

Initiation at a Missouri Prison

Celebrated in a State prison, the rites of initiation can move hearts as deeply as they do in a parish church. You don't have all the advantages that a church offers: a spacious sanctuary, the participation of a large assembly, a rich environment highlighting the seasons of the year, and the generous use of symbols. Nonetheless, the initiation rites are fundamentally about interior conversion, and even when they are celebrated in meager surroundings, if the catechumen's intent is sincere, the celebration will move hearts.

Here in Cameron, Missouri, I serve as a volunteer in corrections at a local State prison for male offenders. Catholics have access to our prison's interdenominational chapel twice a week for up to two hours on each occasion. Another volunteer offers a catechetical session on Sundays for a handful of Catholic offenders, and I preside for the eucharist on Wednesdays when about 25 participants come. I've done this for 9 years. Our mass is bilingual. No one objects. The guys take up ministries and pray reverently during the service. They appreciate this oasis in the middle of their week.

Once in a while, someone wants to be baptized. I admit that my experience in the prison is limited. My purpose here is to share with you some of the challenges we have faced in our situation. It may be similar in other prisons, or it may be quite different. Prison life is not as uniform as you might think. For what it's worth, here are some of the situations I have faced in our initiation ministry.

Catechesis is always possible and most often fruitful – as long as the offender intends to grow in the spiritual life. We have helpful printed materials at our disposal. The ones I saw when I first arrived seemed rather shallow to me. We improved these through a combination of gifts received and purchases made. All religious groups within our prison have a budget for acquiring materials, but the process is not easy, and it's not quick. Our requests have to be approved, then ordered, and then received. None of these

steps moves very quickly, and sometimes the request we make is denied – but we do not find out about it for months at a time. Patience pays off, though. There is plenty of time in a prison, and it can be used well.

Our catechetical sessions are not restricted to those who seek baptism. We have only one opportunity for catechesis each week, so we encourage all Catholic offenders to come. Very few do, but they all seem enriched by the experience. As in the parish, a typical adult seeking baptism in our part of the world has learned quite a bit about God, Jesus, and the bible long before we meet. Catechesis for baptism steers a path through the lectionary and the fundamental teachings of Christianity. If an offender does not come for these sessions, we can assume that his intent was not sincere. We do not have all the options for catechesis-in-action that catechumens in a parish do: no volunteering at the local food pantry, no visits from the Knights of Columbus, no service day to mow the lawns of elderly neighbors.

In a related case, a man I'll call Peter told me he wanted to make his first communion. He was in his mid-20s, was baptized Catholic as an infant, but never had the opportunity to receive communion. I told Peter to come to the catechetical sessions. He agreed. We haven't seen him since. Now, this could be disinterest on his part, or it could be disorganization, or he may have a conflict with other responsibilities, or he may have transferred to another prison. I'm not sure. But we'll be there for him if and when he comes back.

This uncovers another difficulty with providing catechesis in prison. We cannot be sure how long an offender will remain in our care. He may be transferred to another of the State's facilities, often without much notice. We can begin catechesis, but we may not be able to finish it. We once had a fellow, whom I'll call Thomas, who showed up new for mass one night. Thomas told me he had been preparing for reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church (OK, he didn't use those words), and was all set to be received when he got transferred to Cameron. I asked Thomas for the name of the volunteer who was helping him. He told me. I called that volunteer. He verified the story. So our volunteer conducted a little catechesis to make sure that she experienced the same thing the other volunteer did. Then I received Thomas into the Church.

In prison, the first rubric from the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens always brings a smile to my face: “The candidates, their sponsors, and a group of the faithful gather outside the church” (RCIA 48). Believe me, our guys would love nothing more! But we have to choose another place, “some other site suitable for this rite.” For us, that’s near the back row of our chapel.

In the parish, we like to use the complete option for the signing of the senses (RCIA 56), touching the ears, eyes, lips, breast, shoulders, hands and feet of the new catechumen, after signing the forehead. But in prison, this is not always a good idea. In general, we volunteers have been trained to touch offenders with no more than a handshake. Besides, it is hard to know what the offender’s peers may make of this ritual, how they might talk about it, and how other offenders might misinterpret it. In the context of a religious ceremony, we could probably do all the signings, but a more limited approach may be more prudent.

Anointing with the oil of catechumens is a possibility. But I have to carry the oil on the day I use it in a plastic container. I cannot bring glass inside. And I cannot store the oil at the prison. Each religious group has its own locker, but we can only keep the items permitted by the State of Missouri. The oil of catechumens is not among them.

