

## A CATECHUMENATE FOR ADULTS

### Starting out from experience.

Everything that I say in this article is based on the experience of a group of "catechumens" that have been together for twelve years. This catechumenal group began in October of 1974 as a result of a parent-teacher meeting in the school where I work. At that meeting we had tried to help them see that the religious formation that their children were receiving was quite different from the one that we had received when we were children and young people.

They themselves then asked to be given a catechesis that would update them in their formation in the faith, and in that way have the religious instruction that they were trying to give at home in accord with what was being imparted in school.

We had very intense catechetical sessions for the first eight years — weekly sessions of two hours each. Since that time, we put in an hour and a half at bi-weekly meetings.

The work that we are presently doing is rather a dialogue on some specific theme which the members of the group have prepared beforehand.

The evolution of the group has been a very positive experience. All claim to have a much better grasp of the content of their Faith and a greater awareness of the message of the Gospel. They unanimously feel that their own Christian life is stronger and more authentic than before.

Two of the participants have organized their own catechumenal groups in other school centers. Three of the group have taken courses in theology or ecclesiology or moral theology, or all three in the diocesan seminary. Most of the members of the group have undertaken catechetical activity in parish centers. Also several of them have helped out in our school with special catechism classes organized to prepare our students for the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Communion.

### The times, they are a-changing.

We are all aware of the speed with which times have changed for society. We might even say that these come with dizzying speed. And change is affecting every facet of human life, including the religious.

Precisely in this facet, society, our society, is asking for Christians that "know how to give the reason of their faith"; that will testify that Christ is living; that it is worth the trouble to follow in His steps; that they may be the builders of a new world.

Given the demand for "authentic Christians", one may ask with St. Paul: "But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe unless they have heard of him? And how can they hear unless there is someone to preach?" (Romans 10,14).

This is the question, how are there going to be committed Christians if they practically have not heard of Jesus Christ and of the Faith?

With good reason St. John Baptist De La Salle insists that among the chief duties that fathers and mothers have one of the most serious is the Christian education of their children and their instruction in their religion.

But for the most part they themselves do not properly know the Faith. Many are occupied with temporal concerns all day long besides the care of their family; others are all taken up with the need to earn a livelihood and put bread on the table for themselves and their children, so that they cannot have the time to instruct their children in their duties as Christians. (Med. 194).

*One solution:* The Catechumenate for Adults. When we speak of an "adult catechumenate" what is normally understood is the catechetical process through which Christians-in-name become truly Christian trying to discover a Faith which is presumed to be "adult" but which, in fact, is not for not having developed in favorable circumstances.

What is needed with great urgency today is a means to strengthen and revitalize a goodly number of those that call themselves Christians but who in fact are not because they have not received sufficient formation to be so. As we all know, the Church baptizes infants as a general practice. Logically, there can be no question of a previous preparation for these.

On the other hand, among baptized persons there are many who have not received any religious instruction, or very little, after their baptism. As a consequence, it can be stated that there are many who in their childhood, youth or even as adults really have not had a "proper Christian education".

For these reasons, it is clear, these baptized persons require a catechetical attention through which they may discover the faith which they have received in Baptism and which will permit them to live according to the exigencies of the other Sacraments.

The "adult catechumenate" comes to us in a specific context since it does not deal with a preparation to receive the Sacraments of "Christian initiation"; rather, it addresses itself to the development of the faith already received in Baptism, so that, as adults, these people may responsibly assume the duties that the Faith places on the Christian.

### Objectives of the adult catechumenate

We will point out a few. The first objective is the passage from an unconscious and irresponsible infantile Faith to one which is developed and with the full acceptance of responsibility, which implies a true option for Christ. This is what is meant by an adult faith.

Another objective which the catechesis of adults strives to achieve is the incorporation of the catechumens in a Christian community where their faith may grow and be celebrated. If such a community does not exist it should be created. In fact, community is the key to the living of the catechumenal process.

The catechumens must live and celebrate their faith in community. Therefore, it will be an objective of the catechumenate to create Christian community or to join one that already exists.

A third objective is that of forming committed Christians, who are capable of assuming a real commitment as a consequence of their faith.

We have said the group is the key to the development of catechetical activity. A catechesis in community and in the catechumenal process seems to require as a medium in which it may come about most properly, its actualization in a group.

Dealing with adults, it seems to be in the group where the sense of Christian responsibility is best developed today.

