

The Baptismal Catechumenate as Model for Catechesis

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THE 1998 *General Directory for Catechesis* speaks of the baptismal catechumenate as the model for all catechesis.¹ What does this mean? How would it shape the way we catechize in the third millennium of our life as Church? In order to appreciate the richness of what the *General Directory for Catechesis* is calling for here, we must first have a clear understanding of what the baptismal catechumenate is. The first part of this essay will thus flesh out what the *Directory* is referring to when it speaks of the baptismal catechumenate. The second part will then pull together the various sections of the *General Directory for Catechesis* which enable us to consider what catechesis would be like if it were modeled on the catechumenate.

Background for Understanding the Baptismal Catechumenate

Restoration of the Catechumenate by the Second Vatican Council

The baptismal catechumenate in the Church today is a result of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council. In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium*, number 64, the council fathers called for the restoration of the catechumenate for unbaptized adults, and later, in the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, Ad gentes*, they added this description of it:

Those who, through the Church, have accepted from God a belief in Christ should be admitted to the catechumenate by liturgical rites. The

¹ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 59, 90.

catechumenate is not a mere expounding of doctrines and precepts, but a training period for the whole Christian life. It is an apprenticeship of appropriate length, during which disciples are joined to Christ their Teacher. Therefore, catechumens should be properly instructed in the mystery of salvation and in the practice of gospel morality. By sacred rites which are to be held at successive intervals, they should be introduced into the life of faith, liturgy, and love, which God's People lives.

Then, when the sacraments of Christian initiation have freed them from the power of darkness (cf. Col 1:13), having died with Christ, been buried with him, and risen with him (cf. Rom 6:4–11; Col 2:12–13; 1 Pt 3:21–22; Mk 16:16), they receive the Spirit (cf. 1 Thes 3:5–7; Acts 8:14–17) who makes them adopted sons, and celebrate the remembrance of the Lord's death and resurrection together with the whole People of God.

It is the desire of this council that the liturgy of the Lenten and Easter seasons be restored in such a way as to dispose the hearts of the catechumens to celebrate the paschal mystery at whose solemn ceremonies they are reborn to Christ through baptism.

But this Christian initiation through the catechumenate should be taken care of not only by catechists and priests, but by the entire community of the faithful, especially by the sponsors. Thus, right from the outset the catechumens will feel that they belong to the People of God. Since the life of the Church is an apostolic one, the catechumens should also learn to cooperate actively, by the witness of their lives and by the profession of their faith, in the spread of the gospel and in the upbuilding of the Church.²

The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (1972) provided the liturgical rites necessary to fulfill the council's decree that the catechumenate be restored. In order to have a clear picture of how the RCIA catechumenate is intended to function, it is necessary to consider it in light of the catechumenate of the early centuries of the Church which inspired it.³

² *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad gentes)*, no. 14, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbot, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

³ The *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 129, cites Vatican Council II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*, no. 8, concerning the witness of the early Church Fathers to how the riches of the tradition are poured out in the practice and life of the Church, adding that special attention in this regard should be given to "the decisive importance which the Fathers attribute to the baptismal catechumenate in the structure of the particular churches," and "the gradual and progressive conception of Christian formation, arranged in stages;" for further discussion of the witness of the Fathers, see *Directory*, no. 129. *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 89, provides further description of patristic catechesis and its stages, noting, "This patristic concept continues to illuminate the present catechumenate and initiatory catechesis itself."

What exactly *was* this way of preparing converts for Baptism in the early Church that the council wanted to restore? *How* did this catechumenate actually help people convert?

What the Council Was Seeking to Restore

Initiatory practice in the first few centuries was based on the belief that, as Tertullian put it, “Christians are *made*, not born.” The dominant culture was hostile to Christianity, and Christian worship itself was a crime punishable by death. When people raised in that culture were attracted by the truth of the gospel and wanted to join the Christian community, they had to make a radical break with the culture that formed them. Their understanding of the meaning and purpose of life had to change, and the very way they lived their daily lives had to change. Converts needed to learn both what Christ’s teachings were, and how to put them into practice by consistently changing their behavior; they needed to learn to receive guidance and strength—and express gratitude—in prayer. Conversion to Christ and membership in his Body, the Church, thus required an entirely new way of thinking and living; and growing into this new life took time.

In order to prepare converts to surrender their lives to Christ in Baptism, and to live faithful lives as part of the community of his followers by the power of his Spirit given in Baptism, the early Church developed the catechumenate. Those admitted to the catechumenate, known as catechumens, were being “made” into Christians: They were in training to become members of the baptized faithful.

All the members of the Church community shared in the responsibility for the making of Christians. It was ordinary believers who brought prospective converts for formal instruction (perhaps after having informally evangelized them), who provided testimony that potential members were capable of receiving catechesis and, later, concerning whether their manner of life manifested readiness for Baptism.⁴ Initiation into the Church was thus initiation into a whole fabric of relationships with baptized Christians whose faith was incarnated in their lives.

During their time in the catechumenate, catechumens received instruction in a communal and liturgical setting. Here, in the context of prayer and worship, they heard the proclamation of Scripture and preaching that flowed from that proclamation. This preaching proclaimed the mystery of who God had revealed himself to be through his actions in human history, and sought to bring the catechumens into that mystery.

⁴ See, for example, *Apostolic Tradition*, 15–20.

Since initiatory catechesis took place in the context of worship and was, thus, part of a worship celebration, it was not at all like presenting information in a classroom with people taking notes. The catechist did explain who God is and how to live in faithful relationship with him, by carefully laying out the narrative of salvation history. But at the same time as the catechist told the story of how God had acted to save, simultaneously he sought to draw the catechumens into that story, so that they would become the latest chapters in the story of how God calls and redeems a People. Catechesis was, thus, a vehicle through which the Holy Spirit could touch the hearts of listeners and convert them, draw them into relationship with God in Christ.

