

Journeying by Stages: Unpacking the Mystery with John, the Catechist

by Daniel Benedict

This address was given at the North American Association for the Catechumenate (NAAC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico June 28, 2016 under the conference theme, "Sing a New Song: Unpacking the Mystery of Faith". It has been abbreviated and edited for reading. This article is copyright © 2016 Daniel Benedict. It may be reproduced in print or as a digital file in whole or in part for educational use so long as the following copyright notice is attached: "© 2015 Daniel Benedict. Used with permission." It may not be posted on any website other than NAAC without permission of the author. References to Aidan Kavanagh are from his essay titled "Catechesis: Formation in Stages" in The Baptismal Mystery and the Catechumenate, edited by Michael W. Merriman (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), pp. 36-52.

"My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is **formed in you....**"
Galatians 4.19

My intent in this presentation is to focus on the *what* of catechesis in light of threshold questions inherent in each stage and, then, on the *how*, illustrated by 'John, the catechist and the post-dismissal group' at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew (Honolulu) in the winter and spring of 2015. In other words, I'll propose a structural framework for the movements of the catechumenal process and then illumine it recalling the skillful work of a particular catechist.

But, before I go there, there are a couple of matters I'd like to address to set the context.

Definitions

First, *some definitions*. At the risk of being too elementary, but in the hope that some definitions will be helpful, especially for those of you who are just tipping your toes into this catechumenal thing, I'll venture the following. And, perhaps, it will put the rest of us on the same page for conversation.

We have this cluster of strange words, that become "inspeak" rather quickly. They are good words and we need to use them because they connect us with *a long tradition* and offer us terminology that has *precision: catechumenate, catechumen, catechesis, catechized, and catechist*.

The root word in this cluster that contain "**catech**" is the Greek word from which we get 'echo.' The word occurs in the New Testament in several places and is usually translated "instruction."ⁱ

Catechesis aims at forming persons in the Christian faith and life so that the Word of God echoes or resounds in them; it is instruction, primarily oral, used to form persons in the Christian faith and life. Catechesis encompasses all forms, approaches, and methodologies, both planned and unexpected. Catechesis takes place during the catechumenate and after it as *mystogogy*. A person so formed may be described as *catechized*.

A **catechumen** is the ancient Greek name for unbaptized youth and adults preparing for initiation into life in the sacraments. When the congregation publically welcomes an inquirer to hear the Word of God, pray, study the scriptures, and to engage in service with them, the person becomes a *catechumen*.

The **catechist** is generally a lay person that the congregation calls to guide catechumens through the stages and rites of Christian initiation. The catechist ensures that the catechumens reflect upon their

participation in the basic practices of the worship, scripture, prayer, and service. A congregation might have one or more catechists, depending on the need.

The **catechumenate** is the umbrella word for the basic structure for instructing and forming youth and adults preparing for baptism. It is basic to the church's work of welcoming and journeying with those evangelized by the gospel in order to bring them to life in the sacraments of initiation. The stages or times of the catechumenate are punctuated by public rites of welcome, enrollment, baptism, and affirmation of vocation.ⁱⁱ

The proper work of *catechesis*

Second, *let's be clear that catechesis is not catechism*. The catechumenate can easily lend itself to an *infection*. Where did this infection come from? From the 16th century Reformation and Counter-reformation tradition of the "catechism" as a doctrinal manual. Before you stone me, let me say that there is a place for catechisms, those pamphlets or fat books filled with Christian doctrine, usually in a Q and A format. How many of you went through a catechism class and memorized the answers to the questions? Who can forget the Westminster Catechism's:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

I am grateful for the "Outline of Faith" in the 1979 BCP. I am grateful for the historic catechisms of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions; even the massive 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. These serve an important teaching function. The distortion that infects us is the pernicious presumption that we have "answers" to give people, when at the core *catechesis* is not about questions with answers readymade, but articulating questions for which there are no readymade answers; questions that demand thoughtful reflection and deep interior response. Furthermore, the most profound questions are those that well up within those undergoing conversion and the new birth. Catechesis at its best senses these questions welling up in the sharing of stories and gives voice to the implicit questions so that they hang there to be reflected upon.

