

# **What Is the Adult Catechumenate?**

**by Rev. Dennis Brushkofsky**

The adult catechumenate is a response to mission needs and the reality of our world today. Even so-called “Christian” societies are less influenced by the church than they once were. This is particularly true in North America where we have recognized in recent years that the mission field is right outside our doors. We may still send missionaries overseas, but all Christians have the opportunity and the duty to be missionaries right in their own communities. Many people have never really heard the good news of Jesus Christ. They need people of faith to introduce them to it.

The process of the adult catechumenate is quite simply that of leading an unbaptized adult to faith and to the waters of baptism. While an infant child must be brought up in the faith following baptism, in the case of an adult the church has the opportunity (and indeed the duty) to explore many aspects of the faith before baptism. A process for bringing adults to baptism builds on a tradition which dates nearly to the New Testament itself.

When a person has somehow heard about God or the church and begins asking questions related to the faith we call this person an inquirer. We need to be able to respond to persons’ questions as authentically and directly as we can. We cannot presume to know an inquirer’s questions before they start asking them (our idea of their questions may not in fact be their questions). We must relate specifically to each inquirer in a personal way. A program or set curriculum is not really what is needed here. The inquirer needs primarily to build a relationship with people of faith.

After a person has been asking basic faith questions and has received a few responses from someone representing the church, he or she may now be interested to begin discovering the Bible and Christian teachings in a somewhat structured or intentional way. If this is the case, then we welcome the inquirer into the fellowship of the church in some visible way. We give the local congregation the opportunity to pray for and be introduced to this person who has now become more than just an inquirer. She or he is now typically called a catechumen.

In a way the relationship between the catechumen and the church is like a couple who is “seeing one another” regularly (years ago we might have said “going steady”). The commitment toward one another is building, but it’s only at an exploratory level. The

catechumen may still not be sure that coming to baptism is what he or she wants to do. It may take some time listening to stories from the Bible and hearing the faith interpreted to her before the catechumen will be able to make a serious adult commitment to the church. It will also take pastors, catechists, and sponsors a while to determine whether the catechumen is ready to enter more fully into the church. After having spent several weeks, months, or even more than a year attending worship, becoming immersed more and more in the scriptures, learning about the faith and tradition of the church, learning to pray, and taking on some ministry of social justice, it will become apparent to the catechumen and to others in the church whether or not he is able to live as a Christian.

When the catechumen is ready to receive the sacrament of baptism, a brief period of formation specifically geared toward baptismal preparation may begin. (Using our analogy of dating, we might think of this period as the engagement.) Typically the congregation will become aware that the catechumen is preparing for baptism so that the people may pray for what is about to take place. This is often a time of intense excitement for the catechumen as she approaches baptism. The Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer may be presented and learned now (if not learned before). When the time of preparation takes place during the season of Lent, many of the Sunday gospel readings seem particularly appropriate for use with people coming to faith.

Now the catechumen is conscious of being led to the font for baptism. Such a full process of incorporation into the body of Christ needs to be marked with the very best the church can do in its worship life. The ideal time for baptism is at the Easter Vigil, where nearly everything climaxes in God's gift of new life through the waters of baptism, though baptism may occur at other times as well.

But wait! It does not all stop there. Just as newlyweds need to be supported in their life together, the newly baptized person still needs to be supported in this relatively newfound faith. He will need assistance from the church in trying to live out his faith in his daily life. When the early weeks following baptism occur during the Easter season, there are a full seven weeks to celebrate the great joy of being raised to new life (what baptism is all about). The person who communed for the first time at his or her baptism will need to have some time to reflect on both of these sacramental gifts. A year or more of intentional support by sponsors and others in the congregation will be invaluable.

Once the newly baptized person has spent some time reflecting on her vocation, she can be charged with the rest of the congregation to go out into the world to give witness to the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. The catechumenate now ends where it all began: in mission to the world.