

Starting Down the Royal Path: How to Become an Orthodox Christian

By Archpriest Josiah Trenham, Ph.D.

The Conversion of the Nations is the Mission of the Church

After our Savior's brilliant Resurrection and just prior to His glorious Ascension He commissioned His followers with these words, "Go forth into all the world and make disciples of all the nations; baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, And, lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (St. Matt. 28:18-20, St. Mk. 16:8)

It is the will of God that every human being be saved, that each and every human person become a child of God in Holy Baptism, that every human being be washed of his sin and partake of everlasting life. It is the desire of the Holy Trinity that all men, women and children of every race and region learn to live in the ways of love, holiness and dignity, in the ways that Jesus Himself lived – by learning His commandments from His Church and by keeping them as an expression of love for God and men.

For the last two thousand years the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church has been busy about this sacred commission. Bearing witness to the saving acts of God, exalting the Cross of Christ and proclaiming His victory over death, sin and the devil, and inviting all men to partake of the salvation of the Lord by faith and baptism – this has been the work of the Church. Starting where she was at the heart of the Roman Empire the Church converted the Empire itself. She extended her Gospel witness to the east in Persia, India and Western China. She extended her witness to the south in N. Africa. She extended her witness to the north into Slavic lands, and to the north and west into what is now Europe and America, and she continues and will continue to make disciples of all nations until the entire earth is covered with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea, or human history comes to an end in the providence of God.

It is the very essence of the Church to be apostolic, that is, to not only be built upon the unchanging apostolic teaching, but to be messengers of the good news sent to all corners of the world to announce salvation and to bring the sweet and saving aroma of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, to all. Each local parish manifests the fullness of Christ, and serves as a beachhead for this universal missionary endeavor concretely in the city or village in which it is. There is no parish that is not to be a missionary center.

Disciples of Jesus Christ are Formed by Catechism

The practical means by which the Church accomplishes her task of preaching and evangelization is the catechumenate (which will be discussed at greater length below). Preaching and catechism is how the Great Commission is accomplished. The centrality of the Church's work with catechumens is manifested by the fact that in every liturgy in every Orthodox Church there is appointed to be prayed the *Litany for the Catechumens*.

The Litany for the Catechumens

Deacon: Pray to the Lord, ye catechumens.

(The choir responds – Lord have mercy – to each petition.)

Let us, the faithful, pray for the catechumens, that the Lord will have mercy on them.

That he will teach them the word of truth.

That he will reveal to them the gospel of righteousness.

That he will unite them to his holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Save them; have mercy on them; help them; and keep them, O God, by thy grace.

Bow your heads unto the Lord, ye catechumens.

Choir: To thee, O Lord.

Priest: O Lord our God, who dwellest on high and regardest the humble, who has sent forth as the salvation of the race of men thine only-begotten Son and God, our Lord Jesus Christ: Look down upon thy servants the Catechumens, who have bowed their necks before thee; make them worthy in due season of the laver of regeneration, the forgiveness of sins and the robe of incorruption. Unite them to thy holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and number them with thine elect flock: That with us they may glorify thine all-honorable and majestic name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

Choir: Amen.

This litany for the catechumens is placed just after the reading of the Holy Gospel and the sermon. This placement highlights the fact that the Holy Gospel is read and the homily is given for the evangelization and instruction of the catechumens as well as for the edification of the faithful. Even in parishes in established Orthodox countries where the great majority of the population is Orthodox, the litany can still be authentically prayed for it is a prayer for the catechumens of the entire church. We Orthodox Christians who live in the distant west, and those of us who are in Africa and Asia where Holy Orthodoxy is making its way to the masses depend on the prayers of our brothers and sisters in traditionally Orthodox lands for our work of evangelization. The litany for the catechumens concludes with the dismissal of the catechumens as the deacon instructs “depart catechumens.” At this point the catechumens are asked to leave the Divine Liturgy in order not to be in the gathering around the Eucharist since they are not yet members of the Body of Christ. It is appropriate at this point to dismiss the catechumens with a parish catechist or team of catechists who will meet with the catechumens for further instruction in the parish hall or educational center. Sometimes catechumens are dismissed without a formal program of catechism, and sometimes catechumens are not presumed to be present and so are not dismissed at all.¹

