



THE IMPORTANCE OF CATECHESIS: PREPARATION FOR LIFE IN CHRIST

A note from Archbishop SERAPHIM: Sometimes people ask why it is that clergy have those adults wishing to convert to Orthodoxy, and the parents of children to be baptised, take instructions in advance; and then why it is that the new members of the church are expected to attend services regularly, as are all Orthodox Christians. Entering the Church is something very serious. The following article, by a seminary graduate, is offered in order to begin answering some of those questions.

The Holy Mysteries (sacraments) of Baptism and Chrismation bring us into the life of the Church. The Church as «the pillar and ground of the truth» (1Tim 3:15), has received authority to teach the truth about the Faith and to administer the Holy Mysteries to the faithful and to lead them on the path to salvation (Mtt. 28:1-20). This authority was given by the Founder of the Church, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the early days of the Church, when «Christians were made and not born» (Tertillian), a postulant (one desiring to become a Christian), before joining the Church had to go through a fairly long process of catechesis— that is, preparation for the Holy Mystery of Baptism.

The word «catechesis» comes from a Greek word which means verbal instructions and/ or explanations of the Faith. This catechesis was delivered prior to Baptism, prior to the joining the Body of Christ.

The early Church established the guidelines/ rules defining the preparation or Baptism by those who desired to become Christians. The catechetical instructions lasted for up to two or three years. It seemed obvious then that a person could become member of the Church only after learning its teachings and assimilating them, truly understanding its law of life. In some cases, when there was an immediate danger of death or persecution, the preparation time would be cut short.

The Bishop would order that those who desired to be baptised be instructed verbally by the presbyters. Often catechesis in the early Church took the form of questions and answer. The presbyters also used the question-and-answer format to examine the catechumens. There were established catechetical schools. The Church still uses the word «catechumen» for the one who is preparing for Baptism and/ or Chrismation. This system of verbal instructions continued throughout the period of missionary expansion of Christianity, with adult Baptism remaining the prevailing custom, and this verbal instruction of catechumens lasted for centuries. After the Reformation (16th C), catechesis began to take a written form both in the West and in the East.

As Father Alexander Schmemmann has shown in *Water and Spirit*, the catechumens were progressively introduced into the life of the Church by special rites which included exorcism, prayers, explanations of the Holy Scripture, etc. The preparation involved the entire community, which thus was preparing itself for the reception of the new members. It is from this double preparation— that of the catechumens and that of the Church— that there were developed the pre-paschal liturgical season which today we call Great Lent. It is the time of intimate and intensive preparation for the «Holy Night», the climax of which was precisely the «illumination» of those coming to Christ and seeking salvation and new life in Him.

The baptismal catechesis is the earlier record in the Church tradition of the manner of which the

Church thought its members Christian doctrine and the Christian law of life. It is important to note that this catechesis was liturgical in its character. As Fr Alexander Schmemmann has written in *Liturgy and Life*,

The explanation of Scriptures, the unfolding the meaning of the Creed (i.e. the Church doctrine), the teaching of Christian morality— in another words the entire contents of Christian education— was transmitted on direct connection with liturgical services, partly even during such services. We find traces of such liturgical catechesis in our church services today. Thus the first part of the Divine Liturgy is still called the «Liturgy of the Catechumens,» and this is not merely because catechumens were allowed to attend it, but primarily because it was and still is a *teaching service*, because it is didactic in its very nature and purpose. (pages 8-9).

The main purpose of the liturgical catechesis is to bring the person into the life of the Church. It is not merely the communication of the religious knowledge, nor the training of the human being to be a good person, but for edification— the building up of the Body of Christ, what 1Peter 2:9 terms the new «chosen race» and «holy nation», the mysterious life of which began on Pentecost. «And make him/her a reason-endowed sheep in the holy flock of Thy Christ, an honourable member of Thy Church,» says the baptismal prayer.

Through the Mystery of the Baptism, together with Chrismation which immediately follows it, the newly illumined one becomes a member of the Body of Christ, one of the children of God, the sheep of his flock. Together with other members he is energized by the Holy Spirit. He has made a commitment to live the Christian life according to the Faith. And this faith in Christ is dynamic: it is unceasing growth process which finds its natural and normal realization in good works.

Baptism is not a means of identifying oneself with a certain ethnic group or language. Remember the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? As charming as the film may be in some respects, it illustrates perfectly how baptism can be used /abused for ethnic identification— in this case so that the WASP could «become Greek» and marry the Greek! *At the same token, being born in Russia or Greece, does not automatically make one an «Orthodox Christian».*

To baptise and chrismate people in the Church without catechetical preparation and proper integration of them within the community leads only to increase in membership numbers of the parish on paper. In reality, we might never see them again in the Church. *Lack of preparation and integration also results in making a mockery of the Holy Mysteries. To desire to be baptised in the Orthodox Church is to commit oneself to life in Christ, to «put on Christ» and to live every minute of one's life for the glory of God.* It is not a matter of convenience, nor an interesting thing to say «I

am baptised,» nor just to be able to present a baptismal certificate to a certain agency.

