

Pondering the Journey

A Review of the Report

"Journey to the Fullness of Life"

[Article published in the May 2001, "Catechumenate"]

[vol 23, Number 3, pp 25-32]

"Journey to the Fullness of Life" is a report on the implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States. Published in October 2000 by the United States Catholic Conference in Washington, D.C., it summarizes a study authorized by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB).

The report mixes enthusiastic support for the restored catechumenate with concerns about its realization. It reads as both a trustworthy summary of the American experience and as an inexperienced walk through initiatory language. The study will have its value, but lacking specific proposals--much less a strategy for applying them--it seems perilously poised to occupy a space on the shelf with other nice reports.

There are two main divisions: executive summaries and bishops' committee responses. The first division summarizes the data received from each of the groups surveyed: people initiated into the church, diocesan and parish leaders, people who withdrew from formation, bishops of the United States, and diocesan offices.

The second division presents reactions by the five NCCB committees who sponsored the survey and its report: Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Education, Evangelization, Liturgy, and Pastoral Practices.

The entire report concludes by affirming that the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults "is renewing the life of the Church in the United States. . . . [The Rite] must continue to be a major priority in the local churches" (56). It then presents its four areas of concern: a need for ongoing formation, for greater distinction between catechumens and candidates, for early pastoral attention to irregular marriages and for adaptation of the rite.

Concerns about the Report

The report itself generates some concerns. The main point is hard to decipher, and it is unclear why the data was collected and for what purpose.

This was a massive study. Five committees of the NCCB co-sponsored it in April of 1997. In May yet another committee was formed with representatives from five East Coast dioceses and the North American Forum on the Catechumenate. They hired two consultants: Dr. Dean Hoge, director of the Life Cycle Institute at The Catholic University of America, and the Rev. Dr. Robert J. O'Donnell, CSP, director of the Paulist Institute for Religious Research.

The consultation was colossal. Every diocesan director of the catechumenate in the United States received information forms. Fifty-five percent of the dioceses responded. Eight regional consultations of 46 dioceses were convened to reach 152 diocesan leaders and 496 parish leaders, including 2 bishops and 75 priests and deacons. Seven hundred persons who joined the church returned surveys. One hundred seven who withdrew from formation answered questions by telephone. One hundred sixty-six Roman Rite diocesan bishops returned their surveys--a 94 percent response.

In a study of such proportions, a high response rate is rare, making the data collected most valuable. However, unless the purpose for collecting the data is clearly defined, it's useless and of little value.

There are other oddities with "Journey to the Fullness of Life." It mixes the experience of unbaptized catechumens with baptized candidates and Catholics who never completed their initiation. Although the responses could have been categorized, the respondents are lumped together for the report's conclusions.

There are some annoying editorial decisions, like the pervasive use of the acronym "RCIA," which the North American Forum, one of the consultative bodies, has urged the American church to abandon. The report also uses the alternative spelling "mystagogia" where the rite calls it "mystagogy." Hoge's introduction refers to "the five rituals" (8), an unexplained grouping completely unknown to the rite in its current or past forms. O'Donnell's report speaks of "liturgical celebrations of steps in the initiation process--the acceptance of catechumens, the welcome of candidates, and the Lenten scrutinies" (18), as if election and baptism are not steps in initiation and as if scrutinies are. Hoge also notes "the lack of follow-up after confirmation" (9), whereas follow-up should pertain more to baptism and Eucharist.

Then there are the photos. Several show appealing images of faith-filled seekers of divine union, and one depicts baptism by immersion (12). But the cover photo portrays baptism by pouring from a pitcher, though the National Statutes of the very same NCCB prefer immersion (#17). A fragile bowl of water (48) does little to connote the life-changing properties of baptism, and the white garments on the neophytes in the same photo show how badly we need garments that evoke the triumphant heavenly host versus an apron-clad kitchen crew. Most troubling, though, are the two photos that appear to illustrate the Rite of Election. In both cases (16 and 19) they depict a bishop signing a book that someone else is holding. Why a bishop is signing a book is not explained, nor are the identities of the people holding it for him. The rite of election is primarily about the signature of catechumens, yet they are missing.