In fourth-century Jerusalem, for example, every morning during Lent, catechumens in the final stages of preparation for Baptism came for catechesis. But it was only *after* they had prayed, been exorcized, and heard the proclamation of the Word related to the topic of the catechesis, that they were actually given instruction. Then the bishop of Jerusalem himself, Cyril, delivered the catechesis. After a few introductory sessions, he simply took the articles of the Creed and explained each in turn by using texts from Scripture.

But Cyril's *Catecheses* are not dry lectures of abstract theology. As he himself explains, "We have come together now not to make speculative exposition of the Scriptures, but rather to"—the Greek word he uses here means literally—"make faith."⁵ As Cyril lays out the narrative of how all through human history God has acted to bring salvation, he encourages his listeners to identify with those God has saved in the Scripture. As the catechumens identify with those who have gone before them in salvation history, they themselves become part of salvation history.

There is no dichotomy here between conversion of heart and conversion of mind. Converts are being drawn to a deeper knowledge of God and a deeper love of God simultaneously, so they will be able to surrender their lives to him at Baptism. After all, "knowledge of God" without love of God is not really knowledge. But—at the same time—it is not possible to love God without knowledge of who he is, what he is like. Catechetical formation in the early Church thus included cognitive, moral, spiritual, and affective dimensions.

This simultaneous conversion of heart and mind was mediated through communal worship, not instilled in private one-on-one sessions for instruction. With so many members of the community involved in

⁵ Cyril, *Catechesis*, 13.9; see further P. Jackson, "Cyril of Jerusalem's Use of Scripture in Catechesis," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 431–50.

the preparation of converts for Baptism, it was understood that conversion is not private but ecclesial, and, since the place where the Church most fully realizes and expresses her identity is in worship, the context for conversion is liturgical.

Through this kind of catechesis at liturgical rites fostering conversion in the context of community, catechumens were prepared to die and rise with Christ and receive his Spirit at Baptism. It was this kind of initiatory practice that formed the many martyrs and saints of the early Church, and helped Christianity to grow from the faith of a handful of Palestinian Jews to the official religion of the Roman Empire by the end of the fourth century. And it was this tradition of catechetical formation precipitating genuine conversion in communal context that the council fathers of Vatican II had in mind when they called for the restoration of the catechumenate for adults and its rites.

How the Catechumenate Was Restored in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)

In order to grasp how the restored catechumenate is intended to “work” in the contemporary Church, three aspects of the RCIA must be kept in mind:

1. how the catechumenate fits into the ritual structure of the RCIA;
2. the dimensions of conversion the RCIA intends to be brought to maturity in the catechumenate; and
3. the liturgical context for conversion and the role of the Word as catalyst for conversion in the RCIA.

Ritual Structure

First, it is necessary to understand the place of the catechumenate in the RCIA’s ritual structure. The council had called for the initiatory process to be made up of several distinct steps and to be sanctified by sacred rites celebrated at successive intervals of time. The RCIA, therefore, comprises four stages, with specific liturgical celebrations marking important moments in these stages. In the first stage, Evangelization and the Precatechumenate, people come to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and desire to be his disciples.⁶

⁶ *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. IA, *Initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1988), numbers 36–40. The paragraph numbers for the RCIA given in this essay are as found in this edition of the RCIA, which was approved for the United States in 1988. These differ from the numbers for the RCIA given in the *General Directory for Catechesis*, which correspond to the numbers in *Ordo initiationis Christianiae adultorum* (Editio Typica, 1972).

When they have sufficient familiarity with Christ's teaching and want to give their lives to him as part of his Church, they are ready for the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens (RCIA, nos. 41–74), where they are formally signed with the Cross and may be given a book of the gospels.

The second stage, the Catechumenate (RCIA, nos. 75–117), is “a lengthy period of formation of catechumens’ minds and hearts” (RCIA, no. 118) and “the context of integral catechesis” (*General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 88). During this stage there are celebrations of the Word of God for the catechumens’ benefit (RCIA, nos. 75; 81–85), gradual and complete catechesis (no. 75), minor exorcisms (nos. 90–94), and blessings (nos. 95–97). When the catechumens’ faith has reached sufficient maturity for them to be able to live faithful Christian lives in the Catholic Church, they are formally chosen to be baptized at the Rite of Election; this is normally celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent in preparation for Easter Baptism (nos. 118–37).

The third stage, the time of Purification and Enlightenment (RCIA, nos. 138–84), is a more intense spiritual preparation for the sacraments of initiation. During this stage, the catechumens, now known as the Elect, experience the rites of the Scrutinies and Presentations. At each of the three Scrutinies (normally celebrated in the Masses of the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent), the Elect are exorcized and receive special solemn intercessory prayers from the assembly before they are dismissed (nos. 141–56, 164–77). At the Presentation of the Creed, the Creed is formally delivered to the Elect (nos. 157–63); the Lord’s Prayer is entrusted to them at the Presentation of the Lord’s Prayer (nos. 178–84). After final preparatory rites on Holy Saturday (nos. 185–204), the Elect receive Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist during the Easter Vigil (nos. 206–43).

In the final stage, Mystagogy (RCIA, nos. 244–51), the “distinctive spirit and power of postbaptismal catechesis . . . derive from the new personal experience of the sacraments and of the community,” so the main setting is “the so-called Masses for neophytes, that is, the Sunday Masses of the Easter season” (no. 247). The RCIA, then, is composed of a sequence of liturgical rites marking successive stages of formation, through which God can give adults the graces of conversion they need for Baptism.

