

The Catechumenate

Forming the Body of Christ in the 21st Century

Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission

EDITOR'S NOTE

This booklet is designed to guide congregational leaders in the formation of new Christians, and in the continuing formation of others needing particular incorporation or re-integration into the church. For a catechumenal process to be effective, there must be congregational awareness of and commitment to that process. Careful catechesis will bear much fruit in the life of the whole body of the faithful.

This booklet is one in a series dealing with the work of the parishes of the Episcopal Church in the United States and the Anglican Church of Canada. It has been prepared by members of the Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission.

Text references are:

- BCP *The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church, 1979.*
- BAS *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada, 1985.*
- BOS *The Book of Occasional Services, 1994*
- OC *Occasional Celebrations of the Anglican Church of Canada.*

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THE CATECHUMENATE: FORMING THE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A. INTRODUCTION TO THE CATECHUMENATE

'Catechumenate' is the traditional name for the pastoral and liturgical ministry of formation with those who are entering the way of Christ through initiation into the Church. Those who are not yet baptized but are attached to the Church as hearers of the Word are called 'catechumens'.

'Catechumenal Process' is making disciples the way Jesus did: attracting followers, calling them into a special relationship, sharing with them his own mission and ministry, and leading them through his 'baptism' of death and resurrection – a kind of baptism by fire for them – into a new life with a new horizon.

A catechumenal approach is also appropriate in the ministry of formation with those already baptized who are joining the community of faith or returning to Christ after a time of separation from the Church, and in ministry to parents and sponsors bringing children to Baptism. Developing a catechumenal ministry in a congregation is a slow and incremental process of training a whole community to be intentional about making disciples.

The beginnings of the Catechumenate can be seen in the New Testament. Initially the good news of God's salvation of the world through Jesus Christ was simply announced, with the expectation that those who were prepared to hear would recognize the

implications and act on them. As soon as the audience for the Gospel expanded beyond the synagogue, however, it was no longer possible to take for granted that hearers would possess the basic foundations of the Gospel: acknowledgment of the one God, awareness of the relationship between faith and daily life, or the hope of salvation. And so *The Acts of the Apostles* portrays an evolving missionary strategy as the Gospel penetrated new cultures, and as public perceptions of the Christian movement changed.

This development continued as the Christian faith spread throughout the Roman Empire, until there were few adults seeking Baptism; and then the Catechumenate virtually disappeared. But wherever Christianity has encountered new cultures, the need to find ways to help converts undergo a transformation of lifestyle and outlook has been recognized. As North American Christians find themselves confronting a post-Christian culture, this need becomes more pressing. It is in this context that an ordered catechumenal ministry has begun to re-emerge within many Christian denominations, enabling the formation of new disciples who can embody a living faith.

1. METHOD: APPRENTICESHIP, RELATIONSHIP

The Catechumenate is something like an apprenticeship. Those who are interested in learning the way of Christ learn from others who are already on the way, developing the basic skills or habits of a Christian's life by practicing them. These basic habits include:

- ◆ the practice of personal prayer
- ◆ hearing and responding to scripture
- ◆ participating in worship
- ◆ sharing the burdens of those in need, resisting the evil structures of the world, and honoring the integrity of creation.

Learning the way of Christ may even be compared to the formation of a dancer or athlete – through a discipline that transforms body and mind, develops patterns of movement, and strengthens the entire person until a new loveliness and strength of form emerges. Apprentices learn in stages, developing these

patterns by degrees, and being entrusted with the responsibilities for which they are ready.

An even stronger analogy for the Catechumenate is the process of dating and marriage. Becoming a Christian has to do above all with relationship with Christ and with the Church. The stages of growth in relationship have to do with developing trust and assisting discernment, on the part of both the individual and the Christian community. Like a couple's relationship, growth in this faith relationship is recognized by the celebration of threshold moments along the way. A couple celebrates 'engagement' to acknowledge that one particular question about their relationship has been answered, and to commit themselves to the new agenda that flows from this decision; so the Church will want to celebrate thresholds with a person who is exploring the possibility of life in Christ. It will celebrate the measure of trust that has been built, and anticipate the new dimensions of the developing relationship. In this way, the entire community of faith is enabled to be a part of the emerging relationship.

