

GARGOYLE GAZETTE



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september 2024

I have been learning a considerable amount about Christian initiation rituals since becoming the Pastoral Associate at the Cathedral. As I was reading about the origins of Christian initiation, an article opened with the sentence, “The Catholic Church is a church of converts.” How obvious and true! We forget that all of the apostles were called by Jesus in the midst of their adult lives and they were each coming from varied lifestyles and religions. Saint Augustine converted in his thirties after a life wrought with sin. Thomas Merton was born Catholic, but his was a slow turning and accepting of the fullness of the Gospel. We can see in the lives of Christians who have gone before us that Pentecost is not just an event that took place at one time, but the Holy Spirit descends upon souls when he wills throughout history and throughout individual lives.

The event of Pentecost in the Gospels laid out the format for Christian catechesis: teaching, repentance, and baptism, as we read in Acts 2:37-42:



St. Augustine's Baptism by J. Briffa

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers,[i] what should we do?” 38 Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

In this month's gazette, I wanted to share with you my findings on how the Order of Christian Initiation today has come to be what it is. This article is a birds-eye-view look at the development of Christian initiation, just from the first through fifth centuries. I hope to deliver more information on how the sacraments of initiation developed later in history next month. If what you read sparks your interest, I encourage you to conduct your own research on the topic.

For the first four centuries after Christ's resurrection, there was no uniform process of initiation. Inquirers were attracted to the faith by the witness of the Christian lifestyle, and began the initiation process by seeking out personal contacts. Generally, baptism, confession, and reception of the Eucharist all happened contiguously, often beginning in the evening and culminating in the early morning light of the following day. As time went on, however, persecution required that those seeking to be baptized must undergo a certain level of testing prior to initiation.

From Saint Hippolytus we have an account of the first forms of the catechumenate in early Christian communities. He recounts a three-stage process that begins with an interview of the inquirer regarding the morality of their life at the time. If they were found to be living a morally upright life, they were permitted to begin a three-year process of learning the Gospel. At this time in the early Church, persecution was still common and one had to have their faith strengthened. Those Christians responsible for the formation of catechumens sought to avoid the scandal of apostasy (Christians denying Christ), so they prepared catechumens thoroughly, should they be asked to die for their faith.

In 313, Constantine legalized Christianity and in 380, it was made the state religion of the Roman Empire. To be Christian was now in style. The number of inquirers increased, but the quality of formation diminished due to the overwhelm placed on the catechumenate. Around this time, Saint Ambrose wrote of a process that included the catechumenate, Lent, and mystagogy. This resembles OCIA today, in that it begins with teaching, leads through a period of purification during Lent, and ends with continued conversion and living out of the faith.

Around the fifth century, people were being baptized en masse. The practice of infant baptism became the norm, due to high infant mortality rates and the belief that the unbaptized would not be saved. This practice solidified over the following centuries with infant baptism being mandated by Church authority. The catechumenate fell away, which unfortunately led to less formalized formation. The original sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, Communion), which were formerly conducted in one continuous rite for children and adults, became extricated from one another due to the necessity to baptize infants.

In learning about the origins of Christian initiation, I have been challenged to imagine and understand a world in which Christianity was not the majority religion and people were not being baptized at birth. Most of the early Christians came to the faith later in life. The adults that join the Church today are in good company with the original twelve and their companions, as are we who were born into it and in need of consistent conversion. Whether you are born into the Catholic Church or enter it later on, that which we all have in common is the choice we are given everyday to respond to the Holy Spirit's prompting to turn ever more towards the face of God.