

Dismissals in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

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The very word “dismissal” sounds inhospitable. Why on earth would we dismiss from the liturgy the very people we are inviting into a lifetime at the eucharistic table?

The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* allows - even promotes - the practice: “Ordinarily, however, when they are present in the assembly of the faithful [catechumens] should be kindly dismissed before the liturgy of the eucharist begins (unless their dismissal would present practical or pastoral problems)” (RCIA 75/3). The dismissal is also noted in the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens (44 and 67), any time the catechumens are present for the Liturgy of the Word at the Sunday eucharist (83/2), and during the Rite of Election (123).

Sample texts are provided in RCIA 67. These samples cover three circumstances: dismissal from a celebration in which the faithful will remain for the Liturgy of the Eucharist (A), permission to remain through the Liturgy of the Eucharist (B), and the dismissal of all present because no Liturgy of the Eucharist will follow (C).

The dismissal of catechumens is rare in the United Kingdom. In the United States, it would not be surprising to witness one following the homily at a Sunday eucharist, but the custom is by no means universal.

The idea for dismissing catechumens is quite ancient. Evidence from the third to fourth centuries comes from both West and East, the *Apostolic Tradition* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. Both are church orders; that is, they contain collections of rubrics and suggestions for governance. The *Apostolic Tradition* presents an elaborate description of the entire catechumenal process and the rites of initiation. Although the origins of this document are complex and disputed, the *Apostolic Tradition* is generally thought to preserve the thinking of the Roman Church at a very early stage. Not long ago, the presumed author was Hippolytus; however, scholars now doubt that the man who became both saint and antipope was the same person who collected the work now known as the *Apostolic Tradition*. The work had been lost for many centuries. Discovered in the mid-nineteenth century, its significance came to light in the early twentieth. By the time of the Second Vatican Council, it became a motherlode of material for *ressourcement*, the movement to go back to the sources.

Without question the *Apostolic Tradition* had a profound impact on the group preparing the revised baptismal rites for adults. Up to the twentieth century, the various patristic preparatory rites had been collapsed into one lengthy celebration together with baptism. The driving force behind the revised rites aimed to untangle them, and to let them each stand on their own. Hence, the

Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens and the Rite of Election came into position as sentinels on either side of period of the catechumenate. Scrutinies and presentations were restored for the season of Lent. Priests were given permission to confirm adults whom they baptized, and the three sacraments of initiation were celebrated together in one glorious night. All of these post-Vatican II practices had appeared in some form in the *Apostolic Tradition*.

So did dismissals. And that is probably why the group restoring the catechumenate and the initiation rites for adults included them in its work. During the period of formation, a catechist prayed for the catechumens, imposed hands on them, and dismissed them. They were not to stay for the eucharist. They were not to exchange the kiss of peace - a bonding gesture sacred among Christians.

Similarly, the *Apostolic Constitutions* included a dismissal of catechumens. This Church order came from fourth-century Syria, probably a contemporary in the East of the *Apostolic Tradition* in the West. Its style of praying is more prolix, and the ceremonies are even more elaborate. The *Apostolic Constitutions* envisioned four dismissals from the liturgy: catechumens, energoumens (those possessed by demons), penitents, and finally the faithful. Deacons sent these groups forth at different times of the celebration. Catechumens received an imposition of hands before departing. Handlaying was probably inspired by biblical practices; for example, Ananias imposed hands on Saint Paul shortly before baptizing him (Acts 9:17-18; 22:12-16).

By the fifth century, Saint Augustine was practicing dismissals. In Sermon 132, he noted that catechumens could attend the word service with the faithful, but not the eucharist. Because Augustine carries so much authority in the history of the development of doctrine, his liturgical practices were also influential in the post-Vatican II reforms. The practice of the *Apostolic Tradition* and the *Apostolic Constitutions* should have provided sufficiently convincing evidence for the restoration of dismissals in the twentieth-century Church. That Augustine also practiced dismissals surely sealed the deal.

Why did the early Church dismiss catechumens? Augustine says in the same sermon that he hoped the practice would make them curious. By not participating in the eucharist, they would naturally wonder what they were missing. This intrigue would keep them returning for instruction so that they could one day be admitted to the rest of the liturgy through the waters of baptism.

