

# **The Catechumenate and a New World**

**by the Rt. Rev. Mark MacDonald**

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## **Introduction**

### **I. Receive**

#### **A. Some Assumptions Throughout**

1. Catechumenal thinking is the unity we seek in our many fragmented perspectives and issues in the Church today.
2. A Catechumenal Approach was the secret of the growth of the Early Church.
3. We are in a crisis and opportunity that begs for a Catechumenal answer.

#### **B. Preliminary Considerations**

1. There is a World “Hidden” in this World — It is God’s Future.
  - a. Hidden in this world; revealed in Jesus; it is God’s Future.
  - b. This is another way at looking at the incarnational emphasis of John 1 and the catechumenal theology of Irenaeus.
  - c. It is revealed decisively and fully in Jesus in such a way that it becomes revealed not just as knowledge but also as reality — as it is revealed God’s Future begins in such a substantial way that we can be said to live in the “Last Days.”
  - d. Revealed in the Story of Jesus (The Gospel Proclamation), it is often obscured by the other stories that we live by.
    - In many ways, the goal of the Catechumenate is to adopt a life-style of attending to the Story of Jesus, as opposed the story of the World.
    - This is always true; it is particularly urgent today.
    - In today’s story, Jesus’ story is a footnote, and this is seen in special clarity in fundamentalism.
2. The Gospel Zone or Gospel Land helps us to see this reality more clearly — in the Gospels and now.

- a. Viewed from above, Jesus has two “zones” surrounding him almost always:
  - A densely-packed group that is constantly asking him important questions like: “When do we eat?” — The Duh Zone.
  - A less densely-packed group that is desperate and connects immediately with Jesus — The Gospel Zone or Gospel Land.
- b. In Gospel Zone/Land the hidden world is revealed in power. One becomes a thousand. Sinners become saints.
- c. The Gospel Zone/Land we see in the Gospels is a visible and historical portrayal of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) and the Parables (compare with Matthew 13:1ff.).
- d. These Realities are very much a part of the Church today.
  - Duh celebrates, enshrines, and confines us to the miserliness of our particularities of our preferences and habits. It is, most often, what people mean by formation.
  - We seek the Comfort Zone (Duh) and never find it.
  - Our search for control and comfort fuels our anxieties.
3. An important principle: The Catechumenate is a disciplined attempt to live within the Gospel Zone, primarily through hearing and living in the story of Jesus, the Gospels.
4. Another important principle: Most programs and much process aimed at being Catechumenal fail because it really brings us deeper into Duh.
5. We must develop “Gospel Eyes” to see this “Hidden” world and to live in the Gospel Zone/Land.

## II. Bless

- A. The Gospel is an example of what modern Navajo philosophers have called Four-Directional-Thinking. It is not just a presentational technique; it is also a cosmology.
  1. Four-Directional-Thinking is common among traditional people, including The People of the Land (Indigenous Peoples), and involves a dynamic multidirectional (as opposed to linear-) way of thought.
  2. We see the same approach in Scripture and The Early Church.
    - a. Genesis 2 — The Four Rivers
    - b. Ezekiel’s Four Living Creatures (compare with Revelations and the Gospels); Four Winds (ch. 37); and Four Rivers (ch. 47), which is the background of Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3.
    - c. Irenaeus says, without thinking it needed an explanation, that the reason there are Four Gospels is because there are Four Winds.
  3. The Gospels create a type of “virtual” reality in which the reader is invited to enter a dynamic “world” and view Jesus from Four Directions.