Dimensions of Conversion

The second aspect of the RCIA that must be borne in mind is the nature of the conversion it seeks to foster during the catechumenate. In the four subsections of number 75, the RCIA summarizes the four ways that the catechumens receive pastoral formation and training in the Christian life,

so that “the dispositions manifested at their acceptance into the catechumenate are brought to maturity.”

The first way the catechumens’ initial conversion is brought to maturity is through “gradual and complete” catechesis. This catechesis provides the necessary knowledge of doctrine, in the framework of the liturgical year, “solidly supported by celebrations of the Word,” and in a way that leads the converts to a “profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate” (no. 75:1).

The second area of the catechumens’ pastoral formation is their assimilation into living the Christian life through their relationships with members of the Christian community. The catechumens learn to pray, to hope in Christ above all, to “follow supernatural inspiration in their deeds, and to practice love of neighbor, even at the cost of self-renunciation,” as they are drawn into the community’s common life. With the help especially of sponsors and godparents, they learn to change their thinking and behavior as they “pass from the old to a new nature made perfect in Christ” (no. 75:2).

The third way in which the catechumens receive “training in the Christian life” is in liturgical prayer. Catholics must be able to relate to God through the formal prayer texts of the liturgical books and through liturgical symbols and rites, and the catechumens’ participation in public worship helps them learn to do this. Both through the proclamation of the Word and through the community’s public intercession for them, the catechumens are drawn into a sacramental way of life, even though they are normally dismissed from the liturgical assembly before the liturgy of the Eucharist begins. They thus learn the “language” of worship by speaking it.

The fourth dimension of the Christian life inculcated during the catechumenate is sharing in the Church’s apostolic mission. The catechumens learn to work with members of the faithful in bearing witness to their faith, both by evangelizing and in works of mercy.

This, then, is the nature of the conversion and transformation of personality which the RCIA seeks to foster. But how is it that this conversion actually comes about as the converts pass through the stages of the RCIA and participate in the rites marking those stages?

*The Liturgical Context for Conversion
and the Proclamation of the Word in the Rites*

The final aspect of the RCIA that must be kept in mind to truly understand how the catechumenate “works,” is the Rite’s appreciation of the liturgy as privileged *locus* for conversion and the crucial role of the proclamation of the Word. The reason that the RCIA is centered around

liturgical rites is precisely that its purpose is conversion—people surrendering their lives to God so that he can transform them—and the place where we are most vulnerable to God is when we are at worship. When we come before God and worship him, we are most fully who we were created to be, so we are most open to being touched by God so that he can convert us and draw us to himself.

Conversion means coming into a whole new way of life. But in order to learn to *act* differently, we need to learn to *think* differently, and that means we need to learn to *perceive* differently. This kind of change can only happen when God touches people with his grace, and we are most open to his transforming grace when we are worshipping. Through the liturgical rites of the RCIA, then, God acts to bring about conversion, both through the ritual actions (such as the signing of the senses with the Cross) and prayers, and also through the proclamation of his Word. Since those preparing for Baptism cannot yet receive the Lord in the Eucharist, he meets them at the “table” of his Word, which functions as catalyst for conversion. The proper readings for each rite were carefully chosen to mediate conversion, to help bring it about through the powerful images and stories they proclaim (for example, the call of Abram). In each rite the readings work together with the ritual actions as a vehicle for conversion.⁷ In addition to the catechumens’ participation in these rites and in the liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass, the RCIA also calls for “special celebrations of the Word” for the catechumens (nos. 81–89; cf. 79). RCIA, number 84, speaks of celebrations of the Word being held in connection with sessions for catechesis “so that these will occur in a context of prayer.”

In the RCIA, then, the grace of God works through the rites of worship marking four stages of initiation to transform people and assimilate them into the Church community by their coming to share the community’s beliefs, their way of living and acting, and their life of prayer and worship. The “lengthy period of formation” of converts’ minds and hearts where their initial conversion is brought to sufficient maturity that they are ready to receive Baptism, is the catechumenate—and it is this baptismal catechumenate, as it has been restored in the life of the Church today, that the *General Directory for Catechesis* now proposes as model for all catechesis.

⁷ Further reflection on how the proper Scripture readings for the RCIA both describe and mediate conversion may be found in P. Jackson, *Journeybread for the Shadowlands: the Readings for the Rites of the Catechumenate*, RCIA (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993).

The Catechumenate as Model for Catechesis in the *General Directory for Catechesis*

In number 90, the *General Directory for Catechesis* affirms: “given that the *missio ad gentes* is the paradigm of all the Church’s missionary activity, the baptismal catechumenate, which is joined to it, is the model of all its catechizing activity.” The *Directory* goes on to give some elements of the catechumenate that should inspire contemporary catechesis, while bearing in mind the fundamental difference between catechesis given to prepare people for Baptism, and catechesis for Catholics who are baptized as infants. The *Directory* explains that the baptismal catechumenate provides a source of inspiration for postbaptismal catechesis in several ways: by reminding the Church of the importance of Christian initiation (from initial catechesis through Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) and pastoral care for it; by demonstrating how catechesis involves a comprehensive process of formation; by witnessing to the centrality of the Paschal Mystery in all the Church’s liturgy and spirituality, which must inform all catechesis; by providing experience with inculturation; and by calling for all the members of the community of the faithful to take responsibility for handing on the Church’s faith.

