

A NEW CATECHUMENATE

INTRODUCTION

I am calling this process of formation or disciple-making “A New Catechumenate.”

Which of course implies an “old” one.

So let me begin by explaining the old one before I return to the new one.

The old one—and first one—refers to the process that early Christian leaders developed to move seekers from the old world of Greco-Roman religion to the very new world of Christianity.

The enormity of the task required church leaders to create some kind of bridge. The chasm between Christianity and Greco-Roman religion was simply too wide to assume that transition would happen easily, quickly, and naturally. The first Christians were Jews who believed that Jesus, the Messiah, came to complete the story of and fulfill the promises to ancient Israel. Jesus was new, of course; but the religion of Israel was not. They already knew about creation, fall and redemption; about the promises made to Abraham, Moses and David; about key characters, like Ruth and Esther; about the law and the prophets. In short, they understood the story of salvation, which, they came to believe, culminated in the coming of Jesus.

But Gentile converts did not know this story. So the church had to develop some kind of process to move them very deliberately from one world to the other. The process took two to three years, and it involved formal enrollment, basic teaching (the story of salvation, Christian doctrine, ethics, and practices), participation in the church community, training in the faith, and mentoring relationships. Belief, belonging and behavior merged together as a seamless whole. It culminated in the “rites of initiation,” which welcomed converts into full membership in the church.

During the Middle Ages the catechumenate all but disappeared, largely because Europe became almost entirely Christian, if not in reality then certainly in appearance. We can see the vestiges of the catechumenate in medieval monastic training. Still, little of it remained in parish churches. This was the period of Christendom, which could be

defined as the symbiotic relationship between Christianity and culture, church and state. Christendom made the catechumenate unnecessary.

Christendom is now fading away. We can't take anything for granted anymore. We need a new catechumenate, which this tool embodies.

How should this tool be used? The most important thing to remember is that Christianity focuses on Jesus Christ, his incarnation, life, death and resurrection. The church emerged in the wake of his life on earth, and it comprised the people who believed in him and committed their lives to him. When a person comes to know Jesus, that person automatically joins the family of faith, too. Community is as important as the faith itself. If anything, the two mutually reinforce each other.

It is imperative, therefore, that you participate in a small group through this entire process and that you pair up with a friend (ideally, that person should be a member of the same small group) to meet together regularly to share life, pray and support each other. It is equally important that your small group meet together on occasion for meals, other social gatherings and service. The point is to learn to do life together as a community of faith.

Why? **Because this new catechumenate is a process, not a program.** It is a process for forming disciples, not a program to disseminate information. Early Christian leaders used athletic metaphors to explain what it means to follow Jesus. They wanted Christians to become "spiritual athletes," that is, people who not only understand the faith but also live it and live it with the seriousness of an athlete. Is it possible to know God in Christ and not respond to him in faith and obedience? I don't think so.

There are 32 videos in the new catechumenate, each one roughly 30 minutes long. A study guide accompanies each of the videos. The study guide provides space for note taking, small group questions, homework assignments, spiritual exercises and special projects.

It is best that your small group meet weekly or, at the least, biweekly. It will take you two years to complete this process. But you can move at more leisurely pace, too, if you wish, taking periodic breaks along the way. There is no need for hurry.

A few churches have served as pilot churches to test the new catechumenate and to shape and refine it for adaptation and use among a larger circle of churches.

Pilot churches have adapted and used it in a variety of ways. In some cases, small groups have met weekly, in other cases less often. Some small groups have devoted a month to each topic, others two weeks. Some small groups have watched the videos or listened to the podcasts while meeting together, others have watched or listened before they gather. As you can see, they have taken a variety of approaches. But ALL have tried to see it as a tool for forming disciples, not as a source of more information.

Here is the format to follow (over the course of two to four weeks):

- Watch a video (separately or as a group) - or listen to the audio-only version
- Follow the printed outline and jot down a few notes if you can
- Begin to study the assigned Bible passages
- Begin to practice the spiritual exercise
- Meet for the first (of two) small groups devoted to the topic. You can meet three times if you are moving at a slower pace.
 - Pray for each other
 - Check in and review
 - View the video or, if the members have already watched or listened to it, discuss the contents. What did you learn? How does this apply to life? What questions do you have?
 - What did you learn from the Bible study?
 - Share insights gained from practicing the spiritual exercise
 - Pray for each other
- Engage in the second week of Bible study
- Continue to practice the spiritual exercise
- Read over and begin to experiment with the “special project,” which is designed to apply the content to your ordinary life
- If you can, meet with your prayer partner to share life together and support each other
- Meet for the second small group
 - Open in prayer
 - Discuss the second week of Bible study
 - Share what you are learning—and how you are changing—by practicing the spiritual exercise
 - Reflect on how the special project is affecting your life

- Explore how this is playing out in your daily life
- Share prayer requests and pray for each other

Once again, the goal is to know, trust, and follow Jesus in ordinary life and to do so as a community of disciples.

THE CURRICULUM

Year 1

I. Knowing

- Does God exist?
- The Redemptive Story
- Who is God?
- Jesus Christ
- Trinity
- The Holy Spirit
- Redemption (New Creation)
- The Kingdom
- The Bible

II. Believing

- Sin & Evil
- Grace & Repentance
- Faith
- Way of Life
- Worship
- Sacraments
- Church

Year 2

III. Becoming

- The Three “Greats”
- Exiles
- Freedom and Spirit
- Spiritual Discipline
- Rule of Life
- Liturgical Script
- Time

- Place
- Embodiment
- Prayer
- Suffering
- Love
- Generosity
- Vocation
- Justice and Mercy
- The End & the Beginning