

A Catechism on the Catechumenate

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What is the catechumenate?

An institutional process for "making a Christian," that is, learning how to be a Christian. Those in the catechumenate are, in effect, apprentice Christians. They are called catechumens and what they are subjected to is catechesis.

These are strange-sounding words. What do they mean?

The root of all these words is the Greek preposition kata, meaning "according to" or "against" or "down," and the verb echo, meaning "sound." The catechumen is the one who receives the "sounding down," or oral instruction. Catechesis is the means by which the instruction is given. The catechist is the one who gives the instruction.

Doesn't the word "catechism" come from the same root?

Yes. A catechism is a handbook for instructing catechumens. It's usually written in a question-and-answer format, with simple answers that are easily memorized.

Haven't we had catechumens in the Lutheran Church?

Yes. We've usually designated as catechumens those who are studying the catechism. We have sometimes applied this term to our confirmands.

You said that the catechumenate is a program for "making Christians;" where do you get that?

From Tertullian, an early third-century North African lay theologian, who said that "Christians are made, not born."

Aren't Christians those who are "born again"?

Precisely. One is not "born" a Christian by being born into a Christian family. Christians need to be born again by water and the Spirit. In other words, they need to be baptized.

Doesn't your definition of the catechumenate as a process of "making Christians" compromise what we claim for all the baptized that they are Christians?

Not necessarily. Our experience of catechetical instruction is of those who were baptized as infants. But after Baptism we are really dealing with faith-formation, which can be a life-long process, not the catechumenate. The catechumenate proper is designed for those preparing for Baptism. Since it involves instruction, we're not talking about infant candidates but older youth and adults.

Do we have this new program because there are more older youth and adult candidates for Baptism than we used to have?

Exactly. In North America we experienced a peak of church attendance and membership in the 1950s when the baby boomers were brought to church. But with the increasing mobility and secularism of our society in the

1960s and 1970s we lost many of these baby boomers to participation in church life. Many of their children, in turn, were not baptized. Now some of them are returning to the Church as "seekers," sometimes to see what they missed in their lives or because they are looking for a meaning and purpose that they have not found elsewhere. If they have not been baptized, the catechumenate is for them. It is especially suited to this generation because it is based on experiential learning.

What happens in the catechumenate?

Those who have made inquiry about the faith and desire to be baptized are enrolled into the catechumenate. Sponsors are appointed for individual catechumens from the ranks of mature Christians. The sponsor becomes a vital link between the catechumen and the congregation. Sponsors help shepherd the catechumens into the ministries of the congregation or the wider Christian community. They also participate in classes in which the faith of the Church is discussed and shared.

Although the catechumens attend the Liturgy of the Word, they are dismissed with a blessing before the Liturgy of the Eucharist, because only the baptized can participate in the Lord's Supper and receive Holy Communion. Recall that the Liturgy of the Word used to be called "the mass of the catechumens" and the Liturgy of the Eucharist "the mass of the faithful." The catechumens leave with their catechists, and sometimes with their sponsors, and go to a class in which the readings and sermon they have heard are discussed.

I should point out that the preferred time for Baptism is the Easter Vigil when Baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ is emphasized. Therefore the intense time of the catechumenate is Lent. Enrollment into the catechumenate might occur at the beginning of Lent (or at the beginning of Advent with Baptism at the Epiphany or Baptism of our Lord). However, as you can well imagine, the time frame of Advent and Christmas conflicts with a lot that's going on in church and society because of the holidays. Moreover, the readings for Lent in Year A of the three-year lectionary are especially designed for the catechumenate. So Lent is the preferred time for the catechumenate.

Suppose one went through the catechumenate during Lent but was prevented by illness or some crisis from being baptized at the Easter Vigil?

Then the catechumen would be baptized at the Vigil of Pentecost.

In what ways is the catechumenate experiential besides going to class?

First, the preferred way of dealing with the readings is experiential. The so-called "African method of Bible study" is especially popular. In this method, the text is read aloud (and listened to rather than followed). Then the participants say what struck them positively. This is discussed. Then the text is read again and the participants say what struck them negatively. This is discussed. Finally, there is a third reading (and the participants may follow the text as it is read) and exegetical comments are made. This method has been called "conversion therapy." Second, the catechumenate is experiential because it is connected with the public liturgy of the Church. On the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays in Lent the dismissal of the catechumens includes prayers of healing and exorcism asking God to give the catechumens strength to withstand evil and remain free from captivity to sin as they journey toward Baptism and first Communion. These rites are called the "scrutinies." In the ancient Church, the four Gospels and the texts of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer were also presented to the catechumens, and they would recite these texts on the following Sunday.

I could see a public catechizing during Lent in which enrollment takes place on the first Sunday, the Gospels presented on the second Sunday, the Ten Commandments on the third Sunday, the Creed and Lord's Prayer on the fourth, and the last three texts recited on the fifth Sunday. Note that many of us in older generations who were Lutheran confirmands had to go through a public examination before the congregation. So this would be nothing new. Third, the whole process leads to Baptism and Communion. This is the climax of the journey, but not the end of the journey. There still remains instruction in the meaning of the sacraments after they have been received. This instruction is called "mystagogical catechesis," or instruction in the mysteries. Mysterion is the

Greek word for the sacraments. In the ancient Church this was done during the so-called "week of white robes." The newly baptized attended daily services wearing their white baptismal robes and received instruction in the sacraments from the bishop or pastor.