The purpose of catechumenal ministry is to enable new Christians to become joyful inheritors of the Church's tradition and responsible, competent participants in the Church's liturgy and mission. So, for example, the methodology for reflection on scripture typically emphasizes not so much the acquisition of a correct understanding of the text but the development of confidence in formulating one's own response to the text in dialogue with other hearers and students of the word. Reflection on the experience of participating in the liturgy emphasizes the cultivation of an imagination alive to symbols, rather than foreclosing on imagination by reciting pat answers. The voice of tradition and scholarship is important; but it cannot take the place of the person's own response. Likewise, the opportunity both to engage in acts of witness, justice, and service, and to reflect on those experiences with others, is part of the process of cultivating responsible membership in Christ.

The other important aspect of this apprenticeship method is the role of the mentor or sponsor. It is here that the relationship of trust and mutuality can be most directly cultivated. The sponsor is a companion on the way, whose own experience can encourage the newcomer to make the connections between scripture and tradition on the one hand and life experience on the other.

2. CONVERSION AND 'THE WAY'

A catechumenal approach to formation in Christ integrates the knowledge of God's revelation, the experience of God's love and forgiveness, and the framing of a way of life that appropriates God's salvation. This is a life-long process, even though it often has climactic moments along the way. Thus conversion to the way of Christ is a work in progress; and Christians are appropriately called the 'people of the way'. A Church that can effectively support and guide new Christians on the way will be a Church whose members live with an acute sense of that work in progress in themselves.

The annual cycle of the Church Year, perpetually drawing living water from the well of the Paschal Mystery through the celebration of Lent and Easter, provides the pathway for this ongoing conversion of life. Those who can best serve as sponsors are those vividly in touch with this dimension of the Church's life. At the same time, it is the catechumens who serve as the principal icons of this grace of transformation within the community of believers. The presence of catechumens in a congregation is not burden but gift.

3. THE IMPLIED NATURE OF EVANGELIZATION

Many of those who are hungry for knowledge of God must be helped to find a connection with the Gospel *before* they can participate fruitfully in the liturgy: a connection that takes them seriously, and enables them to trust the Church enough to give the Gospel a hearing. People who are thirsting for the water of life need something more than the opportunity to jump in at the deep end.

For this reason, it is unrealistic in today's culture to expect the Sunday liturgy to be the Church's only form of evangelical outreach. For one thing, it fails to provide the opportunity for attentive listening to inquirers; for another, it forgets that, however deeply inculturated our liturgy may be, there is still a huge gulf between secular culture and the Church's culture. The Lectionary, for example, presupposes a basic familiarity with the thread of the story, *and* an ability to hear scripture as relevant to our own story.

The symbolic action of the Eucharist presupposes an openness to metaphor that is uncommon among people who are unchurched.

Reaching out to people before we try to draw them in is a fundamental aspect of the vocation of Christian people: to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. It is this ministry of evangelizing – being witnesses to what we have seen and heard – that will provide the starting point for a truly catechumenal ministry in the decades ahead.

4. A DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

a. The Time of Inquiry: whenever it happens

This stage usually begins before anyone is aware of it, as such: seeking God may begin almost before people are conscious of a desire for God, as the Spirit awakens a yearning for meaning, purpose and direction in life, and as Christian people live out their calling to be witnesses to the love of God in Christ. Sometimes the initiative begins with the inquirer who seeks connection with a community of faith, or seeks answers from a Christian friend in a time of crisis or confusion. Sometimes parents are inquiring into faith out of the desire that their children may be brought into the church. Sometimes the initiative begins when an expression of compassion and outreach by members of the Church touches someone in need. In any case, the Church affirms the interest and the implicit faith of inquirers by drawing them into some cordial association, where they can ask their questions and begin to identify their real interest. There they can be helped to recognize the movements of the Spirit of God in their lives and the ministry to which the Spirit is calling them.

