

The Catechumenate: Making God's Time Our Time

by Jim Schellman

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Talk One: The Period of Inquiry and the Period of the Catechumenate

General Assumptions About the Whole Catechumenal Process:

- The Catechumenate process means conforming to Christ. This is begun, not completed, in the waters of baptism.
- The temptation with the catechumenate is to domesticate it, to make it yet one more program instead of a way of being church that is prophetic, faithful, a people on the journey of faith with the Lord.
- The Catechumenate requires conversion to Christ by all of us, the whole church, and not just those inquiring or new to faith.
- Catechumenate is not something we do in addition to something else, an add-on program. It is immersed in and arises from the way the Christian community lives its life.
- The image or model for the Catechumenate is not a “pull-out” classroom setting, but an “immersion-in”, “companions on the journey” setting.
- The catechumenate is the time-tested means of our ancestors in faith for living in God's time, seeing with God's eyes, acting on God's behalf

(Christ's Body) for the in-breaking of the Kingdom. It is about "a hidden world emerging" among us in Christ.

Period of Inquiry/Evangelization

A time for eliciting and naming human hunger for God and giving it initial Gospel focus. This period is really about the community as well. While it may appear to be about those becoming Christian, it is about the entire baptized community.

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying and they remained with him that day (John 1:38-39)

Inquiry Elements (or Images, Tones, Realities)

- Primary Goal = not to discover the right answers, but to raise the right questions, thus Inquiry
- John 1:38-39
 - A question
 - Another question as answer
 - An answer that isn't an answer but invites. Jesus knew what they were asking.
- Hunger/Wonder: evangelization is invitation that arises from listening to the question that is so deep it has not been asked
- Hospitality, but of a different kind from our culture. We must move away from a ministry that sees ourselves as the "do-ers" and the others as "receivers," those who are lacking and await a "cure". Instead – RECEPTIVITY, awaiting the other in his or her full humanity.
- "What are you looking for/Where are you staying?" Acknowledging the hunger of the one who approaches but resisting temptation to give an answer whose question is not ripe. Response is another question and an invitation, "Come and see," to personal relationship, personal knowing of each other.
- Evangelization is not instruction, but about introduction, about meeting Jesus Christ – "Come and see." The meeting is appropriate to the people being met. It takes as long as it takes. The call is God's work. We only need to be available.

- “They remained with Him” – An invitation to relationship, to discovery of the mystery. Beyond “churchy” questions to Gospel questions. Some info on church necessary, but the church is merely the vehicle to the journey with Christ. Keep bringing the Gospel to the fore. What is the essential stuff? Who is the person of Christ who draws you? Who are you going to be when they come and accept the invitation? (Welcome and hospitality are not the same.)
- Inquiry leads to
 - First faith
 - Initial conversion/adhere to the Lord/growing and longing
 - Sense of repentance, prayer, church community

Reflection Question:

Recall an experience when you felt listened to, heard, respected. Savor it. Share with another person.

What we glean in such places and people may include

- we feel invited to share
- we feel received
- we feel affirmed by the quality of the listening
- we feel a commonality with another person, that we are not alone
- no temptation to fix or solve
- born out of pain and crisis. Since Christ is already there for them, we are ready to hear their crisis
- listen for the questions that have not been asked yet
- time is the primary sacrament we have to give one another

Period of the Catechumenate

A time for giving our human hunger and discontent Gospel form and focus.

When evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea: “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:35-41)

Catechumenate Elements (or Images, Tones, Realities)

- Catechumenate is about risky journey, conversion, and transformation. Yet Jesus is in the boat!
- It is not about imparting of information, though this is part of the Catechumenate. Rather, it is about living of a risky and dangerous kind – the only real living there is.
- The point is to book passage and go into the storm. It is less about arrival than the “going” itself and who we go with, Christ and one another.
- “Let us go across.” A mutual journey, not one in which we have already arrived and the catechumens have not. We must do it together and each time it is different, new, deeper, more life – changing.
- “Leave the crowd.” Not a feel good, pleasure cruise, but a coming away from the familiar in our culture, perceptions, etc. (Caution here not to resist the good aspects of our culture.)
- “A great storm.” All of us are in the storm, the passage together. Jesus awaits our realization of needing his help. Catechumens will experience the storm of change. We are not to save them from it (Messiah complex) but help row them through it. Jesus provides needed calming.
- “Don’t you care!” Jesus awaits us in the boat in the back! Conversion = stop bailing and acknowledge the Christ who saves!
- “Be Still.” Right out of Ps. 46. This act manifests the Christ of God., whom the elements obey. We must let God be God, ask for salvation.
- Catechumenate from within life of community

- Apprentice/Mentor
- The four essential ways we form each other in the Christian life:
 - Word
 - Worship
 - Life
 - Mission

These four are the community’s job description. These are the ways catechumens are formed in a Way of life. The RCIA says it this way: Catechumens are formed in a way of life, participate in the mystery of salvation, practice love of neighbour, and learn to work actively in service of the Kingdom.

