

North American Association for the Catechumenate
Workshop
August 2, 2011, 700 pm
Mercy Center, Burlingame
Gospel and Catechumenate: Journey the Four-fold Path”

Greetings

Intro: I am here to share a vision of the gospels and their purpose that, I believe, resonates beautifully with the processes and practices of the Catechumenate.

Indeed, Catechumenal process is one of the resonances: the emphasis is on faith formation, with an acknowledgement of the importance of experience in the framework of a community that welcomes, nurtures, and practices the faith. Quadratos, the name for the vision of the gospel I will set forward this evening, all places an emphasis faith formation and experience, shaped and formed by the living word which addresses us in a four-fold way. ,

Thus, the four-foldness is another resonance: Catechumenal work involves four stages, which though variously named, remarkably parallel the fourfold path of the one gospel.

And it is no accident that the church as recognized, if only here and there right now, that, in a changing world, when Christendom is gone, and the cultural encouragement and supports for the Christian faith are dying or gone, that the Catechumenate was rediscovered. In a similar way, I suggest, Quadratos surfaced from ancient history as a gift to our troubled times.

Finally, it needs to be said in this introductory way that both Quadratos and catechumenate see the goal of the four-foldness as a process of maturing faith. It is not expected that people entering the Catechumenate or those entering into the deepening work of Quadratos will stay the same throughout the whole experience. Quite the contrary, it is expected that change and deepening will occur.

Having said these things by way of introduction, I now present the outlines of the vision of Quadratos in the hope that some of you may find in this a helpful, even joyful affirmation of the gospels, the gospels not as mere history, or the biography of Jesus, but as inviting us into a four-fold way of faith formation that may, it is hoped, lead to a fullness of understanding of the realities of life, and a growing maturity of faith.

I. Overview

In his book, *The Hidden Power of the Gospels*, Dr Shaia proposes a transformative and transforming appreciation of the four gospels.

The gospels arose in a period of great change—with the accompanying turmoil and suffering, a time not dissimilar to ours. In such a setting the original purpose of the gospels, we could suppose, was spiritual direction for and spiritual formation of, the early Christian communities.

Keep in mind that those communities predated what later became Christendom. There were no existing governmental or social structures that directly supported the fledgling faith. In fact, government and social structures were hostile toward the new faith, until the era of Constantine. Not only that, there were many competing religions. It was not as though all that existed was the Jewish religion and Christianity as a new sect within it, although the pain of the eventual split continues even to today. A huge variety of dynamic and attractive religions were present and competing for the allegiance of people. Among them were various expressions of Gnosticism, a movement that tended to discount the material world, and within it, our flesh and blood existent in order to seek the knowledge (the gnosis) that would free the divine spark within.

Now we are living in another time of great change. And the Christendom that once supported and legitimated Christianity is gone. And again, Christian faith faces competition from other religions, and in the various New Age expressions, one can once again find Gnosticism, for many a comforting and alluring answer to the yearning of the human heart for escape from the flesh and blood, conflicted and confused existence we experience and endure in these times.

In just such a setting, Dr Shaia's discovery of what was likely the original purpose of the gospels seems to me to be a gift of the Spirit. Quadratos does not propose to abandon any one's tradition, but neither does it affirm any one's tradition as absolute. What Quadratos does do, like Luther, for example, did with Law and Gospel, is to ask us to use its fourfold understanding of the gospels as a prime interpretative framework, for the good of the church—and the world. And again, it does not provide iron clad answers for every situation, but asks us to creatively and honestly assess our situations as congregations or as citizens of the nation. It asks also that we see that call of the Spirit as one of ongoing, ever transformational spiritual direction and formation.

So let us now confront an almost child-like, seemingly innocent question: Why do we have four gospels? Why not just one--if biography/history is what we're looking for, wouldn't the church in its fresh wisdom have selected just one? Why four, when there were many other choices possible early on?

There was certainly fierce argument in the early church over the formation of the canon. From the modern scholarly perspective, it is possible to claim that any number of influences and agendas came to bear on the selection of the canon, and indeed some scholars have built quite a following suggesting nefarious plots and political moves on the part of early leaders in the formation of the canon—and some of that stuff may actually be true.

Nevertheless, what we have are four gospels. And considerable scholarly time has been given over to dealing this unarguable fact: there are a number of points where the gospels differ from one another, and sometimes in significant stories, details and time lines. This discomfort has caused the church to attempt gospel harmonization, to put together a "biography" of Jesus. This is a particularly serious matter for those for whom literalism is an important concept, and who believe that the gospel's chief purpose is the historically verifiable biography of Jesus the Christ.

Yet what did the early church give us? Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, four different portraits or tellings of events surrounding Jesus.

