

FORLORN YET PRIVILEGED: THE CASE OF CANDIDATES

Jim Dunning has written a pair of thought-provoking articles in the *FORUM Newsletter* (summer 1992 and winter 1993) promoting the inclusion of catechumens and candidates in the same rites preparing for initiation. ("Candidates" means those who are already baptized but uncatechized.) These articles explain Jim's proposal that all those preparing for initiation sign the book of the elect and celebrate adapted scrutinies during lent.

Jim reports that the responses to his articles support his experience; namely, that all those seeking initiation follow a similar journey, and that journey should then be marked by similar ritual stages.

I'd like to broaden the conversation a bit, because I'm not convinced this is the best solution. This article will explain what Jim's proposal means, what problems it answers and creates, and what other solutions may be considered.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE PROPOSAL

The proposal can be seen as a response to three questions: 1) "What are the appropriate preparatory rites for initiation?" 2) "Should these rites differ between the baptized and the unbaptized?" 3) "Should these rites differ between the catechized and the uncatechized?"

Answering 3, since Jim deals only with the uncatechized here, he implies that catechized candidates may celebrate simpler rites. Jim answers 2 in the negative if the baptized are uncatechized. He says the initiation journey is so similar for those approaching the church for formation that the preparatory rites should all be the same. Then, to answer the first question, he proposes that the appropriate rites be adapted from the ritual text for the catechumenate, so that they fit the needs of the entire initiatory group.

Astute readers of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* will recognize that if questions 2 and 3 were posed to the ritual text, they would seem redundant. The text assumes that the baptized are catechized, and that the unbaptized are uncatechized. In fact, it assumes that the unbaptized are also *unevangelized*. That means we assume they have not begun to meet Christ or the Gospel. So the first period, the pre-catechumenate, introduces them to the Gospel, by which they can decide if they wish to accept it, hearing it now for the first time. *Then* they can begin catechesis, or instruction and formation in the Christian way of life.

Astute ministers of the catechumenate know that the ritual text errs on this point. We have plenty of baptized who are uncatechized, and plenty of non-baptized

who know the Gospel better than most. We also have baptized, catechized Christians who seek communion with our church. But we tend to treat them with the same process and rituals as the unbaptized, uncatechized.

What Jim proposes, then, is wonderfully simple: No need to separate sheep from goats. Everybody's on a journey, so let them approach the milestones together.

PROBLEMS POSED

Ritual Distinctions

The most obvious problem is that the ritual text sees things differently. Continually it separates catechumens from candidates. It envisions that those becoming catechumens will be met at the door of the church (48), but those welcomed as candidates begin their journey with us in a pew (416). It suggests that catechumens be dismissed from the assembly after the liturgy of the word (67), but that candidates are dismissed only if the whole assembly is (432). And the rites of election and scrutinies are completed adapted when those seeking membership have already been baptized.

What's going on here? The rituals express the disparity between catechumen and faithful. The faithful meet catechumens at the door, because they are joining us from outside the Christian assembly. In the dismissals, we permit them to meditate at great length on the word, because they have just completed the period of evangelization, and now they need more time to let the Scriptures sink in.

But candidates are already baptized. Hence, they have a place with the Christian assembly. They are welcome to stay for the liturgy of the Eucharist because they have already been forming their lives on the Gospel, because our creed is already their creed, because they are accustomed to our prayers for the world (the prayers of the faithful), because they share the Lord's Prayer with us by their faith in Christ, and because in our communion of faith we may fittingly offer the holy kiss of peace, a sign of the Christian family. What's missing, of course, is communion. That's why they're in preparation--to join full communion.

Few are the parishes who make these distinctions. The catechetical group, most frequently comprising catechumens and candidates, finds solace in sharing their catechetical and ritual experiences together. So candidates willingly dismiss themselves after the liturgy of the word; they can't receive communion anyway. And besides, our beleaguered initiation teams cannot honorably give more time to minister to sacramentally disparate groups who seem to be on spiritually similar paths.

The Rite of Election

The rite of election poses its own symbolic problems. The ritual suggests that the elect (i.e., catechumens who are ritually chosen early in lent to be baptized this Easter) sign the book, but candidates for full communion do not. Clearly the liturgy seeks a link between book and water, or more accurately, between name and water. The primary symbol of election is the name. Our names are sacraments of ourselves. They stand for what we stand for. We sign on to ratify, to speak out, to pay our bills, to make the typed words of letters our own. Our name is what people use to call us. Election and baptism will Christianize our names. In that way, whenever someone calls us by our name, they call us Christian. This is why catechumens also have the option of choosing a baptismal name (200-205). This ritual makes sense only if in baptism they're changing the name by which they wish to be called for the rest of their lives.

Candidates, however, are in another league altogether. Having been baptized by name, their names already symbolize that they are Christian. At best, the signing of the book is redundant. At worst, it ritually scorns their baptism.

The problem is, most people experience the rite of election as a rite of preparation for Catholic church membership, or as a rite marking another stage on the ritual journey. Since all seek membership, and since all pursue such a similar journey, to separate catechumens from candidates at this point seems boorish. It makes candidates feel like they're not good enough to have their names in that book. The rite has become counterproductive to what it tries to achieve: affirming the baptism of the candidate.