The great tradition of the catechumenate keeps trying to remind us that we can't package answers to *primary questions* like

"What's happening to me as my life turns around?"

"Does my life matter?"

"Why do I have this sense that God knows me and is calling to me?"

Let's be honest. We church people are like secondary questions. They are less demanding. We are good at playing around with what Aidan Kavanagh called "ecclesiastical data": "What is the Trinity?" "How do bishops get elected?" "What is the Church Year?" "What is sin?" "How does Christ save us from sin and death?" These are important but secondary. The primary questions require answers that must come from within — from the Word of God internalized and so resounding in each catechumen.

Catechesis is a life and death, risky, Holy Spirit thing, and by the Spirit we invite each inquirer and catechumen to search for his or her answer to such questions existentially — in terms of their flesh and blood existence. Catechesis is about unpacking the mystery so that a new Christian experiences singing a NEW song never sung before in the uniqueness of their turning from sin and self to life in Jesus Christ with his people, the *ecclesia*, the *called out* ones.

The mysteries we steward are ultimately hidden within and must become manifest in flesh and blood. St. Paul makes clear that Christ is the mystery (Col. 2:2; 4:3) and that this mystery resides in us.

He writes:

God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of *the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Colossians 1: 27-28

That might be the catechetical community's key text – its *locus classicus*.

Set that next to what Richard Rodriguez so poignantly expresses in his book, *Darling*:

The congregation does not believe one thing; we believe a multitude of hazy, crazy things. Some among us are smart; some serene; some feeble, poor, practical, guilt-ridden; some are lazy; some arrogant, rich, pious, prurient, bitter, injured, sad. We gather in belief of one big thing: that we matter, somehow. We all matter. No one can matter unless all matter. We call that which gives matter God.ⁱⁱⁱ

(We may not all feel that we matter, especially those outside of the white, Western, male hegemony. The gospel we proclaim and celebrate in the liturgy is that all matter and no one can matter unless all matter.)

The mystery that we unpack is multifaceted. Yes, the mystery is Christ Jesus in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming again. It is Christ known and revealed and concealed in the sacraments. But all of that more narrow theological reflection points to Christ concealed and revealed in a diverse host of people who matter, each in their own unique set of hurts and hopes. And this is equally true of those who in the midst of life and death are being upended by the Logos — the Word made flesh — in *their* day to day. If this Word, this key, to the NEW SONG in all living, loving and dying is to be unpacked, we have to get over the notion that we can “teach” some content and job done!

The infection is reliance on ourselves instead of trusting the Holy Spirit to work in those whose lives have been upended by the gospel. The infection is supposing that the life of faith can be equated with propositions set forth in conformity with the “traditional” and creedal answers of the church. It is not that these answers are wrong; nor should they be disposed of. It is that they can't be arrived at like a check deposited in a savings account. They have to come by discovery as *personal truth* — *not private, but personal*.

Christ-Jesus-at-the-center is not an idea or set of doctrines; he is the resurrection and the life, to be known and loved and reckoned with for the duration. He is to be listened to; heard deep within. The catechumenal process is first and foremost about learning to hear and respond to the living Word. Soren Kierkegaard tried to remind the Danish church of this with his *Fear and Trembling*. This knowing is *disturbing and disorienting* before it is reconciling and reorienting. It requires opening up, digging down, and discovering who is there and what he means in us. John Bell and Graham Maule's interrogative song, “The Summons” invites us into this mystery and unpacks it with a series of questions that we all struggle to answer over time, and again and again. [Due to copyright issues related to song texts, the lyrics for “The Summons” are not included here. You can search for the text online or find them in any number of recently hymn and song collections, e.g., *The Faith We Sing*.]

The catechumenate starts with persons beginning to hear those questions and living into the answers discovered. Hopefully as the journey nears the first Sunday in Lent, participants are ready to sing the last stanza, which is the response to the Mystery's questions. [See stanza 5.]