The remainder of this essay will consider what it would mean for catechesis to be modeled on the catechumenate, by summarizing what the *General Directory for Catechesis* has to say about five key aspects that characterize the baptismal catechumenate and that could be applied to catechesis at all levels: (1) that it comprises formation; (2) that it mediates conversion; (3) specific dimensions of that conversion; (4) that it has a liturgical context; and (5) that it involves the whole Church community.

Catechesis as Comprising Formation

First, the *Directory* states:

the concept of the baptismal catechumenate as *a process of formation and as a true school of the faith* offers post-baptismal catechesis dynamic and particular characteristics: comprehensiveness and integrity of formation; its gradual character, expressed in various stages; its connection with meaningful rites, symbols, biblical and liturgical signs; its constant references to the Christian community.⁸

⁸ *General Directory for Catechesis*, 91, original emphasis. While the *General Directory for Catechesis* states that the gradual character of the catechumenate, “expressed in stages,” can provide a model for all catechesis, it does not spell out specific ways in which postbaptismal catechesis of those baptized as infants could be divided into particular stages. Since this might vary according to local pastoral factors (for

Because initiatory catechesis is thus formation for the whole Christian life, it “comprises but surpasses mere instruction.”⁹ According to the *General Directory for Catechesis*, all catechesis should therefore learn from patristic catechesis how “to form the personality of the believer and be a true and proper school of Christian pedagogy.”¹⁰ This means that catechists themselves must be formed so that they “are able to transmit not only a teaching but also an integral Christian formation,” so that they are simultaneously “teachers, educators, and witnesses of the faith” (no. 237).

Catechesis as Directed Toward Conversion

What would be involved in understanding catechesis in this way? The *Directory* points out that since those who are being catechized today are part of a world “in which religious sense is obscured,” catechesis “must have a catechumenal style, as of integral formation rather than mere information: it must act in reality as a means of arousing true conversion” (no. 29). Catechesis as *formation*, then, means catechesis *directed toward conversion*, because it is only by starting with conversion, “and therefore by making allowance for the interior disposition of ‘whoever believes,’” that catechesis can “fulfill its proper task of education in the faith” (no. 62). It is God who sows experiential faith in human hearts, and the responsibility of catechists is to nourish this gift and help it to grow. Catechists are called to facilitate maturation of the faith given by the Holy Spirit to those they are catechizing.¹¹

But conversion to faith in God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, and growing in that faith, go beyond growing in intellectual certitude. The *Directory* explains that “faith involves a change of life, a ‘*metanoia*’ that is a profound transformation of mind and heart; it causes the believer to live that conversion” (no. 55). This conversion takes place at all levels of Christians’ existence: our life of prayer and acceptance of God’s will, our participating in the mission of the Church,

example, age for Confirmation), it would probably become clear in the course of pastoral adaptation and inculturation.

⁹ Ibid., no. 68; cf., nos. 29, 67. Further, “Genuine catechesis therefore is that catechesis which helps to perceive the action of God throughout the formative journey. It encourages a climate of listening, of thanksgiving, and of prayer” (no. 145). *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 73, provides a clear distinction between religious instruction and catechesis.

¹⁰ Ibid., no. 33. According to *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 64, initiatory catechesis is “basic and fundamental for building up the personality of the individual disciple, as it is for the whole Christian community.”

¹¹ Ibid., no. 244. Further, catechists are actually “prepared or formed so as to facilitate a growth in the experience of faith,” which God himself planted in peoples’ hearts.

our family life, our professional life, our social and economic responsibilities (no. 55). One of the goals of catechesis should thus be to move people to abandon themselves “‘completely and freely to God’: intelligence, will, heart, and memory” (no. 144). Both basic education in the faith and ongoing education are to serve the process of continuing conversion (no. 69).

To speak in this way about people abandoning themselves to God and learning to do this in ever-deeper ways is, of course, to speak of the mystery of dying and rising with Christ that is at the heart of our lives as Christians. The *Directory* sees initiatory catechesis as drawing converts into this:

The baptismal catechumenate is also completely permeated by the *mystery of Christ's Passover*. For this reason, “all initiation must clearly reveal its paschal nature.” The Easter Vigil, focal point of the Christian liturgy, and its spirituality of Baptism, inspire all catechesis. (no. 91, original emphasis)

If a spirituality that flows from being plunged into the Paschal Mystery at the Easter Vigil is to inspire *all* catechesis, then all catechesis must make disciples who love the Lord Jesus and seek to follow him through the Cross to the Father. In fact, when the *Directory* speaks of conversion, one of the images it uses most often to show what it means by conversion is the image of being a follower of Jesus, a disciple.¹² “Catechesis takes the form of a process or journey of following the Christ of the gospel in the Spirit towards the Father” (no. 143). “It is the task of catechesis to show who Jesus Christ is, his life and ministry, and to present the Christian faith as the following of his person”; it must therefore be based on the gospels (no. 41). “The Christian faith is, above all, conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps” (no. 53).

The *Directory* states that the goal that should permeate all aspects of the formation of those who catechize is

to lead the catechist to know how to animate a catechetical journey of which the necessary stages are: the proclamation of Jesus Christ; making known his life by setting it in the context of salvation history; explanation of the mystery of the Son of God, made man for us; and finally to help the catechumen, or those being catechized, to identify with Jesus

¹² For example, *ibid.*, nos. 69, 85. The *General Directory for Catechesis* also speaks of encountering Christ (no. 53) or meeting him (no. 55); the “good soil” of the parable of the sower is “men and women who are open to a personal relationship with God” (no. 15).