Now we are back to the original question: Why those particular four gospels? I think it is fair to say there must have been something about the four canonical gospels that was recognizably important to the early church. The gospels somehow spoke to the people, were found to nourish, sustain, guide, and encourage the early Christian movement in a diversity of settings, and did so over time.

Irenaeus, a much maligned church fathers in recent times, because of what is viewed as his unfair and misleading critique of Gnosticism, was a strong advocate for the four gospels we now have: Before Irenaeus, Christians differed as to which gospel they preferred. Irenaeus however, stated that there must be four gospels: (Book Three, Chapter 11.8).

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the pillar and ground of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. For the living creatures are quadriform, and the Gospel is quadriform, **as is also the course followed by the Lord.**

Alexander Shaia's Quadratos can be seen as a rediscovery of what Irenaeus was getting at in his insistence on the four gospels we have, and perhaps what many in the early Church knew, albeit perhaps unconsciously, and experienced in its life together in regard to the reading and repeated hearing of the particular gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. His rediscovery is, perhaps, something like Luther's rediscovery of the gospel. It is not as though what he finds is something new, or invented, but is a deep noticing of something the church has been missing for many centuries. Hence, it would be so much better if his book had been title, *The Rediscovered Power of the Gospels*, or perhaps, *The Unrecognized Power of the Gospels*.

The Quadratos vision, in a nutshell, is this: Each of the four gospels brings a sensibility important to the church in its actual life in the world. Each gospel has its own voice. Each gospel brings a particular direction for the formation of Christians and their communities: Four early communities wrestled with four distinct sets of challenges when faced with four distinct sets of historical circumstances that prompted four deep questions requiring answers.

In developing his Quadratos insight, Alexander Shaia builds on the solid work of Biblical scholarship; in particular he gives credit to Robin Griffith Jones, whose work on the four gospels called, *The Four Witnesses*, encourages us to take seriously the actual texts before us; that is, each gospel as offering its particular portrait of Jesus and his meaning for Christian communities. To say it again, Shaia asks that we do not read any one gospel in a way that attempts to harmonize it with the other three, and do not, above all, focus on the biography of Jesus, as though simply getting clear on his place in ancient history solves any real problem facing us as we follow Christ in lives of faithfulness now.

What has often been neglected is the importance of taking seriously the context into which the gospels were written. Of course much good scholarly work has been done on background and setting of the gospel communities. The work is important. But if step one is gaining knowledge of the possible situation of Jesus' day and in the early era of the church when the gospels were

written, step two is to see that the shape, tone, style and purpose of each gospel may be a result of the needs of the communities to which it was addressed. Thirdly, crucial to Quadratos is the proposal that each of the four gospels addresses one path in the one great journey that that gospel is. The four-fold way is therefore a matter of spiritual formation in the life of the Resurrected Christ.

Step four (of course there would be four!) is his insight that the four paths are in fact universal paths, experiences and circumstances of human beings, both individually and communally, present in all religions, cultures, and communities. There is much more scholarly exploration to be done in regard to that hypothesis.

Shaia sets out the heart of Quadratos this way "...the core premise—that the four gospels were selected *together* to be used as a process for inner transformation. This is quite different from Christianity's prevailing view. Quadratos makes the assumption that the four gospels were initially selected because they held a pattern incorporating wisdom already known to be powerful—and therefore certain to move a great and glorious new faith forward. The more common view—that the gospels were four separate stories of Jesus' life and teachings—seems unlikely to accomplish this purpose as successfully. Since there were dozens of gospels available to pick from, the "separate stories" view deems a matter as important as the choosing of the gospels to be less like making a serious plan and more like a committee squabbling and then settling on "the best of the bunch."

"If, however, we instead choose to comprehend the four gospels as one continuous story of renewal divided into four chapters—as an integrated and sequential account of transformation through Jesus the Christ—then we have an entirely different picture.

And this brings us to the basic Quadratos approach to the gospels: four questions, four paths, one journey. [handout at this point]

1. ***How do we face change?* First Path, The Gospel of Matthew, probably written in Antioch following the destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem. Metaphor: the great mountain.**
2. ***How do we move through suffering?* Second Path, The Gospel of Mark, probably written in Rome during Nero's arrest and brutal execution of all believers in the Christ. Metaphor: the stormy sea.**
3. ***How do we receive joy?* Third Path, The Gospel of John, possibly written in Ephesus in a time of harmony, growth and beginning diversity in the Christian community. Used early on in the Christian movement for annual congregation retreats in preparation for the great resurrection celebrations. Metaphor: in the garden (of Eden).**
4. ***How do we mature in service?* Fourth Path, The Gospel of Luke, possibly written to the emerging Christian communities across Asia Minor as Christians and Jews formally separated and official Roman persecution began and intensified, and Christians were "on the move". Metaphor: on the road of richness.**

(I think you can probably easily see the correspondence in those four paths to the moves of the mass, that is, our classic liturgies:

Change happens as soon as we enter the sanctuary.

