

The Rites of Formation: Forming Seekers and Congregations into Communities of Faith

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“From welcome and scrutiny to water and table, the rites for the Christian Initiation of adults celebrate grace: the grace of the Trinitarian God who leads from conversion through formation to incorporation into the Christian community.”

Presentation 1: Rites of Welcome or “Election”?

A. Diversity of Baptismal Theologies and Feasts: “Don’t put all your baptismal eggs in the Easter Basket!” See Maxwell Johnson, *Images of Baptism*, Forum Essays on the Catechumenate, vol. 6 (Chicago: LTP, 2001).

- **Romans 6:** Baptism as Death and Burial; hence Pascha (Easter) as Baptismal Feast
- Lenten Catechumenate prepares for that

- **John 3:5; Titus 3:5;** Baptism as new birth and regeneration in water and the Holy Spirit; hence “Theophany” or “Epiphany” of Christ in the Jordan as Baptismal Feast - Advent Catechumenate prepares for that

- **John 20; Acts 2:** Baptism as “Seal” of the Holy Spirit; hence Pentecost as Baptismal Feast - Final Catechumenal Preparation during the Easter Season

- **All Saints;** Baptism as Entrance into the Communion of Saints; Early Fall Catechumenate prepares for that

Into this rich diversity of baptismal meanings and theologies inquirers are invited and catechumens are enrolled for baptism.

B. But are these Rite of “Welcome” or of “Election?”

- Need to see these rites of “Welcome of Inquirers” and “Enrollment of Candidates for Baptism” as election by **God** to baptism, rather than simply as Church’s “welcome”

- Rita Ferrone: “. . . a rite that has as its principal message ‘welcome to the . . . church’ is very tame in comparison to a rite that exults in a divine decision for humanity that has the power to change both us and the world. [Here the focus would be] in what God is doing in and through these people whom the church calls elect [or candidates for baptism].

. . . [A] Christian theological perspective imposes, or should impose, a healthy critical distance from the notion that initiation is chiefly about the surface phenomena of warm handshakes and all the cheerfully indiscriminate gestures of acceptance that people normally associate with the word *welcome*. Such a theological perspective gives a deeper dimension to our understanding of what the journey of conversion involves. . . .

. . . Election is not a rite of welcome, but it does hold an invitation. The Rite of Election is an invitation into the desert of Lent, with Jesus Christ and with the whole Church, there to find or rediscover the meaning of one’s call for the life of the world. Election takes us to the next step; it invites the elect forward into the period of purification and enlightenment.”

Rita Ferrone, *On the Rite of Election*, Forum Essays 3 (Chicago: LTP, 1994), 73-6.

- Anti-pelagian emphasis upon God’s grace and election; **not** on personal decision, mature adult choice, etc. Designed primarily for missionary contexts, with the initiation of *unbaptized* adults in mind, the adult catechumenate is not a program of religious education but a sacramental *process* designed to “seal” conversion to Christ and the Church, a conversion always rooted in the prior activity of the Holy Spirit, a Spirit who, is active prior, during, and after the sacramental rites themselves

C. Challenge: “How do you celebrate these rites of welcome in such a way that it is God’s election that is primary?”

Presentation 2: Rites of Formation and Conversion: Scrutiny

A. Texts of Catechesis

- Scripture: Especially the Lectionary as read in the Liturgy. Liturgy, including the Liturgical Year, as “hermeneutical” context of Scripture both in its origins and interpretation

- Prayer and Faith: The Liturgy is the great school of prayer (gives us language and structure for Trinitarian prayer to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The

Liturgy is also the school of Faith. Long before there were “Creeds,” the Prayer of Thanksgiving over the baptismal waters and the Great Thanksgiving over the Eucharistic Bread and Cup proclaimed the Church’s Trinitarian Faith and formed the assembly in its orthodox faith

- Particular doctrinal stances: While the catechumenate leads to baptism and to Christian faith in general, the fact that it occurs in particular traditions necessitates that catechumens and candidates know something about those traditions.