There in those questions that expose our fragility is the mystery, the paschal mystery of our union with Jesus Christ in baptism, but in such personal terms.

So, having those definitions out on the table, and with a caution against presumption that we can pour church teaching into catechumens, let's consider the stages of the journey.

Envisioning a Pentecostal catechesis

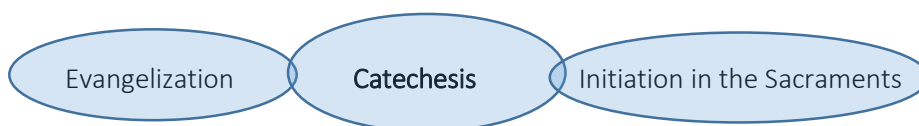
I want to lay out what I'll call a Pentecostal catechesis: not Pentecostal in the sense of a denomination or a tradition of glossolalia, but Pentecostal in the sense of Pentecost in the Book of Acts, the out pouring of the Spirit on the church to engage with those arrested in hearing God's mighty deeds and bringing them to the waters of baptism. This Spirit grounded catechesis requires time and stages of formation toward the horizon of baptism.

Over 25 years ago Aidan Kavanagh set the context of this catechesis. He proposed that there are three large parts in the movement from death to life: *evangelization, catechesis, and initiation*. Present-day church bureaucracies tend to articulate this more plainly as *making disciples* for the transformation of the world. However, I think Kavanagh's three-fold description better holds our feet to the fire of Pentecost.

He spoke perceptively,

We cannot have any one of these three large parts without the other two. Without *evangelization*, catechesis has nothing to work with, and the rites of initiation in that case can only be dissimulated [a sham]. Without *catechesis*, the initial conversion occasioned by evangelization (which is often deeply subjective, incommunicable, and euphoric) cannot be nurtured, steadied, broadened into coherent world view and brought to ecclesial term. And without the *sacraments of initiation*, catechesis loses its primary focus . . . at . . . the Table where the Source and Redeemer of all things sits with us as among friends at dinner (p. 38).

So, what I want to address here and now is the middle part of the three: *catechesis*. When the gospel has been proclaimed and heard, whether in the bar or the office Bible study or in liturgy, and lives have been upended by the grace of the Holy Spirit, *what do we in the community of faith do?* And how does the horizon of initiation into the paschal mystery realized in baptism and the Eucharist shape *what we do*, and *how we do it?*



Stages as What — What We Do

First, let's look at the stages or times with rites through which we seek to unpack the mystery and sing the new song. There are four.

Four Stages of the Catechumenate

In the four stages: Pre-catechumenate, catechumenate, enrollment or election, and mystagogical living. The plainer, more functional language I use in *Come to the Waters* is Inquiry, Formation, Intensive Preparation, and Integration. *Go Make Disciples* names them Inquiry, Exploration, Intensive Formation, and Baptismal Living. (The point is not which vocabulary is right; it is that we get the gist of flow of what happens in that middle part between evangelization and initiation.) Each of the four stages is marked by a public rite that is the transition or threshold to the next stage. As a wise colleague of mine keeps reminding me, the rites are the horizon toward which that stage moves and so shapes what we do during that period of instruction.

1. *Stage 1: Pre-catechumenate or Time of Inquiry: (Touching the edges.)*^{iv}

On the near edge of evangelization in all the ways that happens, planned or not, we engage the “up ended” in inquiry. This is an initial period of time when inquirers alongside catechists, pastors, and sponsors explore broad and general questions of faith and what is reorienting their lives. This is a time of touching the edges of what the Spirit is doing in them through hospitality, sharing stories and testimony, dispelling fears, answering questions, making invitation, and building trust and openness. The quest in this stage is to explore

How do your longings and your story connect with God’s story?

Are you prepared to reorder your life in order to hear and follow Jesus Christ.

The thrust is to begin addressing what is happening in their search. **“What do you seek?”** is the question on the horizon, for that is what the inquirer will be asked publically in the rite of welcome. The gist of what must be in place to go forward with integrity is “I seek life in Jesus Christ.”

