

Insights in Liturgy

Lent and the Catechumens

BY MSGR. WILLIAM H. SHANNON

In 1972 the Church brought back into her lifestream the institution of the catechumenate. This very ancient institution played a very important role in the life of the early Church. Its restoration is an effort to affirm its importance in the life of the Church today.

What was the

catechumenate in the early Church? It was the way of "making Christians," according to that venerable saying of the Fathers: "A Christian is made, not born." It was a period of prayer, of liturgical celebration and of instruction whereby a person who had already come to believe in Jesus as Lord was prepared for the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and First Eucharist.

The catechumens were not "pagans," for they had already come to faith in the Lordship of Jesus. Therefore, they already belonged to the Church (because they had faith); but they were not yet members of the faithful (because they had not yet been initiated into the Christian community). They participated in the Liturgy of the Word, but could not yet partake of the Eucharistic Meal, since this singular privilege was reserved for the faithful.

faithful in full participation in the Eucharist, receiving the first Communion as the climax of their initiation.

Easter thus brought the catechumenate to a glorious climax and conclusion. But Easter was only a beginning. After their initiation the catechumens were called neophytes (newly made Christians) they had become members of the faithful, but they had to continue to learn ever more deeply what it meant to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. Through their initiation they had entered fully into the lifestream of the Christian Church. They needed to learn that this meant entering into a process of conversion that was to continue through the rest of their lives. Initiation into the Christian mysteries began a new phase in their lives. They had undergone their first Easter experience: they had died with Christ and come to life in Him. But that; dying to their "old selves" (their selfishness and self-centeredness) had to continue; the new life they had entered into with Christ had to grow. They had, therefore, to look forward, as did the rest of the faithful to other Easters that would express and deepen in the Easter liturgy the conversion-process begun in their first Easter experience and now going on in their daily lives. Every time they celebrated Lent and Easter they were reminded that, though the catechumenate was over, the process of "being made" into Christians was continuous and ongoing.

Then one night when I was reading in a "rebellious" mood, I was saying to myself, "Why does God want us to be holy?" Holy, holy, holy — good Lord!

God, I know, has to have a sense of humor, for He answered my query almost as soon as I had phrased it. I had just returned from Barbados with my brother, Fr. Ed Shamon, and Fr. Elmer Heindl. The Lord seemed to ask, "Why did you pick those two?" Another group of priests went to St. Croix at the same time. God seemed to say, "Why didn't you go with them?"

I knew why. I went with Fathers Ed and Elmer because all three of us enjoy the same things, like swimming, snorkeling and sailing. We select as friends those who have the same likes and dislikes. If I like music, I choose friends who like it. If I like football, books, and so on, I want my friends to. Otherwise we have no basis for communication, which leads to communion. We must be compatible to be friends. We say a friend is another self.

Then this whole holiness thing fell into place. God is holy: He loves what is good and He does what is good. That is the way He is. Well, He wants us to be His friends! Naturally, then, we ought to be compatible. That is why he wants us to be holy. I choose friends according to my liking. So does God. Holiness is nothing other than trying to be the kind of person who can be friends with God. This insight made holiness so much more attractive to me. Jesus can teach us how to become persons pleasing to His Father. Therefore, the Father said, "Listen to Him." Holiness is quite simple.

For many people in the early Church the catechumenate lasted for several years; but when they were deemed ready for initiation, they were given a more intensive preparation for full reception into the Church. It was out of this need to give the catechumens a more immediate and intensive preparation for Baptism that the liturgical season of Lent came into being.

At the beginning of Lent the names of the catechumens were inscribed on the list of those being readied for Baptism at Easter time. Lent was much more than a period of instruction in Christian doctrine for them. It partook of the nature of a retreat. Special liturgies were celebrated to express and deepen their faith. The so-called "scrutinies" took place, in which their faith was examined by the bishop. Prayers were said by them and for them. They were given the Lord's Prayer and the Creed as precious possessions of the Church. They occupied an overt place in the Church assembly. The faithful saw them, prayed for them and were inspired by their presence to express and deepen their own faith. The dismissal of the catechumens from the assembly after the Liturgy of the Word must have been a deeply moving experience for the faithful, making them realize how great a privilege it was to participate fully in the Eucharistic celebration.

Finally came the great moment of the Easter vigil, and amidst the splendors of the Vigil celebration, the catechumens were baptized and confirmed: then for the first time they joined the

St. Mary's Volunteers Give \$90,000

The Women's Board of St. Mary's Hospital, which coordinates volunteer fund-raising activities, reported a 1977 total of \$90,298, or \$17,000 more than the 1976 total. The money will be used in the refurbishing of outpatient and emergency departments.

portraits taken in the hospital.

More than 900 women do volunteer work on behalf of the 120-year-old hospital. The coordinating board has 35 members.

Seton Branch projects raised the following amounts: Seton Ball, \$25,000; sale, \$25,550; fashion show, \$1,165; tour of homes, \$1,900, and scholarship fund, \$1,650. The Seton Next-to-New Shop contributed \$8,000 to the total; the Marillac Gift Shop, \$20,500. The balance came from a memorial fund and money realized on baby

WOMEN'S RETREAT

Mothers of students at Cardinal Mooney High School have planned a Cenacle retreat for Feb. 24-26. Intended especially for mothers of teenagers, it is open to all women. It will run from 6 p.m. Friday to 3:30 p.m. Sunday.

Sisters Ann Dowd, Arline Brent and Betty Rogers will be the leaders. Father John Mulligan of St. John's, Humboldt Street, will conduct a communal rite of penance, and Father Norman Tanck, CSB, of St. John Fisher College will celebrate Mass Saturday and Sunday. Details are available at the Cenacle, 693 East Ave., (716) 271-8755.

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WORD FOR SUNDAY Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mt. 17:1-9. (R1) Gn. 12:1-4. (R2) 2Tm. 1:8-10.

One of the greatest follies in the world is to think there is no God guiding it and us. "There is a divinity that shapes our ends," Hamlet said, "rough-hew them how we will."

When man lost paradise, he unlocked a Pandora's box. Sin proliferated. As one in quicksand, man sank deeper and deeper into moral turpitude. Even the Flood could not cleanse the filthy inundation. So after Babel, God Himself intervened into history and set up a counter movement to sin and infidelity by calling a man, Abram. "Believe in Me," He said to Abram. "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk... to a land that I will show you." (R1) Mind you, God did not name that land. He just told Abram to go. Faith is going gaily in the dark. Abram went and God Blessed him and, in him, all of us.

From Abram's seed came God's own Son. He seemed a man, for he walked like one, talked, ate slept, got weary, felt pain like any other man. Yet one night on a mountain He revealed the God in the Man. (R3)

He came to save us and call us to a holy life, wrote Paul. (R2) So his Father said, "Listen to Him."

Recently I was reading the Book of Leviticus in the Bible. I was doing it as a matter of discipline, for I felt Leviticus to be one of the most boring books in the Bible — the Lord forgive me! Anyway, I persisted in reading it because it is the inspired word of God. I reasoned that if God took time to inspire it, I ought to take time to read it.

As I read it, one word kept popping up again and again. It was the word "holy" (in some translations; "sacred.") The word appeared 87 times — an average of three times in each chapter.

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