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# “Do I Belong Here?:” The Adult Catechumenate

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Do I belong here? This is a question which each of us has asked probably in a variety of settings, and in a number of ways. Will I be comfortable with those people? Will they accept me since I really don't hold the proper credentials? Will they see the “flaws in my character”? And so the question gets put in a whole host of ways. Do I belong here?

Martin Marty in *Invitation to Discipleship* calls this “the critical question”. He says: “Do I belong here? That is a natural question when people gather who are inquiring about a faith and about a church. We often ask the question about belonging with a bit of fear. We may be uneasy. It's a bit frightening.”<sup>1</sup>

This article intends to focus on a particular dimension of adult education within the parish context, namely, what has come to be known as the Adult Catechumenate. Examined here will be some present practices of adult membership instruction, some differing styles of learning and their implications, the nature and shape of a particular approach to the adult catechumenate which in the Roman Catholic Church is referred to as the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults, and some reflections on practical parish experiences.

## Present Practices

“Being a member of a congregation involves commitment to the beliefs and practices of the community and personal convictions about the significance of those beliefs and practices as a way of life.”<sup>2</sup> Obviously then the question of “Do I belong here?” takes on a particular significance, not only for the person who is considering becoming a member of a particular denomination or congregation, but also for what the denomination or the congregation is offering. On this score, as adult educator Leon McKenzie notes:

Adult religious education, as it is practiced in most local churches and parishes, is largely ineffectual. . . . What is sorely needed is nothing less than a thorough reconceptualization of the purposes and scope of adult religious education. This reconceptualization should be based not only on theological perspectives but also on principles of adult education, an understanding of educational anthropology and contextual meta-language, research information regarding adult development, and on the principles of marketing.<sup>3</sup>

What McKenzie is claiming in these comments appears to be substantiated by some clergy and laity. Recently, a group of people, quite concerned about the way the church handles development in discipleship, told me that they are "disappointed with the haphazard manner in which most churches do adult membership instruction." In most instances, it's really non-existent. Or if it does take place, it's a session or two on how the church is organized or how desperately the church needs money in times of declining membership and reduced giving. Said they: "Very little is done to help people learn about discipleship, what it means to be a follower of Christ not only within a congregation but also within the world." They wondered whether the way the Christian church goes about "forming Christians, nurturing Christians, supporting members" has changed within the individualism and the consumerism of the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

Although there will certainly be variations in approaches taken denominationally and regionally, as well as congregationally, to adult membership instruction, it is my sense that what is quite common throughout is what is called "the adult membership class". Traditionally, this has consisted of four to six sessions, largely geared to the sharing of information. Participants, usually taught by the pastor, are given information which is considered basic and essential about the Scriptures, specific church doctrines, some church practices, and probably some denominational history. There might also be some congregational history added to the core curriculum. Once the participants have mastered a sufficient amount of data, or attended the prescribed number of sessions, they are formally received into adult membership through a public ritual, incorporated into a regular worship service.

The concerns expressed by the group of clergy and laity identified above focus on how membership instruction is handled within the individualism and the consumerism of the

1990s. Within those discussions, comments like this were not uncommon: “There are no short-cuts to discipleship. I’m not at all surprised that the church is hurting today; the church really needs to be more thorough in its training and then maybe there will be a deeper sense of commitment.” “Those who educate in the church, especially when it comes to membership instruction, need to realize that adults don’t necessarily want more information but they want information that helps them make important connections between life and faith, between what they’re experiencing in the world and how faith can be a helpful guide in making sense out of that.” “People don’t want to be given more answers; people want to know from faith- people how they got to the answers which are helpful to their meaningful living in the 1990s.”

### Styles: Learning That Changes Lives

Education theorists like David Kolb<sup>5</sup> tell us that people learn in a variety of styles. Together with David Kolb, Bernice McCarthy<sup>6</sup> notes that these differences in learning style depend on many things:

Who we are, where we are, how we see ourselves, and what people ask of us. There are two major differences in how we learn. The first is how we *perceive*, the second is how we *process*. We perceive reality differently. We take things in in different ways. In new situations, some of us sense and feel our way, while others think things through. Those who perceive in a sensing/feeling way connect the experience, the information, to meaning. They learn through empathy, through the lens of personhood....On the other hand, those who think through the experience tend more to the abstract dimensions of reality. They analyze what is happening. Their intellect makes the first appraisal. They reason experience. They perceive with a logical approach....As we perceive, we process. Some of us jump right in and try it. In processing experience and information, some of us are watchers, while some of us are doers. Both ways of processing information and experience are equally valuable.<sup>7</sup>