- a. This was intuitively apprehended by Native preachers like Albert Tritt of the Gwich'in in the Arctic Regions of NE Alaska and NW Canada.
  - b. We see this approach in many of the Early Church Elders: Ephrem, Maximus, etc. It is why their thinking appears to be so circular and foreign.
4. This reality has very important and practical implications for the Church.
- a. It is the structure of our formation/catechumenate — a living in a Gospel “cosmology,” the Gospel Zone/Land.
  - b. It is the structure of our Mission, as is seen in the missionary instructions of Jesus. This, like many Native Ceremonials and in contrast to modern utilitarian thinking, makes the invitation an intimate part of the event itself — Creating a New World.
- B. The Life of Jesus and the Eucharist — The Heart of Discipleship.
1. The Four-Directional Life of Jesus — Birth-Death-Resurrection-Coming Again — is clearly the shape of all these things. It is our basic Cosmology. He is the Life of the World made flesh.
  2. This is reflected, again, in the inner logic, Four-fold structure, and cosmology of the Eucharist: Receive-Bless-Break-Share.
    - a. An important principle: This un-does the Fall of our First Parents, who ate their way into hell. We eat our way into Heaven.
    - b. An important principle: This is the way we develop Gospel Eyes.
      - We see the Gospel Zone/Land.
      - We see the “stranger” as our friend, even as Jesus.
      - This is seen clearly on the road to Emmaus, a fundamental picture of our discipleship (Luke 24:13-35).
  3. This Birth-Death-Resurrection-Coming Again and the Receive-Bless-Break-Share revelation and enactment is the pattern of the Catechumenate.
    - a. Enrollment/Pre-catechumenate — God Calls Us.
    - b. Catechumenate — We Listen.
    - c. Enlightenment — God Gives us Light.
    - d. Mystagogy — We Live in God’s Life.

### III. Break

#### A. Our Context

1. Americanization
  - a. Much that is good can be found in Globalization.
  - b. However, much that makes it difficult for the Poor and the Environment can be seen in missiologist Lamin Sanneh’s phrase, “Americanization.”

- Fragmentation often attributed to “Tribalization,” a title that obscures the true problem.
  - It is polarization into groups of poverty of body or poverty of soul.
2. The People of the Land: The Fourth World
    - a. Often hidden in First World Nations.
    - b. Their Poverty and Danger is worse than most of the Two-Thirds World.
    - c. One Fourth of the World’s usable land is in their hands. They are right in the sights of the global gun of Americanized Development — McWorld!
    - d. They represent the hidden character of sin and suffering, our ability to hide from the consequences of our actions.
  3. Growing Poverty and Environmental Degradation: Two consequences of Americanization.
    - a. The Three-Worlds of Mission Show this:
      - One Third of the World has heard about Jesus and Claims to have some affiliation.
      - One Third is in a position to hear and know.
      - One Third doesn’t, and probably will never, hear or know.
      - This Last One Third is projected to Grow to One Half within the next few decades because of poverty.
    - b. We are hindered in seeing this because we are caught in Two difficult Stories that obscure the Truth of our World:
      - Christendom and its identification with Western Civilization (Americanization?).
      - Our own Affluence.
  4. We need to develop “Gospel Eyes,”
    - a. To see Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) — The Holocaust of Poverty and AIDS that exists in our World.
    - b. We are called to the Gospel Zone — Marginal to this world — Outside the Gate (compare with Orlando Costas’ *Christ Outside the Gate*).
- B. The Apostolic Pattern and The Jesus Way: Its Catechumenal Dimensions.
1. The Gospel, understood in a Four-Directional-Thinking (a Catechumenal Thinking), is the vehicle, then, of the Incarnation/God’s Antidote for our sin-sickness. This is also seen in many other healing acts unrelated or loosely connected to Institutional Christianity. (Compare with AA).
    - a. The Mission of God is the Unity of All Creation in Christ, the Incarnated Principle of all life (Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:15-20).
    - b. The Incarnation is the way that this is accomplished.