The Church Year was created by our ancestors in faith out of the whole experience of developing the early catechumenal process. For this reason the Period of the Catechumenate alone should normally take one full year."

Reflection Question:

Recall a time when you felt really mentored by someone. Then share with a partner.

You may have experienced in this relationship some of the following:

- respect for yourself as a learner
- you were invited in equality to learn a skill or craft
- a lack of possessiveness
- companionship
- deep learning in this relational dynamic
- you were set on the way to learning
- validation/intimate knowledge of who I was that I did not recognize
- a form of real love . . . for without this, then it was not a real meeting

Questions for Small Group Discussion:

If the catechumenal process arises from the community's life, where is it already happening? Where does personal faith sharing and story telling happen? Where does it need to begin happening?

Also, where is the mentoring community already happening? How might we encourage more of such mentoring?

Talk Two: Period of Lent, Baptism, and the Period of Mystagogy

The Church has promised catechumens to walk with them in their faith journey. During this period they discern the time for baptism, and they solemnly promise to observe this period of Lent and baptismal preparation. Periods one and two are open-ended in time, but the final two periods are time-bound.

The Period of Lent (Purification and Enlightenment)

A time for becoming immersed in the interior/spiritual reality of God's reign.

This is not a time for catechesis or teaching, but it is a time for prayer, repentance, and reflection – just as it is for the entire community. It is a time to go deep into the liturgical

and prayer life and to be given resources to confront brokenness and sin. It is a time of discernment and prayer.

Jesus went out again beside the sea.... He saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples.... When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:13-17)

Lent Elements (or Images, Tones, Realities)

- Knowing the difference between sins and sinfulness. Thus, the story of the prodigal son! The younger son had many sins, but the older son was full of SIN.
- If sin is to live in division and alienation, then grace is to live in the gift of intimate union.
- Knowledge of Christ the Savior is radically different from ACKNOWLEDGING Christ as the Savior. And this means confronting our sinfulness
- Jesus saw Levi – who he was in truth and not simply what he did – not judgment by performance, but invitation to interior transformation and external change (from tax collection to apostle).
- Levi got up and followed Jesus. Blessings and other prayers over catechumens during Lent are not about breast-beating and fault-finding, but getting up, repositioning our relationship with the Lord and all that is our life.
- Enlightenment happens when we look at the Lord and not ourselves. Then we see our sin clearly, but in the light of grace! "Sin increased, but grace far surpassed it!" (Romans 5:20)
- The result is purification and enlightenment, the final preparation for baptism, the sacramental and public joining with Christ and Christ's mission in world.
- To know our separation from God is to join the true company of believers, to live in the truth of our alienation and the world's alienation from God's original plan.
- This is ANAMNESIS, that primordial REMEMBERING of the Garden, of joining our hope to God's gracious, powerful, redeeming TRANSFORMATION of all creation.

Baptism

Embracing God's grace, at the heart of the world's brokenness into death for resurrected life.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:3-11)

Baptism Elements (or Images, Tones, Realities)

- Baptism is first of all immersion into Christ's DEATH. This is Christ's entry into the very heart of the world's brokenness and self-destruction. Jesus became sin itself for our sakes.
- We are perhaps the most death-denying culture yet. This is to live with untruth and to rob people of the journey of exploring life's deepest meaning.
- As Paul says in Romans, this death in Christ is for the sake of resurrection. But because we deny or misunderstand death, we misunderstand resurrection. As Christians under the sway of our culture's weaknesses, we tend to see resurrection as RESUSCITATION, that is, something that occurs after our death. It is the old self brought back to life.
- But baptism is true insertion into and conformity with Jesus' death and resurrection NOW, immersion in Christ's self-surrender in each of those baptized and all who accompany them through the waters of death and rebirth.
- Resurrection is not a Christian fountain of youth, it is the radical sign of the in-breaking of God's saving will here and now – a new life begun and experienced, transforming the broken world that we know – the hidden and emerging world of God's reign.

