

Whither the R.C.I.A.?

**A.**

Many parishes now run courses inspired, directly or indirectly, by the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults. Sometimes these are called “Journey of Faith”, sometimes “Renewal”. Sometimes they include preparation for baptism or for reception into full communion, sometimes not.

The purpose of this paper is to see how this loosely connected body of work fits into the perspective of the ancient Catechumenate and its modern renewal (the R.C.I.A.); and to look to the general pattern of our future work with adults.

The R.C.I.A. is a liturgical rite, not a handbook of Catechesis. However it is plain that both the text and the introduction expect that behind the coastline of the Rite there will be a large and well-cultivated pastoral and Catechetical hinterland. Moreover the connections between the liturgical actions and the pastoral preparation and follow up, are unusually strong and specific. It is this quality in the Rite which has caught the imagination and has led to the acceptance as a model of what pastoral liturgy should be. One brief guide to it is entitled “Creating a Living and Missionary Parish”. Such claims for the Rite are perhaps a little exaggerated. Still it is striking that they should be made for liturgical rite – claims that we would more readily connect with a five-year plan or pastoral congress. It raises some new questions about the role of liturgy in Christian life to which we may return later.

**B. The Catechumenate in the Early Church.**

The Rite is a restoration of ancient practice, but a restoration which did not arise simply out of devotion to the past. It is not that the oldest is best so as to rule out the principle of development. Yet it harks back to early times to catch not only the spirit but even the detail of ancient liturgical practice. This is based on a conviction that some important, almost essential element in Christian initiation had been lost in the intervening centuries. It is not that the principle of development is mistaken but that particular developments sometimes go astray.

What were these elements? What characteristics define the ancient Catechumenate? The first of them is that the **adult not the child** was the central figure. The aspirants of baptism are called, “accedentes”, those who came to enquire, “auditores” those who stay to listen, “electi” those who have been examined and chosen. They must be given their names, they must apply for baptism. They must submit to having their knowledge tested and their lives scrutinised. All of this suggests candidates who are thoughtful, serious, very desirous of baptism, committed to the discipline of a Christian life style. Of course, infant baptism did occur in the early church and it is probable that the parents sometimes carried their children in their arms when they came to the front: so that some became Christians through the solidarity of family rather than by personal choice.

Secondly the Catechumenate concerned itself with an **initiation into mystery**; it was in no way a curriculum with aims, objectives and behavioural outcomes. The discipline of secrecy which it imposed set it quite apart from the world of public control and verification which in our days many see as a definitive for education. This

discipline already foreshadowed in the Gospels was no doubt strengthened by pagan mystery cults. Still it is defended by Ambrose and by Augustine for serious reasons. Truth is too sacred to be generally exposed. Experience is necessary if real understanding is to be achieved. Keep the secret lest “by premature speech you should commit them (the mysteries) half baked so to speak, to the faithless or weak ears and the hearer should be repelled and feel repugnance or loathing; if he tasted them more fully baked, he would enjoy a taste of spiritual food.” The basis of secrecy is not that the mysteries are esoteric, private knowledge. They embody truths available to all, but of such rage and depth that discursive logical forms and concepts cannot express them directly. This is the meaning of *mysterium* or *sacramentum*. It is salutary to recall it, for us who often think that truth can be approached without homage, that access to it is via a public, plain and well-mapped high road. Cardinal Danielou remarked that one of the diseases of the modern mind is that of degrading mysteries into problems.

Two other characteristics of the Catechumenate follow from this notion of initiation into mystery. First the approach was **varied and many-sided**. It included instructions such as that given by the deacon Diognatas and in the later stages through the Catechetical sermons of Cyril, Ambrose, Theodore. But shared worship though limited to the liturgy of the word was clearly an important factor. So too were the relationships with sponsors and with the Christian community generally. It was expected that members of the community would know the lives and attitudes of candidates well enough to be able to judge their suitability for baptism.

Secondly we should note the **gradualness** of the initiation. Rome wasn't built in a day. The structure of faith cannot be thrown up in a dozen doctrinal lessons. If it takes nine months for a human child to come to birth, it will take at least as long as that for a Christian to be ready for the font. The image of gestation was (and is) a common one. In baptism we are reborn, we inherit new life. Preparation for it occurs slowly, darkly and obscurely – in the womb. Coming to the mysteries is a journey which has its stages, enquiring, hearing, being chosen, purification, enlightenment. Moreover, “being a Catechumen” appears as itself a form of Christian life. Some remained in it for many years, some until death. The modern Rite of initiation is faithful to the ancient when it lays down that if a Catechumen marries the appropriate rite is celebrated. If one dies he or she receives Christian burial. Unreasonable and prolonged delays in the journey to baptism were opposed then, as they are now. Still much time was lost in the disappearance of this gradualism. Our tendency formed by many centuries of Western Christianity is to lay down stark juridical lines, and to establish fixed states. The Catechumenate envisaged a community which was less homogeneous, whose modern members were on the move. Their journey was marked out by climatic events. But these were less likely to mark out fixed and finished states. The re-establishment of the image of faith as a journey is one of the most important achievements of the restored Catechumenate.