Seekers at this stage may benefit from 'inquirer classes', although the 'class' must attend first of all to the agenda of the inquirers, and not simply offer a prescribed package of information. Inquiry is properly a time for sharing stories, and identifying the nature of the inquirer's spiritual interest. It is normally during this period that one or more sponsors are selected, affirming the inquirer's quest, providing a personal connection to the Church,

and offering a model of honest and open dialogue with the Gospel. Sponsors and catechists together attempt to discern and demonstrate whatever 'good news' there is in the Gospel for each particular person.

When an inquirer acknowledges a desire to learn the way of faith, and is prepared to associate with the community of faith as a hearer of the word of God, the Church will ask the inquirer to come and be welcomed into the community as a catechumen. This welcome may take place at any Sunday liturgy; it will include an opportunity for the inquirer to say what it is he or she is seeking, and an outline of the simple covenant of participation that constitutes a catechumen's new way of life. The new catechumen is prayed for, signed with the cross, and invited to come and share with all God's people in hearing God's word. Commonly, a Bible is presented, following the liturgy of the word; and from then on, a catechumen is counted a member of the community.

b. The Time of Catechumenate: as long as is needed

After the formal welcome, the catechumen regularly attends the Liturgy of the Word, (what the ancient Church called the 'mass of the catechumens'); the catechumen also participate in an additional regular gathering to reflect on the scriptures read and preached, and to explore the tradition of the Church. This is a time for setting both scripture and experience in the context of the story of salvation. It is a time for learning the many meanings of prayer and cultivating a practice of prayer. It is a time to undertake some particular commitment to service or witness, and to learn what it means to respond to Christ encountered in people of the world who are poor. The agenda has now changed to focus upon the life of faith, the way of obedience to Christ.

This period does not need to be linked with any particular season of the Church's life. Not until a catechumen is ready to consider Baptism does the Church's time-frame begin to shape the process. Until then, the Christian community accompanies the catechumen on a journey of discernment, learning to depend upon the Spirit for conversion of heart and life. It takes time and practice to learn to place the experiences of one's life within the context of

the biblical story, to be comfortable with a life of regular prayer, and to be at home in liturgical worship. Church members need to learn patience in allowing the Gospel to change an inquirer's perspective on work, relationships, and the use of time, talents, and treasure.

In this process, the experience of the sponsors and catechists is critically important. As they share their own stories, including their problems and doubts, catechumens discover how Christian discipleship flourishes not *in spite of* such problems and doubts, but *in and through* them. The experience and insight of the catechumens themselves is also critically important. Their questions are often fresh and insightful: they challenge customary ways of thinking in the Church. Their growing confidence in formulating their own convictions must be gently nurtured through encouragement and respectful dialogue.

One form of this ministry of formation is a small group gathering immediately after the liturgy of the word: catechumens (and sometimes sponsors) and a catechist may be dismissed to another place for reflection, discussion, and prayer, with catechists and sponsors receiving Communion at another time. This withdrawal (useful in some cases but not appropriate in all) recognizes that catechumens are already members of the community of faith but not yet integrated into the full sacramental identity of the Church. Such dismissal is not ostracism but an invitation to further reflection on the word proclaimed in a separate forum.

Other forms of this formational ministry may employ existing small groups within the congregation, seasonal learning events, or groups formed specifically for this purpose.

The ritual dimension of this period includes prayer for the catechumens: invoking the Spirit to illumine and inspire, liberate and sustain them on their way. It is fitting for catechists to offer such prayer as an act of blessing over the catechumens either in the separate gathering for catechumens or as they are dismissed from the liturgy of the word. Other ritual moments might include a ceremonial gift of the Baptismal Creed, (given immediately before Baptism in the early Church, but very appropriate during this

period), symbolizing the key role of our core story in interpreting the faith; and a ceremonial gift of the Lord's Prayer, symbolizing the way the Spirit of Jesus reshapes the prayer of our hearts¹.