The reason for the choice of a group catechesis is that it serves as a base on which such a group can and ought to build a magnificent experience of Christian ecclesial life.

Essential dimensions of the faith are developed in a special way by group catechetics. These are:

— the communitarian dimension and the sense of belonging to the Church, since, thanks to the group, the faith is shared in common; the common experience of the faith of the Church is created, is expressed; it becomes possible to announce one's faith to others, to return the faith that has been received as one's own word.

One feels that he is welcome in the heart of the group, he is accepted and recognized in his own personhood; he feels personally called and recognized... Fraternal love becomes possible.

— The experience of the unfathomable richness of the plan of God who acts in so many ways in different persons and who conducts the lives of men on different paths. This too can be lived in the catechesis of a group.

The education in the faith of the believer, with a view to initiate him in the Christian community, is the summing up and finality of catechesis. To accomplish that, together with the profession of faith, the celebration of the mysteries of Christianity, and the living of Gospel values, the community is the goal of catechesis.

### Some characteristic traits

Which have shaped the catechesis of adults. In the degree to which the catechumenate is a process through which the baptized person discovers and matures in the faith, in relationship with other catechumens, it has a structure and, consequently, some traits that define it.

I will point out some of these traits which we use in our catechumenate:

— The catechesis must be Christ-centered. There can be no Christianity without Christ who is the center — the way, the truth and the life — of the disciple so that each catechumen progressively acquires the clear awareness of his personal union with Christ.

The catechumenal group is brought together by the WORD OF GOD which supposes that the WORD is listened to, that it is made use of, that it is reflected upon, that in it is seen God's design and His plan of salvation for all men. An authentically ecclesial group is so designed that it will be in a permanent disposition to review, to change, to respond faithfully to the Will of God as manifested in His WORD.

— Community character. The catechumenal group is something more than the sum of the individuals that make it up. It must be characterized by dialogue and by interpersonal communication which are its working traits. It is also recognized by its spirit of solidarity, and by communion with regard to the goals it tries to achieve through the living-out of the catechumenal process.

— It tends to responsibility and co-responsibility, joined with and diversified from service for the neighbor. Each of the catechumens, from his own station and situation in life, ought to contribute to the building up and growth of the "Kingdom". The level of commitment, it can be said, is the level that a Christian must attain.

— Another trait of a catechumenal group must be its human face. The firming up of the community sense of Church comes about most effectively in groups or com-

munities in which the number of the members make the interpersonal relationship possible.

★ Believers feel they are integrated into the Church when they are known by name, in a personal way.

★ They learn to share their own faith with that of their brothers, overcoming differences and varying points of view, in communion.

★ The personal attitude of each can be more active and creative.

★ The hearing of the Word of God, the Christian commitment of the members and the celebration of the Eucharist make up the places for the experience of the life of the Church. And these are what the Christian group does.

### The family

A catechumen who perseveringly continues his catechesis will be prepared to live his faith in a committed way and will also be able to form others in this beautiful task.

One of the objectives of our catechumenate was precisely that — to prepare fathers and mothers so that they could in turn educate their children in the faith.

The family must be considered as the catechetical channel of primordial importance and, in a certain way, irreplaceable (*Catechesi tradendae*).

This is the way in which it has been considered and emphatically promoted in the tradition of the Church, especially since Vatican II.

The family is the first community in which men open themselves to a knowledge of the truth, to love, and to relationships with others.

The Christian family ought to be a space where the Gospel is transmitted from one generation to another and from which it radiates out. (*Evangeli Nuntiandi*).

The Christian family has its own mission with regard to the education of its members, especially of the children. The family is "catechist" by vocation and nature.

Parents and the family as a whole are the first catechists and make up the very first catechesis of the children.

The family catechesis precedes, accompanies and enriches every other form of catechesis. (*Catechesi Tradendae*).

The faith is transmitted within the context of family, by word and example, by prayers which are said together and principally, by creating a Christian atmosphere. (Synod of 1977).

In fact, this education in the faith ought to begin at the very earliest age of the children. It takes place when the family members help one another to grow in the faith by means of the witness of a Christian life, often silent, but persevering throughout a daily existence lived according to the Gospel. It will be most outstanding when, in the regular rhythm of family happenings, the Christian and religious significance of those happenings is made clear. (*Catechesi Tradendae*).

All of this is going to require a real change of mentality in many families, and especially with regard to the education in the faith in the midst of the family.

The catechumenate of adults can be one of the formulas that give a solution to these needs.

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