Scrutinies

Then there are the scrutinies. Guideposts for the season of lent, the scrutinies direct and purify those chosen for baptism. The ritual is anchored by exorcisms. These prayers ask God to drive out the spirit of evil and fill the elect with the spirit of goodness. Exorcisms do not presume that the elect had been demonically possessed, but they do presume that the pre-baptismal state is more subject to forces of evil than the state of baptism. If the initiation rites incorporate new members into the body of Christ, if they fill newcomers with the Holy Spirit, there must be some nasty former state out there from which people pass in order to enjoy the fullness of life in Christ.

Scrutinies developed in the early centuries of church history, at a time when knowledge about demons, temptation, and human psychology was quite primitive. Flawed as they may be, they desperately try to define the spiritual states people pass between in initiation rites. Still, their goal is baptismal.

They presume a spiritual state outside the body of Christ, and a desire to find in the waters of baptism the new life in Christ promised in the Scriptures.

Consequently, the scrutinies have several problems. The terms seem all wrong in modern language. "Scrutiny" sounds like we're checking out one last time whether or not we really want these candidates. (And that was a feature in the early days when these rituals developed. We downplay it now.) "Exorcism" sounds like a Hollywood drama expelling demons who infest and contort the innocent. Further, although the passage into baptism brings one along a serious spiritual journey, we're less prone to suggest that the pre-baptismal state is demonic. We recognize that God dwells in non-believers who, in the words of the eucharistic prayer, seek God "with a sincere heart."

To resolve this dilemma, many communities have decided to celebrate scrutinies which identify the sins we all hold in common, the selfishness in human society which keeps us all from Christ. In a sense, we all need to be "exorcised". But, quite frankly, the ritual doesn't see it that way. It still presumes that the unbaptized need big exorcisms (and some little ones along the way (94)), and the baptized candidates need prayer for the coming of the Spirit, but not exorcisms for the expulsion of spirits (compare 154 and 470)--unless, of course, the baptized have become demonically possessed.

The recognition of common sin may help bring these archaic rituals a step further along the way, but to expand the usage of exorcisms runs into dangerous territory: either we apply a prebaptismal concept to the baptized (scorning their baptism again), or in displacing exorcism from pre-baptism to post-baptism we lump it with those questionable media-magnetic cases of demonic possession in its most dramatic forms.

Original Sin

Incidentally, this entire assumption that exorcisms move people from the spirit of sin to the spirit of Christ finds its corollary in the rite of infant baptism with the concept of original sin. Since babies don't commit personal sin, the liturgy faces a theological problem: In what sense are babies passing from evil into new life? The answer comes with original sin. The doctrine assumes that we are all born into a prebaptismal state which cries out for redemption. The rite of infant baptism mentions the expression "original sin" in only one place: the prayer of *exorcism* which precedes the pouring of water and which may accompany the anointing with the oil of catechumens.

Reflecting on the evils of our society, Jim Dunning finds original sin here: "We are born into a world corrupted by this demonic power." At first blush, this sounds right, but it does not square with the traditional beliefs that original sin is what Mary was preserved from (Wasn't she born into the same world?) and that it is wiped away by baptism (Isn't the corruption still here?). Laudably Jim tries to rescue a traditional term ("original sin") by giving it a contemporary context ("corrupt world"). But his definition sounds more like what we used to call "concupiscence": the human tendency toward personal sin. In sacramental

terms, original sin is what baptism does away with; personal sin is what penance does away with; and concupiscence, like the corrupt world, is always here. All the doctrine of original sin need say is that in order for something positive to happen in baptism, something negative must have preceded it. It describes a feeble "spiritual state," a personal condition from which one passes in order to enjoy the new life in Christ. Jim is quite right that social sin is rampant, but it differs from what we call "original". "Original sin" is a faulty term even for the spiritual state it tries to describe: It isn't really original, especially for those conceived in a Christian household who have access to Christian burial if they die before baptism, and it isn't really sin, since it does not of itself desire separation from God. It's merely that darkness outside the light of baptism, that solitude outside the Christian community. Even in its most traditional sense, then, baptism eliminates it, and Mary was miraculously preserved from it.

Still, the doctrine is not neat. Notice that by the time we deal with the adult rites of initiation, all references to original sin disappear. Original sin tries to reconcile an adult phenomenon with an infant's experience. But read from infancy back to adulthood, original sin either becomes exclusively a childhood phenomenon, or it is so overshadowed by adult personal sin that it flies beneath the radar of the revised rites. It's just as well: A survey of the history of original sin will reveal we used to teach it was transmitted by intercourse and contributed to the sinfulness of the sexual act, whether or not it was conjugal or even pleasurable. No one wants to open that closet door.

These theological assumptions do not stir pride in every Catholic breast. Encrusted with medieval notions of demonology and the worthlessness of unbaptized human life, they badly need rethinking in an age of religious pluralism and modern psychology. Rushing all hands on deck to celebrate the next exorcism may cause us to slip rather than shine.