At some point in this journey of discernment, catechumens (or families and sponsors of children coming to baptism) must be guided to explore the covenant of baptism as the sign of God's saving work in the world and the call to a sacramental life². Once it is clear to both the catechumen and to the sponsors and catechists that the catechumen is ready to accept the baptismal calling, the rite of Enrollment for Baptism can be celebrated.

Enrollment is traditionally celebrated in the liturgy on the first Sunday of Lent. Once the decision concerning Baptism has been made, a catechumen's journey merges into the seasons of the Church's life. If Baptism is to be celebrated at the Great Vigil of Easter, then the whole time from the beginning of Lent to the end of the Paschal Season becomes the Church's celebration of the initiation of new members into the household of faith. Thus the timing of Baptism depends upon the time of the Church, and the timing of Enrollment depends upon the time of Baptism. The churches' liturgical books suggest other occasions when Baptism may be celebrated for pastoral reasons, but all agree that the Great Vigil, which brings to a climax the entire movement of the Christian year, is the premier occasion for the celebration of Baptism.

Enrollment is the opportunity for the catechumen to declare publicly a desire for Baptism; it is also the opportunity for the sponsors to declare publicly their conviction that the catechumen is ready to be baptized. And it is the time for the Church to affirm this calling, and promise its prayer and support through the time of preparation. It is at this moment that the names of the new candidates may be 'enrolled' – i.e., publicly entered in a book (perhaps the Baptismal Register, whose entries can be completed after the Baptism itself).

c. The Time of Candidacy: Lent

After enrollment, candidates are prayed for by name at every Sunday liturgy until the day of their Baptism. They continue the pattern established during the Catechumenate: sharing in the liturgy of the word, and in the small group reflection and prayer, and practicing some particular ministry.

But the special character of this stage, often referred to as a time of 'enlightenment and purification', is its anticipation of the baptized life: candidates are helped to identify those things which would hinder it, and seek God's empowering to overcome them. Beginning from the scripture readings of the Lenten Sundays, especially the three great texts from the Fourth Gospel³, candidates are guided in discovering, through reflection, sharing and prayer, how their own lives are mirrored in these great images of Jesus' encounter with the power of evil. In this way they learn what to hope for in the gift of Baptism, and what to pray for as the Church prays for their deliverance from alienation, darkness, and death.

On the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent (when the three great gospel readings are heard) candidates are called, just before the Prayers of the People, to stand before the assembly. They are prayed for in words that invoke the power of God in Christ, as displayed in the Gospel reading. Traditionally referred to as an act of exorcism, this is a prayer for liberation from all that defaces the image of God in them, all that hinders them from following the way of Christ. This is a vital part of the process of healing the wounds of alienation from God and from others.

Candidates are also invited to share in the Lenten disciplines undertaken by the Church. Indeed, it must be remembered that the call to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on the word of God is made in order that, by so doing, the baptized

¹ Lent continues to be the setting for these ceremonial gifts of Creed and Lord's Prayer in some of the contemporary rites of the Catechumenate as well.

² For Anglicans, this vocation is symbolized by the 'Baptismal Covenant', comprised of the *creed* which tells the story of salvation, and the *promises* which articulate our participation in that salvation.

³ John 4: 5 - 42; John 9: 1 - 41; and John 11: 1 - 45. It is customary to use the Year A lections in Lent, or at least the Year A gospel lections, whenever there are candidates for Baptism at Easter, regardless of the cycle of readings being used the rest of the year.

may join with candidates and support them in their final preparation for Baptism. Thus it is helpful to provide times of retreat for candidates in which other members of the Church can share. This may include a quiet day for candidates and sponsors on the eve of Holy Week, or on Holy Saturday while they await the beginning of the Great Vigil.