¹ Some parishes that do not have formal catechetical programs which include catechesis during the 2nd half of the Divine Liturgy may simply allow catechumens to remain in the narthex liturgy. At St. Andrew Parish at the present time the litany for the catechumens and the dismissal of the catechumens is followed by a catechetical lecture that takes place each Sunday.

The Place of the Catechumens in the Narthex

The sacred art of ecclesiastical architecture also bears witness to the important ministry of catechesis and the role of catechumens. All Orthodox churches are traditionally divided into three portions: the narthex, the nave, and the sanctuary or holy altar. The narthex is the furthest western portion of the church, and serves many purposes. It is a place of transition between the world (outside) and the kingdom of God (the nave), and is a place where Orthodox Christians make special prayers and intentions, venerate icons, and light candles. The narthex is also the place of penitents, or those Orthodox Christians who are under penance for some particular sin. The narthex is also the place of the catechumens. The catechumens, by virtue of being enrolled as catechumens, have been initially separated from the world and brought near to the Church, but have not yet been organically joined to her by baptism into the body of Christ. This spiritual reality is manifested by the fact that the catechumens are in the church temple, but not in its heart – the nave.²

The Process of Catechism: Courtship-Engagement-Marriage

The process of becoming an Orthodox Christian can be compared very closely to the process of becoming a married person for it involves the same basic movements of courtship, engagement and marriage. When a person first becomes interested in the Orthodox Church a series of initial interactions take place. Perhaps one visits for a liturgy, researches Orthodoxy on-line, or engages in a conversation with a friend who is Orthodox. If these initial interactions are blessed, a more studied process of inquiry follows which can be compared to the process of courtship. One who launches into this dance with the Church is called by the Church an *inquirer* or a *seeker*. These early days of exploration can be overwhelming and eye-popping for an inquirer, who perhaps has never seen anything like the Divine Liturgy, a church temple full of sacred icons staring at the inquirer, and persons crossing themselves, bowing, and prostrating. It may be the inquirer's first exposure to sacred chant, incense, and sacred space. As such it takes a while to become familiar and comfortable with these new liturgical surroundings, and the inquirer is encouraged to be patient and to expect to slowly and progressively come to a greater understanding and appreciation of the deep meaning of each liturgical action.

During this courtship with the church the inquirer is encouraged to be focused, and to attend as many divine services as possible. The best catechism is in frequent and watchful attendance at the divine services. This is true because the Church prays what she believes, and believes what she prays.³ Every service of prayer is deep theology, and all true theology is prayer. During the period of inquiry/courtship the seeker is also encouraged to read at least one basic text that introduces the Orthodox Church.⁴ If all proceeds well, the seeker will begin to ask himself if he could, in fact, become an Orthodox Christian; if he could envision himself living the Orthodox life. This is a natural development, much like a couple in courtship beginning to envision the possibility of wedlock.

² Many Orthodox parishes in America do not meet in formally constructed and consecrated Orthodox Church temples, and therefore may not even have a narthex. Catechumens ought follow the practice of the parish in which they are receiving instruction. At St. Andrew catechumens are encouraged to take up their position in the narthex or in the western portion of the nave near the narthex.

³ *Lex credendi est lex orandi* is the patristic dictum: the rule of faith is the rule of prayer.

⁴ Suggestions are found on the *Catechumen's Requirements List*.