We are confronted by songs and the proclaimed word, urging us to face the truth about ourselves: suffering

We celebrate our common-union with Christ and with one other in Eucharist: third path.

And then we are sent out into the world, to our daily lives a mission and service to others: fourth path.)

But if Quadratos is about four-foldness, why is there a three year lectionary? John's gospel, so remarkable different from the synoptic gospels, is used every year, chiefly during Lent-Easter, but also at other times, such as Christmas, and a few other designated days or feasts. According to Alexander, John was used early on in the church for the annual congregation retreat, a time of examination and reconciliation before Easter, a time that devolved over the centuries into what we know as Lent. We'll look at this retreat idea a bit later.

Basic to Quadratos, and basic to the deeper reason for the lectionary cycles is that whether we acknowledge it or not, individuals and communities do move through a cycle of change, suffering, joy, and service. Indeed the fullness of living in Christ is not attained without the wholeness of the fourfold path. The three year lectionary, using John's gospel during Lent and Easter, means that the faithful worshippers will hear and experience the fullness of the Good News of the Christ, and enter more deeply into his eternal life. This work is the way the Holy One moves in our lives and in the Universe. It is, as Irenaeus said, quadraform! It is quadraform spiritual formation! Which is also, of course, the aim of the Catechumenate!

II. Quadratos and the Catechumenate.

In view, as I noted in the introduction, Quadratos and Catechumenate share much in common.

Let's look at the four paths now.

Inquiry: how do we face change? Think of the varied reasons that bring a person to the doors of our churches, seeking something, seeking "God". I often ponder the courage it takes to make that move to the church door, or maybe it is desperation. Certainly many seekers are seeking exactly because something is wrong in their lives, something has happened, they are facing change, and in that chaos, they come seeking...God. Or community. They are at the threshold of First Path work.

This is why we want to spend as much time with the new ones as possible at the very beginning. Formation begins with authentic welcome and careful, gentles listening and noticing of what is going on in these new ones. Fledgling community begins to happen. This is important. The word we use in the Quadratos movement that is absolutely necessary in the first path, is *temenos*: an environment created and maintained in which people begin to feel safe and dare to trust.

Temenos is a kind of community sense that when we are together, we are safe enough to be unsafe—that is, we can share something of ourselves that in other contexts might be too risky.

Catechumenate and Baptismal Preparation: how do we deal with suffering? In unpacking bit by bit some of the important doctrines of the church and encountering the scriptures as the living word of God addressing them, everything is not all sweetness and bliss. There is much to take in. There is presence of their sponsors or congregational companion, and there will be bumps along the way with that, perhaps. The new ones experience something of the second path, Mark's stormy sea, the suffering involved in facing one's life, learning the ways of a new community, being challenged by the word as it is opened in their sessions. As they enter into baptismal preparation, the intensity grows and so does the asking for commitment, self-examination, and promises before each other, the congregation, and God. There is excitement to be sure, but there is also suffering in that.

What if all congregations a retreat every year? It would suggest several things. One, the life of the church as community would be taken seriously. Attention would be given to spiritual practices by which we attempt to live the grace we preach, teach, and claim as central to the Christian life. And it would make clear what should be no shock to anyone, but often is: the realities of sin and wounded relationships in our lives together. Seeking forgiveness and reconciliation would be (and is) a powerful acknowledgement of faith in the gospel as the power of new or renewed life together. And, since it is based on what we believe is given to us in our baptisms, it would truly get us ready for a profound celebration of the resurrection that is ours in Christ.

Well, isn't that exactly what the Catechumenate brings forward during the Sundays of Lent? I think it very likely that over years of witnessing, and participating in the rites of the Catechumenate on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent, that this kind of deep and rich and truth-telling ritual expression may end up being a kind of yearly retreat during which not only the catechumens, but the whole congregation, scrutinizing themselves, getting real about their relationships with one another, all in preparation for a clean and joyous celebration of Easter. There is challenge and some suffering in that as well, if the congregation seriously engages.

Baptisms and Affirmations: how do we receive joy? Then finally comes the Easter Vigil or whatever other special day is set aside for baptisms and affirmations. This brings them to the third path experience of joy. Many are the new ones who weep for joy at the font. Many realize that they are embarking on a new life, and they are thrilled. And the congregation is thrilled as well. There is joy in the camp, or shall we say, in the garden: a new day is dawning, a new creation, a sense of union with Christ and with one another. This is all third path stuff: how do we receive joy?

There is much to ponder, and we do well to help the new ones understand they need to stay with their joy a while and let it steep. This is not the time for zealotry and righteous crusades. But it is also most definitely not the end of the journey.

