

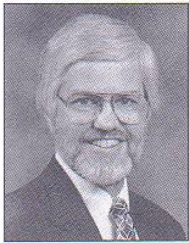
PARISH PRACTICE NOTEBOOK

The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

Winter 2001 • Number 62

Catechumenate for Adults: Being Formed in the Faith

The author, the Rev. Dr. Gordon Lathrop, is the Charles Schieren Professor of Practical Theology at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia



The Lutheran church has often understood itself—especially in North America and

in the European lands of its origin—as a “folk church,” wedded to the culture of a particular land or of a particular group of immigrants. In such a church, faith is passed on by the baptism and subsequent formation of the children of the community. And in such a church, the surrounding culture is expected to do its part in the “formation” of the children.

But there is no such help from the surrounding culture today. Instead, we are freshly reminded by the culture that the worlds of North America—and we ourselves—are in profound need of the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. That gospel is held out to us in word and sacrament and in enabling men and women to trust the grace of the triune God and be incorporated into communities of faith and witness.

We are aware that the surrounding culture is constantly seeking to form us — through advertisements and television stories, for example — in pat-

terns and practices which are not particularly Christian. And we are aware that the churches of the Lutheran confession have a gift to give to our neighbors and that in giving that gift we also will be invited again and again to faith. We are coming to see that the catechumenate, an educational process for forming people

did not invent that water, but we can share it. That water is present already in our communities in word and sacrament, in sharing the scriptures and in listening to newcomers, in adult education and baptismal sponsors and Lenten renewal. The water is flowing, as if from a wonderful spring. What needs to happen,

We are aware that the surrounding culture is constantly seeking to form us — through advertisements and television stories, for example — in patterns and practices which are not particularly Christian.

in the faith, is an important way to give this gift. Indeed, we are realizing that something like the catechumenate is implied by our theology and is being practiced by many of our congregations already.

Say it this way: The water of the gift of Christ is flowing. We

in each of our places, as theologian John Vannorsdall would say, is the clearing out of the spring, so the water might flow with more strength and clarity. Some central Lutheran ideas may help us to do such clearing. Indeed, these ideas might help us to see that the catechumenate is a very “Lutheran” thing to undertake.

For example: Such an idea is the doctrine of *the Word of God*. Lutherans have long held, with St. Paul, that “faith comes from

THEME OF THIS ISSUE:

Bringing others to faith

STORIES:

<i>Catechumenate for Adults</i>	1
<i>Lifelong learning</i>	6
<i>From the editor</i>	10

Lutherans believe that God continually brings us to faith in Jesus Christ through certain concrete, material means: the Word of the scripture, read aloud and preached orally, the water of baptism, the bread and wine of the holy communion, and the word of forgiveness in the mouth of our brother or sister.

what is heard" (Romans 10:17). For Martin Luther, the church was to be not a "pen-house," a place of writing and reading, but a "mouth-house," a place for speaking and hearing the word of Christ, for mutual conversation and comfort in the gift of Christ. The catechumenate takes that idea seriously. The very word from which the process is named—*katecheo*—means "to speak so that the word echoes deeply in ears and heart," and so, "to instruct orally, by word of mouth." At the heart of a strong catechumenate is the group in which adult inquirers are welcomed to discuss the lectionary readings of the week.

Catechumenal groups are little "mouth-houses." The center of the discussion is the ways in which the scripture speaks the gospel and brings us to faith in the forgiveness and presence of the triune God. But this is a real discussion, a "mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters" (Smalcald Articles III:4). For the catechumenate, Paul's counsel that "faith comes through what is heard," is conjoined also with his urging:

"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you" (Romans 15:7). For the stories of each inquirer or catechumen who is coming to Christ are also *listened to* and welcomed, so that those stories might be gathered up into the Story of the Word of God.

But the doctrine of the Word of God is deeper yet. Lutherans believe in the *presence of Christ in the scriptures*. The Bible is not just a book of instruction. Its words, read aloud in an assembly of hearers, are an actual means for the encounter with God. As Luther says, "When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him" (*Luther's Works* 35:121). The Sunday lectionary is exactly a system of scripture-reading based upon the conviction of the presence of Christ in the readings. Then a lectionary-based catechumenal group will be focused not only on telling and hearing personal stories in the light of the scriptural

story. It will also be a gathering in the presence of Jesus Christ, a continued echoing of that Living Word which is present in the assembly of the church.

But then it will be clear that the catechumenal process is making use of *the means of grace*. Lutherans believe that God continually brings us to faith in Jesus Christ through certain concrete, material means: the Word of the scripture, read aloud and preached orally, the water of baptism, the bread and wine of the holy communion, and the word of forgiveness in the mouth of our brother or sister. We have these wonderful gifts, gifts which form the church when they are exercised. In fact, these means are *all* we have to call ourselves or others to true faith. But these means have the promise of God in their use. And here is one lively use of these very means of grace: A catechumenal group discusses the Sunday *scriptures*, the readings which have been read and preached in the congregational celebration of the *eucharist*, doing so in the manner of *mutual conversation*, while the catechumens in the group are moving toward baptism and the catechist and sponsors are being refreshed in their baptismal life.