- c. The Gospel is the vehicle in which the Incarnation travels.
  - d. Discipleship is the Road upon which the vehicle travels.
2. The Missionary Instructions of Jesus and the Nature of the Gospel.
- a. Counter their religious training and instincts (Duh!), Jesus redirects the traffic from the Jerusalem temple to the villages (Ezekiel 11:16).
  - b. He asks them to make each place a “little temple” by:
    - God is near to you! — Recognizing the Presence of God.
    - Turn around and believe the Good News! — Examining the Old Life/Living the New World.
  - c. Note the way that this is witnessed in Jesus’ own Evangelism/ Catechumenal approach:
    - The woman at the well (John 4)
    - Zacchaeus (Luke 19)
3. The Shape of this Endeavor is Catechumenal and places its stress on the ongoing life of conversion for the missionary/catechist.
- a. They were to live with the people and, in their own recognition of God’s presence in the stranger, bring this new world to others.
  - b. They sealed this New World relationship in eating what was set before them — a very hard thing for a pious Jew to contemplate.
    - Pointing the way to inculturation (see below).
    - Reminding us that the deeper conversion was taking place in the messenger (missionary/catechist).
    - Revealing that the greatest barriers to Evangelism are in the hearts of the Evangelists, not in the hearts of the others. This is a Gospel Zone way of thinking.
4. The Catechumenate: The secret of Pre-Christendom’s phenomenal growth (see *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, by Alan Kreider (Grove Books, 1995).
- a. Much of what the Early Church did is contrary to the common wisdom on church growth and evangelism.
    - People never went to worship until they were initiated through the Catechumenate. There was no connection between worship and evangelism.
    - They do not pray for converts; they pray for their enemies and persecutors.
    - They were silent in public and unobtrusive.
    - They acted like *paroikoi* — “Resident Aliens” (1 Peter 2:11).
    - They raised questions about life that are usually left till much later. The Catechumenate was their Stewardship Program.
    - They focused the Catechumenate on turning from the “worship, more subtle than that of idols, which is greed” (Origen).
  - b. They achieved liberation (according to Justin) in four primary areas

of bondage (addiction) (Kreider, p. 15):

- Sexual Adventure
  - Magic Arts
  - Escalating Living Standards
  - Xenophobic Violence
- c. They did not forget the two-fold shape of their instructions (see III. B. 2. Above) and, in addition to their focus on turning, practiced the recognition that “God is Near to you!”
- By enthusiastically inculturating their faith (compare with Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19).
  - This is not just mission expediency; it is the nature of the mission and the heart of the Gospel — the Word made flesh.
5. Returning to our Context (see III. A.), we may, in light of this, ask the question, “What should we do?”
- a. Do we shun the entire modern world and every aspect of Americanization?
- b. The evidence suggests that a Four-Directional Catechumenal Approach is the heart of our response:
- By Inculturating the Faith (God is Near you!)
  - By making the focus of Catechumenal living the discernment of where we, in this modern world, must “Turn around and believe the Good News.”
- c. The result was “a conversion to marginality” — a dwelling in the Gospel Zone.
- d. The making of a “New World”
- By exemplary and heroic service — Early Christians were seen running to trouble to help (as opposed to others; they were especially ready to help their enemies).
  - By a worship that embodied their New World.
  - By a generosity that astounded others.

#### IV. **Share**

- A. We should now focus on “Discipleship.” This is a reorientation — a Catechumenal Process for our Institutions.
1. The Gospel is the agent of change.
  2. This is a Gospel-Based Approach, as opposed to an Institution-Based Approach.
  3. Disciple-Centered, not Priest/Pastor-Centered.
  4. We recognize Christ outside the Gate in realizing that Discipleship is happening in many forms outside the institutional church.
  5. Leadership Development is focused on Catechist/Catalyst Development.

- Gospel-Based Discipleship in a group setting.
- All groups in Church Gather around the Gospel — that which is most sacred to us.

- B. The role of “Bishop” (Judicatory Leader) is reoriented to the Gospel Zone.
1. The “Bishop’s” role is reworked with the Catechumenate as the basic model.
  2. Determine the size and boundaries (or lack of them) of “Jurisdictions” by the Catechumenate.
  3. **STAY IN THE GOSPEL ZONE!**