Fourth-century Christians probably wanted to protect their privacy. They were subject to much misunderstanding and persecution, difficulties that catechesis would remedy. Consequently, they did not admit the uninitiated into the eucharist, nor did they share the Creed with just anyone. Only those being made ready for baptism were given the Creed, and that was done orally. They did not write it down, for fear it would fall into the hands of the uncatechized, who would misrepresent the nuances of what Christians believed. The body of catechesis came to be known as the *disciplina arcani* - the learning of the secret.

Today, of course, such a plan is completely unreasonable. The body of Christian teaching is widely available, as is access to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Anyone can read the Catechism of the Catholic Church online or walk into a Catholic Church on Sunday to witness the entire celebration of the mass. In fact, both these possibilities are considered positive modes of evangelization. Today's Church has many ways of explaining belief and defending misrepresentations of it. Such methods were not accessible to the earliest generations of Christians.

So, why do the revised rites of initiation include a dismissal? Quite honestly, part of it probably had to do with the lure of returning to the sources. If it worked for the early Church, perhaps there was something there of value today.

More importantly, the RCIA sees dismissals as an outreach of pastoral care. When the revision was under development, the group at work knew about the experience of missionaries in non-Christian countries. They felt that the Catholic initiation rite for adults compared inadequately with the elaborate, multi-staged initiation rites of non-Christian circles. A Christian initiation in steps would be attractive to people familiar with this form of belonging. Because of its desire to help missionaries in the non-Christian milieu, the RCIA presumes that the unbaptized are people quite unfamiliar with the Christian way of life - and with Christian prayer. If they do not understand the grammar of the liturgy, it may be better for them to remain in formation longer before entering the community's eucharistic worship. For example, when the RCIA speaks of celebrations of the word that may take place during the period of the catechumenate, it lists one goal as preparing catechumens "gradually to enter the worship assembly of the entire community" (82/4). The RCIA fears that catechumens would not yet be ready for Christian prayer, and a dismissal was offered as pastoral care to help them prepare for assisting at the eucharist at some future date.

In the practice of dismissals, though, other values have come to light. Parish churches have found that both groups - catechumens and the faithful - enter more deeply into the work expected of them. Catechumens generally are not simply dismissed *from* the liturgy; they are dismissed *into* catechesis. They generally go someplace with a catechist who helps them reflect more deeply on the Word of God that they just heard proclaimed and preached. Often this guided faith-sharing becomes an important way for catechumens to express how God is active in their lives from week to week.

This idea is foreshadowed in the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. After the signations, the celebrant invites the new catechumens to enter the church building - or some other place where the liturgy of the word will be celebrated. He says, "come into the church, to share with us at the table of God's word" (RCIA 60). Then, when they have reached their places, he speaks again to help them understand "the dignity of God's word, which is proclaimed and heard in the church" (61). These statements indicate the importance of the Word of God in the formation of catechumens. A dismissal after the Liturgy of the Word will give the catechumens the opportunity to give this formation a stronger foundation.

Furthermore, the faithful who remain for the Liturgy of the Eucharist enter into the part of the mass for which their baptism has prepared them.

1. The Creed is the first activity that follows the dismissal. Catechumens who have not received the Creed nor professed it in their baptism do not yet own it. But the Creed unifies the baptized, who share a common faith.

2. The prayer of the faithful (the universal prayer or the bidding prayers) is just that: the prayer that belongs to the baptized faithful. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal explicitly makes this point (69). This prayer is an exercise of the priestly ministry by those who are baptized and anointed as Christ was anointed priest, prophet and king. Just as a priest prays, so do the priestly people. Each time the people answer “Hear us, O Lord,” or some other variation on that response, they are addressing God and praying as the baptized faithful.

3. The collection is a symbol of the sacrifice that the people are making to God in Christ. They believe that the sacrifice of the cross was the perfect act of praise, and they will now unite their own sacrifice with that of Christ. Placing money in the basket is a sacred Christian sacrificial act expressing belief in the power of the cross.

4. In the eucharistic prayer, the faithful join with the priest in giving praise to God and offering the sacrifice (GIRM 78). Again, they are exercising their baptismal priesthood.