Together with educators like Kolb and McCarthy, adult education theorists like Malcolm Knowles and Allen Tough<sup>8</sup> tell us that adults learn best when they can design their own learning programs and projects, when they can develop a sense of ownership in what they are doing, and when they can address questions and concerns relevant to their everyday lives. This is usually called “andragogy—self-designed and self-directed learning projects.”<sup>9</sup>

In a 1990 journal article, Celia A. Hahn raises the penetrating question: "What kind of learning changes lives?"<sup>10</sup> In a personal response to the question, Hahn states:

For me, transformational learning happens when the depths of my life—my yearnings, my shaky places, my deepest joys, my fears and failures—connect with the symbols and story of my church and traditions. My task as a teacher, therefore, is to arrange opportunities for people to explore those depths in their own story, and to encounter their faith story.

Where those two stories meet, Gospel may happen.

The learning that has changed my life:

1. is a process, not a product;
2. is experiential;
3. affirms and challenges me;
4. happens in a community.<sup>11</sup>

The kind of learning which has transformative power does not happen in isolation; it requires a community, a God-given community of two or more in which there is open and candid dialogue. "Growing to Christian maturity requires a Christian friend or parent or teacher or a Christian community."<sup>12</sup> It is further contended that when it comes to the processes of adult membership education "it is the congregation, the people of God in a particular place, which can best assist the adult on the journey toward active membership and a reaffirmation of faith."<sup>13</sup>

Do I belong here? When potential members for any denomination, or for a congregation or parish, raise this question, it is apparent that they are asking for more than some pertinent information. They are also asking for personal friendship; is this a place, is this a community in which I will experience acceptance without judgment, in which I will feel comfortable to be myself? They are also asking for personal guidance; is this a congregation in which hospitality is practised, that is, hospitality in the scriptural sense of making room for the stranger, or is this a congregation in which the "established inner circle" will prevail and through whose doors no outsiders can pass? They are also asking for personal interpretation; is this an assembly in which the rituals are explained so that a newcomer may have a sense of how it is that tradition and present-day living interact with one another with a view to one informing the other?

I believe that adults are eager to learn what it means to be faithful Christians in today's modern world. But they don't simply want to be told; they need more. They need to feel that the making of a commitment has within it a deeply personal and communal reality of grace and promise. That is, they need to experience Gospel while growing into commitment to God, to neighbour and to self. The experience of such Gospel will result in an affirmative response to the question: Do I belong here? Little wonder then that the historian Marty called it “the critical question” in a chapter entitled “An Inviting Church”. “The love of God often reaches us through people—people who make up classes, or start churches, or guide inquirers. And they, too, try to say, ‘You belong’ in this inviting church. The best way to test ourselves, our inviters, and our God is to do the inquiring.”<sup>14</sup>

### One Approach: A Ministry of Incorporation

Do I belong here? What might a ministry of incorporation include which can help me come to the point where I am able to say “Yes” to this question? I do not know whether this question can be answered in a general way; perhaps each person has to respond individually. Nevertheless, I am impressed with the claim which was made in 1984 in an article entitled: “The Key to Congregational Vitality”; this article claimed that congregations which attract people have ministries which “nurture and support spiritual growth in persons, nurture and sustain caring, supportive relationships and reach out to persons to enable them to live healthy creative lives.”<sup>15</sup>

The task of adult membership education then needs to be assumed and will be accomplished primarily as a relationship building process, that is, the transformational kind of learning identified earlier in this article. It is probably the kind of education called for by William Willimon in *Sunday Dinner* when he notes how people feel a sense of belonging around the dinner table with nuclear family and/or with extended family; notes Willimon:

No one had to explain to me that I belonged or that I was loved. I learned all that at the Sunday dinner table. If someone had asked me, “Who are your people and what do they stand for?” I would have responded quite honestly, “My people are those who gather at grandmother's dinner table.” At the table we were initiated,

nurtured, and claimed into the family. There we participated in common memory, fellowship, and identity. There we found our place, our name, our story—at the table.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, the model of education called for in responding to this question, Do I belong here? is an action-reflection model, that is an experientially-grounded model which incorporates human and textual resources into its concurrent and post-experience reflections.<sup>17</sup> Such is the model which is basic to the processes intrinsic to the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Christian Church has a responsibility to be faithful to the Great Commission, which is simultaneously command and promise: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... and lo I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20).