Christ through the sacraments of initiation.¹³ *With continuing catechesis, the catechist merely tries to deepen these basic elements.* (no. 235, emphasis added)

In seeking to help people identify with Christ, catechists are seeking to enable them to enter into union with him. “In reality, the fundamental task of catechesis is to present Christ and everything in relation to him. This explicitly promotes the following of Jesus and communion with him.”¹⁴ Again,

conversion to Jesus Christ implies walking in his footsteps. Catechesis must, therefore, transmit to the disciples the attitudes of the Master himself. The disciples thus undertake a journey of interior transformation, in which, by participating in the paschal mystery of the Lord, “they pass from the old man to the new man who has been made perfect in Christ.”¹⁵

Yet while the *Directory* so often describes catechesis as seeking to draw people into personal following of—relationship with—the Risen Lord, it is explicit that this is *not* a private, individualistic relationship that can be lived out without reference to the Church that is his Body on earth:

Faith is a personal encounter with Christ, making of oneself a disciple of him. This demands a permanent commitment to think like him, to judge like him and to live as he lived. *In this way the believer unites himself to the community of disciples and appropriates the faith of the Church.*¹⁶

Catechesis and the Dimensions of Conversion

The *General Directory for Catechesis* is clear, then, that the baptismal catechumenate can help us understand all catechesis (including postbaptismal

¹³ At this point in the text, the *General Directory for Catechesis* contains the footnote: “The four stages of the baptismal catechumenate are cultivated in a christocentric prospective.” Cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 41: “the mystery of Christ, in the revealed message, is not another element alongside others, it is rather the center from which all other elements are structured and illuminated.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 98; cf. no. 235: “The christocentric purpose of catechesis, which emphasizes the communion of the convert with Jesus Christ, permeates all aspects of the formation of catechists.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 85; cf. no. 67, which describes catechesis as providing “comprehensive formation” which “promotes an authentic following of Christ focused on his Person.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 53, emphasis added. Catechesis as formation nurtures the roots of the Christian’s faith life and “enables him to receive more solid nourishment in the ordinary life of the Christian community.” *Ibid.*, no. 67.

catechesis) as formation, which should inspire genuine conversion to Christ as Lord, a conversion understood as following him to the Father. But *how* does the *Directory* describe the dimensions of this conversion fostered by the catechumenate that it envisions as model for *all* catechesis?

The *Directory* states that since the catechumenate is “an apprenticeship in the *whole* Christian life,”¹⁷ it must initiate people into the “*fullness* of the Christian life” (no. 63), incorporate them “into the community which lives, celebrates, and bears witness to the faith,” adding, “this inherent richness in the catechumenate of nonbaptized adults should serve to inspire other forms of catechesis” (no. 68). Basing itself on the way Jesus himself formed his disciples, the *Directory* concludes, “the duties of catechesis correspond to education of the different dimensions of faith. . . . In virtue of its own internal dynamic, the faith demands to be known, celebrated, lived, and translated into prayer,” in the context of being lived out in the Christian community and proclaimed in mission.¹⁸ In other words, when the *Directory* calls for all catechesis to learn from the baptismal catechumenate to provide formation that is comprehensive (for example, nos. 90, 91), it is calling for catechesis that fosters the same dimensions of conversion found in RCIA number 75 which were summarized in the first part of this essay.

First, *knowing* the faith: “Knowledge of the faith (*fides quae*) is required by adherence to the faith (*fides qua*)”; the more we love someone, the more we want to know them.¹⁹ Here the *Directory* calls attention to the need for catechesis in both Revelation and Tradition, and to the interrelationship of Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium (no. 30). “Catechesis transmits the content of the Word of God according to the two modalities whereby the Church possesses it, interiorizes it, and lives it: As a narration of the history of salvation and as an explication of the Creed” (no. 128). Drawing on the wealth of the patristic tradition, and the later tradition of catechisms, the *Directory* names seven basic elements that characterize catechesis: the three phases of the narrative of salvation history (Old Testament, life of Christ, history of the Church), and the four pillars of its exposition (Creed, sacraments, Decalogue, Our Father), naming these as seven foundation stones both for initiatory and for continuing catechesis (no. 130). The *Directory* thus presents Sacred Scripture and the *Catechism of the*

¹⁷ Emphasis added. The term “apprenticeship” derives from *Ad gentes*, no. 14; cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, nos. 86a, 67.

¹⁸ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 84, cf. no. 144: One of the objects inspiring the methodological choices of catechesis is “to develop all the dimensions of faith through which it conveys faith which is known, celebrated, lived and prayed.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 85, cf. no. 92.

Catholic Church as the two basic sources for contemporary catechesis (no. 128). This catechesis must be capable of initiating *all* Catholic Christians into a “‘theological reading of modern problems’”: an ability to perceive all reality as marked simultaneously by God’s creative goodness, the power of human sin, and the dynamism of the Resurrection (no. 16).

Second, *living* the Christian life in the community of the faithful. The *Directory* affirms:

The Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus takes up the Decalogue and impresses upon it the spirit of the beatitudes, is an indispensable point of reference for the moral formation which is most necessary today. (no. 85)

Living a faithful Christian life in the Christian community requires careful training, and the *Directory* names specific attitudes taught by Christ himself that catechesis today must inculcate: the spirit of simplicity and humility (Mt 18:3), solicitude for the least among the brethren (Mt 18:6), particular care for those who are alienated (Mt 18:12), fraternal correction (Mt 18:15), common prayer (Mt 18:19), and mutual forgiveness (Mt 18:22), all of which can be embraced by the new commandment “Love one another as I have loved you” (no. 86a). These attitudes are not only to be *explained* by catechesis: “the Christian community is in herself living catechesis. Thus she proclaims, celebrates, works, and remains always a vital, indispensable, and primary *locus* of catechesis” (no. 141). The *Directory* insists that the members of the community live the gospel morality they proclaim and that their moral testimony “must always demonstrate the social consequences of the demands of the gospel” (no. 85).