As extensive as the consultation was, it still eliminated some important groups. Eastern rite bishops correctly pointed out that they do not follow the Roman rite of initiation, but the project then disregards the experience of the East (3). Furthermore, the youngest participants in the survey were 17 years old (5), leaving out those younger, who have reached catechetical age.

Conclusions of the Study

Making its way through the various summaries and responses, "Journey to the Fullness of Life" comes to its conclusions (56 - 58), which both praise contemporary practice and name the emerging challenges. These conclusions will resonate with the pastoral experience of many catechumenate ministers. Regarding the affirmations, yes, the catechumenate is renewing the life of the Church. Yes, it deserves priority of place in local churches. Regarding the challenges, ministers know these all too well. But they raise the following concerns:

1.) A Need for Ongoing Formation Continuing formation will surely enhance the catechumenal ministry. Interestingly, this concern pertains to the formation of the ministers more than to the formation of catechumens and candidates. The report gives absolutely no credence to the hypothetical fear that the catechumenate has watered down the content essential for proper formation in faith.

Mystagogy, called "the weakest" aspect of formation (39, 47, 57), is roundly criticized. The report seems to be looking for a mystagogy that promotes participation in parish ministries (15, 21). Not finding that, it concludes that this stage is weak. However, responses from participants with fewer than three weeks of mystagogy were no different from those with more (6), and neophytes' participation at Mass and involvement in ministries is "much higher than the Catholic average" (7). It makes one wonder why "[a] number of bishops indicate concern about having an effective mystagogia and keeping newly baptized and received Catholics active in the community of faith" (25). It appears that they should be less concerned about those baptized as adults and more concerned about those baptized as infants.

Mystagogy is defined in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults: "This is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the gospel, sharing in the Eucharist, and doing the works of charity" (244)--not specifically by signing up for a parish organization or attending more catechetical meetings. Mystagogy first appeared in the patristic church when there had been no catechesis about baptism and Eucharist prior to the celebration of the sacraments. Mystagogy was necessary because the neophytes needed explanations for what they experienced. Today no catechist, pastor or bishop would permit the baptism of someone unacquainted with the basics of these mysteries. The original purpose of mystagogy, formation about the sacraments, is now being addressed before baptism. Furthermore, the occasion for mystagogical catechesis in the early church appears to have been the homily at Eucharist. If neophytes participate in the Sunday Eucharist after their initiation, they will experience mystagogy with good preaching.

"Journey to the Fullness of Life" seems to have another kind of mystagogy in mind, and shakes its head in dismay that it does not exist. The report also ignores the important distinction between the newly baptized and the newly received. Mystagogy, in its precise sense, appears in the section of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults dedicated to the formation of those who are newly baptized. There is no "mystagogy" for the newly received.

2.) A Need for Greater Distinction between Those Preparing for Baptism and Those Seeking Full Reception into the Catholic Church The second concluding concern, ironically, promotes better distinction between catechumens and candidates. Good recommendations come from the bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (31). Its members deplore the dismissal of both baptized and unbaptized persons "after the Gospel" (surely they mean after the homily). And they question the presentation of a Bible to a Christian already familiar with the scriptures at the "Rite of Reception" (surely they mean the Rite of Welcoming the Candidates). The same committee also reminds the reader that the Rite of Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church suggests that candidates be initiated at a time other than the Easter Vigil (32). A change in pastoral practice in this regard would revolutionize the entire catechumenate.

3.) A Need for Early Pastoral Attention to Irregular Marriages The wording for this third area of concern is curious. This is not exactly the concern that came up through the survey. Diocesan and parish ministers involved in the catechumenate name "complications in divorce and remarriage cases" as the greatest obstacle (15) to the process. Parish leaders "express a need for diocesan direction and help, especially in dealing with marriage cases" (20). Those who withdrew from formation name among the greatest weaknesses of the catechumenate process "that it didn't clarify annulment issues at the beginning" (23). They recommend that the program should be individualized "to fit different life stages and marital statuses" (24). Their most common reason for discontinuing was "My spouse or I need an annulment" (24). Even the bishops noted "remarriage/annulment cases as impeding people's entry into the church" (26). With all of this evidence, the report concludes that the solution is "early pastoral attention" for annulments. Obviously, another conclusion could be drawn: that the current Roman Catholic procedures for annulments need evaluation because they are not completely meeting the pastoral needs of those who seek baptism or the full communion of the Catholic Church.

