

Brief History of the Baptismal Catechumenate

Introduction

The Word became flesh so that “we might know God’s love.”

(CCC 458)

If we take the Catechism’s second reason why the Word became flesh in the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, we realize just how unique our relationship with God really is. Our relationship with Him is based on His love for us intimately revealed through His Son Jesus Christ (Jn 3:16-17).

Echoing the words of the Catechism, the Catechumenal process serves as a journey to know and understand God’s love further revealed in His Son Jesus Christ. In the early stages of the ancient catechumenate, both Jew and Gentile were initiated into the Church. The emphasis for these catechumens was two-fold: that Christ was the Messiah and in particular to bring our Jewish brethren from the “Law” to “Christ” (Acts 2:41 ff.).

The Gentiles received instruction directing them to the one true God in an effort to clarify their polytheistic tendencies. Recognizing that sound catechesis involves the teaching of faith and morals Christian morality was preached from the beginning.

By the end of the 2nd century individual instructions evolved into group instruction. Group Baptism’s continued during this period and special catechists were involved receiving training through catechetical schools. During this time, Baptism was administered at Easter season and invoked the participation of the Resurrection of Christ as seen through the liturgy. Hence a complimentary relationship evolved between liturgy and catechesis. This structure gave rise to the catechumenate.

Order and structure of the Catechumenate

The first form and structure of the catechumenate occurred around 215 a.d. during the time of Constantine. The structure was done in the Apostolic tradition of Hippolytus of Rome.

The Catechumenate began:

- With a rigorous examination for the purpose of determining whether the profession and the way of life of the candidate were compatible with the Christian moral law.
- This stage lasted as a rule for three years
- It was not only a period of probation but also one devoted to teaching of Christian doctrine.
- The catechist concluded every instruction with prayer and the imposition of hands.

Subjects in the Catechumenate

- The books of Esther, Judith, Tobias and the Sapiential books i.e. the biblical texts which would illustrate Christian conduct.

Catechumenate Continued

- At the conclusion of three years an examination followed concentrating less on knowledge but on moral conduct of life.
- When this was successfully completed, the candidate was permitted “to listen to the Gospel.”
- He was given daily instruction dealing with the teachings of the faith, joined in daily imposition of hands which was exorcistic in character.
- In the third century the instruction culminated in the “handing over” of the Apostles Creed, which the Baptismal candidate had to recite before he received Baptism.

Later period of the Catechumenate

The catechumenate in the 4-5th century was characterized by mass conversions. Many contented themselves with entering the catechumenate only. Some characteristics of this period are as follows:

- The desire for conversion Jews and Gentiles were recognized as Christians.
- Some sought to delay Baptism for a later period of time until they were a riper age.
- One of the more important reasons for deferring Baptism was the fact that if a grievous sin had been committed after Baptism, the Christian could, according to the severe penitential discipline of the times, obtain forgiveness only by undergoing public penance.
- In fact even in Christian families this practice of deferred Baptism was sometimes adopted.
- Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom and others were baptized only in adulthood.
- The Order of the Catechumenate had to be adapted to these conditions.

The Catechumenate in this period consisted of the following elements:

1. An initial examination included an emphasis on catechetical instruction.
2. This catechesis was designed to give a survey of the content of Christian doctrine of salvation.
3. Instruction for this is given by St. Augustine compiled in his work: De Catechizandi rudibus.
4. After this the catechist was supposed to present in the form of a narration (narratio) the entire doctrine of salvation, from the fall of our first parents down to the Last Judgment.
5. By this process it was hoped that the candidate would be led from faith to hope and from hope to love. For this reason Augustine attached great value to the fact that during the catechesis an atmosphere of happiness should prevail.
6. The reception into the catechumenate took place by signing the candidate with the sign of the Cross, which was generally followed by the imposition of hands.
7. The presentation of blessed salt was done.

8. Through these ceremonies the candidate became a catechumen, and hence a Christian.
9. The Fathers in their homilies, urged the catechumens to make known to the authorities that they were ready for Baptism before beginning the period which is now customarily known as Lent and serves as a preparation for Easter.

Catechesis during this time.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (348 a.d.) delivered his catechetical lectures. His 19 catechesis were given prior to Baptism.

Order of St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Catechetical Lectures

- 1.) First five instructions treat sin, Baptism and faith; the rest of the Creed.
- 2.) Imparting or handing-over of the Creed took place, especially in the west in a special ceremony, the tradition symboli.
- 3.) Both formulas, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, were subject to the strict discipline of the secret; they could be communicated only orally and had to be learned by heart.

In Rome

1. Communication of the Four Gospels took place. (6th cent.)
2. Order is as follows: Procession of clerics, thuriferarii with censers, acolytes with lighted candles, then four deacons with the Four Gospels, and finally the priest.
3. The four deacons placed the four Gospel books on the four corners of the altar.
4. Following this, the priest spoke of the Gospels. Then the first four deacons stepped up and read the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew; thereupon the priest gave a short talk in which he explained the symbolism of Matthew: *facies hominis*. The same thing was done by the other three deacons with the other Gospels.

The Sunday Mass

1. The godparents of the candidates for Baptism came to the fore. Their names were read at the Memento of the Living; the name of the Baptismal aspirants, who because of the discipline of the secret were unable to be present . . .

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Baptism was administered at the Vigil with great solemnity.

1. The ceremonies began with a renunciation of Satan and a confession of faith.
2. Newly baptized were then confirmed, vested in white Baptismal robes, they assisted, for the first time, at the celebration of the Mass, and received Holy Communion.
3. The newly baptized wore the white baptismal robe during the entire octave of the Paschal feast up to Low Sunday.
4. They appeared daily at Mass during the festal week after the Vigil.
5. They were given the final catechesis on the Sacraments.

After the sixth century – the order of the catechumenate died down because of the mass conversions occurring throughout Europe.

1. Catechesis involved only a few weeks of instruction.
2. You had mass baptisms.
3. Education was left to the community.
4. Modified catechumenate consisted of the following:
 - Introductory catechesis
 - The insufflation
 - Sign of the Cross
 - Salt blessed under exorcism
 - Further blessings
 - Lord's Prayer
 - Profession of Faith, the Creed.
 - Last exorcism as well as the renunciation of Satan
 - Replies to the questions concerning the faith which are expected of the godparents immediately before the act of Baptism itself were part of the Baptism of Children.