One of the ways in which that responsibility is fulfilled is through “catechesis”. The New Testament doesn’t use the noun “catechesis”; it uses only the verb “to catechize”, that is, “to hand on what has been received”. Literature describes this process as follows:

Catechesis is a process intended to recall and reconstruct the church’s tradition so that it might become conscious and active in the lives of maturing persons and communities; a process by which persons learn to know, internalize and apply the Word of God in daily individual and corporate life...[As such, it] aims to enable the faithful to meet the twofold responsibility that Christian faith requires: community with God and neighbour. Catechesis, therefore, is a life’s work shared by all those who participate in the ministry and mission of the Christian faith community. Catechesis asks the fundamental question: How can we be Christian together in the community and in the world?<sup>18</sup>

This is a central question of The Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). This rite was instituted in 1972 by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council as a new ritual formed out of the Church’s ancient traditions. It is described as “the most far-reaching and ambitious of all the post-Vatican liturgical reforms.”<sup>19</sup> The RCIA is divided into three stages: the Precatechumenate, the Catechumenate and the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

The RCIA, and any Protestant versions that have been designed as variations, incorporates a number of significant assumptions into how it is structured and the nature in which it evolves as a process of discipling. These are:

1. Catechesis has within it the notion of journey. The person is involved in a faith journey within the Christian faith community.
2. Catechesis unveils the presence of God’s Word in the person’s life. We don’t bring God to a person. God is already present but the person may not be present to the Word.
3. Catechesis surrounds the person with other persons who are living words of the Word.
4. Formal catechesis occurs in the Mass (Worship). It is not privatistic but public and corporate; it is not a “schooling” model but an “action- reflection” model.
5. Members of the community minister the Word by sharing their stories of faith. Dialogue is basic to the journey in faith within the faith community.
6. The faith community is essential. The entire initiation process is an attempt to interpret the meaning of our lives in the light of the paschal mystery, the dying and rising of Jesus the Christ.
7. It is not a priest’s or a pastor’s program for adult membership instruction. It is a ministry of the faith community in which all become Gospel-sharers, nurturing others in the faith while being nurtured themselves. In the process, priests and pastors, as well as other professional staff, become enablers of other ministers of the Word.

An Adult Catechumenate allows candidates time for inquiry, for hospitality, for searching, for making a choice and for developing a sense of belonging in the community of faith. As the participant involves him/herself in the worship and study life of the congregation, it is anticipated that he or she experiences the church as a means of grace. People will want to remain in the life of a community if they discover significant and satisfying relationships there with God, with others and with self. The Adult Catechumenate is an invitation to discipleship in the Christian faith through a particular congregation.

## Some Reflections

The processes of catechesis, as expressed through the Adult Catechumenate, are intended to transform the church from an emphasis on clerical dogmatism to that of shared faith in community, from a focus on individualism to that of a church community in mission, and from an approach to using people for its own ends to that of a welcoming hospitality which makes room for the stranger and which respects every person as a unique revelation of God's presence.<sup>20</sup>

Do I belong here? Within the Adult Catechumenate,<sup>21</sup> which is of a varied length and often of a lengthy duration, from one to three years, the candidate is given sufficient time and support in which to come to terms with a committed response to the question. A concern, of course, within our modern-day society given to instant gratification, is whether adults are ready to make such a time commitment for growth in faith. A further concern is whether the parishioners within the church are ready to make such a commitment to one another and to others in order really to be a faith community rather than a gathering of individuals.

Naturally, in the church, as probably in all of life, no one can decide how this question should be answered by another. "Educators cannot engineer people to enter into the reign of God. They cannot manipulate people to respond positively to God's offer of grace. Educators can facilitate persons to satisfy their curiosity, to deal with their queries, and to explore various features of theology and of faith."<sup>22</sup>

The Adult Catechumenate is an invitation to discipleship in the Christian faith through a particular congregation. It is patterned on an action- reflection model, using a dialogical mode for learning which respects the participants' personal and communal experiences in worship and in life and through those dialogical processes seeks to help persons make significant connections between faith and life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Martin Marty, *Invitation to Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 5.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene C. Kreider, "Theological Perspectives," in Kenneth F. Pohlmann (ed.), *A Handbook For Ministry With The Adult Inquirer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 15.

