

The Catechumenate in the First 5 Centuries

Introduction

A period of preparation before the baptism of adults was the universal practice of the Early Church until the 6th century when it fell into disuse with the rise of universal infant baptism. After the 6th century the emphasis switched to the post baptismal education of baptised Christian adults, something which had been provided for during the catechumenate itself but which then started to grow in importance. Since the 6th century, the catechumenate survived in modified forms, especially in the mission field outside historic Christian lands, but it was only in the twentieth century, and particularly after the Second World War, that many churches began to show interest in the revival of the formal adult catechumenate in the light of growing secularism in the west.

There has been no such thing as one systematic approach to the catechesis of converts in the early Church, both in the east and in the west. Nevertheless, certain common features in both content and process are discernible, particularly as the catechumenate evolved its mature forms into the 4th century when many adult converts flooded into the Church after the settlement of Constantine in 313 AD. Doubtless, the need to develop a more systematic approach corresponded to the needs of the day when motives for conversion had to be even more rigorously scrutinised and teaching enhanced.

The Table below maps out those common features across the Catechumenate, as developed from the Apostolic period into the age of the post Nicene Fathers.

The Catechumenate – Process, Content and Aims

Stage	Stepped Process	Content and Aims	References and Detail
Stage One – The Inquirer	Basic Instruction and the Examination of Spiritual Life and Moral Conduct	Basic introduction to Christian life over an indefinite period, sometimes three years*, according to personal needs. Examination of life determined the time spent in this stage.	For the two stages, see the Canons of St Hippolytus, the Apostolic Constitutions and St Augustine. * Council of Elvira in Spain (c. 305/6), period set at 2 to 3 years as the norm ... also the Apostolic Constitutions: 3 years with flexibility.
Stage Two – The Catechumen	First Scrutiny made by the Bishop	Final check on qualifications	If accepted, specialised instruction and scrutiny.

Stage	Stepped Process	Content and Aims	References and Detail
	(assisted by reports from sponsors and the clergy).	satisfied to be accepted as a Catechumen.	began in Lent for baptism at Pascha. If more time was needed baptism could be delayed until Pentecost.
	Signing with the Cross, laying on of hands and prayers for Reception into the Catechumenate	Subject to further examination the Catechumen commits to baptism.	Catechumen is now a Christian in waiting. If martyred, they would be considered saved and baptised in blood.
	Lenten Scrutinies ~ These covered: - <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Piety and Morality 2. Doctrine 3. The Lord's Prayer and the Creed <i>(memorised just before baptism)</i> 	Periodic testing of the catechumen's knowledge and spiritual maturity. Regular, intensive teaching from the Scriptures, prayers and examinations occurred daily throughout Lent in church.	~ By the 7 th Century there were 7 Scrutinies. Most of our understanding of teaching content and the process itself comes from St Cyril of Jerusalem, the Apostolic Constitutions and St Augustine of Hippo.
	Ascetical Preparation ... <i>... the whole process of catechumenal preparation concludes in time for the Paschal Vigil on Holy Saturday night when the Baptism would take place before the Paschal Liturgy and first Eucharistic Communion.</i>	<i>Requirements During Lent: -</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintaining silence and sobriety 2. Abstaining from marital relations 3. Fasting and Daily Prayers including Exorcisms 4. Frequent Confession 5. Final scrutiny prior to baptism. 	In addition to the above Fathers and Teachings: - Tertullian, St Justin Martyr. The Fourth Council of Carthage (348) enjoined daily exorcism of the catechumen.