

“Liturgy, Catechesis and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults”

by Linda Gaupin

Sunday after Sunday I listen to the presiding celebrant call the catechumens forward to dismiss them to reflect more deeply on the word of God. Most of them are children of catechetical age. Black faces, brown faces, white faces march boldly down aisles to the front of the altar, each clutching a Bible. I sit in the same location every week because a group of senior citizen friends faithfully save my seat for me. Last week, Ann, who is in her nineties, leaned over and said, “This is one of my favorite parts of the Mass.”

This simple ritual of dismissal, which touches Ann so deeply, reveals only one small dimension of the formative power of the catechumenate. One of the most important contributions of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)* is the restoration of the intimate relationship between catechesis and liturgy. Aware of the power of the catechumenate to both form and transform the people of God, the *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)* makes the catechumenate the model for all catechesis in the church: The model for all catechesis is the baptismal catechumenate when, by specific formation, an adult converted to belief is brought to explicit profession of baptismal faith during the Paschal Vigil. This catechumenal formation should inspire other forms of catechesis in both their objectives and in their dynamism” (59). The directive is clear. We have been given a whole new model for catechesis in the church. It is a model that realizes the RCIA is more than a program or a contemporary design for baptizing people after the Second Vatican Council. Rather, the catechumenate reveals that the objectives and dynamics of making Catholic Christians is at the core of who we are as church. These same objectives and dynamics must permeate all our catechetical programs. They are to be at the heart of all post-baptismal formation in the church.

Too often our ongoing formation for those already baptized is directly opposite the formation of those seeking initiation into the church. I have often heard people say they envy those initiated through the catechumenate. It is more meaningful to them; it enlivens faith; it touches the human heart; it truly converts. Our ongoing formation should be doing these things continuously for us as well.

The catechumenate as a model for all catechesis does not mean that we slavishly impose the structural elements of inquiry, catechumenate proper, etc., into our catechetical programs. Rather, it means the core dynamics and objectives present in the catechumenate should permeate all of our post-baptismal catechetical endeavors.

The first of these endeavors is conversion. The catechumenate is about enabling those who have heard the mystery of Christ proclaimed to “consciously and freely seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts” (*RCIA* 1). It is a spiritual journey that does not end with full initiation. It is not simply a religious education program for the non-baptized.

As a model for all catechesis, the catechumenate challenges the quality and direction of all catechetical programs in the parish. As the *GDC* states, catechesis “comprises but surpasses mere instruction” (68). Post-baptismal catechesis for children, youth and adults is not just about instruction. A major component of all parish catechetical programs is to enable people to continue to seek the living God in their lives and to deepen their way of faith. It requires catechists who are able to incarnate the Gospel in the concrete lives of those with whom they minister (*GDC* 230). As a source of inspiration for all post-baptismal catechesis, the

catechumenate reminds us of the fundamental importance of our initiatory identity as basis for all catechesis. It reminds us of the paschal nature of all catechesis and that catechesis, by its very nature, is life long.

The catechumenate is a faith journey that takes place within the Christian community. The *RCIA* states: “The initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful”(4). As an inspiration for all catechesis, the catechumenate calls us to reexamine our catechetical structures. The *GDC* emphasizes the ecclesial nature of all catechesis and teaches that it is “not an action which can be realized in the community on a private basis or by purely personal initiative” (219.b).

Catechesis is the Responsibility of the Entire Christian Community

The communal context for catechesis often disappears in our post-baptismal programs. Catechetical programs are frequently designed according to age groups. They are often led by individuals with infrequent dialogue. The *GDC* addresses the situation directly by pointing out that, “It is important that the catechesis of children and young people, permanent catechesis and the catechesis of adults should not be separate watertight compartments” (72).

Our parish catechetical programs often excel in being separate, watertight compartments. In my diocese, we use the fictional parish of St. Separatus in the city of Grand Divide, USA, to illustrate how this is manifested in our sacramental programs. In St. Separatus parish has the following parish ministers: the youth minister, the DRE, the adult education leader, the adult catechumenate director and the children’s catechumenate director. There is also the Catholic school principal, the pastoral associate, the liturgy director and the person in charge of sacramental preparation in Spanish. All are involved in some way with the preparation for confirmation or the topic of the Holy Spirit, yet all meet with only his or her own constituents usually on a different night, and/or a different month. There are nine different theologies of confirmation circulating around the parish, depending on the people in charge and/or his or her theological background.

Recent movements toward intergenerational catechesis and other similar programs are attempts in the right direction. It is important to remember this is not about buying programs; it is about the way we live as church. The catechumenate reminds us that the process of becoming Christian takes place within the community of the faithful, and this community is the primary context for our continued faith formation.

Another major dynamic of the catechumenate is the integral role liturgical prayer plays in formation of the faith. The entire catechumenal journey is marked by three major, intense moments of initiation: the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens, the rite of election or enrollment of names and the celebration of the sacraments of Christian initiation. Catechesis throughout the year is solidly supported by celebrations of the word. A variety of rituals are celebrated during the catechumenate proper and the season of Lent.

In the *RCIA*, catechesis and liturgy are wed. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that liturgy “is therefore the privileged place for catechizing the people of God”(1074). This relationship is not often appreciated in catechetical programs. When reflecting back over the past several decades of catechetical ministry, the *GDC* laments the fragmentary link between catechesis and liturgy.

Catechesis is intrinsically bound to every liturgical and sacramental action. Frequently however, the practice of catechetics testifies to a weak and fragmentary link with the liturgy: limited attention to liturgical symbols and rites, scant use of the liturgical fonts, catechetical

courses with little or no connection with the liturgical year; the marginalization of liturgical celebrations in catechetical programs (30).

The catechumenate is proof of liturgical prayer's power to form faith even more powerfully than words of instruction. Just ask those who have made the journey or those in the assembly who are moved, like Ann, when they witness moments of profound ritual significance.

The *GDC* is correct. We have marginalized liturgical celebrations in our catechetical programs. These important events need to be restored. Celebrations of the word, morning or evening prayer, and blessings serve to begin our catechesis. These are not seen merely as opening prayer but, rather, as the first formation for catechesis. By means of this, we allow the ritual, symbols, gestures and living word of God to form us first.

Catechumenal formation should inspire other forms of catechesis and not vice versa. As a model for all catechesis in the church, it is important that those in charge of the RCIA in the parish respect its inherent dynamic principles and objectives. We need to make sure the catechesis not only instructs but “also enlightens faith, directs the heart toward God, fosters participation in the liturgy, inspires apostolic activity, and nurtures a life completely in accord with the spirit of Christ” (78). We must foster the active participation of the community in all aspects of formation—liturgical, catechetical, and apostolic—so that catechumens are ultimately led to be active members of the spirit filled eucharistic community, the body of Christ. We need to give careful attention to the preparation and celebration of all the ritual celebrations so they truly form and transform catechumens and the faithful.

The *GDC* refers to the baptismal catechumenate as the “preparatory school” for Christian life. Our post-baptismal catechesis should allow itself to be “enriched by those principal elements which characterize the catechumenate” (91). When our lifelong post-baptismal catechesis, is linked with that of the baptismal catechumenate, the harmonious growth of the church is fostered and the Christian community is nourished.

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