

JOURNEY TO THE SOURCE

Over one hundred and twenty people from around Australia and New Zealand gathered in Perth from October 6 - 9 for the Christian Initiation Australia Network National conference *Journey to the Source*, organised by the National RCIA organising committee.

The first keynote speaker, Fr Tony Chiera was born and raised in Western Australia and was taught by the Josephite Sisters and Christian Brothers. After ordination he continued post graduate studies in theology and adult faith education in Ireland and also at Notre Dame University, Fremantle. His experience in adult faith education and liturgical development at diocesan level, has led to his current position in the Pastoral Office in the Bunbury Diocese. Fr Tony is serving as Vicar General for the diocese as he continues his work in adult faith formation.



Fr Tony's address based on the theme of the conference *Journey to the Source*,

reminded us that we are "the pilgrim people of God" and are all on the same journey and as members of the RCIA team we are called to "draw others into the journey". As Christians we have the duty to proclaim the Gospel - to share, to point, to experience and express joy and to invite individuals to join us. Others are drawn to the journey when they witness how "Christians love one another". God finds each of us 'where we are' in our human situation. The RCIA journey is with others "within the community of the faithful" (RCIA#4) journeying towards change, transformation and growth. The heart of the journey is conversion – a new way of relating with God and therefore with those around us.

The RCIA journey is an apprenticeship where one is training and learning to live the life of a 'whole' Christian, by experiencing and doing with others in the community. The journey needs the story – the story of Jesus and his disciples. We need to encounter the Word of God with the experience of the person. This particular journey of RCIA has rituals where God showers grace on those who participate. Fr Tony's dynamic and charismatic presentation had participants wanting more.

Nick Wagner, the director and founder of TeamRCIA.com was the second keynote speaker. Nick has more than twenty-five years' experience as a leader and trainer in liturgical and catechetical ministries in the USA. With his gift of translating theological principles into simple and clear language he definitely inspired commitment, passion and joy for faith in all present.

Nick's keynote address: *New Tools for a New Age* suggested that the digital world is not just about new tools. It is a new culture. It is a culture with its own language, conventions, rituals and stories. If we are going to evangelize and catechize with the tools of social media, we have to first learn the language and the culture of the digital world. He continued to elaborate on this concept explaining to the group that John Paul II "summarizes and affirms the Church's imperative to consider social communication not just as a tool but as a new culture into which the church is called to integrate the message of the Good News." The online work that Nick and the TeamRCIA.com offers, further supports

this belief that we need to use these new tools if we are to engage not only the young people of today, but also to support those who may be in remote areas and need support for RCIA from the wider Church community.



Nick completed his presentation with words from Pope Francis *“The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people”*. (*“Communication at the service of an authentic culture of encounter”* 2014)

A variety of workshops were offered by presenters that came from across the dioceses in Australia, so many new ideas were shared and many other actions were affirmed. Although all who participate in the journey of RCIA follow the Church documents on the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, it was evident that each diocese, even at times each

parish, implements the process in slightly different ways. Some parishes emphasise the Dismissal aspect of the journey, others the evening gatherings for Formation. Some parishes had RCIA teams with many members, other parishes had only one or two people in the team responsible for all aspects of the journey the catechumens and candidates were undertaking. Some smaller parishes explored the idea of working together so that teams were not exhausted. They celebrated the Rites within their own parishes, but came together for formation sessions, thus sharing Catechists. All parishes represented in the workshops affirmed the importance of the Rites that celebrated/marked the end of each phase of the journey.

It was emphasised throughout the conference how important it is to know and understand that it is **the community** that invites, welcomes and supports those who are making the important decision about becoming a member of the parish community. Therefore, it is important that we tap into the gifts of the community members and utilise these gifts as they assist those on the journey to explore the depth and richness of RCIA and thus develop a greater appreciation of community. It is through the example and modelling of the community that those on the journey will, through an apprenticeship style model, learn what the Catholic faith is all about. It is through the prayer of the community that catechumens and candidates are sustained on their journey. The importance of having the backing of the Parish Priest was discussed in a number of the workshops and also in the keynote addresses. Without this support for not only those participating in the journey, but also for the team supporting these people, then the RCIA journey can be difficult.

The other very important concept that was stressed again and again throughout the conference was the point that RCIA is NOT a program, but a journey and every participant on that journey will be at different points, with different needs, different understandings and different approaches to continuing the journey. The community, and in particular RCIA teams, have to be aware of this and endeavour not to make the journey the same for all and still implement what is needed to guide catechumens and candidates as they search for their way to an encounter with Christ.

The liturgies prepared by the Perth organisational team brought us together each morning and finished our days with prayer and song. The importance of such liturgies and encouraging catechumens and candidates to participate in other than Sunday Liturgy, was explored in a number of workshops. Identifying the different aspects of Liturgy and what should be part of formation throughout the RCIA journey and how it should be explored, was part of many discussions within workshops.