclaims Jesus Christ?**

2. Situating the Prodigal Son retreat in RCIA during Lent and near the scrutinies

The Topic 29 notes explicitly situate this retreat in Lent, describing Lent as a season of repentance, renewal, prayer, and deepening relationship with God. This is deeply fitting.

Lent is the season of return

Lent is not only about giving things up.

Lent is the Church’s great season of return:

- return to God,
- return to truth,
- return to our true identity,
- return to the Father’s house.

That is precisely why the Prodigal Son belongs in Lent.

The younger son “comes to himself,” rises, and returns.

That is a Lenten movement.

The older son is invited to come inside and rejoice.

That too is a Lenten movement.

So the retreat is not an isolated event. It participates in the whole spiritual rhythm of Lent.

The scrutinies and the Prodigal Son retreat

During Lent, the elect are also going through the **three scrutinies**. Even if this retreat is not itself a scrutiny, it should be understood in harmony with them.

The scrutinies are not meant to shame people. They are rites of grace. They uncover what is weak, wounded, sinful, resistant, divided, or enslaved in the human heart so that Christ may heal, strengthen, and free.

That is exactly what the Prodigal Son story does.

It reveals:

- the illusion of freedom apart from the Father,
- the misery of sin,
- the hunger of the heart,
- the lies we tell ourselves,
- the shame that keeps us at a distance,
- the resentment that can hide beneath outward obedience,
- and above all, the mercy of the Father.

In that sense, the retreat helps prepare catechumens and catechists alike to understand the scrutinies rightly:
not as public exposure,
but as merciful truth-telling in the presence of Christ.

The younger son needs scrutiny: his false freedom, waste, and collapse are brought into the light.

The older son also needs scrutiny: his bitterness, self-righteousness, and refusal to enter the joy of mercy are also exposed.

So this retreat is very suitable in Lent because it helps participants see that **both rebellion and resentment need healing**.

Lent, scrutiny, and kerygma together

If we separate Lent from the kerygma, Lent becomes heavy.

If we separate scrutiny from mercy, scrutiny becomes frightening.

If we separate repentance from the Father's love, conversion becomes joyless.

But in Luke 15 everything comes together:

- sin is real,
- distance is real,
- misery is real,
- but mercy is greater,
- sonship is restored,
- and the Father desires joy.

That is the heart of Lent in RCIA.

3. Insights from the Prodigal Son story from Topic 29

The retreat notes from Topic 29 are already rich. They emphasize unconditional love, the Father's mercy, reflection on all three characters, the symbols of ring, robe, and sandals, spiritual accompaniment, liberation from slavery, and a movement toward mission and compassion. I would draw out the following key insights for catechist formation.

a. The story is about more than one lost son

The notes rightly insist that the parable has **three main characters**, not one: the father, the younger son, and the elder son.

This is crucial.

Usually we focus only on the younger son.

But Jesus gives us two lost sons:

- one lost through rebellion,
- one lost through resentment.

This is important in RCIA because inquirers and catechumens may resemble either son.

Some have clearly wandered.

Others are outwardly respectable but inwardly wounded, proud, or resistant.

Some feel unworthy.

Some feel superior.

Some are ashamed.

Some are judgmental.

Both need the Father.

And catechists too can become either son.

Sometimes we become weary elder brothers:

“I have served for years. Why is so much attention given to newcomers?”

Or sometimes we carry the younger son’s hidden story:

old wounds, regret, compromises, and interior hunger.

So this retreat speaks to everyone.

b. Sin is not merely rule-breaking; it is leaving home

The younger son’s tragedy is not merely bad behavior.

It is rupture of relationship.

He wants the father’s gifts without the father.

He wants inheritance without communion.

He wants freedom without belonging.

That is the heart of sin even today.

Sin says:

“I want life on my own terms.”

“I want God’s gifts, but not God.”

“I want autonomy without dependence.”

“I want fulfillment without obedience.”

But the result is always a “distant country”:

interior famine,

fragmented identity,

and slavery.

This is why the notes use questions like:

“In what ways might you have left home and the Father’s embrace?” and “Have you stopped connecting with the Father regularly and intimately?” These are excellent RCIA questions because they move beyond external behavior into relational conversion.

c. Conversion begins when a person “comes to himself”

One of the most powerful lines in the parable is that the younger son **came to himself**.

Conversion is not becoming someone else.

It is returning to who we truly are in God.

Sin makes us less ourselves.

Mercy restores us.

So in RCIA we are not merely helping people “join the Church.”

We are helping them rediscover who they are:

beloved children, made for communion with God.

This is why silence, journaling, and reflection are so important in the retreat. The notes invite participants to imagine kneeling like the prodigal son, being embraced by the Father, and listening to what God says to them. That is not sentimentality. That is a path toward true self-knowledge before God.

d. The Father’s mercy comes before the son’s finished speech

The father sees, runs, embraces, and kisses the son while he is still far off.

This means:

- mercy is prior,
- grace takes initiative,
- God is not reluctant,
- the Father is not waiting to humiliate the repentant sinner.

This is essential in RCIA because many come expecting God to reject them.

Some carry father wounds.

Some feel stained by their past.

Some are afraid of the Church.

The retreat must reveal the true face of God.

The Topic 29 notes say beautifully that God never stops paying attention to us, never stops loving, and invites us to come home. This is one of the strongest themes to preserve.

e. The ring, robe, and sandals are restoration, not mere pardon

The notes explain the symbols well:

- the **ring** means authority and restored sonship,
- the **robe** signifies love, mercy, holiness, and protection,
- the **sandals** signify that he returns not as a slave but as a son.

