

Insights
In Liturgy

By Father
Robert J. Kennedy



Exploring
The Mystery

Last week when we left our comic strip friend Snoopy sitting at his typewriter and writing his great novel, he had just finished his opening line: "It was a dark and stormy night." If he ever gets a chance to write a second line for his great work, it usually is: "There was a knock at the door." This sentence serves as the clue to our discussion of the second stage of the process of initiation as outlined in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

We saw how the inquirer first hears the call of God, Christ and the Church. We saw that the unique faith stories of each inquirer are shared in the context of the story of God's wonderful works on behalf of his People. And we saw how the inquirers are initially converted.

Now comes the "knock at the door." The Church, cooperating with the grace of God already at work in the inquirers, invites them to explore more deeply and thoroughly the mysteries of the Christian faith. This second stage is called Catechumenate, an extended period of "pastoral formation" during which the initial inclinations and intentions of the inquirers are being brought to maturity (RICA No. 19).

This second stage begins with the Rite of Becoming a Catechumen. (The word catechumen means hearer — of the Word of God.) "Assembling publicly for the first time, the candidates make their intentions known to the Church; the Church, carrying out its apostolic mission, admits those who intend to become members. God showers his grace on them, since this celebration manifests their desire publicly and the Church expresses their reception and first consecration" (RICA No. 14). "From this time on the catechumens, who have been welcomed by the Church with a mother's love and concern, are joined to the Church and are part of the household of God" (RICA No. 18).

The Rite of Becoming a Catechumen is the doorway into the already mentioned period of pastoral formation. There is no set length of time for this stage since it continues until the catechumens have matured sufficiently in their conversion and faith (RICA No. 98). And the word "formation" should be taken seriously here, for the catechumenate is not merely instruction or the mastering of a specific body of information. Rather, it is a period of experiential learning when the catechumens begin to live the Christian life and faith. It includes the following elements (see RICA No. 19):

(1) a formation that leads the catechumens to "an intimate understanding of the mystery of salvation" and a knowledge of the dogmas of the creed. Its

basis is the liturgical year which unfolds and celebrates these mysteries of faith; its context is prayer and celebrations of the Word. Catechists, deacons, priests provide this information.

(2) the practice of living the Christian lifestyle. This includes learning to pray, witnessing to the faith, and exercising love of neighbor. In short, through the guidance of sponsors and catechists, the catechumens "put on Christ" and experience "progressive change of outlook and morals."

(3) liturgical rites also help "the catechumens on their journey," cleansing them little by little and strengthening them with God's blessings. It is the catechumens' participation in the Sunday Liturgy of the Word that is crucial here, because by hearing the Word proclaimed and preached they are nourished in their commitment. They also are gathered in these rites with the community of faith which is their support and strength.

(4) "Since the Church's life is apostolic, catechumens... learn how to work actively with others to spread the Gospel and build up the Church." They are helped again by their sponsors here, and other members of the community.

It should be clear from the above that the Catechumenate is a PROCESS, not a PROGRAM. Christian life is learned by active involvement and not by passive instruction. And while the role of instruction should not be minimized, it always needs to be seen in relationship to the other elements of this process of growth.

When each catechumen has sufficiently matured in faith, there is another "knock at the door." This time it is the catechumen him/herself who is seeking to be admitted to Baptism and/or membership in the Church.

That "knock" begins the third stage of the RCIA process and we will look at it next week.

Mother Cabrini
Group Slates
Scholar Benefit

The Mother Cabrini Circle, an interracial and interfaith group of women who have worked together for 35 years to help pay tuition for black students to Catholic high schools, will hold a Scholarship Benefit from 3 to 6 p.m., Sunday, Sept. 20, in the Immaculate Conception Parish Center on Glasgow Street. The event will include a musical program and refreshments.

Nola DeRouen, president, recently expressed her pleasure that so many of the students helped have gone on to higher education, some into the professions, with notable success.

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