

Catechesis

Catechesis is a fundamental pastoral ministry of the church, by which people are enabled to enter into the church's faith, share its life of service in love, and take responsibility for the hope which Christians share. It is a time of directed growth in discipleship and understanding, which has its centre in the celebration of holy baptism. It may partly precede, and will also partly follow, the administration of baptism, depending on the age at which baptism is received.

The initial formation of its new Christians is a solemn responsibility of the Christian community. In the ancient church catechesis was a ministry under direct supervision of the bishop, a supervision shared with the presbyters, deacons and catechists of the diocese. But the incorporation of new members is something that only the community as a whole can accomplish. For this reason catechesis can have a corporate and liturgical dimension; and it properly involves a variety of ministries from within the community of faith.

Those who enter catechesis also offer a vital ministry to the whole community: they become a living sign of that 'turning to Christ' of which baptism speaks. Turning to Christ can be understood as a journey in stages:

Period 1: Evangelization (*"What do you seek?"*)

To this period belong the initial contact of enquirers with the Christian fellowship, the recognition of the mystery of God's grace at work already in their lives, and their attraction to the way of Christ. It is a time when people are encouraged to share the stories of their own lives, articulate their own questions and needs, and encounter the promise and challenge of the gospel. It is the responsibility of the church's members to share the meaning of the good news in their own lives, and to begin to discern on behalf of enquirers how Christ offers them hope, healing and friendship. Initially, the enquirers 'set the agenda' much of the time; and their Christian friends encourage them to follow more and more the moving of God's Spirit within their own hearts. But evangelization continues as a fundamental concern throughout catechesis as well, when the agenda is being set in a more directive fashion.

Period 2: Catechumenate (*"Is this person ready to enter the covenant?"*)

To this period belong regular participation of catechumens in the life of the community of faith; they share in the liturgy of the word, and receive direction in exploring the bearing of the Christian tradition upon their lives. It is a time for them to be introduced to the story of salvation as set forth in the scriptures; it is a time for helping them cultivate a life of prayer together; it is a time for drawing them into the church's apostolic mission of serving the world in the name of Christ. More and more the scriptures themselves 'set the agenda'. The basic aim in this period is to provide support and guidance for those who are undergoing an initial conversion of life to the way of Christ.

Entry to this period may appropriately be celebrated by a public liturgical act; each person accepted as a catechumen is presented by a sponsor who will accompany that person through the catechumenal experience, and, when possible, present the person for baptism. It is important, however, that accepting someone as a catechumen be the response to a true desire for God's gifts, and not an automatic reward for participation in a programme.



During this period, the handing on of the Christian tradition may be celebrated in a series of rites within the regular gatherings of the catechumens.

Period 3: Candidacy (*“Do you renounce evil and turn to Christ?”*)

Holy baptism, preceded when appropriate by a rite of Choosing Candidates for Baptism, may be celebrated once it is clear that there is a true desire on the part of the catechumen to share in the calling of Christ and his church. Catechesis should not be probation (as if to test a person’s ability to keep the baptismal covenant without the grace of baptism). Nor should the choosing of a candidate for baptism be the automatic reward for spending a certain length of time in the catechumenate; it should be an act of discernment.

The most appropriate time for baptism is Easter, especially at the Great Vigil; candidates for baptism may be formally chosen at the beginning of Lent; and rites of preparation for baptism may be included within the Sunday liturgies during Lent. This time of candidacy should focus upon the illumination, purification and strengthening of heart and soul, through spiritual direction and examination of conscience, and the practice of spiritual disciplines. It is important that sponsors share with the candidates for baptism this experience of preparation.

Period 4: Mystagogia (*“Become who you are!”*)

This period begins after baptism. While the fundamental formation of catechesis continues, it now has a radically new character as the baptized are encouraged to claim the power of the symbols with which they have begun to celebrate their new life. As they become capable of greater self-direction in their growth in faith and obedience to the Lord, and come to recognize their own responsibility within the church’s mission and ministry, they should be guided into the fullness of the church’s life, and become familiar with its history and fundamental teaching. Above all, they should be encouraged to discern their own particular calling, and guided in developing their special gifts.

