

BALTHASAR FISCHER, 1912-2001

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The full catechumenate was reborn under the patient and learned direction of Balthasar Fischer. After the close of the Second Vatican Council the implementation of the council's wishes fell to many study groups. To revise the initiation rites, the fathers turned to Fischer, a former student of liturgical theologian Joseph Jungmann, and a professor at the seminary in Trier. Fisher was ordained to the diocesan priesthood for Trier, the birthplace of Ambrose, in 1936, and began his career as a professor in 1945. In 1961 he served on the preparatory commission for the council, and after the council he chaired the 12 members of Study Group 22, which revised the catechumenate.

In addition to Fisher, Group 22 included the following members (their nations of origin are in parentheses): Frederick MacManus, a diocesan priest from Boston and canonist at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. (United States); Aemilius Lengeling, a diocesan priest from Minister and professor at the university there (Germany); Ignatius Oatibia, a diocesan priest from Vitoria and professor at the seminary there (Spain); Boniface Luykx, OPraem, a specialist in the African experiences (Belgium); Aloysius Stenzel, SJ, a specialist in infant baptism and former professor at the Jesuit Faculty of Frankfurt (Germany); Aloysius Ligier, SJ, a professor at the Gregorian University in Rome (France); Joseph Lecuyer, CSSP, another professor in Rome (France); Jean Baptiste Molin, FMC, a specialist in the prayers of the faithful (France); Jacques Cellier, a diocesan priest and founder of the first modern catechumenate in Europe (France); and Corbinian Ritzer, OSB, a monk of the Abbey of Schftlarn, a specialist in the rites of matrimony (Germany). Xavier Seumois, one of the White Fathers promoting the catechumenate in Africa, served as secretary (Belgium). Together this group developed the revised order for the Christian initiation of adults from 1965 to 1969, in a series of reports and drafts. After the first round of meetings, Cellier, who would later become the national director of the catechumenate in France, succeeded Fischer as the chair.

At the beginning, however, Fischer helped educate people. Drawing on his study of the catechumenate's history, his knowledge of the Roman Ritual, his conviction of the relevance of the *Apostolic Tradition*, his sensitivity to tradition, and his commitment to pastoral advantage, Fischer taught the council fathers how the catechumenate had blossomed in the early church before undergoing the simplification of its structure. Aware of the missionary success with a catechumenate in stages and of the growing interest in modern Europe, he persuasively crafted a series of changes in the order for adult initiation that built on the insights of the optional 1962 order and dramatically altered the baptism of adults in the Roman Ritual for the first time since its publication in 1614.

The study group had authored a provisional text by 1966 and received approval from Rome to experiment with its application. Fifty pastoral centers in Japan, Indonesia, Mali, Togo, the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Rwanda, Zaire, Congo, Belgium, France, Canada and the United States received the new text and tested it until 1969. The study group reviewed the reports from these centers before finishing its work that year with a revised order. That order went to the

Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith, for Sacraments and for the Propagation of the Faith. Final approval waited for the revised order of confirmation, which was being handled by another study group. The congregations authorized a few revisions before the order of adult initiation went to Pope Paul VI for his approval, which he gave in 1972. After that the ritual was translated and adapted by episcopal conferences around the world with approval from the Vatican. The 1974 provisional English translation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* in the United States was replaced by the standard translation in 1988.

Throughout the period of its development (1965-1969), the new order received accolades and criticisms from those who experimented with it. Pastoral centers the world over praised its general structure, its division of preparation into two periods of formation, its relevance to contemporary needs, the improvement of its prayers, adaptations, options, new creations and the acknowledged role of catechists. However, they voiced many concerns they hoped would be clarified before its publication: the remoteness of the antiquated terminology, the need for promoting and not just permitting local adaptation, too little ritual involvement for catechists, the complicated steps, the appearance of a precatechumenate when some communities had none, the negative implications of its concept of conversion, the intricacy of the Rite of Acceptance, the inappropriateness of dismissals, the absence of rites in the catechumenate period, the artificiality of the Rite of Election and the presentations, the number and language of scrutinies, their repetitious prayers, imprecision about the minister and occasion of confirmation, the empty state of mystagogy, and the contradiction of saying the community should be involved when the rites gave them so little to do. The study group went to work on simplification and adaptation, but they hoped that experience with the rituals and reading the introductions to them (which had not yet been written) would clarify many of these matters.

Though published as liturgy, the concept of the catechumenate relied on catechesis. The document was born out of a liturgical need: Missionaries had already built a catechetical structure and they needed rituals to support it. However, once those rituals were in place, they sparked a revolution in catechesis and in the faith communities which gave birth to new members. Christiane Brusselmans (1930-1991) in Belgium, James B. Dunning (1937-1995) in the United States, and others in pastoral work promoted the catechumenate as a means for entire parishes to celebrate, catechize, form community and serve. They captured the spirit of the study group's intent, involving the entire community in baptismal preparation, not just the parish priest. As Balthasar Fischer liked to say, "Not the shepherds make sheep. Sheep make sheep."

Father Fisher's death in June of 2001 left behind a legacy in print, flesh and blood. The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* has enjoyed success beyond what he or the other council fathers imagined in both developed and developing countries. Theologians trained by him throughout the world were shaped not just by his teachings but by his person. He inspired his students to become thinkers with a love for the past, a commitment to the needs of the present and a vision for the future. His influence will continue to spread like ripples in a baptismal pool, Easter after Easter, generation after generation.

*God of mercy and love,
grant to Balthasar, your servant and priest,
a glorious place at your heavenly table,
for you made him here on earth
a faithful minister of your word and sacrament.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.*

<https://paulturner.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/fischer1.htm>