Today, the Orthodox Church continues to prepare catechumens for the Holy Mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation. Instruction may take between six months to one year, using some «standard» introductory works. Catechesis today should not be a highly academic, seminary type programme. Neither should catechesis be omitted. No one should be baptized just because he or she wants, or just because one has just found his ethnic parish in the city.

The Bishop and the clergy have responsibility to ensure that every catechumen will receive instructions. For this they are accountable before God. Practice of course will vary from parish to parish, since the Orthodox Church does not use a standardized programme as do the Roman Catholics. In some of our parishes instruction is done in a group setting; in others it is done on a one —to-one basis. In some parishes, the priest appoints a catechist to teach the catechumens; in others the priest himself is actively involved in teaching. The one— to— one approach allows the priest or the catechist to customized the programme based on the unique questions and concerns which each person might have. A convert from Roman Catholicism, for example, will probably have a different set of questions and concerns from one coming from Lutheranism, just as a convert from Protestantism would have different questions from one coming from Wicca or atheism.

Each catechumen should have a sponsor/ witness. The sponsor of a candidate for Holy Baptism is a guarantor to the Church that the person will be reared and educated in the Orthodox Faith, and that he or she would practice the Faith. A person will guarantee or pass only what he/she practices. The sponsor is usually from the same gender and should be leading a full sacramental life.

Working closely with the priest or catechist, and often as well with his or her sponsor, the catechumen will learn not only the dogmatic truths of the Faith but also the practical aspects of Christian life: prayer life, lives of the Saints, the Liturgical cycle. The regular contacts will also assist the one desiring Baptism to be better integrated within the community in Christ.

Finally, it is important to say that catechesis is not only for the catechumens. Religious education is a life-long process leading to a better understanding of the living Faith, helping us to actualize the Holy Spirit in our lives. Therefore, once the newly enlightened adult is a member of the Church, together with others he or she would want to continue to study the Faith and to grow in Christ. Our Orthodox Faith is dynamic, alive and finds expression in the liturgical services but also in each individual person's own life, and in the life of the Church as the community in Christ.

Antonina Kemilev Dunn

M. Div. St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1984

According to the Saints, our relationship with God finds expression in our life with others, and our relationship with others reflects our relationship with God. Christian life is a continuous journey of growth. We grow through living the Orthodox Faith in our day to day life, attending the Divine Services and participating in the Sacraments. We strive to live and grow in Christ with all our soul, mind and heart. The religious education/ instructions for adults and children offered in our parishes help us in the understanding of the living Faith and how to actualize the Holy Spirit in our lives. Having a spiritual father with whom to share, pray and be guided is of a great importance. Learning about the Faith is not only for the newly enlightened adult members of the Church, it is for all those who desire to grow in Christ. Our Orthodox Faith is dynamic, alive and finds expression in the liturgical services as well as in each individual

WHAT IS MIND CONTROL?

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During my recent visit to Bulgaria I met with another Orthodox woman Theologian, Dr Desislava Panayotova. She was a lecturer in one of the Orthodox Churches in Sofia, teaching the Orthodox Faith to adults. In addition she was in charge of the Committee for dealing with various cults and movements in Bulgaria, assisting the exiting members, reuniting them to their families and teaching them the Orthodox Faith. We talk about her work in this field and the importance of religious education in the Orthodox Church. I will share my interview with Desislava at another time.

One of the topics we discussed during our meeting, was the mind control cults or movements. In the early

1990ies I gave a talk on this topic in Toronto. For this purpose I attended few meetings at COMA (Counsel On Mind Abuse, which no longer exist). I took many flyers with information, read some of the recommended books, and met some of the people exiting groups and their families. Things have changed for the last 20 years— the internet provides us abundance of information in seconds; we can access it at any time and from anywhere. So, when we clicked on Google about mind control, we were offered numerous materials. *Please, do not blame me that I am tempting you to stay on the computer for hours...* Here is a **brief** summary of what mind control is and enumeration of characteristics of a mind control movement/ cult. These are mentioned repeatedly in various articles by differ-

ent authors, as well as in books on this topic from the 80ies and 90ies. Nowadays those are posted on internet. All these characteristics are valid / applicable today.

The word «cult» describes a relationship between a leader and a group, or less commonly between a pair of individuals, where the leader utilizes the techniques of thought reform. The book **Cults, Sects and the New Age**, Rev James LeBar, describes the following two behaviours of a cult:

1. It does not tell the truth about itself.

2. By means of unrestricted use of psychological and social control techniques, it makes its members unable to resist its influence and authority.

The result is that members of the cults or movements cannot make their own life decisions, determine their future goals, feel their own feelings, or make their own choices.

Cont. on page 12