What about the third dimension of conversion, formation in the community’s life of prayer and worship? The *Directory* tells us:

Communion with Jesus Christ leads the disciples to assume the attitude of prayer and contemplation which the Master himself had. To learn to pray with Jesus is to pray with the same sentiments with which he turned to the Father: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, filial confidence, supplication, and awe for his glory. (no. 85)

Praying the Our Father, the prayer Jesus taught his disciples that is the model of all Christian prayer, allows Christians to enter into all those dimensions of his relationship with the Father. The *Directory* thus speaks of the rite known as the Presentation of the Lord’s Prayer (RCIA, nos. 178–84) as “a summary of the entire gospel” and “therefore a true act of catechesis” (no. 85).

The *Directory* refers to liturgical catechesis as an “eminent kind of catechesis,”²⁰ which

prepares for the sacraments by promoting a deeper understanding and experience of the liturgy. This explains the contents of the prayers, the meaning of the signs and gestures, educates to active participation, contemplation, and silence. (no. 71)

The *Directory* expresses concern that catechesis be connected to the liturgical year, draw from liturgical sources, and present the riches of liturgical symbols and rites.²¹

The baptismal catechumenate is a time for teaching the language of the faith—the language of Scripture and sacramental rite²²—and this is true for all catechesis; the *Directory* speaks explicitly of the need for children to learn a biblical and sacramental language (no. 207). The faithful need to know the stories of salvation history,²³ so they can think of themselves as part of it and understand how the liturgy connects them to it. Catechesis should

situate the sacraments within the history of salvation by means of a mystagogy which “relives the great events of salvation history in the ‘today’ of her [the Church’s] liturgy.”²⁴

This essential understanding of how God continues his saving work in the “today” of the liturgy helps all being catechized “to open themselves to this ‘spiritual’ understanding of the economy of salvation.”²⁵

Liturgical formation must not only explain what the liturgy and sacraments are, but also “offer an experience of the different kinds of celebration and it must make symbols and gestures, etc., known and loved” (no. 87). The

²⁰ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 71, quoting John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae*, no. 23; cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 207: “a privileged means” of inculturation is “liturgical catechesis with its richness of signs in expressing the gospel message and its accessibility to so great a part of the people of God.”

²¹ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 30. Liturgical catechesis is to make “constant references to the great human experiences represented by the signs and symbols of liturgical actions originating in Jewish and Christian culture.” *Ibid.*, no. 117.

²² In no. 154, the *General Directory for Catechesis* states: “Secure possession of the language of the faith is an indispensable condition for living that same faith.” While this is stated in reference to the “formulae” of the faith, these formulae are said to include biblical and liturgical texts and prayers such as the Our Father.

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 108a.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 108, citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1095. The *General Directory for Catechesis* adds: “cf. CCC 1075; CCC 1116; Cf. CCC 129–30 and 1093–94.”

²⁵ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 108 citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1095.

Directory calls for liturgical catechesis that will “educate the disciples of Jesus Christ ‘for prayer, for thanksgiving, for repentance, for praying with confidence, for community spirit, for understanding correctly the meaning of the creeds.’”²⁶ As part of a process of formation and conversion, then, liturgical catechesis must teach people how to relate to God through the liturgy, how to pray and worship, how to be open to God, how to be reverent, and how to celebrate.

In regard to the fourth dimension of conversion, the *Directory* expresses concern that, sometimes, contemporary catechesis is not providing enough formation for missionary activity (no. 30). It calls for catechesis to equip Christians for mission both in society and by cooperating in ecclesial services, and discusses the role of the faithful in evangelization (no. 86).

The *Directory* points out the necessity that catechesis cover *all* these dimensions of conversion: knowledge of the faith, moral formation, living as part of the community of faith, prayer, liturgical life, missionary spirit: “When catechesis omits one of these elements, the Christian faith does not attain full development” (no. 87). Further, these dimensions are interrelated and should inform each other.²⁷

The Liturgical Context of Catechesis and the Role of the Word Proclaimed

The *Directory* makes clear that as catechesis addresses itself to these areas for conversion, it is not only providing facts but, guided by the Holy Spirit, it seeks “to encourage a true experience of faith, and thus a *filial encounter with God*” (no. 143, emphasis added). Catechesis is the “untiring echo” of the “wonderful dialogue” of salvation “that God undertakes with every person.”²⁸ Catechesis is to enable followers of Christ to “profess the faith *from the ‘heart’*”²⁹ and to help evoke the affective and deeper spiritual dimension of faith.³⁰ Since the aim of catechesis is “to encourage a living, explicit, and fruitful profession of faith, the Church, in order to achieve this, transmits to catechumens and those to be catechized her *living experience* of the gospel, her faith, so that they may appropriate it and confess it” (no. 66, emphasis added).

²⁶ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 85 quoting the *General Catechetical Directory* (1971), no. 25b.

²⁷ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 87; cf. nos. 35, 122.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 144; cf. no. 143.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 67, emphasis added. The *General Directory for Catechesis* citation reads: “Cf. CT 20; St. Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, I, chap. 4, n. 8; CCL 46, 128–29.” Cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 55.

³⁰ Cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 144.