After this initial period of serious inquiry (it is suggested that this be no less than two months) the inquirer may come to a place in which he wishes to be enrolled amongst the catechumens of a particular parish in order to be prepared for reception into the Church. This is a very serious decision akin to becoming engaged, and Orthodoxy takes engagement very seriously. When one moves from courtship to engagement, no longer is the question asked “Will we get married?” That question was asked and answered in the act of engagement, and the engagement itself is a matter of preparation for the wedding. So it is with the inquirer becoming a catechumen. Once that move has been made, it is no longer a question of whether the person intends to be baptized into the Orthodox Church but rather it is a matter of preparing for such. It is not a question of if, but when.

At this time the inquirer should seek the blessing of the pastor of the parish he is attending, and request to be made a catechumen. Should the pastor judge that the inquirer is well-prepared to do so he will read the Prayer for Enrolling a Catechumen, making the inquirer a catechumen.⁵ Here is the text for enrollment into the catechumenate:

Prayer for Enrolling a Catechumen⁶

Deacon: Let us pray to the Lord.

Choir: Lord have mercy.

Priest: O Lord our God, we pray unto thee, and we beseech thee, that the light of thy countenance may be shown upon thy servant, N.; and that the Cross of thine Only-begotten Son may be graven in his heart and his thoughts; that he may flee from the vanity of the world and from every evil snare of the enemy, and may follow after thy commandments. And grant, O Lord, that thy Holy Name may remain unrejected by him and that he may be united, in due time, to thy holy Church; and that the fearful mysteries of thy Christ may be administered unto him; That having lived according to thy commandments, and preserved without flaw the Seal, he may receive the bliss of the elect in thy Kingdom; through the grace and love towards mankind of thine Only-begotten Son, with whom thou art blessed, together with thine all-holy, and good, and life-giving Spirit: now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

At this point the inquirer has made a definitive decision to become an Orthodox Christian forever. He knows that this commitment is not a denominational switch, but an approach to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. It is a commitment to faithfully serve God as a member of the Orthodox Church no matter where one lives on this earth. The catechumen is engaged to the Church, and will complete this engagement with the spiritual marriage which is holy baptism. It is expected at this juncture that the new catechumen inform in writing any religious body in which he was previously a member his desire to be removed from the membership of said body. The catechumen is numbered

⁵ It is suggested that this enrollment be prayed publicly during the divine service so that the faithful can take note of the new catechumen, and begin to assist the catechumen in their formation. A nice place to do this is after the sermon in the Sunday Divine Liturgy just prior to the Litany of the Catechumens.

⁶ This prayer is the *Prayer for Naming a Child on the 8th Day* after birth through which prayer the child of an Orthodox family becomes a catechumen until the day of his baptism.

amongst a class of catechumens that belongs to the particular parish, and will begin the formal process of catechesis. From this point the catechumen self-identifies to the outside world as an Orthodox Christian. Should the catechumen die before reception into the church, he will be buried as an Orthodox Christian

The Content and Contours of Catechism

A catechumen (Greek: κατηχούμενος) is an individual engaged in the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ and entering into His Holy Church. As one reads the book of the Acts of the Apostles it is apparent that many of the hearers of the Holy Apostles were baptized immediately. This is, in almost every instance, those who were Jews or God-fearing Greeks. The Old Covenant Jewish life was itself an extensive two-thousand year catechism, a preparation for full Christian revelation and life. It was most natural for all the Jews to believe in Jesus Christ since He was their longed-for Messiah, and it was a natural movement for the Jews to become Christians, and many of them did. As the remnant of the Jews was believing in Christ and being baptized, the Holy Apostles turned their attention to the Greeks and barbarians. In the ancient Church, the catechumenate, or time during which one is a catechumen, often lasted for as much as three years. This was the case because Greeks and barbarians were polytheists, and idolatry and its superstitions were deeply imbedded in the Greco-Roman way of life. It took time to be purged of these unseemly beliefs and practices, and to form a Christian mind and disposition. Catechism itself included not only participation in some of the divine services but also formal catechesis, formal oral instruction from a teacher, often the bishop or appointed catechist, special prayers of exorcism and entreaty, and extensive involvement in the fellowship of the church which enabled the catechumens to form the new social connections that would become the most important bonds in their lives. This authentic integration into the family of believers with a supreme bond established by the blood of Christ, not by the blood of one's biological parents, has always been a central hallmark of the Christian Church. The believer's ultimate loyalty is not to one's earthly family or tribe, but to Christ and the Church. No one who loves mother or father or siblings more than Christ and the believers is worthy of Christ and His Kingdom.