2. *Stage 2: Catechumenate or Time of Exploration: (Discovering the Riches)*

If and when the inquirer is ready, the process goes forward. If a person discerns that he or she is not ready or is unwilling to go forward in the process, we respect and love them in that decision. If they are ready and declare that they seek Christ and life with the church they are admitted as *catechumens* in the rite of welcome (Admission of a Catechumens) and participate actively in the practices of Christian discipleship alongside catechists, pastors, and sponsors. This is an indeterminate period of time in which to test the depth and perseverance of desire to live as a Christian and to live as a disciple.^v The central practice of this period is listening for the Word of God and responding by worshiping, praying, reflecting on Scripture, and serving others in daily life. It is a time of discovering themselves in relationship to the gospel; *a time of discovering the rich practices* of Christian living. All of this leads toward a new discernment question: “Do you desire to be baptized and to live with Jesus Christ and his people at his Table and in the world?”

3. *Stage 3: Time of Election/Intensive Preparation: (Exploring the Depths)*

Given that discernment of readiness to be baptized, we admit these “senior catechumens” and on the first Sunday in Lent we enroll them for baptism at the Great Vigil of Easter and enter into a “*six-week retreat*” to “remember and internalize the baptismal images that are laid before [us]; each image^{vi} tells us all, once again, who we are and of what we are capable without the grace of faith” (Kavanagh, p. 46).

The tempter in the wilderness, Nicodemus — the obtuse night visitor, the thirsty woman at the well, the man born blind, and Lazarus in the tomb and his sisters provide a stage where catechumens and congregation find themselves in God's story.^{vii} In these stories all encounter Jesus facing our temptations, deep questions, thirsts, blindness, and death. The creeds and confessions, and prayer of the church, along with the church's most intense worship, mentor and model the depth dynamic of our public faith known personally. This is the consummation of the journey begun in evangelization and prayer, fasting, and good works.

All of this is to populate the imagination in ways that allow holy play on the horizon of renunciation and affirmation at the heart of the baptismal covenant:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

Do you confess Jesus Christ as Savior and put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church?^{viii}

4. *Post-baptismal Catechesis or Time of Mystagogy: (Living the Life)*

Then comes the Great Vigil. When it is over it's like the newly baptized are in a huge train station. Like dazed and wondering travelers with suit case in hand, the neophytes get off the train on a bright morning after a long night on the coach, unsettled but ready to unpack and get oriented to a new life by water and the Spirit, a life that is by now familiar but somehow more real and more consequential than could be known before this arrival. In the unpacking of the mystery we sing the NEW SONG in a new key.

It is a period of time following baptism and first Eucharist when the newly baptized are encouraged to explore their experience of the sacraments of baptism and holy communion and the implications for living a sacramental life. The practical matters include exploration of questions such as:

How will you endeavor to follow Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

What is your sense of calling?

What support do you need from other Christians in order to continue as Christ's faithful disciples?^{ix}

The patristic/matristic church called this time *mystagogy*.^x

In some traditions this period concludes with the Rite of Affirmation of Vocation on the Day of Pentecost.

This schema of stages punctuated by rites gives us a theoretical, structural framework over against the actual process of peeling back the layers of awareness and attention to the deeply personal work of the Spirit that brings us to an immersion in the church and its life around the bath, the story, the meal, and the sending forth.

How do we do catechesis?

Now I turn to how do we do what we do in catechesis. I'd like to do that with a snapshot or two from an actual catechetical season in 2015 at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew, paying close attention to the work of a catechist named John.

I agree with Aidan Kavanagh that catechists are rare birds. As he said, “If you find one take him or her to dinner, and listen closely” (p. 36). Meet John, the catechist. (Forgive me: I’m a grandfather to preschoolers so “Bob, the builder” prompts me to use “John, the catechist.”)

John, a lay man and a gay man, served as the catechist for the Cathedral of Saint Andrew in Honolulu where for three years I served as team leader for the catechumenate. John is an architect by profession, a trained spiritual director, and an active leader in the cathedral and diocesan community. For a number of years, he has taught Education for Ministry (EFM) a four-year formational program to provide laity with the tools for ministry in the baptismal covenant.

