

On the Road to Baptism

Clement Mehlman writes our church...

Grace be yours and peace.

It is helpful to get in touch with the questions and reflections—and even struggles—of those moving toward baptism. What concerns face adult Christians as they make the journey to baptism? The seekers or the inquirers into faith have a story to tell—often one we never hear—as questions and aspects of their lives arise as they prepare to renounce evil and let their old selves die in the waters of baptism.

John Paterson is a new Christian who came to baptism in the parish of St. John's (Eric Dyck, pastor) in Montreal. He writes of his journey to baptism:

"My thoughts have been immersed in the subject of baptism for several years, so extracting some perspective on it is a challenge. I first became a Christian nearly six years ago, but I only decided to get baptized one year ago. I spent the intervening time in an egg, contemplating the prospect of being born and entering the world, but cozily content to postpone it. I was always clear on what baptism meant for me: it meant going public with my beliefs, vocally and actively. It will be the point of entering into the world, from the source that I tapped into years earlier. Not taking any stand before, I could be both for and against Christianity from one occasion to the next, in and out of the church, all as I chose. Baptism shall be my first step in spiritual maturity and my acceptance of an offered life for which I am responsible.

"Spiritual maturity does not grow naturally from earthly maturity, and there is much that had to be undone. By the time a baby is ready to be born, it's almost too big to be born; how much more drastic must it be for an adult asking to be reborn! What mother, what god, would consent to carry and then deliver such an adult? I considered my role as a catechumen to be one of preparation. I do not mean that I had to earn my place at the baptismal font, but that I had to place myself in a more receptive position, the same way as we undress in order to bathe. With God's help, I wanted to fight old demons, offload old burdens, close old questions, all so that I may approach baptism with an empty, singular heart. I had always assumed that this was what God wanted and that he would support me.

"I put a lot on my plate. This was to be a year of steady but liberating work, as I tried to replace old patterns of life with healthy disciplines, and basically sort out what is to stay and what is to go. I put constant thought into my vocation and future, but I wanted to see a change in my concrete lifestyle. I wanted to attend church regularly, eat properly, spend time with friends, exercise, study, help with things like the Food Bank, say grace before meals, write overdue letters, pray daily, not let my dishes in the sink add up I did not think this was too much.

"But that is not what happened. Instead the world took over, and I quickly saw my priorities shifting to suit other people's agendas. Being reborn of the spirit still takes place *while* remaining in the world of flesh, and my responsibilities towards Christ soon collided with the environment in which I found myself. Everything that was

important to me was late, sloppy, or in disrepair; I was physically, mentally and spiritually tired, and I hardly felt that I made any progress. This was supposed to be the most important event of my life, yet I could not shake the upsetting image like I was rushing off to my wedding in my pajamas. I prayed for strength, but I felt pushed; I prayed for relief, but I felt tested. I felt that I had prayed more this year than I ever have in the past, and had never had so many prayers go unanswered.

"Only a few of my priorities remained untouched, such as going to church and the weekly catechumenate session that follows, and taking part in the general church community. Jennifer Harris heads the catechumenate session with Jutta Schirdewahn as my sponsor, and almost every week there are others joining us. It is a quiet, slow-paced time for contemplation and discussion. Church, surprisingly, has become a sanctuary for me. Sometimes I get something out of the service and sometimes I don't, but it is a constant that I can rely on like a rock jutting out of a raging river.

"There is one more ingredient to my experiences that I still cannot digest, but which turns the flavour around. As trying as this year was, I never once doubted that I was going in the right direction. I have had to reinterpret where the path is, but I never felt misguided in my choice to get baptized. This year has taught me hope, patience and an openness to what I can feel but not see. I don't know where that hope came from, because I only noticed it when I needed it, and never developed it beforehand. This includes seeing that there is still a whole life to lead *after* baptism. I was worried that the way in which I enter the Christian life will have irrevocable effects on how that life unfolds, but now I don't feel so rushed. I have hardly thought at all about the other sacraments, and as important as baptism is, it is only one day. Being in the world but not of the world will be a constant tension, but part of dealing with it is to see that as daunting as the world can be, the spiritual world is greater still. I retain hope that God remembers my prayers and that he will respond, but in his time and on his terms. Finally, God's womb is large: he can take me with my baggage, and it can be sorted out over the longer course of my life, not just this one year. Even if I'm not ready for God, God is ready for me."

John's intimate and honest words invite us to enter the heart and mind of an adult seeking baptism. He is aware that baptism is not just an event but also a process, and he allows us a glimpse into this process by which he comes to the font. As I reflect on using the Affirmation of Baptism liturgies, I wonder how members of a parish might be prepared for the renewal of their baptismal promises. People often appear at worship, and the rite is just another item in the Sunday bulletin. Could there be more preparation through sermons, conversations, and communal and individual experiences, and perhaps even private confession for the public reclaiming of the baptismal promises?

For resources to assist adults moving toward baptism or the already-baptized to the reaffirmation of baptism, visit <www.catechumenate.org> or contact me at [cmehlman@eastlink.ca] or by telephone at 902.475.1852.

Clement.



Mr. Clement Mehlman, long associated with the ELCIC's catechumenate ministry, serves as chaplain in the community of Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. For further insights into the catechumenate, please see [Vision of Discipleship](#) in Section 2, and the items on the [Baptismal Catechumenate](#) in Section 3, of the ELCIC's [Lift Up Your Hearts](#) <www.worship.ca> website.