In the first part of this essay, we saw how, because the baptismal catechumenate seeks to bring people into living relationship with God in Christ through conversion of both mind and heart, it is centered around liturgical rites—since worship is the privileged *locus* for the personal meeting with God which precipitates conversion. The recovery of the liturgical context for conversion in the baptismal catechumenate today is another of its aspects which can provide a source of inspiration for all catechesis. The *General Directory for Catechesis* explicitly identifies “the marginalization of liturgical celebrations in catechetical programs,” and inadequate instruction concerning the meaning of the liturgy as problems that need to be remedied (no. 30). In describing the pedagogy of Jesus during his earthly ministry, the *Directory* depicts it as including “the use of all the resources of interpersonal communication, such as word, silence, metaphor, image, example, and many diverse signs as was the case with the biblical prophets” (no. 140). It is in the context of the Church’s worship, through its rites, symbols, and proclamation of Scripture, that the Risen Lord continues to teach this way today.

Further, presenting catechesis in a setting of worship allows it to be received in an atmosphere of prayer, which helps people to listen more closely for what the Lord might be teaching them. The *Directory* affirms that

When catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit. This climate is especially necessary when the catechumen and those to be catechized are confronted with the more demanding aspects of the gospel and when they feel weak, or when they discover the mysterious action of God in their lives. (no. 85, emphasis added)

Since “genuine catechesis . . . is that catechesis which helps to perceive the action of God throughout the formative journey,” it “encourages a climate of listening, of thanksgiving, and of prayer” (no. 145).

Looking to the baptismal catechumenate as model for all catechesis leads not only to an appreciation of how the liturgy’s climate of prayer and worship can serve as context for conversion, but also to renewed awareness of the key importance of the Word proclaimed in the liturgy, which evokes and nurtures conversion. The *General Directory for Catechesis* notes that “the Word of God is celebrated in the sacred liturgy, where it is constantly proclaimed, heard, interiorized, and explained” (no. 95), and points out that when the ministry of the Word “is realized in the context of a sacred action, it is an integral part of that action” (no. 51).

Drawing on *Dei Verbum*, number 21, the *Directory* speaks of the disciples of Jesus as nourished at the twofold table of the Word and of the

Body of Christ: "The gospel and the Eucharist are the constant food for the journey to the Father's House" (no. 70). When discussing how the entire Christian community is called to continuing formation and growth in holiness, the *Directory* points out that it therefore needs great faithfulness to the Holy Spirit, constant nourishment in the Eucharist, and "continuing education in the faith, listening all the time to the Word" (no. 70). At this table of the Word of God, which the liturgy provides,

the homily occupies a privileged position since it "takes up again the journey of faith put forward by catechesis and brings it to its natural fulfillment, at the same time it encourages the Lord's disciples to begin anew each day their spiritual journey in truth, adoration, and thanksgiving."³¹

The *General Directory for Catechesis* also stresses the importance of the lectionary and Sunday homily for catechesis, in its discussion of inculturation (no. 207).

In the rites of the catechumenate, the proclamation of the Word extends the story of God's saving work outward from the Scriptures being proclaimed to the hearers who are being drawn into that story as they listen. This also can provide a model for postbaptismal catechesis that flows from the Word proclaimed in the Sunday assembly where the Church "relives the great events of salvation history in the 'today' of her liturgy";³² in this way, "the catechetical message helps the Christian to locate himself in [salvation] history and to insert himself into it, by showing that Christ is the ultimate meaning of this history" (no. 98). The *Directory* also speaks of the need for biblical catechesis to "help interpret present-day human life in light of the experiences of the people of Israel, of Jesus Christ and the ecclesial community, in which the Spirit of the Risen Jesus continually lives and works" (no. 117). While not all catechesis takes place in a liturgical context, it is the liturgy "which brings about the most perfect actualization of biblical texts," where "written text thus becomes living Word."³³ The rites of the catechumenate thus provide a model of how all catechesis should flow from God's living Word and draw hearers into understanding

³¹ Ibid., no. 70. The citation reads: "Cf. CT 48; cf. SC 52; DV 24; DcG (1971) 17; *Missale romanum*, *Ordo lectionum missae*, no. 24 Editio Typica Altera, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1981."

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1095. Cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, nos. 107, 108, especially the reference to *Dei Verbum*, no. 2: "the 'deeds and words' of Revelation point to the 'mystery contained in them'; catechesis helps to make the passage from sign to mystery" (original emphasis). Cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 128.

³³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Origins* 23 (January 6, 1994): IV.C.1.

their lives and all reality in terms of God's saving action in human history culminating in Jesus Christ.

Even as those preparing for Baptism are nourished by the proclamation of Scripture and catechesis at the rites of the catechumenate, so "those who are already disciples of Jesus Christ also require to be constantly nourished by the Word of God so that they may grow in their Christian life."³⁴ The *Directory* affirms that all catechesis should educate the believer in the faith "in such a manner that the entire person, at his deepest levels, feels enriched by the Word of God" (no. 67). One of the tasks of adult catechesis is to "introduce adults to a faith-filled reading of Sacred Scripture and the practice of prayer" (no. 175). In fact,

the Church desires that in the ministry of the Word, Sacred Scripture should have a pre-eminent position. In concrete terms, catechesis should be "an authentic introduction to *lectio divina*, that is, to a reading of the Sacred Scriptures done in accordance to the Spirit who dwells in the Church."³⁵

The baptismal catechumenate in the patristic period and today, is centered on the proclamation of Scripture as catalyst for conversion. As *post*baptismal catechesis seeks to recover the catechumenate's goal of inspiring conversion, it is also called to learn how to draw from the catechumenate's appreciation of the key role of the Word, since "faith comes by hearing."

