

# What *is* the Catechumenate?

*The process of making important decisions in our lives usually unfolds in stages of growing commitment. As people prepare for baptism — initiation into Christian discipleship — these stages may be described as:*

1. *Inquiry: questioning faith*
2. *Apprenticeship: learning to hear God's word and exploring Christian practice together*
3. *Candidacy: coming to terms with commitment to Christ*
4. *Commitment: deepening appreciation of the sacramental way of life.<sup>1</sup>*

*The catechumenate is a ministry that supports people as they grow in commitment to Christ, naturally moving through these stages, as described below.*

## **Stage 1: Inquiry (questioning faith)**

**The Inquiry Stage seems to operate most helpfully when these assumptions are made:**

1. that ultimately God has brought inquirers to the church, no matter what reasons are presented;
2. that parents seeking baptism for their baby will need to prepare to re-affirm their own baptisms (since they are making the vows on behalf of the infant, and since they are taking responsibility for the faith formation of the child);
3. that the whole catechumenal process is open-ended, and that there will be threshold moments when the Inquirer will choose to proceed to the next stage or to opt out (with an open invitation to continue at any time);
4. that ordinary Christians need to have their confidence and skills cultivated so they are able to identify the Good News of Jesus in their own lives, so that they can recognize those who are struggling to find meaning in their lives and who may be ready to hear the Good News;
5. that the development of authentic relationships between the Inquirer, the parish sponsor and the parish community, with a growing feeling of trust

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<sup>1</sup>Traditionally, these four stages have been called 'pre-catechumenate', 'catechumenate', 'purification and enlightenment', and 'mystagogy'. This language is confusing because it uses the the word 'catechumenate' both for the second stage and for the process as a whole. This document uses plain language.

in each other, is integral to this process, realizing that the willingness to be in trusting relationships is part of what we offer as a Christian community.

There is a whole range of possible first encounters, inside or outside the church building, at the initiative of an Inquirer or at the initiative of a member of the church (including parish clergy, leadership of the parish baptismal process, and especially ordinary Christian acquaintances). These informal and open-ended conversations are an integral part of the Inquiry stage, recognizing that normal social interaction is part of the sharing of the gospel, part of the calling of all Christians.

At some point in ongoing conversations, as friendship and trust increase, there may be a threshold moment where the Inquirer is encouraged to consider participation in groups exploring Christian spirituality, some association with the church, or baptism.

When the Inquirer acknowledges a desire to continue spiritual exploration with help from the church, he or she will be formally linked with a parish sponsor (who may or may not be the person with whom the Inquirer has already been talking). The sponsor will be a respectful listener, and the person with whom the Inquirer develops a relationship on behalf of the church: both hearing what is and isn't being said about what the Inquirer is looking for, what the Inquirer cares about most deeply, what wounds are in need of God's healing, what the Inquirer's life experience has been generally, as well as the Inquirer's experience of God, the church and baptism. The sponsor will help the Inquirer discern where God has been and is in his or her life, avoiding a lot of church and psychological jargon.

When the Inquirer is ready to acknowledge to the church a desire to learn the way of faith, is prepared to be associated with the church, and to become a Hearer of the Word of God in the context of the Sunday Liturgy, he or she will be welcomed as an Apprentice during the Sunday liturgy.

## **Stage 2: Apprenticeship (learning to hear God's word and exploring Christian practice together)**

This is a period of exploring and testing in which Apprentices have the opportunity to acquire an appetite for the rich and varied fare from the banquet that is the Christian life. This way they can develop their taste and passion for the Christian Way through their own experience. Apprentices will approach this in their own way, and initially follow their own interests, but under the guidance of their sponsors (and/or catechists) will be encouraged to broaden their experience and understanding. This stage may culminate in a recognition on the part of the Apprentices that they want to be baptized and become a disciple of the Lord. The "appetizers" may include:

**Deepening relationships:** The Christian community will help Apprentices meet people whose relationships reveal intimacy with God, encouraging and enabling them to deepen their own relationship with God.

### **Participation in public worship**

Through the worship of the Church, Apprentices will be introduced to who the Church is, and also be formed by the presence of Christ in the community at prayer.

### **Hearing the scriptures in liturgy**

Through the Liturgy of the Word, Apprentices will learn how to hear the public proclamation of scripture, and to connect it with their lives. Some experience of responding to scripture in a small group is important. If appropriate, after the readings and sermon Apprentices may leave the service for bible study with their sponsors.

### **Exploring Christian life skills**

Sponsors and catechists will spend time with Apprentices, showing them the skills that will enable them to develop confidence in their relationship with Christ. They will come to recognize how they have already developed these skills in their own way according to their particular gifts, and that their uniqueness is a contribution enriching the People of God and the tradition of Christ. Skills include:

**Praying:** Helping Apprentices to broaden their appreciation of what practices constitute prayer, and to develop increasing confidence for praying in a way that best expresses who they are in their own "voice".