- 3 Leon McKenzie, *The Religious Education of Adults* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1982) 1; Leon McKenzie, “The Purposes and Scope of Adult Religious Education,” in Nancy T. Foltz (ed.), *Handbook of Adult Religious Education* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1986) 23–24.
- 4 The concerns raised by this group of people assembled at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in 1989 are also raised in current literature. See Peter L. Benson, “Building A Faith For The 90’s,” *The Lutheran*, (January 3, 1990) 9–11. Also see Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987), and Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church: Where Are We Headed?* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1989).
- 5 David A. Kolb, Irwin M. Rubin, James M. McIntyre, *Organizational Psychology*, 3rd edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1979).
- 6 Bernice McCarthy, *The 4Mat System: Teaching to Learning Styles With Right/Left Mode Techniques* (Barrington, Ill.: Excel Inc., 1980, 1987) 3, 9.
- 7 *Ibid.* 3, 9.
- 8 See Malcolm Knowles, *Modern Practice of Adult Education*, revised and updated (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1980); Malcolm Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1973); Allen Tough, *The Adult’s Learning Projects* (Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1971).
- 9 Knowles, *Modern Practice of Adult Education*, 43.
- 10 Celia A. Hahn, “What kind of learning changes lives?,” *Action Information*, [journal of the Alban Institute, Washington, D.C.], XVI/2 (March/April 1990) 1–5.
- 11 *Ibid.* 1.
- 12 Phoebe M. Anderson and Thomas R. Henry, *Teach What You Preach* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982) 2.
- 13 Pohlmann (ed.), *A Handbook for Ministry With The Adult Inquirer*, 7.
- 14 Marty, *Invitation to Discipleship*, 7.
- 15 James Sauer, “The Key to Congregational Vitality” *The Practice of Ministry in Canada*, I/1 (March 1984) 10–12.
- 16 William Willimon, *Sunday Dinner* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1981) 10. A similar emphasis is found in Leo Buscaglia, *Papa, my Father* (New Jersey: Slack Inc., 1989) when he identifies how in the Buscaglia home the dinner table turned out to be the family university; the discussion was always introduced by papa asking: (Name) tell me what you learned today? Of course such “involvement learning” is in sharp contrast to the “observational learning” which modern-day television generates!
- 17 “To ask what a reality is, is to ask about it as a whole, to seek to ‘know’ it in the biblical sense, and so be able to ‘name it’. To ask what any word

of God is, is to ask about the impact it has on my life. What difference does it make? How do I appropriate it or incorporate it into my life?... Now is the time to reincorporate Luther's insights on meditation into the lifestyle of our Lutheran [perhaps all] congregations." Larry Denef, "Praying the Catechism," *The Canada Lutheran* (October 1986) 34.

- 18 John Westerhoff, *Inner Growth/Outer Change* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979) 57-58. "The Christian life results in part from nurture in a Christian community of faith... Faith as I am using the word is not simply knowledge of God or a relationship to God, it is rather an action in response to God, a centered reflective action of the total personality that assumes various styles in terms of our growth and development. Persons who live in a nurturing environment assume the characteristics of an ever expanding and more complex expression of faith. Faith grows as one passes, in turn, through each style of faith and continually meets the needs of that style" (17). Westerhoff identified four styles of faith: Experienced Faith, Affiliative Faith, Searching Faith, and Owned or Mature Faith; he preferred to speak of "styles" rather than "stages" in order to acknowledge the interactive nature of the styles at any point in a person's life.
- 19 Michel Dujarier, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, trans. and ed. Kevin Hart (New York: Sadlier, 1979) 14.
- 20 Arnold D. Weigel, "Journey in Discipleship," *The Practice of Ministry in Canada*, 5/4 (November 1988) 6-7.
- 21 For a discussion on the historical development of the Adult Catechuminate, see John H. Westerhoff and O.C. Edwards Jr., *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow Co. Inc., 1981). Within this discussion, Study Text 10 of *Christian Initiation of Adults: A Commentary*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, D.C.: Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1985) may also be found helpful.
- 22 Bill Adamson, "Adult Education in the Church," *The Practice of Ministry in Canada*, 7/1 (March 1990) 32.