The four-foldness is essential for wholeness and vibrancy in communities engaged in the journey of faith. And yet, points out Dr Shaia “what we meet in much of advice and therapy and religious formation is a threeness, a threeness not to be confused with our lectionary.”

"Although there are many different vocabularies, generally mainline Christian theology and spiritual direction describe a progression of purgation, illumination, and union. Psychology uses surrender (or commitment), testing (or trial), and illumination (or resolution). Regardless of what words are used, the implication in all three-step designs is that once you have found “it”—union or illumination or resolution—all you have to do is maintain “it.” Not only is this mistaken; in our present world, it is a dangerous and damaging misconception.

"Three-step processes produce electrifying conversion stories and seemingly instantaneous changes, which look great and warm our hearts. Quadratos shows what happens after the dramatic change, however. Sadly and almost inevitably, the old habits, attitudes, or behaviors return—usually with a vengeance. Alternatively, elaborate fantasy worlds in which everything remains “nice” on the surface are constructed and maintained. Sometimes, whole groups can participate in these fantasies. In either form of regression, nothing approaching authentic behavior is possible, because pain, anger, and disappointment underlie every single action.

So the fourth path, mission and service to others is essential for further development and a maturing of faith. On this vital point, Quadratos and the wisdom of the Catechumenal process completely agree: mystogogy cannot be neglected. Indeed, it needs to be a serious, deep encounter with the realities of one’s personality, spiritual and other gifts, the intentions of the heart, and discernment of God’s call to mission and service. Vocation is a vital concept to be embraced.

Now the spiritual formation that happens over a fairly short period of time, a year or so, or in some cases, less, in the Catechumenate, is a sign of what is meant to happen, consciously, on a continuing basis in the congregation. Note the word consciously.

It is important that the four questions, four paths, one journey idea be presented in ways that help the congregation understand that church doctrine and practice is not about getting the biography of Jesus down pat, but is rather about the practice of the faith in Christ, in his Spirit. And that practice is four-fold, not just one thing.

Since this is the case, a mutuality of catechumenate and Quadratos doubles the blessing and brings about a life-giving resonance for all involved.

Just think. The year of Mark is coming up. What if the leaders of the congregation pondered well the dynamics of second path, how do we deal with suffering, and considered how to preach, teach, liturgically affirm both the reality of suffering in our lives, our communities, and the world, and the radical hope we have in the living Christ, who has gone down into the depths with us, and for us. It is a crucial piece of spiritual formation and wisdom to get to the point of recognizing that suffering comes upon us all. It is one of the paths of the great journey, and cannot be avoided. But it helps immeasurably when we affirm this consciously, instead of suffering, shall we say, mindlessly.

This is important to share with the catechumens as well.

And so with the other three gospel paths and movements of the catechumenate. It is important spiritual formation and wisdom to acknowledge, deeply, and consciously, that change is a path we all must walk at some point or another in our lives, and it will come to us more than once. How much healthier we would be as congregations if we reminded of that, in a variety of ways every time the lectionary brings us to the year of Matthew!

And, to tell one on myself and my tradition, a real problem for Lutherans, seems to be the third path: how do we receive joy? This past winter I had a part in one of the sessions at my seminary class retreat down in Arizona. The plan was we talk about our lives, past, present, and future from the perspective of the seasons of the church year. I got the assignment to take the segment on Easter. I eagerly accepted it, thinking to myself, this will be a lot of fun. We'll get to talk about our experiences of joy and what we noticed about them and how we integrated them into our lives. Well, guess what. The session was agony for these professional church leaders and their spouses. Most of them couldn't even think of times of joy! I guess I should have anticipated that, somehow, but just never thought joy would be that big of a problem. So you see the wisdom of Shaia in phrasing the third path question, *How do we receive joy?*

And to be conscious every third year the fourth path, *maturing in mission and service*. Many congregations need to consciously and creatively affirm that fourth path. Other congregations, with strong social justice sensibilities, need to be conscious not only of this fourth path which feels like home to them, but also conscious that a maturing Christian faith and practice include the other three paths as well!

I find compelling the overall potential for maturity of faith in consciously recognizing, accepting and walking these four paths present in the holy gospels. I take them as universal. Change, suffering, joy, and service come to us all eventually and even regularly, but to live them consciously leads to great blessing and growing wisdom.

It begins, awesomely, and one hopes, more or less consciously in the catechumenate, but then continues on in the year by year experience of living the paths in the context of the Christian community and our service to the world. The whole gospel experience includes all the paths. Real life, in others, is a matter of journeying through change, suffering, joy, and service over and over again. For many it happens unconsciously, and perhaps not very graciously. But for those of faith, who recognize and honor the presence of Christ among them, this is a most blessed way.

Your Pattern is perfection
It quiets the soul that knows it
And its eloquent expression
Makes everything clear
So that even the simple are wise