### **Serving**

Participating in making the world more inclusive and just by sharing the burden of those in need, resisting evil systems, and honouring the integrity of creation.

### **Hearing the scriptures personally**

Discovering how scripture can resonate in their own lives and valuing their own response to God's word (as well as tradition and scholarship).

### **Forgiving**

Forgiving their own failures and imperfections, and forgiving others, as participation in God's limitless love.

### **Naming the Good News of Christ in their own life**

Growing in their understanding of Good News: how God offers all humanity forgiveness, wholeness and acceptance in Christ, and how that forgiveness, healing, wholeness and acceptance has been present in their own history, and is part of their current experience.

### **Accepting Mystery**

Exploring the ambiguities of life and faith, recognizing that the Christian Way is not so much dogmatically prescriptive as it is a process of nurturing the trusting relationship with God that is symbolized in the stories of faith.

### **Discerning**

Apprentices will discern with their sponsors (and other members of the church community as appropriate) how God is present in their lives and calling them, acknowledging the costs as well as the advantages of discipleship. Apprentices should explore what is being promised in the baptismal covenant, and what it could mean to make those promises in their own lives. When it is mutually clear that an Apprentice is ready to embrace the challenge of being formed into an actively committed Christian who is a partner in the covenant and a sacrament in the world, a date will be set for baptism and he or she will be named as a candidate during the Sunday liturgy. For those who will be baptised at Easter, this traditionally happens on the first Sunday of Lent.

### **Stage 3: Candidacy (coming to terms with commitment to Christ)**

The patterns of formation established in stage 2 (meeting with sponsor and/or catechist, participating in the Liturgy of the Word, and reflecting on that experience) continue in stage 3, but with an intentionally growing convergence with the life of the Christian community.

The candidates focus on discovering the personal relevance of particular gospel stories through which the Community of the Baptized is itself continuously converted.<sup>2</sup> This leads to a naming of the personal deliverance they seek, which will be symbolically expressed in the renunciations and affirmations of baptism. This leads further to reflection on the whole gospel story as summarized in the baptismal Creed within which the candidates' own stories of frustration and achievement, sorrow and joy, begin to find meaning and wholeness. In the case of those being baptized who cannot answer for themselves, this means that their parents and sponsors begin to identify those destructive forces, systems and illusions from which they hope their child will be saved, and their hopes of what this New Life will bring to their child.

As they reflect upon both the promises of the baptismal covenant, candidates are challenged to be concrete and specific about how their lives will change upon entering

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<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, there are three gospel stories at the heart of this stage in the process: the Woman at the Well (John 4); the Healing of the Man Born Blind (John 9); and the Raising of Lazarus (John 11). If the baptism will be celebrated at a time other than Easter, it may be appropriate to also reflect upon the gospel of that feast day, and other stories preceding it in the lectionary.

this lifelong covenant relationship. It is a time for candidates to test and discern their readiness to make this commitment, and to hear the church's discernment of their readiness. For parents moving through this process with a subsequent child, this is a chance (with the whole community) to continue the discipline of ongoing conversion and growth.

The community signifies its deeper relationship and commitment to these candidates by weekly including them in the Prayers of the People.

All of this helps those coming to baptism to celebrate with a sense of consummation.

#### **Stage 4: Commitment (deepening appreciation of the sacramental way of life)**

From the point of baptism, there is a change in how the church provides support: moving from preparatory mechanisms to the regular ongoing mutual support of the church's common life. Everything here is for everybody in the church. There are no ritual acts exclusively for the newly baptized; the only rituals that we have for them are the rituals for the whole People of God.

After baptism, the new Christians are invited, together with the whole church community, to a deeper appreciation of the sacramental life, beginning with a time of reflection upon their own experience of baptism and eucharist. This invitation involves recognizing that the significance of particular sacraments flows directly from the life of the People of God, which (as the Body of Christ) is itself the primary sacrament. This sacramentality of the People of God, and of its individual members, is the vocation of being the embodiment of Christ for the sake of the world. Just as yeast and salt, which have no purpose unless they interact elsewhere, so the Church exists to immerse itself in the world, revealing to the world the fullness of its being.

This is also a time to be disabused of certain false notions of the church (e.g., clericalism, authoritarianism, infallibility), and therefore to assume their own responsibility as ministers within the Community of the Faithful seeking the guidance of God's Spirit. Learning perseverance in the sacramental way includes consideration of their experience of being imperfect, support through disillusionment, and the ongoing challenge of conversion and reconciliation.

As the newly baptized awake to the reality of their altered existence, they reflect upon God's call to them as ministers, based upon their own passions and gifts, and what particular roles they will embrace within the church community and in the world. As stewards of God's gifts, they are nurtured, empowered and encouraged to share, as they are able, in the church's service to the world.

Moving from a position of dependency to shared responsibility, new Christians become co-bearers of the tradition with other members of the church.