What I want to do here is to share with you what I observed in the way he embodied catechesis and to draw from that some observations with regard to the “how” of Pentecostal catechetical work.

You might wonder why I insert “Pentecostal” in the phrase. In forming group leaders, John liked to say that before leading a catechumenal session we should “Take a deep breath, imagine swigging down a stiff drink, and know that the Holy Spirit is with you. Then dive in!”

The setting is Sunday mornings during the catechumenate period and during Lent (that six-week retreat as Kavanagh refers to it). (The dismissal sessions were in addition to the weekly catechumenal sessions, each of which had time for scripture reflection and a focus on content.) Each Sunday, the catechumens, their sponsors, and the catechist were dismissed with prayer after the readings and the sermon to go and reflect on the gospel.

At the dismissal, the catechumens stood before the congregation and the presider addressed them saying:

Kim and Michi^{xi}, this community now sends you forth to reflect more deeply upon the word of God which you have shared with us today. Be assured of our loving support and prayers for you. We look forward to the day when you will share fully in the Lord's Table. Let us pray.

The congregation extended hands toward the catechumens as the presider prayed for to the Holy Spirit to come upon them as wind and fire to convict, convert, and consecrate their hearts and minds.

Departing, we go down the cloister walk to the associate priest’s office. We sat in a circle: two catechumens, Kim and Michi, their sponsors, Eve and Barbara, and John, the catechist. I was there both as a sponsor and team leader.

John always came with his dog and his shopping bag library—books that he could draw upon as needed for the session: a Bible, a Frederick Buechner book or two, which he favored for their short, pithy and evocative texts, and other resources. I always made sure that there were copies of the *Book of Common Prayer* for the group.

Once seated, John would look around the circle making eye contact with each of us and smile. Then he would ask a simple, probing question — something like, “So, Kim, what is going on in you this morning?” or “Michi, what did you experience in the liturgy today?” If he said anything more, it would be an encouragement to say whatever first came to mind as the appropriate thing to say. The Spirit! Remember?

Kim would almost always reach for the Kleenex that Eve, her sponsor, had at the ready. John would wait as long as necessary — sometimes uncomfortably long. As he told me, “I am not into rescuing people,” meaning rescuing them from God and the deep work of the Spirit. His body language and presence conveyed, “Silence is ok. There is no hurry. Just rest and listen. Dare to pay attention to what is going on inside of you where God is calling.” He is comfortable, or, at least, disciplined about living with silence. In time, Kim (middle-aged, brought up in a Buddhist home) would compose herself enough to say something. One morning it was, “I am just so grateful.” John receives that repeating it aloud and then quietly asks “What does that mean to you this week?” More silence. Maybe more tears. Silence. Then Kim said, “There is so much love here. I just don’t know how to take it in.” Then John probes that comment repeating it and asking, “What have you experienced that feels like love in this morning’s liturgy?” More silence. Then she connects to an experience from just minutes prior. The dismissal group knows and shares the moment in a fresh way through Kim’s sharing.

Another catechetical moment. On the 3rd Sunday in Lent when the candidates had been presented with the Apostles’ Creed prior to dismissal. In the dismissal group John asks, “What does the creed mean to you?” After a silence, he simply said, “Michi?” (Michi was our reluctant candidate. She too was from a Buddhist family and wanted to simply be baptized without all the public stuff that made her squirm. If her life had been “upended,” to use Kavanagh’s word, she was containing it mightily. She wanted a transaction; the church was inviting her to participation in public transformation.) Michi said, “I guess it’s like a hand hold.” John repeated the phrase, “Hand hold?” Then Michi expanded on her comment. John then focused on Kim for her response to the creed’s significance for her. Then he opened the circle for comments from the sponsors. Always, the initial conversation was dialogical between the candidates and himself as catechist. He allowed as much silence as it took and never did he take the onus off from candidates. Always, he encouraged them to say whatever first surfaced. It wasn’t speaking in tongues, but it was declaring, however haltingly, the mighty acts of God in their tongue.