5. The Lord’s Prayer is the prayer of God’s own children. Many catechumens have already been praying it on their own, but through their baptism they will become children of God in a more profound way, reborn through the waters of life. After their baptism they will join the faithful in praying “Our Father,” as they number themselves among the body of believers.

6. The sign of peace, as the *Apostolic Tradition* indicates, is a symbol shared among baptized Christians. It is not a polite expression of greeting, nor a time to exchange messages, nor a brief intermission. Rather, it is a deep indication of the unique bond shared among Christians. The kiss of peace foreshadows the sacrament soon to come.

7. The sharing of communion is the most profound expression of Christian belief and unity. Only the baptized are invited to share at the table of the Lord’s Body and Blood.

8. At the dismissal, the faithful are sent forth as a body, nourished with the eucharist, to bring the gospel to the world. Their dismissal is different from that of the catechumens. In this Sunday gathering, the faithful have shared more. Now they in turn share more of their lives and faith with the world.

Thus, the reason catechumens are dismissed is not simply that they are not eligible for communion. They are not sacramentally equipped to do all that is expected of the faithful as the Liturgy of the Eucharist gets underway. Before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council the Liturgy of the Word was called the

Mass of the Catechumens, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist was called the Mass of the Faithful. Although these terms are no longer used, the purpose of the parts of the mass can be plainly read through them.

Practically speaking, then, how can parishes practice the dismissals? First, the RCIA never suggests that validly baptized candidates for the Rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church be dismissed from the liturgy. Because they are already baptized, they may partake in the Liturgy of the Eucharist - except, of course, for receiving communion. But as baptized members of the faithful, they may join the Creed, the prayers, the peace and the dismissal of others with whom they share baptism. However, baptized candidates will sometimes ask to be dismissed together with catechumens. Because they will not be sharing in communion yet, they often find that the time of sharing faith around the lectionary readings is a profitable spiritual exercise for them.

The catechist who leads the session ideally will also be participating in another mass that weekend, so that he or she may share the eucharist, be nourished for the spiritual life, and set an example for those undergoing formation. It means that this person participates in a “mass and a half” in order to serve the needs of catechumens. If this ministry is shared among several catechists, the burden will not be too great.

In communities where this is difficult, some other solution may be sought. For example, a homebound catechist unable to join the community at mass might welcome the catechetical group for a session away from the church. Or the session could take place between masses, instead of during one. In this case, there is no dismissal from the Sunday assembly; the catechumens meet for their own Liturgy of the Word and are dismissed directly from it. Or, if the members are willing and able, the group could remain in another room near the church and engage in self-directed sharing until the Liturgy of the Eucharist is complete. Another option is that, having participated in the Liturgy of the Word at the parish Sunday mass, they simply go home. The RCIA does not command that they be dismissed into a catechetical session.

One of the most frequent objections to dismissals is raised by pastors, catechists and members of parish RCIA teams. The word sounds offensive. Why should we dismiss? Why be inhospitable to this group?

In practice, many people find that the fears of inhospitality are felt more by RCIA teams than by the catechumens. Many of them are fine with the dismissal. It makes sense to them. They appreciate having the time apart. If the team is concerned about how this might feel, the first step is to ask the catechumens. Find out what they think. They may surprisingly agree that their dismissal is a good idea.

At the end of the homily, the catechumens leave their places and come forward toward the presider’s chair. A catechist may join them, perhaps taking up the Book of the Gospels from the ambo. The priest may offer one of the prayers of exorcism (94) or blessing (97). He may on occasion anoint with the oil of catechumens (102). Or he may omit all those options for prayer. He sends the

group forth, using a formula such as the one in 67A. In some communities, the musicians lead an antiphon. There are many possibilities for this song, but the Rite of Acceptance includes at different moments (RCIA 60 and 62) Psalm 34 (“Come, my children, and listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord”) and Psalm 33 (“Happy the people the Lord has chosen as his own.”) Ideally the selected text praises God more than it extends the community’s apologetic comfort to those leaving the room.

The word “dismissal” does sound like the word “dismissive”, so it can appear inelegant. However, the entire mass concludes with a dismissal of the faithful. The word is related to the word “mission”, and it implies that, upon leaving this place, there is work to do. Even the catechumens have work to do. They may be profitably sent forth after the Liturgy of the Word to continue their formation and to tell others what they are discovering in their search for life in Christ.