The rites of this period are rites for all the people of God; the new Christians are no longer called apart for prayer, but take their place among the faithful. Mystagogia may include a Celebration of Commitment to Christian Service. But this period has no concluding ritual; informally, it continues for the rest of one’s life.

Catechesis for Parent Bringing Children to Baptism

In the initiation of children, it is appropriate that their parents pass through a form of catechesis as well. Parents should be enabled to celebrate the baptism of their children as the reaffirmation of their own baptismal covenant; and their catechetical formation should take seriously the stage of growth in their own response to the gospel, enabling them to make this reaffirmation genuinely. Children may be accepted as catechumens through their parents; if the baptism is at Easter, the parents may bring them to be chosen as candidates at the beginning of Lent. Their commitment to Christian service should be primarily to the nurture and catechizing of their own children; they and the other sponsors have the duty to help the children grow in the knowledge and love of God, and in their responsibilities as members of the church. The children’s own experience of catechesis will be more gradual and much longer, continuing until the time when they are able to profess their faith as responsible adult members: see the following section.



Catechesis for Baptized Children

This is essentially a ministry of mystagogia: providing children the opportunity to grow into the meaning of their baptism. It should consist of regular participation in the eucharist, and a process of formation centred in scripture - hearing and responding to the word of God as it addresses their own situation and needs.

But as they begin to take responsibility for their own lives, they also need increasing opportunity to formulate their own questions and set their own agendas. The church must offer them the sensitivity and caring discernment characteristic of evangelization; for their entrance into adulthood is a time to discover for themselves, independently of their family traditions, the good news of God in Christ. In many cases it will be appropriate to offer them some form of ministry of restoration, as they relearn, in a new life situation, what it means to follow Christ: see the following section.

Catechesis for Baptized Enquirers

There are many more or less practicing members of the church who have never had the opportunity to receive any basic formation, and who could benefit from an experience of fundamental catechesis. But the principal rites of the catechumenate may be used only for the unbaptized.

However, the baptized who have been living outside the communion of the church may be restored through a catechetical formation which is also celebrated in stages: they may be welcomed as returning members; and they may celebrate the stages of their restoration in the rites of Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday, and make solemn reaffirmation of their baptismal covenant at Easter. In this way they also become a living sign in the community of the covenant promise to “repent and return to the Lord”.

The Ministries of Catechesis

The community of faith is the principal minister of initiation; the community draws, welcomes and incorporates new members into itself as into Christ. Thus the people of God together play an essential and active role both in evangelism and in the rites of initiation. It is the responsibility of the community to reach out to others, to maintain a spirit of generous and humble openness to all whom God calls into the fellowship, and to provide from amongst its members the sponsors and other particular ministers of initiation. The community serves those who turn to Christ by generous hospitality, sympathetic support, discerning encouragement, and spiritual example.

The sponsor embodies the church’s welcome and support for the catechumen (or the family of the catechumen). Sponsors pray for them, and accompany them throughout this pilgrimage, sharing from personal experience, and encouraging them in faith. Sponsors present their candidates before the community, thereby signifying their endorsement of them, and enabling the community wholeheartedly to receive them. For each catechumen, there should be at least one sponsor from within the local community of faith.

Parents who bring children into the Christian life become the primary sponsors in the children’s baptism (though never without the sponsorship of other members of the community). In reaffirming their own baptismal covenant, parents acknowledge the inescapable role they play as the children’s first catechists. Traditionally, the Christian family has been looked upon as a sacrament of



the church, and parents as presbyters in their own households.

The bishop, as the principal officer of initiation in the church, is responsible for the seriousness with which the church takes the issue of membership. The bishop's presence at baptism is especially to be desired.

The presbyter is responsible for the appointment of sponsors, and should personally assist people in deciding when to proceed to the catechumenate, and to baptism. It is the presbyter's responsibility to provide for spiritual direction through catechesis, to adapt the rites to the pastoral needs of catechumens, and to lead new Christians into the fullness of sacramental life.