The dismissal sessions were two parts: the first, listening, attending to what surfaced in the candidates. Part two included some reflection on content. On this day, the content was not so much on the articles of the creed, but seeking to interpret what saying “I believe” means. John hands out a copy of a page from an Education for Ministry text, a course he teaches. The gist is that a better, more existential meaning is “I give my heart to God the Father . . . I give my heart to Jesus Christ...I put my trust in the Holy Spirit.” Then he invites the candidates to share what it means to give your heart to God in recitation of the creed, under the analogous human context of what does it mean to give your heart to someone? “Can you imagine such a moment? Such a giving? What is the character or quality of such a gift?”

Someone observed that the creed gives us, as Michi said, a “hand hold” to identify the God to whom we give our hearts in trust. Another noted that the creed is a healing description grounded in the narrative of Jesus’ conception, birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection, and his judgment, who forever dwells with us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I ventured to the group that I still struggled with the creed. Barbara, Michi’s sponsor, expressed surprise and a measure of relief that I, as an ordained presbyter, struggled with the creeds. In all of this, we were traversing rugged Lenten terrain with the destination of arriving with Jesus right up to the hilt of his agony, bloody sweat, betrayal, and death as the arc that leads to resurrection and new creation.

It is a gift to observe people coming to their own life’s interpretation in light of grace and grace-filled moments. On the 5th Sunday in Lent when the congregation ritualized the gift of the prayer of the church,

giving each candidate a beautifully lettered copy of the Lord's Prayer on parchment paper, and reciting it around them, the dismissal was to go and reflect on the church's life of prayer. Kim, again weeping, responded to John's initial query about what is going on in you, said, "I'm working through stuff." Going deeper, she said, "I'm going through baptism before baptism." Michi was more stoic, but no less involved.

The flow of thought moved to goodness, truth, and beauty — not in those terms, but that was the sense and spirit in the room. Words and phrases surfaced and intertwined. Barbara, Michi's sponsor, connected with the conversation concerning the creed from two weeks earlier and the notion that "I believe" is really about "I give my heart to" as a declaration of trust. This connected with the day's OT text from Jeremiah 31, "I will write my law upon their hearts . . . I will be their God and they will be my people." John, the catechist, drew this out, building on Michi's comment about mutuality of relationship in the ongoing conversation that is prayer: "God gives us a new heart and we give our hearts to God."

Kim asked if the catechumenal process would go on after Easter and baptism. Without missing a beat John quipped, "Yes, for the rest of your life!" He laughed as did we all — getting it. That *is* the point after all. But then we came back to the more proximate reference, "And yes, in the small group we will continue for the Great 50 Days, but not after the dismissal. We'll meet before the Eucharist."

After the session, John talks with me about foot washing on Maundy Thursday anticipating the candidates experience in that moment and how best to include them. Then I give him a bottle of champagne to test for the Easter Vigil reception.

The preceding narrative may seem a bit ordinary and quite peculiar to one church, with little application to any other setting. At the same time, my intention in sharing it is that together we can reflect upon it as the kind of earthy, real, and singular stuff that makes up catechesis.

In listening to it, what questions and observations do you find welling up in you? Let's take a few minutes to surface those questions and observations.

[At this point in the conversation the plenary session engaged in reflection in pairs and that as a group of the whole.]

If we are not all catechists (by charism), we can all be involved in the Pentecostal journey with catechumens of coming to baptism and life in the sacraments. We are all called to the church's catechizing ministry. Here I'll venture some observations as heuristic proposals:

- Like catechists, we do not have answers; we are to bring and live intentionally with probing questions.
- Like catechists, we do not do religious (Christian) education. We do formation for life in the sacraments. Our focus in catechumenal ministry is that middle part between evangelization and the rites of initiation that we call catechesis.
- Like catechists, we are not necessarily academics or scholars, though we are called to be students of the ways of the Spirit and keen observers and practitioners of the church in its sacramental and evangelical life.
- Like catechists, we are called to be undeterred and unafraid of those whose lives have been upended by the grace of conversion. This is not to say that we know what or how to proceed, but like them we are to *be still enough* at the center to enter into the moment and attend to the Spirit who will direct the way forward for the sake of the convert and the converting.