Obviously, the discussion of such a group will not only be about scripture. It will sometimes turn to explanation of the formal, systematic propositions of doctrine as they are alive in the church. But the classic Lutheran approach to these propositions will need to be much in evidence: the approach marked by the *existential significance of doctrine*. The *Small Catechism* makes this clear.

There Luther helps us not only to discuss the abstract ideas of “creation,” “salvation,” and “sanctification,” but also to confess, “I believe that God has created me together with all that exists . . .,” and “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God . . . and also a true human being . . . is my Lord . . .,” and “I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel . . .”

The great doctrines always include *me*, are known especially as marking *my* life. The strength of the Lutheran approach is the strong reception of traditional communal formulation combined with the strong interest in its meaning for the person in daily life. That is an interest

shared by a healthy catechumenate where doctrinal discussion will always be based in a real intersection between scripture and daily life.

The *catechism* has relevance for the catechumenate in yet another way. Its very order, in the pattern recovered by Luther himself, is a summary of the process of an adult coming to baptism and to the communal life in Christ. In the *Small Catechism*,

Commandments lead to Creed followed by Prayer, Baptism itself and the Supper. This is the very order of the catechumenate: First we are warned that our life will be changed by this process; then we learn the faith in the triune God; we are taught to pray and led to the Bath and, through the Bath, to the Supper. Then there follow the matters of the

Christian life: confession and absolution, morning and evening prayer, meal prayers, and the table of duties. In fact, a “catechism” is none other than symbolic texts which sum up the whole process of being formed as a Christian, the content of the hearing and speaking, the conversation, which is the catechumenate.

It is no wonder that Lutherans, then, speak of a *lifelong catechumenate*, just as Luther described himself as one “who must still read and study

the catechism daily” (*Large Catechism*, Preface). The Lutheran conception of Christian faith recognizes our constant need to be awakened to trust in God and to hear the word of forgiveness. Luther’s “lifelong study” could lead him at last to see that the order of the catechism is never something from which we “gradu-

***We are warned
that our life will be
changed by this
process***

ate.” Indeed, the baptized person may experience that the life of faith often involves going forward and backward through its order throughout the Christian life. Because we cannot obey the commandments or even believe or pray, God gives us the remembrance of baptism and the participation in the eucharist to restore us to the Body of Christ, so incorporating us into prayer in and through Christ, and so bringing us again to faith and so to new obedience. Those who are accompanying inquirers and catechumens in the catechumenal process—catechists, sponsors, pastors, the whole congregation—are no less always beginners than are the candidates for baptism. They are beggars telling other beggars where there is bread.

That is also the implication of yet another Lutheran insight: the doctrine of *justification by grace through faith*. Indeed, this “insight” is none other than the principal cornerstone of the edifice of Lutheran confession. Coming through an adult catechumenate to baptism or being a sponsor or



The recent baptism of Hiram Gabriel Rabell-Gonzales, shown held by seminarian-father, Nelson and his spouse, Fabiola, was an occasion for the entire Seminary community to revisit baptisms. Also shown in the photo are Seminary Chaplain and author Gordon Lathrop, and the Rev. Nelson Rivera, a Seminary Assistant Professor who presided at the baptism.

The process of the catechumenate is moving toward baptism and toward identification with the mission of the community in Christ.

catechist assisting such a person cannot be understood as a “work” we do in order to “climb up” to God. Understood in this way, the catechumenate will be deceptive and profoundly disappointing. But when it functions as it is intended, when it involves needy people together gathering around the word of God as the church reads that word in Christ, it will be very helpful. The catechist and the pastor—as well as the catechumens—continually need both the lively Word of the scripture read in community and the witness and word of others in order to hear and trust the promise of Christ. The faith-creating, justifying word is always coming to us from outside ourselves. For that word we need our sisters and brothers. At its best, the catechumenate is an institution formed by this conviction.

Of course, the process of the catechumenate is moving toward baptism and toward identification with the mission of the community in Christ. It is in the seriousness of *baptism* itself that the catechumenate has its strongest Lutheran echoes. For Lutherans, baptism happens once but takes our lifetime to live out. For Lutherans, baptism is active in our lives again and again: in every word of absolution, as we creep back to the astonishing grace of the font; in every Lord’s Supper, as Christ receives us anew in “the repeatable part of

baptism” which is the holy communion; in every word full of Christ’s presence, as the water lives and speaks in our very hearts; in every new beginning, every discovery of courage to start anew, in spite of death and loss. For Lutherans, baptism is for children, who are baptized with dignity, being addressed, as if they were adults, as our sisters or brothers in Christ. But baptism is also for adults, who are welcomed and clothed, as if they were newborn. It is no wonder that the process which leads to this event-for-a-lifetime, then, should be taken with all the seriousness of the catechumenate. In fact, it will only be after the water-bath that the Christian will be led, again and again, to reflect on the lifelong significance of what he or she has undergone. The way toward the bath will be marked, especially, with the discovery of the importance of the scriptures, the nature of faith in the triune God, and the significance of justification by grace for daily living. But the words which are full of these things are the very words which are joined with the water in the bath of baptism. In baptism, all the scriptures are poured over the baptized who are gathered into the life of the triune God and into faith in the justifying Christ.

