

INTRODUCTION

The Catechumenate and its Importance in the Life of the Church

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The ministry of preparation for adults to receive the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation is one of the most important works in the mission of the Church. As the believer is integrated into the Church by means of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation, this work should above all be ecclesial, in collaboration with the various agencies of the children of the Church: priests, consecrated and the practising laity.

To begin with, we must draw attention to the fact that, according to Tradition, the teaching of catechumens has been based on several complementary elements: scriptural, dogmatic, moral and liturgical. At the same time great care was taken that this teaching was accompanied by a change in the life of the catechumen. To this end, a number of different acts of penance, such as vigils, fasting, prayer and adoration, took place during this period of formation.

In this context, St Cyril of Jerusalem, in the middle of the fourth century, calls on catechumens to make haste to learn about the faith. As Baptism brings about the liberation of the oppressed, the forgiveness of sins and the second birth of the soul, the catechumens will have to prepare their hearts to confront the dragon (i.e. enemies, demons) waiting for them on the way. St Cyril writes thus: "Prepare your hearts to receive the teachings and to participate in the holy Sacraments. Persevere in prayer, so that God may make you worthy of the celestial and eternal mysteries. Do not stop praying, night and day. And when sleep eludes you, go back to praying."¹

Without doubt, the teaching and the homily served as an important foundation for the transmission of the faith in the life of the Church. St Paul, in Col 14:19,

¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Sermons*, translated into Arabic by Father George Nassour, Liturgical Texts Series, 2 Kaslik, 1982 First Sermon p. 12.

uses the verb *kathcew* or *catécheó*, which means to teach the faith orally, and in Gal 6:6 the use of the words *kathcou*, *menoj*, *katekoumenos* (*catéchou*, *menos*, *catecoumenos*), indicates that he who receives the teaching of the Word ought to share the good things he has with his teacher. We shall see later on that these words will be used in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, when they mention the process by which the baptismal candidates will listen to the catechetical homilies, so that through faith, they will come to new life.

Progressively, the catechumenate evolved as a period of teaching and preparation for Baptism for pagan candidates. It benefited from the experience of the first Christians who had suffered persecutions and it reiterated that the new faith must find its expression in daily life. At the beginning of the third century in Carthage, in the book which narrates the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity, and also in Alexandria at the time of St Clement, bishop of the city, we find that, for the first time, the catechumenate is described as a proper formation. Likewise, the text of the *Apostolic Tradition*, which goes back to the third century, mentions the catechumenate as a formation which should last three years.

Indeed, the increase in the number of candidates seeking Baptism under the threat of persecution and the presence of heretics, particularly during the persecution of the Emperor Decius, and the fall in the number of believers along with apostasy, led the Church to urge catechumens to persevere in the preparation for Baptism for as long as possible. During the fourth century, the century of the great kerygma (proclamation of the Faith), with the peace of Constantine in 313 AD, new converts joined the Church and the catechumenate gained a definite status as a solid organisation with a well-defined character.

The need to prepare the candidates well for Baptism, by bringing them to an adult faith, which was so significant in the first centuries, is still important today. There are many adults today who are calling on our priests and our dioceses in the hope of being baptized and brought into the Church. They will be accepted only after rigorous preparation, both in their knowledge of the catechism and in the development of their faith.

To this end, as a result of the experience gained with the catechumens of the two Maronite dioceses of Beirut and Byblos (Jbeil) in the Lebanon, Mgr Antoine Assaf and Fr Michel Sakr have been appointed to prepare this book, the outline of which follows the ancient ecclesial tradition.

In the past, catechesis involved reading and explaining to the catechumens passages from the Bible and gradually introducing to them the content of the Creed, so that they could memorize it and profess it solemnly before receiving the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. In her book, *Peregrinatio Aetheriae*, Egeria, a Spanish pilgrim, gives the best account of the daily kerygma during Lent, a practice she was able to witness during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land (381-384 AD). She relates that the catechesis lasted three hours and began with the prayer of exorcism, accompanied by the laying on of hands (as seen in the *Apostolic Tradition*). The aim of the catechesis was to bring about the acceptance of the Creed and its solemn confession, and it ended with the catechumens being taught the Lord's prayer, the Our Father.

In the spirit of this ancient tradition, the two priests, Sakr and Assaf, have chosen the Gospel of St Matthew to be the basis of the teachings given today to the catechumens who are getting to know Jesus Christ and his teachings. The book starts with the theme of new birth, with reference to the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. This is followed by St Luke's account of Jesus' childhood. The teachings are spread out over thirty-three chapters. In each one of these, a passage of the Gospel is explained and then the chapter shows how it relates to the life of the catechumens. The teaching contains a theological and a spiritual dimension. It sets out the content of the Christian dogmatic truths pertaining to the Creed.

Finally, I wish to thank Fr Assaf and Fr Sakr for this ecclesial and catechetical work which they have begun, based on their years of experience in theological and biblical teaching, and with a great love for the Church and for those who are seeking Baptism. I hope that this book will be a precious reference for those priests who will be accompanying catechumens in their spiritual journey. I hope that it will also be of help to anyone who desires to know Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour, and who wants to know him personally, with the aim of being born anew in the Spirit through the Sacrament of Baptism. Through Baptism, the mystery of the death and the resurrection of Christ comes to fruition in the life of the believer.