- Like catechists, we are not the primary agents in the catechesis. That role belongs to the Holy Spirit at work in the congregation, its ongoing liturgical worship, and in the inquirers, catechumens, candidates, and neophytes. Catechists do play a unique and critical role in the catechumenal process. They serve along with the rest of us in sponsoring, befriending, welcoming, and accompanying seekers and catechumens on the journey into faith.
- With catechists and the whole congregation, we do three things in catechesis: (Here, I refer you to Kavanagh's essay for more on these)
 1. Catechesis ***establishes a new center of gravity***:
"[It] helps the convert reassemble his or her personality and life around the new center of gravity which is God revealed around Christ Jesus (Kavanagh, p. 39). This involves not only the mind but the heart and the senses engaged in lavish liturgy that engages all of these faculties. As Kavanagh puts it, "Conversion therapy is a worshipful endeavor . . ." (p. 39-40). Catechesis presumes strong liturgical life and experience followed up with suitable reflection upon it.
 2. *Catechesis reframes the initial inchoate, inarticulate experience of God:*
*"[It] attempts to [tease out] the convert's initial, subjective, and largely incommunicable experience of faith into the public [and ecclesial] domain" (Kavanagh, p. 40). The catechist knows that the Christian faith is never solely one's personal possession. It has to come to fruition in solidarity and communion with others past, present and future. Catechesis helps to coax faith out into the open. That is why the rites of initiation and the weekly liturgy are so central to the process of discovering one's self acting in the public arena of worship where the inward and personal connects to and is realized in the outward and social spheres. Catholic faith is public faith. If you remember the Liturgy Training Publications film, *This Is the Night*, you'll recall the priest saying of the congregation's catechesis, "We don't do anything in private here." He was not saying that people are exposed or confidences are not kept; he was saying that the church and its way of life is public and in view for all to see. Eucharist week in and week out is not ever done behind closed doors. There redemption is enacted, gathering us from the world, proclaiming the Word and inviting response, celebrating a meal laid out with thanksgiving and mastication, and sending us out to make the world more loving and just with deeds and words that free and heal. In this the convert learns to dance a public dance.*
 3. *"Catechesis instructs the convert in basic discipline for living a Christian life" (Kavanagh, p. 40). Unlike the early church and its conversion therapy that anchored catechumens in conversion of *behavior*, our 21st century churches are habituated to think in terms of *belonging and believing* — values closely linked to Western enlightenment culture. Possessions, cocooning, hiding out, and patterns of individualism (bowling alone) are more compatible with belonging to a privileged insider group and believing in "my" brand and my party's ideology. Distinctive gospel *behavior* is not compatible with these values. Kavanagh's rendering of what Christians do and do not do is confronting: (I quote)*

One absolutely does *not* pray against others in the presence of the only One who sees into hearts. One loves especially one's enemies, and always reveres the poor. One refuses to be eaten alive by work, money, and sex. One spends less time amid abstractions like world justice, more time in living justly day by day without counting on receiving justice in return. One loves God above all things, and one's neighbor as

oneself. One knows and respects the Way of Life, and one also knows and respects the Way of Death. One washes the devils out of one's hair and, by God alone, keeps them out. One's "yes" means yes, one's "no" means no. One stands reverently in the alarming presence of the Living God. And one understands that even so great a sin as oppression drains the oppressor no less than the oppressed, making both victims. This is the way sin metastasizes in our lives.

And I add in the context of climate change and extinction of species in the language of Sallie McFague, "One exercises restraint in consumption and in one's carbon footprint so that there is room for others as God makes room for us in the kenosis of Jesus Christ."^{xii}

The catechizing congregation and the catechist are strong in inciting the convert to behavior that is anchored in the great commandments for the life of the world. This matters more than belonging and believing, though in the end they are whole cloth.