The Rite of Election poses serious logistical problems. In our diocese, the catechumens sign the book of the elect at the cathedral ceremony. In a past experience at the prison, the catechumen handily asked one of the Catholic volunteers to be his godparent. That godparent attended the cathedral celebration and signed the book of the elect on behalf of the catechumen. In dioceses where catechumens sign their names to papers that are presented to the cathedral, another option presents itself. The offender can sign his own name, and the paper could be brought with others to the cathedral celebration.

The only challenge we face with the scrutinies is that I am usually not in the prison on Sundays, the preferred day for their celebration. But the lectionary, foreseeing some difficulty, offers optional masses for weeks 3, 4

and 5 of Lent, at which the scrutiny readings may be proclaimed on a weekday. We have used these.

The presentations of the Creed and Lord's Prayer offer no difficulties. These ceremonies can take place easily behind bars. However, the preparation rites of Holy Saturday do not work well because in my situation I do not have access to the prison chapel on that day. For me, it makes more sense to conduct these before the baptismal liturgy begins.

You have probably already figured out that baptism will not take place at the Easter Vigil. I don't have access to the prison chapel on Saturday nights, and even if I did, I would be celebrating that night at the parish church. An alternative baptismal occasion would then be Easter Sunday, when we usually do schedule a mass. The other volunteers and I give up part of Easter with our families in order to do this. Honestly, we don't mind, but there is one large obstacle to baptizing in prison at mass on Easter Sunday night: the font.

Oh, I could administer baptism by pouring. But I like baptism by immersion. And, believe it or not, our prison chapel has an immersion pool. I'm not making this up. Imagine, if you will, a 3-foot deep bathtub inside a wooden box. During most of the year, the top of the box is locked, and the tub has no water. But for baptisms – remember, this is an interdenominational chapel – the top is removed, the tub is exposed, and it is filled with water. Now imagine that the bottom of the tub is shallow except for the area at one end. There the bottom of the tub takes a sharp drop of a foot or so where you expect the drain to be. To administer baptism, volunteers help the offender into the tub. He puts his feet in the deep end, faces away from the rest of the tub, and sits down in the water on the tub's long raised bottom. Just like that, he is poised for baptism by immersion. I take his upper torso backwards into the water three times while reciting the baptismal formula.

It's a brilliant piece of work, this baptismal font. But to use it, it has to have water, and the persons who fill the font do not work on Sundays, much less on Easter Sunday. So I have administered baptisms there on Wednesday of Easter Week. It was the best we could do.

“It is most desirable” that the newly baptized receive communion under both kinds (RCIA 243). But not in prison. Offenders are not allowed to drink

any alcohol, even after it has been consecrated. I would like to offer them the blood of Christ under the form of mustum (unfermented grape juice permitted at mass for those who cannot tolerate alcohol), but the State will not let the offenders drink anything I bring in, and I cannot bring in such a liquid outside of its own bottle, and the bottles of mustum are large, and they are made of glass. Besides, receiving under both forms is not essential for communion, and if it's not essential, the prisoners are not getting permission for it. Case closed.

Still, the baptisms have been glorious. The new Catholics feel a genuine welcome by the rest of the community, and they sense participation in Christ as they never have before.

Prison initiation ministry is never easy, but the case I have on my mind right now involves an offender I'll call John. John has been coming to the weekly mass quite regularly ever since he transferred into our prison. He participates well. He receives communion faithfully. He visits easily with the guys and the volunteers before and after the service.

He asked us a few months ago if we could prepare him for confirmation. Yes, we can do that. In these cases, after the catechesis is complete, I ask the bishop for permission to confirm, and he readily grants it. We need some basic information, of course, such as a copy of the baptismal certificate.

I asked John where he was baptized. He didn't know, but he talked on the phone frequently to his mother, and he'd ask her. That conversation shocked him. His mother said, "You never were baptized." John couldn't believe it. His grandmother got on the phone. "It's true," she said. They never got around to it.

So, here I am, scratching my head over a faithful communicant who has never been baptized. I admitted John into the order of catechumens last week, but the friend he asked to be his sponsor, let's call him James, got some surprising news of his own shortly after that mass. "Pack your bags," the guards told him. "You're being transferred to another prison." John needs a new sponsor.

I will probably baptize John outside the Easter season. Normally, I think it is best to baptize adults at the Easter Vigil, but prison life is just not normal.

And given John's background, I think it is unnecessary and unreasonable to delay his initiation.

Each of these prisoners is incarcerated because he committed a crime. He has left a trail of victims behind him. The lives of those victims have been forever changed for the worse because of offenders like those I see in Cameron. When a man goes to prison in Missouri, he loses many of his rights. This is important for the safety of our whole society. Some of those rights affect the initiation ministry of the Catholic Church. Not every offender makes a sincere conversion. But some of them do. And when they do, I like to think that we volunteers are bringing them the face of Christ, a face that challenges them to renounce Satan and to believe in God.

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