4.) A Need for Adaptation of the Rite (58) This final concern is the report's most radical. It recalls that the rite and its general instruction advocate adaptations "when pastoral needs arise" and urges all "to be open to such adaptation." It even summons the testimony of Pope John Paul II, who noted the great, rich diversity "of faith found among people of different ethnic backgrounds" in the United States. Then the report says the challenge "must be embraced by the local churches." In recent years, rare is the encouragement for adaptation apart from Roman-sanctioned proposals of episcopal conferences. Here, the bishops' own report attempts to clear the ground for adaptations to be made by local churches.

Adaptations for scheduling are already inherent in the rite for those who seek to use them. A year-round catechumenate would provide the flexibility sought by participants and team members (17, 20, 43). But, according to the study, 59 percent of parishes begin precatechumenate in September (28). If parishes offered precatechumenate throughout the year, and the Rite of Reception for candidates on several occasions each year, they could better tend the scheduling needs of those who seek union with the church.

What Is Not Developed

Although the report touches on many issues pertinent to the faith, it does not develop some themes.

Reasons for Joining

Worth noting are the reasons why people join the Catholic Church. The main motivation "is to unify an ecumenical or interchurch marriage" (7). Of married participants, a whopping 83 percent have Catholic spouses. The second strongest motivation is spiritual hunger related to family life, health, the death of a loved one, emptiness or an inspiring experience. Third is loneliness or a need for community. Diocesan and parish leaders add to this list the importance of invitations, publicity, and an experience of the Catholic community (14). The bishops' Committee on Evangelization emphasizes a welcoming community, the centrality of the liturgy and preaching, and personal and flexible ministry to inquirers (45). Interestingly, the Rite of Reception and the Vatican document *Dominus Iesus* assume something else. They assume that people are moving from a deficient experience of Christianity into the full communion of the Catholic Church. Baptized candidates have not picked up on that. They do not seek to escape deficient Christianity. They seek family unity, spiritual enrichment or community. To experience the unicity and salvific universality of the Catholic Church is not their motivation. This assumption limits the church's ability to reach and keep these people.

Obstacles

Obstacles to the faith are mentioned several times (e.g., 15, 23, 24). Contrary to what people might assume, they are not the sacrament of penance and devotion to the saints. The two main reasons people withdraw from formation are that they are too busy or they have remarriage cases. Preoccupation with too many concerns in life is standing in the way of union with the church. Life in the church may be even more counter-cultural than formerly assumed.

Catechumenate for Children of Catechetical Age

Very little is developed about the catechumenate adapted for children, which is part of the full vision of this ministry. The bishops' Committee on the Liturgy points out that the study failed to ask whether or not children of catechetical age are being confirmed, or whether--"contrary to the provisions of the Rite, its U.S. statutes, and the Code of Canon Law"--children are baptized and given communion, but their confirmation is deferred to a later age (49).

The Rite of Election

As the photographs of bishops with pen in hand suggest, the purpose of the Rite of Election is unclear. For many participants it provides their opportunity "to meet the bishop. In a celebrity-conscious society this conclusion is not surprising, but it misses the point of election, of being named among God's chosen people, called to the waters of baptism. One can only hope that the summary has misrepresented what bishops hold about this event: "Bishops overwhelmingly say that they view the diocesan celebration of the Rite of Election as a highlight of their liturgical and pastoral year" (26). Surely the bishops understand that baptism at the Easter Vigil, not the Rite of Election, should highlight their liturgical and pastoral year.

The American Adaptations

The report could have evaluated the adaptations in the rite that pertain to the United States. The decision to compose a series of rites for baptized candidates has blurred the distinction between them and catechumens. The combined rites, which hold the most inelegant titles in all Christendom, are cumbersome to execute and require further adaptation. The National Statutes discourage celebrating the Rite of Reception at the Easter Vigil (#33), but the combined rite (#562 - 594) has convinced Catholic parishes in the United States that this is how it should be done. An evaluation of this material could have led to improvements, but it did not happen.

As far as reports go, "Journey to the Fullness of Life" may have done all it can do: report the results of a sociological study. It affirms and challenges, but makes several missteps along the way, demonstrating its unfamiliarity with some aspects of its own subject. Having no stated origin and no clear destiny, it remains a nice report.