The deacon is responsible for ensuring that the gospel is proclaimed to bearers with integrity, and for assisting in the discernment of their particular needs. The deacon is responsible for encouraging and leading catechumens and new Christians in the practice of Christian service.

The catechist is responsible for leading catechumens and new Christians into an experience of hearing and responding to the word of God, and giving direction in the growth of faith and understanding. The catechist normally presides at the rites during the catechumenate.

The catechesis team is responsible for developing this ministry, and for coordinating all the ministries described above.



Catechesis for Parents Seeking Baptism for their Children

It is important that people be provided for in ways that are sufficiently flexible to take very different situations into account. Parents who are faithful members of the community, and have been catechized on the occasion of the baptism of previous children need to be offered something very different from the lapsed parents coming with their first-born! The easy path is that of simply laying on a ‘mini-course’ and saying to all parents, “This is what everyone has to do.” Such a path is to be avoided, if possible.

A. Accepting a Child as a Catechumen

The impetus parents feel to do something (to get the baby ‘done’) right after the birth can be met in at least two constructive ways:

1. Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child (*BAS* p. 610ff) is always appropriate, even in the case of those who declare that they have no intention of becoming regular participants in the church’s life.
2. Accepting a catechumen can be appropriate in very different ways:
 - i) Parents who are faithful members and indicate their intention to bring their child to baptism may be encouraged to make the child a catechumen immediately (even though the next baptismal celebration may be weeks away), thus establishing clearly the context in which the child’s baptism will be celebrated, and giving everyone the opportunity to welcome the baby without delay.
 - ii) Parents who are not part of the worshipping community and who are making contact simply because of the new baby may be challenged to discover what it is they really want for their child, and given the opportunity to make the child a catechumen. In this case, however, the ritual must be prepared for by incorporating the parents into hospitable gatherings where they can explore their expectations and hear what the church has to offer (above and beyond baptism!). Whatever techniques may be thought useful in facilitating this, the absolutely essential one is the involvement of members of the community who are not parish staff!

For some families it will seem desirable to do both: to accept the child as a catechumen, and to give thanks for the gift of a child. For families in category i), these may be done on the same occasion; for families in category ii) the thanksgiving may be done immediately, and the acceptance can be celebrated once the parents are clear that there is something more than the ritual of baptism that they seek.



B. Choosing Children as Candidates for Baptism

The parish sponsor plays a number of important roles for both the family and the parish community, not least of which is the role of representative of the community. If everyone is aware of the sponsor's role, then the presence of the sponsor at the baptism helps give credibility to the event for everyone.

What is required, then, is an encounter that enables parents and sponsor to discover together what the baptismal covenant will mean for the life of this child and the child's family, and what the community must do for the family to support the child's growth in faith.

If newborns become catechumens promptly, if baptisms are scheduled only for the great festivals, and if people are encouraged to see baptism as something to prepare for rather than to rush into, then there will be adequate time to provide for this encounter. It will take different forms, depending upon the parents' situation and needs.

1. For mature and faithful members, a single session with a sponsor may suffice; nevertheless the arrival of a new member in the family inevitably changes the family, with consequences for the living out of the covenant. Older children of the family in particular can benefit from being drawn into this reconsideration of what it means to be committed together to the way of Christ, and of the ways in which the new member will be incorporated into that covenant life.
2. For parents still immature in their faith, but committed to the life of the church, catechesis should offer an opportunity to grasp afresh the good news, so that the child's baptism may also be the celebration of the parents' renewal. If there are older children, they too, can be drawn into this process.
3. For parents who have not yet made a commitment to the life of the church, it must be made clear that catechesis is offered to enable them to make that commitment! A ready-made programme which promises baptism for their child if only they 'sit it out' fails to do this. Ideally they will be encouraged to share in the catechesis provided for adults approaching baptism or confirmation; their readiness will be discerned in the same manner; and the baptism of the child will resurface as an issue only when they are ready to be restored as active members themselves. (Of course, if they are unbaptized, they may choose to become catechumens themselves.)