I have already mentioned another characteristic, that of a participation by the **faith community** in offering specific and general support and in making judgements. It is this aspect of the Catechumenate which makes it a force for a “living and missionary parish”. All members are involved in preparation for baptism. The personal journey of faith becomes a community journey and a source of constant renewal.

Finally the strong **liturgical framework** of the Catechumenate is very obvious. It began and ended with and was punctuated by solemn and powerful rites. Liturgy was more than framework. Of all the idioms of faith – doctrinal teaching, scriptural formation, moral exhortation – it was the most distinctive and the most powerful. Perhaps the reason for this was the unfailing centrality of the awe-inspiring mysteries; an instinctive sense that these should not be degraded into problems, that the language of symbol and ritual action came closest to embodying them.

Through these six characters, the Catechumenate provided a distinctive answer to the question: what is it to be a Christian? And how does a person become one? It offered (and offers) to all who engage in Catechesis, not a detailed programme – since there are variations, there is flexibility and room for adaptation; but a unifying archetype. The journey to faith, this answer runs, is undertaken, primarily by enquiring, searching adults who make their way gradually and along several avenues into sacred mysteries. The journey is supported and monitored by the faith community and is embodied in liturgical celebrations. Later generations would offer different answers. To our times, the first comes alive with fresh power.

### **C Decline and Fall**

The Catechumenate in its developed, its classical form, did not last very long. During the 5<sup>th</sup> century it was already in decline. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century only relics of it remained. Its decay is connected with powerful forces for change within the Christian community. These are of some interest to us. They illuminate both the Christian idea which the Catechumenate enshrined and its revival in recent times.

The first of these was the disappearance of the church as a private group whose inner mystery was protected by the discipline of the secret; and its reappearance as part of the public social order of imperial Rome. In this transition there vanished also the idea that the faith was a reality into which entry was slow and was not without difficulty. Such factors as enquiring, personal journey, application, scrutiny, enlightenment were replaced by the very different notion of upbringing. Gradually, as the visible political frontiers of Christendom extended, the child born into a Christian order rather than the adult became the central figure. The process of initiation altered from one of Catechesis to one of **religious socialisation**.

The rapid expansion of the church under new and favourable conditions also involved mass baptisms, sometimes of the whole population of a district. When this happened only a very sketchy preparation could be given. The assumption was, or the hope, that the whole world would shortly become Christian. The need for initiation would then be met by upbringing and by ordinary social life. Because of this all the main characteristics of the Catechumenate, its pattern and “feel”, its distinctive thrust, all disappeared. What replaced it was not an initiation at all but the brief rehearsal of a few doctrinal and moral points. We can see just how sketchy this was in the letter of Pope Boniface to King Edwin, and later in the instructions set out by Alcuin and by Jean Gerson.

As Christianity opened up to the world, assimilating or being influenced by the forces and ideas in it, another form of initiation appeared. This was the route of formal education. In the world of the Fathers of the Church, formal education meant Greek learning. The Fathers themselves were divided in the way they saw and valued this.

Some like St. Jerome would have nothing to do with it for their converts. Sophisticated learning would cloud simple faith, it would reduce the mysteries to a set of ideas. “*Quid Athenae Hierosolymis?*” “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” But others valued it, they thought it another river of truth, and it was this view that won the day. A form of Christian scholarship, a Christian Paideia began to develop. At its best it would be a noble and a very important form of Christian life and work. But it also was a far cry from Catechumenate. It gave Christian initiation the scholastic form which it has retained to this day. We might characterise this change as the shift from Catechesis to education.

For many centuries, these two processes of socialisation and education have been the dominant modes of initiation in the Catholic tradition. Both are important. To regard them as an unfortunate mistake is as futile and simplistic as trying to undo the Constantinian revolution. Yet it is true that both look rather thin and monotone when compared with the rich variety of the Catechumenate.

No-one had a higher regard for liberal education and its best products than did J.H. Newman. Yet the great Cardinal had his nagging doubts. A liberal education may promote nobility of mind. But unless this is rooted in moral and spiritual life it may be no more than a studied elegance, an ethical fastidiousness, a detached critical curiosity. Education is not enough.

The success of socialisation depends greatly on the survival of the society which carries it out. If that society breaks down, if its values are questioned, the processes which give socialisation its power, cease to work. If those strongly socialised in one society are translated to another, they often become the uprooted and anxious. Christian socialisation come to depend heavily on the survival of mediaeval Christendom as a self-sufficient socio-religious system. Yet Christendom did break down. It was possible to see the movements of Renaissance and Reformation as remediable fractures. But after the Enlightenment, the political and social revolutions, and growth of forces connected with secularisation, it became plain that all the King’s horses and all the King’s men were not going to put it together again. The roots of the renewal of the Catechumenate are to be found in the perception of this.