By the time candidates have completed this preparation, they will come to the moment of their Baptism yearning to receive the gift of grace poured out for them. They will know what they must renounce to follow Christ. They will hear their own prayer echoed in the Prayers for the Candidates. They will rejoice in the Thanksgiving over the Water. They will claim the Church's faith as their own and its promise as their hope, eager to share in it as covenant partners. They will plunge beneath the waters in hope of being raised to share Christ's glory. They will be richly anointed to share in the royal priesthood of Christ. They will come at last to the banquet, ready to participate in the mystery of Christ's body, of which they are now members.

d. The Time of Mystagogy: Easter

The weeks following Baptism are the time for new Christians to wake up to the realization of where they are and what they have gotten into, a time to savor it to the full and readjust their outlook on everything else because of the new existence that they have. The most obvious analogy to this period is the honeymoon. The pattern of gatherings may continue as before, yet everything has changed. Now they not only share in the sacrament of Christ's body: they are sacramental people.

In the gatherings during this period, new Christians need to recall and reflect on the experience of initiation in a process traditionally known as 'mystagogy'. This means revisiting the whole sequence of symbolic moments, and developing from the experience of them a sacramental vision, a sense of the essential 'mystery' of life in Christ. Building on this emerging awareness, catechists will introduce the traditional sacramental understanding of the Church, and guide the new Christians into a deeper awareness of their own sacramental vocation, helping them name what they have experienced.

The Sunday lectionary for the Easter season brings together texts addressed particularly to the recently baptized. Sermons in Eastertide can be a major component of mystagogical formation, not only for new Christians, but as a reinforcement of the sacramental vocation of all the baptized to be the Body of Christ in the world.

This is the time for catechists and sponsors to guide new Christians into the larger fellowship of the Church: life in the congregation, the diocese or synod, the national church, the global Communion, and the ecumenical fellowship of Christ. Integration into the life and mission of the Church requires that new Christians come to experience their belonging beyond the bounds of the intimate catechumenal group. Although they must not be misled into thinking that their vocation is primarily to serve the church, there will be groups in the Church within which their experience of the mission of Christ in the world can be expanded and enriched.

B. THE CATECHUMENAL PROCESS FOR THE BAPTIZED

1. FOR THOSE RETURNING TO CHURCH AFTER A LAPSE IN DISCIPLESHIP, AND FOR THOSE TRANSFERRING FROM ANOTHER CONGREGATION

It is clear that becoming a member of the body of Christ entails at least three dimensions of initiation: *incorporation* into a new society, *conversion* of life (turning to the way of Christ), and *healing* of the wounds of sin. Catechumenal process serves all of these dimensions; so whenever baptized people are in further need of incorporation, conversion, or spiritual healing, some form of catechumenal process may be helpful. In the ancient Church, for example, there was an 'order of penitents' that paralleled the 'order of catechumens' for the restoration of those who had fallen into grievous sin.

Today, *incorporation* is an issue for those joining the congregation, whether from another Christian tradition, or another community in the same tradition, or for those returning to church after long absence. *Conversion* is an issue in a special way for those who have experienced a spiritual awakening, or for those whose faith has been shaken through some significant crisis or life transition. *Healing* is an acute issue for those who return to the Church after having abandoned, neglected, or betrayed God's covenant with them in Baptism, whether by their own choice or through alienation by the Church. In all these situations, the role of mentors from within the community of faith is vital. If the person's original sponsors for baptism have been uninvolved or are not available to assist in the renewal of faith, it will be helpful to provide new mentors to serve as spiritual companions for the individual re-entering the church.

However, catechumenal process must be carefully adapted whenever it is used with baptized persons, for only one or two of these three dimensions may be appropriate. First of all, Baptism itself is not repeated, simply reaffirmed. In baptism, we are sealed as Christ's own forever. Baptism in water in the name of the Trinity in any Christian denomination constitutes full and valid baptism

that should not be duplicated and cannot be annulled. For the same reason, no baptized person should be called a 'catechumen'.