Do you mean that there would be no teaching about the sacraments before the catechumens are baptized and communed for the first time?

Exactly. It's not that reference wouldn't be made to these sacraments at various points before they are received. But remember, we're talking about experiential learning. The idea is this: Experience the sacraments, then we'll talk about them. Note that we've had no compunction about doing this in the Baptism of infants. At some point we've got to discuss the significance of Baptism with those who were baptized as infants. Likewise, as children receive Holy Communion at earlier ages, there has to be discussion about the meanings of the Eucharist when they are older. In fact, baptized and communing Christians should constantly be reflecting on the meanings of these sacraments. Sermons (perhaps with opportunity for questioning the pastor) during the Easter season would provide an appropriate way for everyone to "return to the catechumenate," just as the rehearsal of the other texts in the Catechism during Lent would serve to return the whole congregation to the catechumenate. An annual catechizing of everyone during Lent and Easter would be one way to realize Luther's idea of a life-long catechumenate.

You have mentioned ancient practices several times. Is the catechumenate something that comes from the ancient Church?

Yes. The first evidence of a catechumenate comes from the early third century. The practice of the adult catechumenate lasted at least through the fifth century, after which the Baptism of infants became more common.

Why has the catechumenate been revived in the twentieth century?

Because the Church finds itself in a similar missionary situation as in the ancient Church. In parts of Asia and Africa, in Eastern Europe and in the countries of the former Soviet Union, there are masses of people coming to the Church for Baptism. Even in Western Europe and North and South America, there are more adult candidates for Baptism than the churches have had before (except for those churches that practice only so-called "believers' baptism"). These seekers have to be made into Christians in the face of surrounding cultures that are non-Christian, either because they are pagan, Muslim, post-Christian, or secular. Even in North American society we have to deal with state-sponsored, media-engendered secularism, blatant neo-paganism, and religious pluralism. Whatever it takes to make Christians out of pagans or secularists, the Church has to do on its own. Because the pressures of our surrounding society are so great, new Christians have to be formed in such a way that they will take seriously the costs of discipleship.

Who first proposed reviving this ancient form of "making Christians"?

In 1972, a few years after the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church developed its Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). The RCIA was originally designed with the missionary situation of the Church in the Third World in mind. But soon catechists and liturgists saw that it also applied to the new missionary situation of the Church in the First World. Since its implementation, the RCIA has radically changed the practice of Christian initiation in Roman Catholic parishes.

Is this a Roman Catholic rite that Lutherans are imitating?

Not exactly. The structure of the RCIA has been adapted from ancient Christian sources that belong to the heritage of all churches. Moreover, the modern liturgical movement, with its interest in "returning to the sources" as a resource for renewal, has made an impact in many churches. The Roman Catholic Church acted first because it was involved in reforming all of its rites after the Second Vatican Council. But the order for the "Enrollment of Candidates for Baptism" in Occasional Services (1982) noted that "the preparation for Baptism is marked by

three stages 1. Inquirers' class 2. Enrollment 3. Instruction A fourth period immediately follows the baptismal incorporation into the body of Christ (p. 15). Everything I've been talking about is outlined in the "Notes on the Service."

Are other churches using something like the RCIA?

The Department of Evangelism Ministries of the Episcopal Church has developed its own Initiation Rites of the Episcopal Church and a description of how to implement them called *The Catechumenal Process: Formation of Adults for Christian Life and Ministry* (1991). They have expanded the concept to include the simultaneous preparation of parents for the Baptism of their children and the celebration of the return of lapsed Christians with the reaffirmation of their baptismal covenant. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada has also developed a catechumenate in its *Living Witnesses: The Adult Catechumenate* series (1992). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has recently published Lutheran rites for the catechumenate with introduction and catechetical guide in its *Welcome to Christ* series (1997). Literature on the catechumenate, I might add, has become quite extensive.

Do you have any advice for congregations that are interested in implementing the catechumenate?

Yes. Don't treat it like one program among others. This is a front-and-center activity that requires the whole congregation's and the pastor's undivided attention. It cannot be consigned to one of the congregation's standing committees because it involves worship, education, evangelism, social ministry, fellowship, and possibly other committee functions as well. Perhaps there needs to be a special committee just for the catechumenate. In small congregations it might require all the energy and resources the congregation has in order to recruit catechumens, enroll them, shepherd them, teach them, engage them, initiate them, and incorporate them. While there's a format to follow, each congregation can put its own creative touches on the catechumenate. If this seems daunting, the congregation should remember that it has nothing more important to do than to "make Christians." So during Lent especially, maybe nothing else of a programmatic nature should take place in the parish other than worship and catechesis.

I have two more words of advice. First, don't begin a catechumenate until the pastor and lay leaders have become so familiar with the concept, process, practices and goal of the catechumenate that they know immediately what to do when confronted with a candidate for the catechumenate, and have the knowledge that enables them to be resourceful in tailoring the catechumenate to the congregation's abilities and needs. When we're confronted with people who want to come to Christ, we have to know what to do with them. There's too much at stake to risk uncertainty about our goals or slovenliness in our ritual practices.

Second, since we're dealing with the conversion experience of others, we had better be prepared to be affected by it ourselves. We're dealing with the work of the Spirit of God in the lives of other people. You can't get too close to God without being changed by the encounter.



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