

The Courtship Analogy

by David Montgomery

It is typical that those who are just developing a catechumenate in their parish begin by teaching the congregation the technical jargon they deem necessary to the process. But, like many of the most institutional elements of the Church (e.g., clerical collars), the language can in fact turn out to be a hindrance. There will be very few members of the local church who are familiar with words like “catechumens,” “mystagogy,” or even, in the catechumenal sense, “conversion.” Many will find them one more proof of clericalism, that this “new program” is an unwelcome, imposed innovation. There is no question that many of the folks in our pews have a deep desire to understand faith better, but what they are generally looking for has less to do with theologically sophisticated words or concepts than the practical application of Christian faith in their daily lives.

I want to suggest that it is possible to introduce the catechumenate using language and images that the vast majority of our people already appreciate, by building on their own experience — like Jesus, who never once alienated himself from his listeners by using the technical, religious jargon of his day, but instead used their own experience of farming, fishing, keeping house and commerce. Even amongst well-educated members of the Church, theological language is usually foreign, and to use it gives the impression that baptism preparation is essentially about learning *information*. Not that it is unimportant, as one prepares for baptism, to gain some theological understanding, of course. But if we are attempting to foster and encourage and deepen the relationship our inquirers have with God and with God’s People, then technical language is definitely not the place to start.

While the catechumenate was developed in the early Church for adult converts, as it continues to be almost exclusively today, the fact of the matter is that the vast majority of those inquiring about baptism are parents of infants. Almost all the couples who inquire about baptism are folks who have recently been married and had a baby. Their experience of a growing relationship with each other is a wonderful resource for understanding the meaning of discipleship, and indeed is superbly analogous to catechumenal preparation for baptism. In fact, the stages of courtship match the stages of the catechumenate so well, precisely because they both follow a natural course of decision-making in relationships. Both processes are idiosyncratic; everyone follows them in their own ways. But generally they follow a similar pattern.

Flirting, the initial stage of courtship, involves noticing and being noticed. At least one of the two always tries to be as attractive as possible, in order that their advances might be welcomed. Depending on the level of courage, and past experiences will be influential, those advances may be bold or more subtle. And they will continue until either it is obvious the attraction is not mutual or until someone is brave enough to ask “Will you go out with me?” It’s a wonderful thing when the attraction is mutual.

Whether it happens within five minutes or two years, this threshold is absolutely pivotal to the relationship deepening. What happens from the moment the invitation is accepted is a new activity: of testing out the infatuation, checking values, trying levels of comfort — falling in love. And the only way this can ever be accomplished is simply by spending time together. This may involve occasional dates or an intensely passionate romance. But if it to progress to a deeper commitment, it must mean couples get to know each other better. In healthy relationships, they will have challenges,

perhaps even fights which must be overcome. Ultimately, another threshold naturally appears. Someone will ask, "Will you move in with me," or "Will you marry me?"

Again, if the relationship is to progress, this threshold is necessary, otherwise it will become one of those seven-year dating experiences on which bad situation comedies are modelled. When the answer to that question is yes, the relationship changes again. Now it is as if the two have already become one, it is, in some sense, as if they are already married. Now the commitment becomes real, if only in the sense that it allows couples the time they need to let it all sink in. In our culture, the period of engagement often appears to be little more than the time for making elaborate arrangements for the wedding celebration, but it is clear to everyone that the process of making decisions for The Big Day presents challenges to the relationship which must be tested, which are integral for the marriage to work. And, while everyone expects a wedding is inevitable once the engagement has been announced, it is a universally unstated assumption that engagements can (sadly) be broken. For most people, however, as the period of engagement progresses, another threshold occurs at the wedding.

It is then, at the wedding ceremony, that another question is asked which celebrates, but also deepens, the relationship. Even if couples have been living together for a number of years, expectations after the wedding often change. And couples who are lucky enough to celebrate the great anniversaries are the first to tell you they "had no idea what we were getting into when we got married." It is always a surprise.

Couples who have reached the next stage beyond marriage, affirming their commitment by the birth of a child, are ripe for understanding a catechumenal approach to baptism preparation. They know, for example, that if on their first date one of them had proposed and wanted to set a wedding date, the other would have thought they were crazy. Healthy courtship, while full of hope, is also open-ended. Couples understand that relationships take time to develop, and that there are threshold moments which both celebrate and propel the relationship to new levels. Intuitively, they know that *real* relationships mean commitment.

The catechumenate follows an analogous pattern to courtship, from the initial period of Inquiry, when people come to the church asking for baptism, trying their best to be who we will want. They will say the things they think we want to hear, and be the "good people" who they think make up the Church. Unfortunately, the Church too often appears icy and judgmental, making demands before we will even talk to inquirers, or passing out application forms as if preparation for baptism was little different from getting a mortgage. That is us at our most distressingly institutional. At our best, following the example of Jesus, we will accept all comers. It is a moment of revelation when the Church suddenly recognizes that *everyone* who asks about baptism has been brought to us by God. That changes everything.

