

Principles of the Catechumenal Process

by [Clifford King Harbin](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

1) *Storytelling*. Each person, whether a bishop or a new Christian, has experienced God acting in his or her life. Telling those stories connects the biblical narrative with our individual lives.

2) *Questions*. Both our gospel reading and the secular world present us with questions. We discuss the experiences that have elicited our queries during that week and try to answer them. Our agenda almost always can be put aside in order to answer the questions troubling people's hearts and minds.

3) *Community of faith*. The catechumenal process does not operate in a vacuum. Often the group becomes a community, but the greater faith community is always present. The candidates are sponsored by church members willing to mentor a searching person on a spiritual journey. The whole congregation participates in the mandatory rites.

4) *Celebration*. The catechumenal rites (such as those recorded in the Episcopal Book of Occasional Services) are a rich and integral part of the process. These rites are public and participatory. They have integrity and are anticipated and remembered throughout the year. They give continuity to our liturgical worship.

5) *Conversion*. The catechumenal process seeks conversion controlled by the Holy Spirit, who acts on lives and changes hearts. These conversions are profound and tangible witnesses to the way Jesus still bears and brings new life.

6) *Tradition*. The Christian faith has a long history. The story of God's saving deeds stretches from Bible times to the present and continues in the lives of the communion of saints. What we learn from our Christian and denominational past empowers our future.

7) *Mission*. The catechumenal process demands mission or service. It is nearly impossible to reflect on the gospel for nine months without feeling called to

participate in some form of mission. Each small group together undertakes at least one outreach project in the community.

8) *Integrity*. At no point is anyone forced to begin or continue the process. All who wish to explore their faith more intimately and meaningfully are welcome. Church membership does not require participation in the process (except for the nonbaptized). Already baptized people may transfer into the parish or become parish leaders without going through the process.

9) *Activity directed by the Spirit and led by the laity*. The Holy Spirit sends the catechumens when the church is ready. The Spirit provides the sponsors that match their needs. Laypeople rely on the Spirit's direction to form the content of the catechumenal process. The pastor is important as spiritual director, liturgist and cheerleader, but the pastor does not teach his or her version of the faith. Sponsors, small group leaders, catechists and administrator are all essential to the process. When possible each of these roles should be filled by a different layperson.

10) *Creativity and adaptability*. The catechumenal process is fluid; to make it work one must be flexible. The needs of the participants always have priority and determine each meeting's content. The rites also are adaptable and may be changed to suit local circumstances.

11) *Catechetical methods*. Each year the notes from the previous year need to be examined and a new syllabus developed based on the needs of the current year's participants. For the process to remain a process and not a program, the content must change yearly. This content flows naturally from the team's knowledge and involvement in the members' own faith journey.

12) *Heart over head*. This is not an academic process, nor is it a formal Bible study. Ordinary people share their knowledge, experiences and relationship with the gospel. Participants often discover similarities in their personal situations and gain strength from each other. There is no need for academic lecturers or seminary-trained pastors because the catechumenal process focuses on the transforming nature of living as a follower of Christ. Often this requires people to be more willing to grow than an academic approach does.

13) *Generous style*. The congregation gives their all to the participants. The already baptized people may wash candidates' feet or sign their foreheads with ashes. The people watch and pray with the catechumens as they prepare for the joyous

celebration of baptism. Our Easter vigil begins with a roaring fire on the church's front lawn. We retell the entire story of salvation history. Flowers and candles deck the church for the baptismal service. At the end of the vigil, the whole congregation goes to the font to touch the waters of baptism. After the Eucharist, we hold a grand reception, complete with a jazz band, to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and the addition of new members to Christ's body.

14) *Time*. Our catechumenal process is nine months long. Meeting weekly becomes a habit. Group members become friends, support each other, and help each other grow in faith. At the end of the process, each person is invited to continue in a small group.

[The first seven points originated with James Dunning, the late Roman Catholic RCIA consultant.]