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

Before searching for solutions, we must say clearly what has been implied here: The restored catechumenate, marvelous as it is, frequently misses the mark when applied to contemporary religious experience. For it to work, it must be adapted, and is being wonderfully adapted throughout the world to make it fit modern needs.

The main reason is that today's religious skyline differs from that of the third century in two immense ways: the number of baptized non-Catholics joining our church, and the number of infants baptized in the Catholic church who grow up without catechesis. The third century church faced a fairly common need: how to bring people from Judaism or pagan religions into Christianity. Yes, we still have that need, but it pales before these larger issues: How do we welcome baptized non-Catholics to our communion table? How do we ritualize a belated coming to faith for Catholic uncatechized adults who were baptized as infants? This is not

just the issue in your parish church. This is the crux of the problem throughout most of the Christianized world, especially that restless giant of Catholicism: Latin America. The restored catechumenate, however, focuses its attention on the third century problem of the non-baptized (a small percentage of those who wish to approach our communion table), and supports itself on many a medieval doctrine.

Consider the disparities: Dismissing catechumens in the third century helped create a sense of surprise at the Easter Vigil when the newly baptized would experience the liturgy of the eucharist for the first time, and the element of surprise contributed to the need for mystagogy; today, we encourage visitors to come to Mass. Although heresy and schism crippled the unity of the early church, today's multiple Christian religions embarrass the body of Christ and weaken its impact in the global political scene. The third century church largely baptized adults, along with some infants; today we largely baptize infants, along with some adults. We fed fuel to the fire in the evangelization of the new world with its unbridled baptism of infants and adults in unprepared families, and by creating a social expectation in virtually every Christianized corner of the world that if you have a baby you get it baptized.

So before adapting these rituals again, it's imperative to ask how useful they are on the contemporary scene.

What to do with our candidates? They have a few adapted rites in the American edition of the ritual text, and they are not invited into some of the most expressive rituals we have because they've already celebrated the biggie, baptism. We tell them they're privileged. They feel forlorn.

Several solutions are possible:

1) Adapt all the rites.

This solution (essentially that of Jim Dunning) suggests that since the journey is the same (spiritual conversion) and the goal is the same (church membership), the rites should be the same. To make this solution work, all the texts need to be rewritten. One simply cannot pray the scrutinies as they appear in the ritual text for those who are already baptized. They'd virtually announce that their baptism, contrary to Jesus and St. Paul, was worthless.

The problem with this solution is how far do you go? Do you (gulp) adapt baptism itself? Many of our candidates would love to be baptized again, because this life commitment helps them meet a real turning point. But we know that baptism into the life of Christ is a once and for all experience. Nonetheless, if the journey is the same and the goal is the same, the ritual itself should look mighty similar. The gulf between the full immersion of a catechumen and the unmoistened sprinkling of a candidate proclaims that the spiritual journeys were

very different. That's not our experience in the spiritual direction of those approaching our church.

2) Develop a new complex of rituals for candidates.

This solution would honor the importance of baptism for catechumens while proposing a similarly dramatic series of rituals for those who are already baptized. Such rituals might be useful even for very active Catholics who need to express their recommitment to faith at different stages of life's journey. The adapted rituals in the text are just too wimpy to fit the extraordinary conversion our candidates experience.

Regarding scrutinies, adapted exorcisms may not be the best solution. Exorcising the faithful creates a "devil-made-me-do-it" mystique around sin. It invites one to feel released from the culpability of sin. What may serve us better is not exorcisms, but penance rites, rituals that invite us to confess our sin--both personal and social. The advantage of the penance rite is that it may actually offer forgiveness, a feature exorcisms lack. So the focus of the rite may be off how awful we are and onto how merciful God is, who even now extends forgiveness to the faithful.

3) Minimize the rituals for candidates.

This solution asks why are we making it so difficult for the baptized to come to our communion table? The rite of reception itself suggests "that no greater burden than necessary is required for the establishment of communion and unity (473)." Yet we are quick to say: Wait for Easter, join our groups, get a sponsor, sign the book, kneel for exorcisms, (get sprinkled,) and come to mystagogy sessions for another year.

Remember that the goal of the process is coming to full communion. The obstacle is often not the non-faith of the candidate, but the 400-year burden of too many Christian faiths. How anxious we are for whole churches to share communion together, yet how hesitant we are to let individuals eat with us. We are not powerless to bring on ecumenical unity; we are powerful in minimizing the requirements for full communion. By making a big deal out of candidates joining our church we actually set the ecumenical movement *back*. The baptized have a right to a common table. Who are we to stand in the way?

The spiritual journey we ask of candidates is no less than the spiritual journey we ask of every Christian. It need not culminate in initiation. It could culminate in a ritual of renewal common to the baptized.

That there is no clear solution right now should not cause us dismay. The restored catechumenate is new on our church scene. We need time and experience with it to see where it fails and where it succeeds. A thoughtful

evaluation of what we believe about baptism, the spiritual nature of the human person, and the anthropological demands of ritualized conversion will help us see the light. And that light will be Christ.

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