In contemporary times in the post-Christian west the length of catechesis is designed to help secularized westerners, many of whom have some attachment to western forms of Christianity, become Orthodoxized. This process is serious and the usual catechesis takes a minimum of one year. Since adults are received on Great and Holy Saturday, this means that the usual catechumen will be catechized for a minimum of one year and sometimes up to two years depending on what time in the church year the inquirer enrolls as a catechumen. There is no quick catechism, and the basic rule is that the deeper foundation a catechumen receives, the higher the tree of his Christian life will grow. One cannot embrace the Orthodox way of life quickly, and the Church and her faith uphold the whole universe. There is no reason to rush since the Church is not going anywhere. The catechumen should be zealous, focused, and stay the course at a sustainable pace. The one year catechism presupposes that the catechumen will be actively engaged in the process of learning and assimilation to Orthodox modes of belief and Christian living, and may be extended (and often is) as the pastor sees fit due to the catechumen's absence from required lectures, prayers and activities.

Throughout history the Church eventually became the majority religion of the lands in which it sojourned, and the catechumenate as an institution gradually died out in many places as most persons were being baptized shortly after birth. As Holy Orthodoxy has moved into the West, Asia and Africa in recent centuries, the catechumenate is naturally being revived. In some places it is still in embryonic form, but in many places it is in rapid ascendancy.

The Requirements for Catechumens

Each parish utilizes a collection of catechetical material. At this time there is no standardized catechism for American Orthodoxy. This may be a near-term fruit of the unifying work of the Assembly of Orthodox Bishops in America. In general, however, catechism usually consists of faithful attendance at divine services, participation in lectures, accomplishment of prescribed reading, visits to other local parishes and monasteries, episcopal interaction, a measure of paperwork designed to facilitate the integration of the catechumen into parish life, and more. Parishes are encouraged to maintain a *catechumen's requirements list* so that inquirers and catechumens have a clear reference point for their own study.

The goal of all catechism is purification, and conformity to the commandments of God and the Church. For catechumens who come from pious and active non-Orthodox Christian backgrounds there will be less requirement for radical personal changes, but for those who come from no religious background and whose lives have been deeply influenced by secular culture there will be radical changes that may involve the abandonment of illegitimate employment, the cessation of certain personal associations, and deep repentance from sins. Persons who have been married and divorced, sometimes multiple times, must work through these matters with the pastor. All are welcomed to the Church for the Lord God is calling every human being to His household and family, which is the Church,⁷ but for some the adjustments will be serious.

The Role of the Sponsor

Every person received into the church is given a sponsor or godparent. The church requires one sponsor of the same sex, who will stand as sponsor at baptism. An additional sponsor of the opposite sex is not required, but may be allowed if the pastor deems fit. Multiple sponsors of the same sex are not permitted. The role of the godparent is extremely serious, and not every Orthodox Christian is qualified to be a sponsor.

The bond formed between the sponsor and the baptizand in the sacrament of baptism is deep, mystical and eternal. A spiritual bond even deeper than a biological bond is established, that is to say, baptismal water is thicker than blood. The 53rd canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council forbids the marriage of sponsors to the widowed mothers of their god-children saying that "spiritual kinship is better than bodily union." Godparents and Godchildren have a spiritual and familial bond that cannot be dissolved. Godparents cannot be changed or replaced any more than one's biological parents can be. The relationship between sponsor and sponsored ought be nourished and deepened throughout life by mutual prayer and encouragement.

⁷ 1 Timothy 3:15.