Beyond the water-bath, the catechumenate should lead to communal reflection on the meaning of the sacraments for daily life

and mission. That is, the catechumenal process will be engaged in forming a *priesthood of all believers*. This Lutheran idea ought not be read in the way so common in North America: Each individual has his or her own access to God; no “priests” are needed! Rather, each baptized member of the church functions as part of “the priesthood we all share in Christ Jesus” (*Lutheran Book of Worship, Holy Baptism*), the purpose of which is to “proclaim the praise of God and bear his creative and redeeming Word to all the world.” The baptized are made into priests not for themselves, but for the sake of all the needy world. We are priests for our neighbors. Baptism leads the baptized somewhere: to the assembly of the church, telling the truth about God for all the world to hear, Sunday after Sunday, in gatherings around the Word and the Holy Supper. And baptism

The baptized are made into priests not for themselves, but for the sake of all the needy world.

leads the member of that assembly to mission.

At least one other Lutheran idea is significant for the catechumenate: *paradox*. We have already seen this idea at work in our consideration of a Lutheran view of catechumenal process. Baptism, we have said, is a one-

time event, meant for a lifetime. Adults, we have said, are baptized like children, and children like adults. But there is more: Baptism, for the catechumen, is that one-time, astonishing, grace-filled event, perhaps on Easter Eve, at the Vigil, gathering the newly baptized into Christ's own resurrection. But, in another, paradoxical sense, baptism is the whole process, for however

and still be a movement in mission—reaching out to new people; forming, converting and baptizing adults. Both are true; both need to be true. One form of this paradox is the catechumenate. This devotion to paradox, as the only way to tell the truth about God or the church or baptism or faith, is a profoundly Lutheran gift.

So these ideas—the doctrine

Baptism, for the catechumen, is that one-time, astonishing, grace-filled event, perhaps on Easter Eve, at the Vigil, gathering the newly baptized into Christ's own resurrection.

many months or years it takes. As soon as one hears the word of Christ, gathers in the company of Christ, one is already “in” baptism, because one is in the word which, conjoined to the water, makes baptism to be baptism. One form of this paradox is the catechumenate. And more: Baptism actually gives grace, Lutherans believe. But, Lutherans, say, it is addressed to faith. It needs to be trusted. Both things are true. Not the one instead of the other. Both. So: It is not true that baptism is just a “symbol” of our faith in God. God really works in baptism. But it is also not true that it does not matter if we believe God or not, as long as we are baptized. One form of this paradox is the catechumenate. And more: Lutheranism believes that a healthy church can have the characteristics of a settled, catholic church—sacramental in form; baptizing and raising its children; linked to folk cultures—

of the word of God and of the presence of Christ in the scriptures, the means of grace, the existential significance of doctrine itself, the form of the catechism, lifelong catechumenate, the importance of baptism, the priesthood of all believers, the role of paradox and the very doctrine of justification—cast a great light on that catechumenal process many of our congregations are re-considering. Or, to use another metaphor, they are tools we can use to clear the spring which is running already in all of our congregations. If we believe these things—and these ideas are central to our confession!—then the catechumenate gives us a form to put them into motion. The catechumenal process is not a new “program” put out by headquarters for our churches! It is simply adult baptism, with Christ's presence in the word and the centrality of the means of grace and justification taken seriously.

Of course, it would be possible to do the catechumenate without these accents. But there are dangers: that the word which would give a center to catechumenal groups might be only “my story” or only the local church's concern for membership growth, not the word of God, full of Christ's presence, or that catechists and pastors think of themselves as professionals with something to give to the “unlearned” who come, rather than as fellow beggars. Or there is the danger that the whole process could be conceived as a spiritual achievement, “earning” more insight into God, forming “real” disciples. There is the danger that the process be dealt with rigidly, requiring certain “hurdles” always, rather than understanding that the formal “catechumenate” may sometimes be only a few hours (as with the Ethiopian eunuch; Acts 8:26-39), sometimes more like years. And there is the danger that baptism will not lead to community nor to further mission.

The classic Lutheran notes may help us avoid or transform these dangers. Indeed, if your congregation is considering deepening its baptismal practice, doing the kind of adult catechumenate we have been imaging here, it is considering doing a very old, very new, very Lutheran thing.

1. Parts of this article appeared first in [Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate](#) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997). Anyone interested in deepening the parish practice of welcoming adults to baptism should look at this volume and at the other two volumes called [Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate](#) and [Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide](#).