But being open and accepting of all does not mean that we have to become "promiscuous." We don't have to baptize everyone simply because they've asked, like the person who will sleep with anyone because they are afraid they are unattractive. It is quite possible to be clear with folks about our "standards of behaviour," and still be accepting and loving. We have more than enough members who believe that Christian faith is about judgment; we want those who are joining (or having their children join) to appreciate just what kind of freedom following Jesus involves. We are

free not because we have believed or done “the right thing,” but because God accepts us for who as we are, accepting us “while we were still sinners.”

We have had generations of people whose children we baptized with little preparation. We have generations of folks who have almost no education in their faith, and pathetically little spiritual formation. The only way we will ever change things is to help newcomers to the faith deepen the relationship they already have with God, even if they don’t recognize it.

After we have affirmed inquirers, we welcome inquirers to the community of faith, a community of learners. All we ask at this stage is whether or not they are willing to spend some time with us. So the second stage of the catechumenate is analogous to dating. The primary activity in this period is getting to know each other, and this will involve informal conversations about our experience, what we believe, what we are challenged by, and what we are passionate about, as well as shared worship with God’s People.

When it is clear that there is no other place to go but discipleship, and this is discerned by the learner (as by those dating), the threshold rite of calling to be candidates is analogous to engagement. The etymology of the word “candidate” is informative. In ancient Rome a candidate for public office was identifiable by a white robe. So those who were preparing for baptism (when a white robe would be given) were “trying on the robe” — an analogy used by St Paul (Romans 13: 14).

Admittedly, it is unlikely, of course, that anyone coming to inquire about having their child baptized will be looking for anything analogous to courtship. More likely, they are wanting their child baptized with as little commitment to church-going as is possible. But isn’t that typical of God’s surprise, bringing unsuspecting folks to the Feast? If they are open to it, and we at St. Timothy’s have found that more often than not they are, they will discover more than they could ever have “asked or imagined.”

Even if most of those who approach us about baptism are not aware of it, we know that baptism is about relationships. But we act exactly like some frightened single person, afraid that we’re never going to find “The One.” In fact, for all our grumbling about people just wanting their babies “done,” and being “used,” we are getting from our relationship with those inquirers exactly what we put into it. The problem is *ours*, not theirs. We need to help inquirers reframe their questions, and look again at what it really means to be a baptized person. No doubt, if they are open to that, they will discover what they were really looking for but didn’t know, and find why God invited them in the first place.

The catechumenate follows a natural process of commitment-making. It can easily be compared to the stages progressed through in courtship:

Courtship *analogous with the Way to Baptism*

Stage One: Flirting *analogous with Inquiry*

Becoming aware of a dream:
initial attraction
attempts to get noticed

ends with question
Will you go out with me?" "Will you join in worship with us?"
(*Welcoming Rite*)

Stage Two: Dating *analogous with Learning the Way of Jesus*

Catching the dream:
spending time together
getting to know each other better
hearing each other's dreams and passions
regular church attendance

ends with question
"Will you marry me?" "Do you want to be baptized?"
(*Calling of Candidates rite*)

Stage Three: Engagement *analogous to Candidacy*

Committing to sharing the dream:
deliberate planning of life together

ends with
Wedding ceremony Baptism ceremony

Stage Four Wedded Bliss! *analogous to Sacramental Life*

Living the dream:
learning how to do it

The Way to Baptism is a spiritual exercise to help you prepare to renew your baptismal vows. Perhaps calling it a spiritual exercise seems a bit daunting. One way which might help you get your head around what will happen is to think about a similar spiritual exercise which you've already experience in courtship. As in courtship, certain things need to happen in each stage before you are ready to move onto the next and they are remarkably similar: sharing of experiences, learning to trust each other and developing common values. And, of course, people progress at the speed in which they are comfortable making commitments.

The Way to Baptism is based upon **relationships**, not information. It relies upon peer support, in the form of a parish sponsor who will:

- help you integrate into the parish community
- enable you to ask questions and get answers in a nonjudgmental way
- go through the whole process with you, meeting at convenient times in your home

The Way to Baptism **honours your experience**. We hold an assumption that God has been part of your life since the beginning and that you've had experiences which will make sense in the light of Christian faith. Adults learn best when they set their own agendas, so there are no "stupid questions." You are encouraged to ask whatever you need to know.

Like courtship, The Way to Baptism is **open-ended**. (Have you seen the ad where a guy starts making wedding arrangements on the first date? The commercial promises that with this new product you won't have to rinse your dishes before putting them in the dishwasher — "Now for a step you can *really* miss.") There are no commitments made by either the church or the family in the early stages. Inquirers are welcomed with no strings attached other than a willingness to try out each stage of the process you enter. The baptism date will be set at the approach to candidacy. The process flows at its natural speed. Though there is no set time period, most folks who've gone through the process (with their very busy schedules, and exhaustion with so little sleep after the birth of their child) take *at least* 6 months. In any case, since baptism is about "joining our parish family," what's the rush, when you're planning on being here anyway? People tell us that they have found it time very well spent.

The surprise and delight of The Way to Baptism process is the discovery that faith is not simply private and individualistic, but that God is found within human **relationships** and that our lives are infinitely enriched by living in the community of faith.