The role of the sponsor is to speak for the catechumen. In cases where the catechumen is an infant or young child the sponsor *literally* speaks for the child answering the priest's questions during the service of baptism, confessing the Nicene Creed, etc. The sponsor's job is to *recommend* the candidate to the church, to vouch for his character to the priest, and to assure the priest that the candidate knows and believes the Nicene Creed. For this reason the candidate must recite the Creed to his sponsor and explain its basic meaning. In our parish laminated copies of the Nicene Creed are distributed to the catechumens at the beginning of Great Lent for use in learning the text.

Catechumens may wonder how exactly they are to identify a sponsor. This can take place through various means, but usually takes place naturally as the catechumen integrates himself into the life of the parish. Affinities will be made, and relationships established. In the course of such the catechumen might inquire of an acquaintance in the parish if he would be willing to stand as sponsor for him, or the acquaintance himself might inquire of the catechumen if they have found a sponsor. Obtaining a sponsor is a significant decision and ought to be done prayerfully. All sponsors must be approved by the pastor, since in order to serve as a sponsor in baptism one must be an upstanding Orthodox Christian. It is best, therefore, that the catechumen clear a particular name with the priest prior to soliciting a sponsor in order to avoid potential embarrassment.

Candidacy for Baptism

As Great and Holy Lent progresses the decision for candidacy is made by the pastor-catechist. Since individuals are usually allowed to become catechumens at any time throughout the year there will always be two types of catechumens at the same time: those who are preparing to be received into the Church on Great and Holy Saturday, and those who are enrolled in catechism, but who have not completed the time and work requirements to allow them to be baptized.

This two-fold division in the catechumenate is reflected in the liturgical practices that begin in the 4th week of Great and Holy Lent. During this week the catechumens who are approved to be received on Great Saturday will be determined, and a second litany for these catechumens who are "preparing for holy illumination" will be prayed in the divine services following the usual litany of the catechumens. After the usual litany for the catechumens is prayed, those catechumens who are not blessed to be baptized on Great Saturday withdraw, and only those who are blessed by the pastor to be received in on Great Saturday remain for the Litany for Baptismal Candidates:

Litany for Those Preparing for Illumination

(From Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent)

Deacon: As many as are preparing for illumination, draw near.
Pray to the Lord, ye who are preparing for illumination.

Choir: Lord, have mercy (to each petition).

Deacon: Ye faithful, pray to the Lord for these brethren who are preparing for holy illumination and for their salvation.

That the Lord our God will establish them and strengthen them.

That he will illumine them with the light of knowledge and of reverence.

That he will grant unto them, at the appointed time, the laver of regeneration, the forgiveness of sins and the garment of incorruption.

That he will beget them with water and the Spirit.

That he will grant unto them the perfection of faith.

That he will number them with his holy and elect flock.

Save them; have mercy on them; help them; and keep them, O God, by thy grace.

Bow your heads to the Lord, ye who are preparing for illumination.

Priest: Show the light of thy countenance, O Master, upon those who are preparing for holy illumination and who desire to put away the defilement of sin. Enlighten their understanding. Establish them in the faith. Strengthen them in hope. Perfect them in love. Make them honorable members of thy Christ, who gave himself for our souls. For thou art our Illumination, and unto thee we ascribe glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Deacon: As many as are preparing for illumination, depart. Depart, ye who are preparing for illumination.

The litanies for the catechumens, together with the exorcisms, are most powerful aids to the catechumens and bring great help from Almighty God upon them to strengthen them against the opposition of the evil one.

Great and Holy Saturday and Baptism

The traditional day for the reception of converts into the Church is the baptismal liturgy of Great and Holy Saturday. This liturgy is designed so that the administration of holy baptism takes place in the middle of the service.⁸ In cases of catechumen illness, or menstruation, or other serious impediment, the Feast of Holy Pentecost is traditionally used as the alternative date for Holy Baptism (although the baptisms are administered outside of liturgy).

