

What's the Best Model for Parish Life?

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The catechumenate stands out among all other forms of catechesis. It brings someone from outside to inside the body of Christ. It concerns full conversion: a turning around. It takes those pointed West, and faces them East. It changes those committed to worldly pursuits into disciples of Jesus.

This drama is sometimes lost. Look at a list of parish ministries, and you may find the catechumenate sharing equal space with marriage preparation, ushers, and scout troops. To some people, it looks like just another program – just another opportunity for volunteers, just another reservation on the parish calendar, just another thing that eats time at Sunday mass.

But the catechumenate should stand out. The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) states that the catechumenate is the model of the Church's catechizing activity (90). It is not one example of catechesis. It is the model.

Catechizing the unbaptized differs from catechizing the baptized. The baptized derive their formation from the sacraments they have received. Through baptism, they are already members of the body of Christ, disciples turned toward him who is their life. The baptized are not perfect. We sin. But our formation does not introduce us to Christ; it develops the relationship we already have.

Still, there are elements of the catechumenate that inspire other catechesis in the life of the Church. GDC 91 enumerates five. Here they are, along with some questions to ponder about life in your parish:

1. Catechesis reminds the Church of the importance of initiation. Pastoral care includes catechesis for and the celebration of baptism, confirmation and eucharist. How well is this understood in your parish? Does the baptismal font have a central location in the church? Are baptisms celebrated at Sunday mass? Are godparents invited to return as the sponsors when their godchildren are confirmed?
2. Catechesis is the responsibility of the entire Christian community. It is not for priests and catechists alone. Do you recognize all the catechists of your parish? Not just those directly involved in religious education, but those who prepare couples for marriage, those preparing children for baptism, coaches who teach good sportsmanship, and parents who suffer personal sacrifices to teach moral behavior to their children?
3. Catechesis is completely permeated by the mystery of Christ's Passover. The Easter Vigil is the focal point of our liturgy and catechesis. In your parish, how does attendance at the Easter Vigil compare with that of other Easter masses? Which parish groups participate in the Easter Vigil? How do the organizations in the parish support the ministry of baptism?
4. Catechesis is the locus of inculturation. When the Word became flesh, Jesus took on the cultural aspects of a particular people. Catechumens come to us together with their cultural ties. All catechetical activity incorporates different people into the catholicity of

the Church. How are ethnicities respected in your various parish organizations? Does the parish staff reflect the diversity of the community you live in? To look at your parish, is it clear that Christ came to save everyone?

5. Catechesis is a process of formation and a true school of faith. Catechumens undergo a period of formation prior to baptism, but they continue their formation throughout their Christian life. Their catechesis is directly linked to the liturgy. It involves frequent interaction with the rest of the Christian community. In your parish, how do adults learn about their faith? How enriching is the preaching? What materials go into the bulletin or on the website? How do those who worship on Sunday also receive catechesis through the week?

Some other points worth considering:

1. The Church exists to evangelize. The catechumenate depends on our invitation to others. How does your parish evangelize? Do you just wait for someone to call? Are most of your catechumens married to a Catholic spouse? How does your parish actively reach out to invite others in?
2. People learn with others, especially with a sponsor. The catechumenate models how one person guides another. Does your pool of sponsors grow from year to year, or are you using the same ones over and over?
3. Catechesis means discipleship, and discipleship implies service. Catechesis is not just about the head. It puts hands to work. How does your parish serve the community? How much service are people doing on their own? How are people discerning their gifts and using them for the sake of others?

If it seems that the catechumenate in your parish is taking up a lot of time, resources, staffing and volunteers – well, it should. A well-honed catechumenate will stand out among other parish ministries, and it will inspire all other catechesis in the parish. Catholics will learn about the centrality of their baptism, the joy of discipleship, and the call to service.

The Four Stages of Growth

The catechumenate follows four stages of growth.

1. Evangelization. People learn about the presence of God, the coming of Christ, the beauty of the Scriptures, and the concept of prayer.
2. Catechumenate. People follow Christ through catechesis, worship, the community's way of life, and sharing their faith.
3. Purification and Enlightenment. Those in formation spend the season of Lent in spiritual preparation. They purify out whatever keeps them from Christ, and they enlighten and strengthen whatever leads them to him.
4. Mystagogy. Reflecting on their baptism, confirmation and eucharist, the neophytes gain deeper insights into their union with Christ.

Good Sponsors are Just Good Catholics

“Who me? Be a sponsor? You gotta be kidding.”

Nope. Not at all. You’d make a good one. Perhaps you think a sponsor is a know-it-all about the Catholic faith. Not true. Any good Catholic makes a good sponsor.

To join the Church, people need a guide, someone to show them the way. They need someone human who has struggled with faith and life, wrestled with temptation and doubt.

They need someone to show them around and introduce them, someone who knows that faith demands action.

Your faith prompts you to act. Perhaps it’s prompting you to become a sponsor.

The Family as a School of Faith

The catechumenate is the model for the catechetical activity, and its best features are performed by the average Catholic family.

The catechumenate suggests formation that is lifelong, centered on Christ, devoted to service, and rooted in prayer.

If your family prays together, learns together, serves together, and has fun together; if your family lives by certain standards and challenges others to do the same; if members of your family learn and serve, no matter how old they are; then your family is following the model of the baptismal catechumenate. They are showing what disciple demands: a lifetime.

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