This is why Wayne Schwab and his unrelenting emphasis on ministry in daily life from inquiry to the time of mystagogy and baptismal living is so right.^{xiii} It is about behavior that conflates with God's mission of making the world more just and loving.

Catechesis grounded in the basics — Whose mission is it anyway?

All of this may sound quite daunting and demanding for ordinary people and their priests and pastors. In an age when the vocation of life in the sacraments is replaced by entrepreneurial congregations with strategic business plans, journey by stages with those undergoing conversion and doing the basics may can seem quite odd. *Isn't there an "app" for it?*

As long as substitute our "mission statements" for the mission of God (mission dei) and a semi-Pelagian theology we miss the mark. Worshiping, praying, reflecting on life and Scripture in witness to the coming reign of God and in service to others is the church being the church, doing what church is and does without apology. I remember well feeling great relief and a sense of God's good simplicity reading Kim Ward's assertion that all that a pastor and congregation needs to catechize (and I would add to evangelize) is to do the basics as St. Luke describes them in Acts 2.^{xiv}

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . [Distributing] . . . to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The triune God seeking to reconcile all things in Christ calls the church to life in the sacraments for the life of the world. In that confidence, let us catechize, practicing what Christians do alongside those God is reconciling to Godself day by day. And so, together, we will sing the New Song.

ⁱ Instances of *catecheo* (κατηχεω) This list was taken from a NAAC workshop outline by Andy Parker, "Ancient Catechesis: Applications for Today's Church" found at <http://catechumenate.org/uploads/file/AndyParkerCatechesis.pdf>

Luke 1.3-4 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (*katechethas*).

Acts 18.24-25 Apollos was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed (*katechoumenos*) in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus...

Romans 2.17-18 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed (*katechoumenos*) in the law . . .

I Corinthians 14.19 nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct (*katecheso*) others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Galatians 6.6 Those who are taught (*ho katechoumenos*) the word must share in all good things with their teacher (*to katechounti*).

Jim Dunning takes the following passage "as a job description of catechesis for today's Christian community and for catechists and homilists within that community" (*Echoing God's Word*, p.98).

--I John 1.1, 3 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands...We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. --Consider also: I Timothy 1. 3-5 ...you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.

ⁱⁱ The rite of affirmation of vocation is an added rite in some churches, namely the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and in The United Methodist Church expressions.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Rodriguez, *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Viking, 2013), p. 224.

^{iv} The parenthetical characterizations for each of the stages come from "Becoming Disciples and Our Congregation" published by the Uniting Church of Australia. The pamphlet is not available online, however, these terms appear in "Recovering Baptism as the Epicentre of Mission" —an address I gave to a gathering of Uniting Church leaders in 2004. (<https://assembly.uca.org.au/cudw/disciples/item/160-benedict-recovering-baptism-as-the-epicentre-of-mission>)

^v Catechumens were "Christians" in the ancient church. If they died or were killed, they were given a Christian burial.

^{vi} The images listed here are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A gospel readings. These are the ancient and present day recommended reading when there are catechumens enrolled for baptism at the Easter Vigil.

^{vii} The Year A readings for the Sundays (in *Lectionary for the Mass* and *The Revised Common Lectionary*) in Lent are recommended whenever a congregation is journeying with candidates for baptism.

^{viii} Adapted from the questions asked in "The Baptismal Covenant" service in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, p. 88.

^{ix} See Daniel Benedict, *Come to the Waters: Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers and Making Disciples* (Nashville: Discipleship Ministries, 1996), p. 103.

^x Some of the classic mystagogues were Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo.

^{xi} I have changed the names so as not to expose the candidates.

^{xii} See Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.) The concept of restraint as an essential Christian practice based on the self-emptying (kenosis) of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:1-5) is at the heart of the book. The quote is mine.

^{xiii} See Member Mission Network website: <http://www.membermission.org/>. Also see Dwight L. Dubois, *The Scattering: Imagining a Church That Connects Faith and Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015)

^{xiv} See Karen Ward's essay on "Resources for the Catechumenate" in *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate* (ELCA, 1997)

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