Catechesis as the Responsibility of the Whole Christian Community

The *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, cited at the beginning of this essay, clearly stated that the baptismal catechumenate was the responsibility of the entire Christian community. Subsequent Church documents repeated this affirmation and extended it to all catechesis;³⁶ the *Directory*

³⁴ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 50; cf. no. 94: "All God's children, animated by his Spirit, are nourished by this treasure of the Word." In his preaching, John Chrysostom referred to the Scriptures as nourishment and urged his hearers, therefore, to go back over Scripture passages they heard in Church when they were at home.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 127. The citation reads: "MPD 9c. Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, IV.C.3." Cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 71, which calls for "the study and exploration of Sacred Scripture, read not only in the Church but with the Church and her living faith, which helps to discover divine truth, which it contains, in such a way as to arouse a response of faith. The '*lectio divina*' is an eminent form of this vital study of Scripture," and cites *Dei Verbum*, nos. 21–25; and Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," IV.

³⁶ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 220; for additional references, see *ibid.*, no. 220 note 15.

affirms: "The entire Christian community should feel responsible for this service" (that is, catechesis) (no. 219). In order to encourage continuing conversion, "it is necessary to have a Christian community which welcomes the initiated, sustains them, and forms them in the faith" (no. 69), and in order for adult catechesis to be authentic and effective there must be attention to "the involvement of the community so that it may be a welcoming and supportive environment" (no. 174).

This is because the very faith Christians seek to grow in is found incarnated in the lives of the members of the Christian community: "Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it, and communicates it in many ways" (no. 105). The role of the community in handing on the faith is seen not only in the way individual members live it out, but also in the way the faith is lived in members' relationships with each other:

Catechesis therefore is an educational activity which arises from the particular responsibility of every member of the community, in a rich context of relationships, so that catechumens and those being catechized are actively incorporated into the life of the community.³⁷

According to the *Directory*,

Catechetical pedagogy will be effective to the extent that the Christian community becomes a point of concrete reference for the faith journey of individuals. This happens when the community is proposed as a source, *locus*, and means of catechesis. Concretely, the community becomes a visible place of faith-witness. It provides for the formation of its members. . . . It constitutes itself as the living and permanent environment for growth in the faith. (no. 158)

For this reason, personal contact between community members is essential for catechesis "since the gift of the Holy Spirit comes to the subject from one living person to another."³⁸

Members of the community who actively serve as catechists have a mission entrusted to them by the Church (no. 224), work "in the name of the Church" (no. 219 note 13), and need to keep alive in themselves

³⁷ Ibid., no. 220. Further, "at the end of the catechetical process, it is the Christian community that welcomes the catechized in a fraternal environment, 'in which they will be able to live in the fullest way what they have learned,'" quoting John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae*, no. 24.

³⁸ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 158. Similarly, "the personal relationship of the catechist with the subject is of crucial importance." Ibid., no. 156.

“an awareness of being sent by the Church” (no. 247). The *Directory* explains how the vocation of laypeople to catechesis springs from Baptism and is strengthened by Confirmation, through which “they participate in ‘the priestly, prophetic, and kingly ministry of Christ’” (no. 231). It further describes how some laypeople experience a particular vocation from the Lord Jesus to the ministry of catechesis and how the Church discerns their vocation and commissions them (no. 231), affirming that “diocesan pastoral programs must give absolute priority to the formation of lay catechists.”³⁹ According to the *General Directory for Catechesis*, catechists are essentially mediators, facilitating communication between people and the mystery of God, who must remember that it is God who gives faith, and that their catechetical work must “draw support from faith in the Holy Spirit and from prayer” (no. 156). The Church must therefore “promote the interior formation of catechists” through such means as “prayer groups, the fraternal life, spiritual sharing, and spiritual retreats” (no. 247). Both catechumens and others who receive catechesis can find in lay catechists “a Christian model for their future as believers” (no. 230).

The restoration of the baptismal catechumenate has thus led to the recovery of the responsibility of the whole community of the baptized in the formation of new Christians. This now provides a model for the renewed awareness of the community itself in its common life as “living catechesis,” and of the role of the faithful in catechesis. As the *Directory* points out, “the theological, spiritual, and pastoral implications of the ecclesial nature of catechesis are considerable.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

The baptismal catechumenate, as it existed in the early centuries of the Church, and as it has been restored in the life of the Church today, seeks to provide converts with clear knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ as Saving Lord, and with a means of entering into union with him as members of his Body, the Church, by the power of his Spirit, to the glory of the Father. In order to accomplish this, the catechumenate is focused on providing formation of the whole person, which fosters genuine conversion in the areas of knowledge of God, moral life as part of the Christian community, ability to relate to God through prayer and worship, and entering into the Church’s mission. This repenting of sin

³⁹ Ibid., no. 234. For the criteria for this formation, see *ibid.*, no. 237f.

⁴⁰ Ibid., no. 219; cf. no. 28: “It is urgent that an authentic ecclesiology of communion be promoted and deepened in order to arouse in Christians a deep ecclesial spirituality.”

and dying and rising with Christ and learning to live by his Spirit, is mediated in a privileged way through liturgical celebrations, especially in the proclamation of the Word; and the whole Christian community is called to be involved in helping new members to enter into life in Christ. It is *this* reality, this “preparatory school for the Christian life,” which the *General Directory for Catechesis* lifts up as a source of inspiration and enrichment for all catechesis (no. 91). The *Directory* is not proposing specific new structures, programs, or lesson plans for religious education, but rather seeking to extend catechumens’ grace-filled experience of holistic conversion and formation in Christ, mediated through the liturgy in the context of the community, to *all* the baptized, so that the faithful may ever more deeply *be* faithful, and bring the gospel to the new millennium. It is this that the *Directory* has in mind when it affirms:

“The model for all catechesis is the baptismal catechumenate when, by specific formation, an adult converted to belief is brought to explicit profession of baptismal faith during the Paschal Vigil.” *This catechumenal formation should inspire the other forms of catechesis in both their objectives and in their dynamism.* (no. 59, emphasis added)

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