

Pastoral Letter of the Bishops' Conference of the Nordic Countries Concerning Adult Catechesis and Reception into the Church

“Where is the entrance?” If someone needs to ask this question, the architect has made a mistake. Entrances need to be recognizable and inviting, unless one wants to keep away uninvited guests. What, then, about the entrance to the house of the Church, the entering of persons into the community of the faithful? Can the entrance be easily recognized, or must one enquire about it from someone? For centuries this did not pose a problem: becoming Christian and entering into the community of the faithful, the Church, took place through Baptism.

Faith is personally encountering Jesus Christ and becoming his disciple. Continuous effort is required in order to think as He thinks, to be of the same opinion as He, to live as He lived. St. Cyprian of Carthage was once asked, “What would you do to convince a person of Christianity?” He responded, “I would let him live with me for one year.”

What currently happens to those adults interested in the Christian and Catholic faith who are received into communion with the Church and who wish to enter into this home, the Church? This question is often posed by the people of the Nordic countries. Due to changes of Church and society, no longer are all children baptized as infants, as in some instances, parents want to let the children decide about matters of faith by themselves; in other instances, the parents themselves have left the Church. In our Nordic countries there is, however, a growing number of converts; that is, people originally from other Christian communities and Churches, who wish to become part of the Catholic Church.

For these adults, who are in search of the Church's entrance, the Second Vatican Council has revived the way which had existed from almost the beginning of the long history of the Church: the Catechumenate. This Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, which came into effect in 1972, was meant especially for the “young Churches” of Africa and Latin America. Conversely in Europe, today often the only way to prepare for Baptism is by receiving private instruction from a priest. Fortunately, the catechesis for adults offers us in the Nordic countries an excellent opportunity to preach the Gospel to both those who are searching as well as to the parishes.

The Catechumenate is not a door to the Church, but rather a way, which should last for a sufficiently long time—according to experience, at least one year. Why is this? Being a Christian presupposes *becoming* a Christian; the decision to give oneself and one's life to be governed by the Lord Jesus Christ requires development. It may be that people become interested in the Christian faith and, particularly, the Catholic Church after having experienced and participated in one of the great feasts of the liturgical year. The liturgy and communality have drawn them to the Church. Some have experienced God's closeness, which has lit a fire in the search and longing to proceed towards Him. These are good and important preconditions, although alone they are not enough for making the decision.

Additionally, one needs to settle one's ideals, values, expectations and hopes for life. The relationship with God and Jesus Christ must grow and mature, deepen and be able to overcome challenges to the faith. To meet these ends, the Catechumenate offers different phases on the way to becoming a Christian, each of which is started solemnly with its own rite. The person feels a compelling force through the liturgy and catechesis, which results in a living and lasting growth into communion with the Church. Those who are baptized when being received into the Catechumenate are asked for example, "What do you ask of God's Church?" Answering this requires that it is predicated by inner clarity and reason.

Later during the Catechumenate, the candidate is initiated into the Christian doctrine, he participates in the feasts of the liturgical year, and learns better and better to explain and understand the happenings of everyday life based on the Gospel. With this he naturally needs help, as one cannot be a Christian or become a Christian alone. Consequently, the way into the Church is always a way which is walked within a community. This community is found in the Catechumenate groups (they are the Church in miniature form). In addition to those who ask for Baptism or convert the groups also include some members of the parish, a priest and sponsors, who remain present with those being baptized.

Also, the liturgical feasts and the phases of the Catechumenate assist them on their way. For example, in one such celebration, those asking for Baptism are given the "Our Father" prayer, which they may pray with the parish henceforth. In this way, the baptismal candidate grows step by step, to take his place in the parish. The candidate learns that being Christian means also taking responsibility for the life of the parish, and giving one's strengths and gifts to be used, in order that the parish be living and growing. The celebration of becoming Christian through Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist forms the summit of the Catechumenate. However, the Catechumenate is not only a good opportunity for the baptized or converted to follow the path which leads into the Church; it also offers a great opportunity to the parish itself. As the sponsors accompany the candidates who go before the parish, questions are raised also about their respective Baptisms and belonging to the Church; each questions his own faith and voluntarily asks to be baptized and to be received into communion with the Church. It then becomes clear that the Church does not only have a mission; it *is* the mission itself and it cannot relinquish the duty of acting accordingly.

The Catechumenate makes one sensitive to the task of this mission, which has been given to all Christians: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20) When people come to us and ask, "How may I enter?" it is not enough that we guide them to priests or others working in pastoral tasks. Parishioners are also needed, who prepare the newcomer a kind and friendly reception, and are willing to share with him their own faith. This sharing enables the parishioners to strengthen their faith and renew their Baptism.

The practice of the Catechumenate with its rites and celebrations helps in its part to revive the sacramental signs and rites. There are plenty of these symbols and rites, especially in our Catholic liturgy. However, habit and obviousness accompany the danger

that the meaning and meaningfulness of these holy rites is obscured. Supporting a person desiring Baptism or converting on the way of Catechumenate may itself become a catechesis for the parish, during which also active Catholics can regain the richness of liturgy and can be nourished by it. Here in the Nordic countries we are already using the Catechumenate in some parishes. Let us imagine that even more parishes would begin to take advantage of the Catechumenate and a larger amount of those asking for Baptism might grow in this manner on the way towards communion with the Church. Through this, what could change in our parishes? New groups would be formed, the members of the parish would have the possibility to again find their faith, the newly-baptised who are inspired by the Holy Spirit would commit actively to the parish, for example as catechists, lectors, etc. The responsibility for others would grow, as the members of the parish would be concretely responsible for the soon-to-be-baptized person in need of support. The consciousness of the mission of the parish and the whole Church would grow, and the connection between life and faith would become clearer. The parishes would gain an attractive and radiant power and, as a consequence, draw more people to themselves. In this manner, beginning the Catechumenate would aid the renewal of the whole parish.

We bishops wish to encourage all the faithful, priests, parish councils, pastoral councils and the councils of the different religious orders to discuss within themselves and ponder this: can a Catechumenate be founded in more parishes, and if so, how could it be done? We would like to encourage—maybe one step at a time—that the different phases and rites would be realized for the adults who are preparing for Baptism and for the reception into full communion with the Church.

We wish you God's blessings for the approaching Season of Lent.

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