#### **D. Renewal**

A scholarly interest in the possibilities of the Catechumenate goes back a long way. As a practical programme of Catechesis, it first came to public view in France. Its development is connected (at least as part of a single outlook) with such works as Cardinal Suhard’s “*Rise or Decline of the Church*” and Grodin’s “*France. Pays de Mission*”. The English title of the latter, “*France Pagan*” makes it clear the reason for the connection. Christendom is gone. Christians live now, in a society which is hostile or indifferent to their faith and values. This may cause despair if Christians see a supportive social order as essential to their faith. But it can also be seen as a call to renewal. Social support is not of the essence of the Christian idea. Indeed it may serve to conceal a dangerous weakness in faith. Socialised faith may not travel well. It does not seem to survive well in emigrants unless they are able to huddle together to protect themselves from influence of their new society; and the creation of such ghettos is not very healthy nor is it in accord with the Church’s mission to teach all nations. Should not Christians, rather change their procedures of initiation. A fresh consciousness of faith living in diaspora leads naturally to looking over the heads of

intervening centuries towards the early church living its life and communicating its faith without the support of the social order.

In this perspective the several characters of the Catechumenate seem freshly compelling. Enquiring, choosing, development, being accepted highlight the importance of setting a thoughtful personal commitment as the central goal of Christian initiation. This in its turn re-establishes the adult as the typical figure in the process. For it is adults who are able to enquire, reflect and choose. Children of course are thereby not excluded from Christian initiation. But the Catechumenate implies that for them too, personal faith is the main Catechetical goal and is one which speaks in some way to their present condition. "*Adult Catechesis*" the General Catechetical Directory writes, "*is the principle kind. All other forms, even the Catechesis of children should be in some way oriented towards it.*" Current movements to develop adult religious education of various kinds are variations of the ideas of the adult as the typical figure, a central principle of the renewed Catechumenate.

Community development in one form or another has been a major pastoral preoccupation of recent years. The Catechumenate enshrines the idea of a community of faith which participates in the Catechetical process, supporting, befriending, judging and accepting. The Gospel compares the word of God to a seed. If it falls on a road surface, it dies. Only if it falls into good ground will it sprout. Faith cannot be put down on a table like a package to be taken or left. It will thrive where it has shared life into which a new and growing faith can put down its roots.

A movement of liturgical renewal also pre-dated any discussion of the revival of the Catechumenate. Yet the two were connected at least at a deep level. Both were radical in the sense of a search for roots. This search involved looking to the remote past; not because oldest is best. The reasons were that the remoter past seemed pastorally more similar to the present than recent times; and that a serious interest in early times can sometimes set the whole tradition in a different perspective, can lay bare its deep thrust, and call into question recent lines of growth which are easily taken for granted. Liturgy and Catechesis were equally concerned with modernity, with how faith should embody itself in contemporary culture. Liturgy it was thought had in some ways been corrupted by an excess concern for ritualistic correctness. The Catechumenate saw it as expressing the **mysterion** in a uniquely powerful way. This is why it provided the outside framework of the Catechumenate. For this reason also, it was thought to be more deeply formative than any other medium. Its language of sign and rite shapes the flow of our vital feelings. It reaches deeper into human life than instruction touching us where the springs of action lie coiled. Hence the indispensability, so it seemed, of the "awe-inspiring rites" as the centre piece of the Catechumenal process.

Finally, the character and feel of the Catechumenate was created by its gradualism, its sense of faith as a journey. It made of being was dynamic rather than static. It was concerned at least as much with the process as with substance. This characteristic – more in the domain of attitude than of concept – comes vividly alive at a time when the idea of pilgrimage as a mode of being of the Church itself is being recovered.

It seems then that the Catechumenate goes beyond a single rite or process. It touches many aspects of pastoral and educational practice; adult education, community development, liturgical formation, and (in the sense of creating new perspectives of

understanding), schooling. All of these areas it illuminates and unifies within a single rationale. In this sense it is an archetype for Christian initiation and education in our time.

Often it is not appropriate, nor useful, even not possible to put into practice the whole of the R.C.I.A. There is no-one to be baptised, no-one perhaps, to be received into full communion. A certain dynamism is lost, a line of forces is missing. But we should not imagine that work done in the spirit of R.C.I.A. and following its general pattern, becomes thereby an elaborate charade. Circumstances vary and we should adapt boldly. What is important is that this work with adults, is directed towards renewal of faith should be imbued with the spirit of the R.C.I.A. and planned in its mind-set. It should embody at least some of the characteristics of the R.C.I.A. being properly directed toward **adults**; many sided in its approach; involving the **faith community**; content to proceed **gradually**; and set in some way, in a **liturgical framework**.

K.N

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