Participation in the rite of Choosing Candidates will normally be appropriate only for children being baptized at Easter. Nevertheless, it is helpful to be able to offer prayers for the candidates in the weeks prior to baptism. Thus, the final decision about a child's baptism should be settled jointly by parents, sponsor, catechist and pastor at least a week before (and earlier if possible), so that the names of candidates can be announced and included in the prayers of the people.



C. Celebrating Baptism:

The foregoing ensures that the final week(s) before baptism are free for the exclusive purpose of the preparing to receive the grace of which baptism is the sacrament. This should not be downplayed merely because the candidate happens to be unconscious of it. Parents whose children are to be baptized at Easter can simply be urged to see the Lenten and Holy Week observances as the normal form of preparation for them, and invited to participate fully. For baptisms celebrated at other times, opportunity should be provided for parents to explore the meaning for themselves of the act of renunciation and adherence (*BAS* p.154). All parents can be encouraged to use the prayers for the candidates (*BAS* p. 155-6), in the days leading up to the baptism.

As for the ritual itself, the most helpful order is to experience it first, and then to reflect upon it. For this reason, parents should be burdened with as little as possible of the practical details. It may be helpful to rehearse sponsors (rather than parents) and to give to them the responsibility of steering the parents through the ritual.

After the event, parents need an opportunity to look back and see what it was that was said and done and given to their children in the baptism. Awareness of sacraments is not a matter of “decoding by experts”, but of ordinary Christians developing the eyes to see divine presence and meaning. Parents can be helped to see the sacramental vocation of their children, and explore some of the ways in which their children can be helped to grow in this awareness, too. This is the context in which to reflect upon some of the ways in which the faith of children is formed and nurtured: through story, ritual, communal life, and shared acts of faithful love.



A Model for Catechesis of (Non-Active) Parents Seeking Baptism for their Children

This model is addressed to the difficult but all too common situation of parents who happily consider themselves Christians, but who take little or no part in the life of the church; their request to have their children adopted into the community of the covenant is incongruous, in view of their own failure to take this covenant seriously.

Three fundamental assumptions are made:

1. That the ministry needed by these parents is different from that appropriate to parents who are already practicing Christians, even though the line may often be hard to draw. We must not presume to lump them all together for reasons of economy or politics.
2. That the process is interactive, not automatic. Any process that promises baptism after you sit through 'x' number of classes or Sunday liturgies merely invites outer conformity (which proves short-lived), rather than inner response.
3. That the goal is integrating these parents into a community of faith - a process that takes time, and moves through a number of stages. Packaging the process into a neat series of sessions communicates something else entirely.

Since the faith of young children is largely indistinguishable from the faith of their parents, a sound approach to catechetical formation must begin with the formation (perhaps even the evangelization) of the parents themselves.

The analogy of the 'door' will suggest the fundamental strategy: if baptism is the door (sacramentally) to the life of grace, then catechesis will focus primarily on the life of grace for the parents (and for the child), and only secondarily on the rite itself. Rarely do people enter a doorway because they were invited to inspect the door; doorways are entered to reach what's on the other side.

Period 1: "Getting to Know You"

The aim of this period is to bring applicants into a small community where trust and freedom in exploring basic questions of faith can develop. Within this context, their relationship to the Church can change from consumers to friends, and the way can be paved for rethinking their request with some integrity. Whether that happens is for them to decide and the church to discern.

Depending on the numbers and circumstances of those involved (parish sponsors need to be included here, too) this period may be one evening, part of a session, or a series of get-togethers. Introductions should include names, story-telling about their infants/children, introduction to the process, and explanations about the role of sponsors.



Two fundamental issues need to be identified and opened up for consideration:

1. “By what right?”

In our culture, parents do not choose mates for their children, certainly not when their children are too young to be consulted. There is a moral dilemma, therefore, in bringing children to baptism: by what right may parents make a life-choice for them without their consent? This dilemma needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

As an icebreaker and discussion starter, all may be invited to share some stories about the way their own parents or up-bringing shaped their attitudes and values, and especially their faith. This dilemma can be addressed more fully when the baptismal covenant is considered, and when parents look at the way they will bring up their children.