Service of Reception of Converts

The normative (by acrivia or exactitude) means for the reception of all converts is holy baptism. However, at the discretion of the ruling bishop certain catechumens, who are coming to Holy Orthodoxy from specific western Christian traditions, may be received by life confession, renunciation of heresy, and chrismation (by economia or pastoral accommodation).

The service for the reception of converts begins on Great and Holy Friday with the prayers of exorcisms, together with renunciations and affirmations of the Nicene Creed. This first portion of the service for the reception of converts often follows the praying of the Royal Hours or precedes the beginning of the Orthros and Lamentations at the Tomb of Christ which takes place on Friday evening. Prayers of exorcism are traditionally prayed for catechumens throughout their catechesis, and serve as a tremendous help in the struggle

⁸ For a copy of the text and rubrics of this service see *Service Book of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church according to the use of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America*.

of the catechumens to break the hold of evil and to achieve purification. On the morning of Great and Holy Saturday the catechumens arrive for the baptismal liturgy. At the Little Entrance of the Liturgy the celebrants process to the baptismal font and begin the service of Holy Baptism. The catechumens are anointed with the oil of gladness, are baptized with a trine immersion and emersion, are chrismated, washed, tonsured, clothed in a radiant garment, given a baptismal candle, and process back into the church temple (or from the font to the center of the nave if the font is within the temple proper) as the Holy Liturgy resumes with the reading of the Epistle and Gospel for Holy Saturday. At the time of the administration of Holy Communion the newly-illuminated are the first to receive the Holy Eucharist, and are established in the Church of Christ as full members. The reception of baptism-chrismation-eucharist is normative and universal in the Holy Orthodox Church. We know of no partial Christians who are baptized but do not receive communion, nor those who commune but are not confirmed/chrismated. Every Orthodox Christian is established as such by receiving baptism, chrismation and holy eucharist - even if the newly-illuminated is only 40 days old. Following their reception into the Church the newly-illuminated are neo-phytes (from the Greek for “new plants”), and are typically not allowed to exercise some forms of lay leadership for at least one year.

A Final Word to Catechumens

Each catechumen is reminded that the process of catechism is a road of repentance and faith which leads to union with the Holy Trinity and membership in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Such a road is a road toward Christ and away from the evil one. Demonic opposition is to be expected during the course of catechism. These obstacles can be overcome by the help and mercy of God and a strong resolve on the part of the catechumen.

Chart of the Initiatory Process

Period of Inquiry for the Seeker

(minimum two months)

- Visiting services, reading, meeting with clergy and laity, research, counting the cost



Catechumenate

(minimum of one year)

- Prayer of Enrollment as Catechumen / Signing with the Cross
- Fulfillment of Requirements of Catechumens' Requirements List
- Faithful Attendance at Divine Services
- Assimilation to Church Fasting and Feasting
- Attendance at Catechetical Lectures
- Required Reading



Candidacy

(2nd half of Great Lent)

- Sponsor attests to Pastor that Catechumen knows the Creed and is fit for reception
 - Life Confessions



Final Preparations in Holy Week

- Attendance at Holy Week Services
- Exorcisms, Renunciations & Affirmations on Great and Holy Friday



Great and Holy Saturday Baptismal Liturgy

- Procession to Baptismal Font at Little Entrance of Liturgy
- Stripping of Candidates
- (men black shorts, women black 1 piece bathing suit with long black t-shirt)
- Prayers of Preparation and Blessing of the Font
- Blessing of the Oil of Gladness and Anointing of Candidates
- Baptism by Trine Immersion and Emersion
- Clothing with White Baptismal Garments
- Sealing with Holy Chrism
- Washing and Tonsure
- Entrance into the Nave for 2nd portion of Liturgy
- First Communion



Postbaptismal Rite

(Bright Week)

- Communion at Liturgies of Bright Week
- Wear Baptismal Garment in Church all week and through St. Thomas Sunday



Other Baptismal Feasts as Alternates for Baptism of Catechumens

- Following Orthros of Pentecost, Theophany, or Lazarus Saturday