This is a beautiful catechetical opening into sacramental identity.

God does not merely say, “I will tolerate you.”

He restores dignity.

He restores belonging.

He restores mission.

This is extremely important for RCIA. The goal is not simply that a candidate says, “I am forgiven.”

The goal is that the person enters the Church knowing:

“I am loved.”

“I belong.”

“I have a new identity in Christ.”

“I am called to live and witness as a son or daughter.”

f. Freedom must lead to mission

The retreat notes wisely do not stop at inner experience. They move toward freedom, witness, compassion, kindness, and mission. Session 4 explicitly says that Christ teaches us to evangelize through love and that living witness is the most effective form of evangelization.

That is important.

If the Prodigal Son retreat ends only in emotion, it remains incomplete.

The son who returns to the father’s house must now live differently.

Mercy received must become mercy given.

Healing received must become compassion offered.

Restored sonship must become witness.

That is why the Circle of Compassion and Kindness Pledge are pastorally strong ideas in the notes.

4. Catechists too need ongoing healing and conversion

Since this retreat day is for **formation of catechists**, we must say this clearly:

RCIA catechists are not outside the journey.

We are inside it.

The title of the day itself is “Becoming RCIA Evangelizing Catechists.” That word “becoming” matters. We are still being formed.

If a catechist thinks, “This retreat is for the candidates, not for me,” then something has already gone wrong.

Why catechists need ongoing healing

Because catechists also carry:

- fatigue,
- discouragement,
- old wounds,
- unhealed memories,
- ministry disappointments,
- spiritual dryness,
- perfectionism,
- resentment,
- comparison,

- pride,
- hidden sin,
- fear of inadequacy.

A wounded catechist can still teach accurate doctrine, but may not mediate the Father's heart well.

A bitter catechist may become an elder brother in ministry.

A fearful catechist may hide behind notes and control.

An unhealed catechist may correct harshly.

An insecure catechist may seek admiration instead of service.

A busy catechist may speak of prayer without praying.

So the Prodigal Son retreat is also for us.

We must ask:

- In what ways have I gone into a distant country interiorly?
- Am I serving like a son or like a slave?
- Do I rejoice when sinners return, or do I compare?
- Have I allowed hurt to become hardness?
- Am I still living from the Father's embrace?

Catechists must receive before they can accompany

The retreat notes repeatedly build in spiritual accompaniment and reflection. That is wise because accompaniment must flow from a heart that has itself been accompanied by God.

We cannot bring people home if we ourselves are living outside the Father's house interiorly.

We do not need perfect catechists.

But we do need honest catechists.

Praying catechists.

Repenting catechists.

Listening catechists.

Catechists who know what it means to be embraced by mercy.

Practical tips for catechists' ongoing healing and conversion

Here are some concrete tips you can give them:

1. Return constantly to the kerygma

Do not outgrow the first proclamation.

Preach it to yourself:

Christ loves me.

Christ saves me.

Christ is with me.

Christ is still converting me.

2. Pray with Scripture personally, not only for teaching

Before using Luke 15 for others, let it read you.

Ask: Which character am I today?

3. Let the rites evangelize you

Do not only “run” the rites.

Pray them.

Enter them.

Allow the scrutinies, prayers, and symbols of RCIA to purify your own heart.

4. Practice examen and repentance

At the end of each week ask:

Where did I resist grace?

Where was I impatient?

Where did I minister from ego?

Where did I experience the Father’s love?

5. Seek accompaniment yourself

Catechists who accompany others should also have someone who accompanies them spiritually.

6. Watch for elder-brother spirituality

This is a real danger in ministry:

duty without delight,

service without tenderness,

correctness without mercy.

7. Bring your wounds to Christ regularly

Not every wound must be solved immediately, but every wound must be brought into the light.

8. Stay close to the sacraments

Especially Eucharist and Reconciliation.

A catechist who stops receiving mercy will slowly lose the tone of mercy.

9. Learn to listen before teaching

Sometimes people do not first need an answer.

They need to feel seen, like the father who saw the son while he was still far off.

10. Let healing become mission

When God heals you, do not waste the wound.

It can become compassion, patience, wisdom, and spiritual authority.

Suggested conclusion for the talk

Brothers and sisters,

The Prodigal Son retreat is not an extra activity in RCIA.

It reveals the heart of RCIA.

RCIA is the place where the Father still waits,
where Christ still seeks the lost,
where the Holy Spirit still awakens the heart,
where people still come to themselves,
rise, and return home.

During Lent, and especially in the light of the scrutinies, this retreat becomes even more powerful. It helps us see that conversion is not merely moral effort, and healing is not merely emotional relief. Both are the work of grace. Both flow from the kerygma. Both are brought about when the human heart encounters the Father's mercy in Christ.

And for us as catechists, this retreat is not only something we facilitate. It is something we must continually enter.

We too need to hear again:

"You are my son."

"You are my daughter."

"You are not a slave."

"Come home."

"All that is mine is yours."

Only then will we become not just instructors in RCIA,
but true evangelizing catechists,
men and women whose own conversion and healing make them credible witnesses of the
Father's love.

Very brief final exhortation

**A catechist who has personally encountered the Father's mercy will know how to
accompany others with truth, patience, and hope.**