2. “What do you seek for your child?”

Probably it was parents who initiated this encounter by requesting baptism; but on the analogy of the ‘door’, there ought to be a more serious goal, though it may not yet have been identified. What is it they most truly desire for their children?

Sample resource: the tale of **Victor**, from *Stories for Telling*, William R. White (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1986)

The Hebrew Scriptures offer a profound introduction to the nature of our human quest; and the story of Israel’s journey can be used to explore dimensions of every human journey. People may be invited to find in the story a mirror with which to see themselves better. What was it that this people wanted? What did they wish to pass on to their children? How was their quest refined over the centuries?

Sample resource: the slide and cassette production, *I Seek Thy Face*, (The Catholic Biblical Society (Canada) 1975)

As people gain a grasp of this issue and begin to face the question honestly, they can be asked to convert the sense of this discussion, and the heart of their quest, into some form of prayer. Guided meditation is sometimes a useful way for this to happen. Alternatively, a simplified form of the Office might be used for this prayer; some of the readings and psalms provided for the rite of Handing on the Lord’s Prayer could be used.

This kind of group process can serve to awaken people to the stirring of the Spirit within their own lives; and the question “What do you seek...?” may need time to ‘percolate’. That is why the above is referred to as a ‘period’ rather than a ‘programme’ or a ‘session’. The needs of the participants in this regard have to be carefully discerned and assessed; getting locked into a timetable prematurely may be disastrous, because it can rob people of a sense of freedom (and of the responsibility) to actually deal with the agenda which the Spirit raises within them. In any event, people can be brought into this period as soon as they ask about baptism, regardless of the proposed date of baptism; better that the opportunity to live with this question be as long as is useful.



This period can be brought to a happy conclusion with the rite of Accepting a Catechumen. Parents can be invited to recognize that the ‘soul-searching’ they have been doing is an authentic part of the growth in faith of all God’s people; and sometimes this needs to be shared. The only further specific preparation needed for that rite is an invitation to prepare individually the most honest answer they can to the first question of the rite.

Period 2: “Is there any Good News?”

The aim of this period is to give people an encounter with the gospel as good news. This encounter can begin as soon as people have begun to respond to the question posed in Period 1: “What do you seek...?” Whether the encounter really happens is for them to say and the church to discern.

When a child is accepted as a catechumen, it is with a promise on the part of the parent(s) to “come and share . . . in hearing the word of the Lord”. What must be made clear in this period is that participation in the liturgy is not a mere pre-condition of this part of the process, but the heart of it, as the rite of Accepting a Catechumen clearly implies. Nevertheless, a group dimension is also included to provide opportunity for reflection and mutual encouragement. It is assumed that sponsors will be involved in this dimension, too.

The group will probably need help in recognizing why ‘gospel’ is the name for the heart of our faith. What constitutes ‘news’? What makes it ‘good news’? For whom?

For example: to the established social classes of Judea, the birth of another peasant child in Bethlehem could hardly have been ‘news’ at all. According to Matthew, however, the birth of Jesus was bad news for Herod, but good news for the magi. According to Luke, it was good news for the poor shepherds and for the humble believers who awaited “the consolation of Israel”.

Participants can be asked to provide contemporary examples, noting the conditions under which news becomes ‘good news’.

Then they may be invited to hear or read the gospel again, asking themselves where they recognize good news for themselves and their children; or the Sunday lections may be used as the basis for such exploration, over a number of weeks.

Sample resources: the slide and cassette production *The Face of the Lord*, (the Catholic Biblical Society (Canada) 1975); reading the Gospel according to Luke (TEV) might be set as homework.

In the group discussion that follows, three questions may be used:

1. What was Jesus up to? What was God up to?
2. Where did you find good news?
3. What difference does it make?



As the group begins to deal constructively with the last question, it becomes possible to move again from reflection to prayer. Responding to the gospel in some fresh way is the issue. A simplified form of the Office may be used for this prayer; some of the readings and psalms provided for the rite of Handing on the Creed could be used.

Period 3: “Why should (or indeed *should*) my child be baptized?”

