

## SAVE THE CANDIDATES!

Will somebody please save the candidates? They don't deserve what they're enduring. We treat them like catechumens. They're different. We're only demonstrating how poorly we value Christians of other traditions.

Candidates are those baptized in other Christian traditions - or uncatechized, baptized Catholics - who seek confirmation and/or communion in the Catholic Church,.

Lettuce is not cabbage. Baking soda is not baking powder. Lemon oil is not lemon extract. Flour is not flower. You simply don't treat substances alike because they share some similar properties. Candidates are not catechumens, and they deserve a little respect.

This all started placidly enough. The catechumenate offered us a way to welcome through ritual, imagery, renewal, and prayer.

But now it's out of hand. We've overlooked a basic principle: Candidates are not catechumens. We treat them too much alike. We lump them into the same pot like the same ingredient. They're not the same. Will somebody please save the candidates?



The mistake stems from some well-intentioned reasons.

**Staff.** Parishes can't afford the expansive staffs and volunteers who could separately manage catechumens, candidates, returning Catholics, and folks looking for an update. So we often mix and match. Usually the most extensive survey of Catholicism comes in the catechumenate. Why not let everyone into the same room? It saves salaries, volunteers, and time for everyone.

**Dialogue.** A good dialogue needs a few people. Catechumenates thrive on dialogue. But in American catechumenates, the baptized often outnumber the unbaptized. By mixing candidates in, we combine questions and experiences. What's the problem?

**Neat rites.** The rites of the catechumenate are the cookies of Christian initiation. Everybody loves them when they're done well. They change the hearts of seekers. They inspire the community. They publicly demonstrate our commitment. Some cradle Catholics jealously long for the same rites themselves.



Is there really any harm? If treating candidates like catechumens has worked so well, why change?

Some reactions tell a lot. A candidate feels cheated not getting baptized at Easter with catechumens. Or the candidates who don't sign the book feel empty at the rite of election. Some team members mournfully wish they could better ritualize the candidates' transition.

The problem is not how to ritualize something more for candidates, but how to appreciate why we ritualize less. If the baptism of catechumens creates longing among candidates, we haven't done our job.



Our job begins with the ritual text. Flip open the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* to the table of contents. Part one considers the catechumenate. The pure catechumenate. The preparation of the *unbaptized* for baptism. Part two takes on special circumstances--children, an abbreviated rite, the dying, and baptized candidates for confirmation, eucharist, and reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church.

Many ceremonies we celebrate with both catechumens and candidates are actually found only in part one. The ritual text assumes the following:

**Evangelization and Precatechumenate.** The unbaptized may not have experience with the gospel or the rudiments of Christian life. Baptized candidates should already have this familiarity.

**Acceptance.** The rite of acceptance turns the unbaptized into catechumens. They then have a right to marriage and Christian burial in the Catholic Church. In the rite of acceptance we meet them at the door. But when candidates celebrate the rite of "welcome" they should already be in a pew. They're baptized just like the rest of us.

**Catechumenate.** The catechumenate forms those who have decided to follow Christ. They may receive the oil of catechumens. But we don't anoint the baptized candidate. *Someone* judged the candidates worthy of baptism. Why presume they need the same formation as catechumens?

**Dismissal.** Only part one treats dismissals. Part two never calls for the dismissal of candidates. They have the right to join in the creed, the prayer "of the faithful," the Lord's prayer, and the sign of peace--all signs of the Christian community.

**Election.** The rite of election celebrates the call to baptism. The book of the elect dominates the ritual. Candidates have already been called to baptism and don't need election. They may celebrate a "call to continuing conversion," but it never mentions the submission of the name or the signing of the book. Candidates are already baptized.

**Scrutiny.** Scrutinies pray to remove whatever might keep the elect from baptism. Candidates are offered a "penitential rite" to atone for their sins as Christians. But to lump candidates with catechumens in a scrutiny asserts that their baptism didn't take.

**Easter.** Only the unbaptized are baptized at Easter, but if candidates prepared like catechumens, they may well wonder why. They may even desire the preparatory rites on Saturday morning, but those belong to catechumens. Even mystagogy is a period described for the newly baptized.



Could this look different? Yes.

**Preparation.** Preparation should lead to the goal. If the goal is communion, preparation will merely treat what clears the way.

**Time of year.** Although catechumens should be baptized at Easter, candidates may receive the other sacraments any time. Many catechumenates start in the fall and finish at Easter. But we should be prepared to welcome folks into preparation at all times of the year. Candidates may follow a different cycle. Neither their preparation nor their celebration need coincide with that of

catechumens. Some places experience a glut of candidates and catechumens for the rite of election and the Easter Vigil. Why are we bringing so many candidates to these events?

**Ecumenism.** Perhaps we all need a refresher course in ecumenism. Dust off your documents of Vatican II and reread *Unitatis redintegratio*. You'll see statements like paragraph 3: "Those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church." A hunger for Christian unity lays few obstacles before the baptized who seek communion from the Catholic table.



A parish that separates candidates from catechumens will respect the faith of other Christian traditions, celebrate union in the parish throughout the year, and restore baptism to a more primary place at the Easter Vigil.

Somebody can save the candidates from too many requirements. Is that somebody you?

This article first appeared in *Today's Liturgy* 20/2 (Lent-Easter Triduum-Easter Season 1998):9-10.

---

[Top of page](#)