

A towel and water

Rethinking my catechism

Matthew Tschetter

Five teenagers knelt before the expectant congregation. Our pastor uttered the baptismal prayer and poured icy water on each of the others and finally on me. I shivered, and wondered: Was the Spirit descending, or was I going into hypothermic shock? An embarrassed seventeen year old, I waited for the precious towel the others used to dry off the excess water. It never came.

The ritual of baptism is to be the culminating event for catechumens, integrally related to their catechism, an initiation into the body of believers. As I have struggled in my faith journey, I have looked back on my catechism with ambivalence. I have doubted the validity of my decision to be baptized and wondered about my attitude. William Harmless writes, “The catechumenate is not a school but an initiation; the school has some students who learn a lesson; initiation has some disciples that discover a life.”¹ My catechism experience resembled the former more than the latter. I had to learn the material, take a written exam and then an oral one—making a public profession of my faith. In a matter of weeks I went from being a child of the church to being an adult believer baptized into a new life in Christ. Why didn’t I feel different? Had I missed my Damascus Road encounter? My catechism seemed to be just another event in the faith community, like vacation Bible school or a potluck meal.

In pre-Constantinian times, candidates for baptism prepared for three years. Now Mennonites offer instruction for perhaps four months. Churches are quick to sprinkle water on the bowed heads of their youth. Asked “Does your church let you choose when you go through catechism and baptism?” a college student responded, “I have a choice when I turn sixteen.” Our youth may succumb to peer pressure or even bribery, unless they want to become poster children for youthful rebellion. My catechism felt forced, as if I had to hurry to get my name into the membership book.

Reflecting on my catechism and on the history of the church, I have come to believe that conversion is a prerequisite for a baptism that has integrity. Our post-Christendom society offers many alternatives. How are we going to transform complacent attitudes and lifestyles into ones that are transformed and Christ-like? If, as Denis Janz proposes, catechisms “are windows through which one can view the lay religious consciousness of an age,”² what do our catechisms say about our consciousness? What do we want them to reflect about our core convictions and identity?

To restore meaning to catechism and baptism, I recommend that our churches subject our catechetical traditions and patterns to careful critique, and incorporate deeper understandings of catechetical practice and baptismal ritual. Expect the whole community to enter into the process of catechism. Restructure mentoring relationships so that candidate and member walk together on the journey of instruction and learning. Reorient attitudes and expectations so they focus less on membership and more on conversion and discipleship.³ Plan for the preparations to culminate in an Easter vigil service that recovers the meaning and

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passion of this initiation rite for the whole community. And keep striving to maintain openness to conversation about conversion, catechism, and baptism.

As I consider my catechism, I realize that I did what I thought was right. How many in your congregation have also doubted their decision? Perhaps my recommendations can help us look beyond the surface of the rituals

of catechism and baptism into the hearts of seekers. Perhaps then we will be prepared to accompany them on the journey to Jesus.

About the author

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Notes

¹ *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1995), 17.

² *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Pr., 1982), 4.

³ See Robert E. Webber, *Journey to Jesus: The Worship, Evangelism, and Nurture Mission of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 2001).