B. Conversion: What is it?

- Donald Gelpi, S.J., identifies conversion as taking place in four ways throughout our lives: Affective; Intellectual; Moral; and Socio-political. When Religious conversion is added each of these four types take on particular dimensions: Affective is transformed into “zeal” for the kingdom of God; Intellectual is transformed into becoming a “thinking Christian;” Moral conversion finds its center in Christ; and socio-political conversion is transformed into a more prophetic stance rooted in Christ and the whole biblical prophetic tradition. See Donald Gelpi, *Committed Worship, A Sacramental Theology for Converting Christians*, vol. 1: *Adult Conversion and Initiation* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1993), 1-181.

- Such conversion is life-long

- Into what kind of “converted communities” are we initiating people?

C. Rites of Conversion: The Blessings on Lent III, IV, V (or other days if baptism is to take place other than at the Easter Vigil or at Easter)

- The “handing Over” (*Traditio*) and “Giving Back” (*Redditio*) of the Creed and Lord’s Prayer emphasize again the “gift” character of Faith and Prayer. Our ability to say “I believe” or to call out “Abba Father” are gifts of the Holy Spirit. Again, note the liturgical context of both – they are given to the Candidates in Liturgy

- Purpose of The “Blessings” or “Scrutinies:” to emphasize a “lack,” namely “thirst for God” (John 4 – Woman at the Well); “need for sight or illumination” (John 9 – the man born blind), and the “need for life itself” (John 11- the raising of Lazarus. See Andrew Irving, “The Scrutinies and the Arousal of Desire,” *Assembly*, Notre Dame Center for Liturgy, Notre Dame, IN 46556 (see <http://liturgy.nd.edu/assembly/>) Also, Irving quotes Nathan Mitchell, “Liturgy is desire in a state of supreme attention” (N. Mitchell, “Being Good and Being Beautiful,” *Worship* 74 (2000): 554).

- Suggestion: Because Year A of the Lenten lectionary is the original Lenten Season of the Western Church developed expressly for the catechumenate, always use Year A, at least, when there are candidates for Baptism

D. Challenge: If this period of formation is about “lack” and “need,” how do you assist the “elect” in becoming hungry and thirsty for God?

Presentation 3: The Catechumenate is for the Unbaptized!

- **Various pastoral needs:** unbaptized and/or unchurched (the “joiners”); those entering another congregations from a different Christian tradition (the “switchers”); those returning to active church involvement from inactivity; those seeking to affirm or renew their baptism after particular life changes or experiences

- The Adult Catechumenate, as designed and intended, is for the “joiners,” **NOT** for the “switchers” or for these other important categories of people and we should be **VERY** careful about mixing all of these pastoral needs into one and trying to meet them with the same set of rites and processes

- The goal of the Catechumenate is to lead to **BAPTISM!** Hence, this whole process is really about the evangelism and formation of the unbaptized and unchurched! That might well mean that in any given year there is no catechumenate in a given congregation; or it might mean in a given year that the only candidates for baptism to participate in this process are infants and their parents might well bring them to the enrollment and blessings during Lent.

- Adaptations of the Catechumenal process and catechesis itself might certainly be appropriate for “switchers” and other categories **BUT** such persons should never be designated as “catechumens,” they should not sign their names in the book, they should not be treated as catechumens with signings the cross, or the receiving of Creed and Lord’s Prayer, etc. **since they are already baptized Christians!**, they should not make affirmation of baptism at the Easter Vigil, and they should never be designated as those who have gone through “the” catechumenate. If already baptized, they are not and cannot be “catechumens.”

- Our terminology is important because what is at stake is the meaning of Baptism itself and we want nothing to compromise that

- We must allow the Catechumenate neither to become a parish renewal program separate from baptismal preparation (it renews parishes *precisely* by preparing people for baptism!), nor a surrogate designed to compensate for the lack of adequate adult Christian formation in general, nor by any means a therapeutic or 12-step program related to crisis moments; the catechumenate is for the unbaptized. Other processes are for meeting other needs.

- The Easter Vigil is not Ecclesial Musical Chairs Night! It is for Baptism into Christ.

(See Maxwell Johnson, "Let's Stop Receiving 'Converts' at Easter," in Maxwell Johnson, *Worship: Rites, Feasts, and Reflections* (Portland; The Pastoral Press, 2004), pp. 83-94; see <http://www.ocp.org/en/products/books/15573.php>; and "Christian Initiation at Easter: For 'Joiners,' not 'Switchers,'" forthcoming from *Celebrate!* (2007); see <http://www.celebrate-liturgy.ca/>