The aim of this period is to discern, in the light of parents’ encounter with gospel and church, whether the baptismal covenant is what God is calling them into or not. That is something for them to discover and the church to discern.

After they have recalled the previous discussions, people should be invited to reflect on their own experience of appropriating the good news. What helped them to respond? What hindered them?

Two fundamental issues need to be identified:

1. “What has baptism to do with the good news?”

The story of the first Christian baptisms (Acts 2) is a key text for raising this issue. It might be set as a homework task. Participants can then address themselves to these questions:

- i) What does Peter tell the crowd about Jesus? Notice how he assessed their concerns and hopes; in what ways would his account of Jesus have been good news?
- ii) Is the story of Jesus good news today? In what ways? Where do you see it at work?
- iii) How does Peter understand the place of baptism in all these events? How do you understand the place of baptism in relation to the good news?

2. “What will it cost?”

The renunciations and act of adherence (*BAS* p. 154) and the baptismal covenant (*BAS* p. 156f) are the key texts in relation to this issue. Participants need to know what they would be promising for their children in baptism. Instruction will be important here: making clear the meaning of “renunciation and turning”, and the meaning of ‘believing’.

People can be asked to work in small groups: the parents, godparents and parish sponsor for each child make up a separate group. The task for each group is twofold:

- i) To spell out the meaning of the baptismal covenant for this child, and what they will be promising when they promise to support the child in this new life; and
- ii) To identify the obstacles to entering such a covenant, naming them as evils to be renounced.

When this task has been completed, parents may be given the opportunity to submit formal applications for baptism; and each parish sponsor should be asked to indicate to the catechist or the presbyter their willingness to answer for the child.



An act of prayer may conclude this period; a simplified form of the Office may be used. The readings and psalms provided for the rite of Calling to the Life of Discipleship are to be used for this; the prayers for the candidates (*BAS* p. 155) may also be used.

If the children are coming to baptism at Easter, it is appropriate to celebrate the rite of Choosing Candidates for Baptism at or near the beginning of Lent. In any case, it will be helpful to introduce candidates to the congregation before the day of the baptism, and to invite prayer for them and for the families.

Period 4: “Becoming What We Are”

The aim of this period is to develop deeper awareness of the implications of the baptism which has been celebrated, and to lay realistic plans for the nurture of the children.

In the approach thus far, the only direct discussion of baptism prior to the event centred on the meaning of the covenant. Baptism as a symbol is something to focus on afterward, in the light of the experience. This is a time to cultivate sacramental awareness: what did baptism say about these children? Needless to say, this will prove fruitless unless the initiatory and sacramental symbols have been allowed to speak clearly!

Sample method: People arrive to find a table filled with simple objects - a stone, a potted plant, a candle, a jug of water, a set of keys, a piece of bread, a glass of wine, a pencil, a clod of soil, etc. They are invited to describe what they see; they invariably look for symbolism. They are then asked whether they always look for symbolism when they see such objects, and what (or why not). The Christian use of symbols, the incarnational and sacramental presuppositions, can be explored at some level.

Sample resource: the film-strip and cassette production *In the Seeing* (Teleketics 1971).

The central question then becomes: how can baptized children be brought into a living awareness of their new life in Christ?

Issues to be explored include:

- i) the place of children in the eucharist, and in the congregation;
- ii) the ministry of children in the world and in the church;
- iii) the perils of Sunday School as the presumed answer to the above;
- iv) the celebration of faith at home, the interdependence of home celebrations and congregational celebrations, and some of the models and resources for sharing the faith at home.

One of the merits of exploring these issues after the baptism itself is that it exemplifies the conviction that baptism is not getting the baby done, but getting started. Some of the issues identified ought to be pursued as soon after the event as possible (recalling the experience itself, for example); but other issues could be taken up later, and perhaps within larger gatherings of families,



including families from a number of recent baptismal celebrations, or other parish families interested in exploring such issues. The acts of prayer in which these sessions are consummated are the Sunday liturgies themselves, in which pains should be taken to model the involvement and ministry of children.