For these reasons, there is a parallel series of rites for preparation of already-baptized persons who desire to reaffirm their Baptism after a lapse in discipleship. This preparation is linked with the Christian calendar in a very different way than is the Catechumenate. After an initial rite of Welcome, and a period of relearning the Christian way and re-examining the covenant of their Baptism, these people are called to the life of conversion within the liturgy on Ash Wednesday. They enter a time of self-examination in light of the Lenten Gospels, share with all the faithful the Lenten disciplines, and are formally reconciled and reintegrated with the Church within the liturgy on Maundy Thursday. Thus they are able to join with all the faithful in celebrating the Lord's Passover in the Great Vigil of Easter.

Those entering a local church by transfer from active membership in another Christian congregation may need a flexible process of formation that supports and enables their incorporation into the new community. Their need is not for a process that focuses on healing or conversion, but rather upon joining the new congregation. Their incorporation might begin with a rite of Welcome on a Sunday morning, followed by involvement in a small group in which Scripture and Christian life and faith can be shared, and the traditions and understanding in the new church can be articulated. These new members may wish to celebrate their incorporation through the reaffirmation of their Baptism, at one of the feasts of the Church Year when the congregation customarily reaffirms its covenant of baptism.

2. FOR THOSE BRINGING CHILDREN FOR BAPTISM

The Baptism of children is appropriate when those responsible for their lives (their parents or guardians) can provide for them a Christian household, and can support and guide them in their life in the Church. If the parents or guardians are not themselves baptized, then it is their own relationship to Gospel and Church that must constitute the primary agenda. Children who are old

enough to answer for themselves in Baptism should be given the opportunity to move by stages toward an authentic participation in the covenant of Baptism and the communion of the church, with the help of a catechumenal process suited to their age and readiness. But no matter what the age, a child's freedom and responsibility in this movement are always limited by the authority of the parents or guardians; whether the child can answer in Baptism or not, the parents or guardians, along with the sponsors (sometimes called Godparents), must answer *for* the child.

For this reason, the catechumenal process must serve the parents or guardians and the sponsors first of all. Because they are baptized, they cannot become catechumens themselves; yet, just as they will speak for the child in the Baptism, they can speak for the child in accepting the Church's welcome, and in enrolling the child as a baptismal candidate.

The process may begin as soon as a couple announces a pregnancy; more commonly, however, the process begins with their inquiry about Baptism. Clergy and catechists will need to exercise great care in discerning a family's maturity in Christian faith and life, and in their readiness to nurture the spiritual life of their child. Parents or guardians actively involved in the church who have already participated in thorough Christian formation for themselves, or at the baptism of another child, may need little formal preparation beyond the selection of sponsors for the child and the ongoing prayers of the congregation. The *sponsors*, however, may need preparation, including guidance in the spiritual nurture of children. A non-church-attending family who approach the clergy to 'have the baby done' as a matter of custom, need firm and gentle instruction about the significance of baptism and of the importance of religious formation of their children and themselves. Those who were taught to think of Baptism as a time-critical, emergency operation to save a child's soul from damnation in the event of death, will need help to understand that God's mercy and love extends to children before, as well as after, baptism.

Great sensitivity is called for if patterns of formation are to accommodate the complexities of life of young families, particularly those who may be struggling with the demands of work, care of

parents, and care of several small children. A one-on-one ministry may be possible, for example, if a community can cultivate 'catechist-sponsors' to guide parents or guardians through the process of formation.

There are two basic goals for the formational process for parents or guardians and sponsors:

- ◆ to prepare them to reaffirm the covenant of their own Baptism (even as they enter it on behalf of the child); and
- ◆ to guide them in shaping a Christian household in which the spiritual nurture of their children is intentional and effective.

Parents or guardians participate in the rite of Welcome and the rite of Enrollment on behalf of the *child*; but they participate in the process of formation for *themselves*. The concern for the *child's* incorporation, conversion, and healing will come to the fore during the time of formation that follows Baptism, as parents and sponsors consider how the child will be enabled to grow into the awareness and experience of the baptismal vocation, and learn to pray, to serve others, to share in worship, and to live within the story of salvation. It is the work of the whole congregation to help form children as Christian disciples, and to provide help and resources for parents and sponsors in caring for their children at every age.

rites and resources

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