- Incorporation into Christ is not haven from the storm, but insertion into the eye of the storm, the primordial battle God faithfully and patiently wages for the birthing of the NEW CREATION.
- Easter Vigil is cosmic in scope:
 - Word
 - Water
 - Fire
 - Oil
 - Human body
 - Break and wine
 - Corporate Body of Christ

Concerning the baptized who are affirming their baptism. They need a time of remembering of their baptisms, with perhaps a retelling by others in their families of the baptism, the gathering of memorabilia, etc. Such attention to baptismal memories will increase their appreciation for their baptisms.

Reflection Question:

Recall an experience when you were confronted with a fault or failure of your own making but in such a way that you came out renewed and hopeful. Again, share the story with another person.

You may have heard in these experiences of failure and forgiveness:

- genuine regret and sorrow
- the experience of acceptance and grace
- a lack of being judged
- knowing that your failure is not the same as who you are
- companionship in the experience
- ability to go deeper into the experience
- the experience of grace up front. This is what Lent is all about. Confidence in our ability to acknowledge our sinfulness.

Many of those coming through the catechumenal process (nearly 80% in the Roman Catholic experience) are already in some relationship to the Church; we are still dealing with people in the household of faith. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are in mission to change the world; otherwise we are domesticating the catechumenate. There are plenty of unbaptized people who are hungry. We must find ways that are true to ourselves to evangelize them.

The Period of Baptismal Living or Mystagogy

Developing a lifelong pattern of living into and out of Baptism.

Now on that same day two of [the disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them... (Luke 24:13-15)

Easter or Mystagogy Elements (or Images, Tones, Realities)

- Having our eyes opened to the deepest meanings of things, their sacramental nature as evidence of God's gracious acts in our lives and in the world
- Like the disciples on road to Emmaus, "mystagogy" opens up this sacramental experience and births mission, service, and joyful witness.
- At stake is the destiny of each of us and the world itself. To learn to lean into life sacramentally, into the heart of real, concrete things and experience, is to be an agent in the redemption by Christ of a world in great need.
- Redemption is carnate, happens here and now, just as resurrected living is here and now for the kingdom emerging in God's time.

Emmaus

- The two disciples were without hope, had turned their backs on Jerusalem
- "While talking and discussing." Mystagogical reflection needs time and space and companionship. It happens within community.
- Disciples named experiences and gaps in understanding before Lord, who walked with them and heard their story, helping them go deeper, to the real meaning (getting beyond always doing, instructing).
- Experience of worship and life is primary place of God's action. Reflection helps reveal what did not see at time.
- "What things." Jesus asked this in order to hear their experience and their understanding of it. He could have told them everything, but graciously let them go to the heart of their confusion, fear, hope and so be more ready for his gracious revelation.

- Mystagogy is a Christian life skill learned throughout the Catechumenate but especially in the light of Easter sacraments. All Christian living is into or out of Baptism.
- In this light the Easter Vigil is seen not as graduation, but as induction into a full role in Christ's mission. Our life becomes the full unfolding of what was achieved for us in Christ and begun in Baptism.

We recall Luther's expression for Baptism as "walking wet." During the period of Mystagogy we must trust the experience of the neophytes, that experience they have had in baptism where God is working. What was the experience like? Stay with the experience and do not wiggle out of it. Trust their stories, and avoid the temptation to jump immediately into "thinking." The sequence of the talk must be: What is the experience? And then, What do you think it meant? And then, So what? What is God asking of you this week?

Reflection:

Think of an experience where someone helped you reflect on a mutual event with the result that you saw more in the experience as a result. Share with another person.

You probably observed that:

- time and space were adequate to the process
- real listening to each other's experience
- mutual unpacking of the experience that was revelatory
- found yourself in another place after the interaction

Note these words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem in one his mystagogical sermons which emphasizes the importance of savoring the baptismal experience before analysis: "Since seeing is far more persuasive than hearing, I delayed until the present occasion, knowing that I would find you more open to the influence of my words out of your personal experience." (*Mystagogical Catechesis* I, i)

Question for Small Group Discussion:

Where is mystagogical reflection on worship and on life already happening? Where does it need to begin happening?