

North American Recovery of the Rites of Initiation: Embrace and Resistance

(Dedicated to James F. White,
Christian scholar and prophetic voice for drastic sacramental practice.)

This lecture was presented by Daniel Benedict to a graduate class on Christian initiation on November 3, 2004 at Drew University, Madison, NJ.

Introduction

Several years ago, a retired United Methodist pastor named Paul Brown from the New York Annual Conference sent me a letter. Paul sent me numerous letters over a ten-year period. I never met Paul who died in 2002, but in my mind he was sort of a Simeon in the temple waiting to see the birth of a deeply sacramental sense of baptism in the church and to hold it in his arms! Every few months he would send me something he'd been reading or remembering that might be of encouragement to me or that would keep him in the active loop of theological reflection. As I say, he was like Simeon waiting to see something he had longed for all of his life. In his letter he wrote:

Twenty-five years ago, I attended the United Methodist Congress on Evangelism in Philadelphia, PA. The lecturer was Bishop Wayne Clymer. His topic was 'Membership Means Discipleship'. The lectures were [b]iblically oriented, theologically sound and ethically founded.

He [Bishop Clymer] said, "Several decades ago Archbishop William Temple was asked what was the task of the church. He was well known for his commitment to social justice and had involved himself in movements working to effect social change. His answer was not entirely expected:

*'What is the task of the Church? To be itself and not do anything at all. All that it does is secondary and expressive of what it is. And, first of all, it's duty is to be in living actuality . . . the fellowship of those who have received the power of the Holy Spirit through the revelation of the love of God in Christ. It exists to be the redeemed community which worships as redeemed.'*¹ [my emphasis]

"The thought of Archbishop Temple was inspiring then and now," Paul concluded. I don't know why Paul sent that remembrance and quote to me, except that it somehow rang true amidst so many cheap and idolatrous programmatic attempts at church growth and social activism. I think Paul saw in that word of William Temple a kind of courage he wished he had had more of in his pastoral leadership. I share the quote with you, because it expresses a kind of trust and courage that all of us wish we had more of, particularly as we pursue deeply lived practices of sacraments of Christian initiation.

¹ As quoted in a letter from The Rev. Paul Brown dated June 2001. The Temple quote is from William Temple, *The Church and Its Teachings for Today* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936), p. 13. For a print version of Bishop Wayne Clymer's addresses, see his *Membership Means Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1976).

There is in us and among us a longing “*to be the church in actuality as the fellowship of those who have received the power of the Holy Spirit through the revelation of the love of God in Christ.*”

In this address I intend to chronicle the recovery of the ancient catechumenate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and, perhaps like a Simeon, to ask with you, “What has been the reception of this ‘baby’ among us? How have Roman Catholics and some Protestant bodies adapted and adopted the rites for use in their communities? What resistance and embrace is manifest and what does the response of the lack thereof mean?” Perhaps we will hear in all of this something of Simeon’s tantalizing warning about the rising and falling of many and of piercings of our souls.

The Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults: Culture and Counter-Culture

The 2nd and 3rd century church formed Christians in a culture largely hostile to their way of life. This antipathy in the Greco-Roman context was the crucible in which the ancient catechumenate was shaped. Since Christian faith and practice were incompatible with the pagan doctrine of the larger culture, forming Christian disciples was a countercultural, clandestine, and dangerous business. Further, the cultural distance was too great for easy migration. The move from pagan to Christian was much like immigration from Mexico or the Caribbean into the United States: there was a new language to learn, a new grammar and syntax, and new practices to internalize and make one’s own. However, unlike the ambivalence of the US to immigrants from poorer countries seeking to live in the United States, for those who were drawn to the Way, there was a disciplined hospitality conjoined with a liturgical catechesis extended to them by the wary but gracious faith communities.

In the 20th century, the church again has seemed to discern with a kind of prescience that the culture is shifting, that Christendom has faded, and that there is need once again for a radical hospitality known as the catechumenate. But, the recognition of the significance of the cultural shift has been slow in coming. In what follows, I intend to review the contemporary recovery of the ancient catechumenate, and then to chronicle, from a somewhat personal and insider’s vantage point, the resistance and embrace of the catechumenal process in the churches of North America, offering some tentative conjecture about both the reasons for the resistance and, by way of contrast, why some churches are adopting the process.

Recovery of the practice of the catechumenate

The Second Vatican Council’s Congregation for Divine Worship promulgated Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults on January 6, 1972, with the first English edition published in 1974. In the introduction, the decree states:

The Second Vatican Council prescribed the revision of the rite of baptism of adults and decreed that the catechumenate for adults, divided into several steps, should be restored. By this means the time of the catechumenate, which is intended as *a period of well-suited*

instruction, would be sanctified by liturgical rites to be celebrated at successive intervals of time.²

The RCIA goes on to say:

The initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place *within the community of the faithful*. By joining the catechumens in reflecting on the value of the paschal mystery and by renewing *their own conversion*, the faithful provide an example that will *help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously*.³ [emphasis added]

The RCIA is the ur-text of present day catechumenal reflection. While Protestant expressions have had to develop their own adaptations of the RCIA, its measured descriptions and directives are generative and worthy of extended and repeated reflection. For example, note the phrases in the paragraphs cited: “a period of well-suited instruction” “takes place within the community of the faithful” “By joining the catechumens in reflecting on the value of the paschal mystery” “by renewing their own conversion [i.e., the faithful]” “help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously.” These phrases are illustrative of how the RCIA calls catechizing communities to the central things, things that can easily be lost from view in the process of adaptation. Like the Bible, it is worth coming back to again and again!

Now, thirty years later, the US bishops conference has reported the results of this experiment in *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States*.⁴ The study was conducted from 1997-2000. Many reporting parishes had more than a decade of experience with the Rite and some trace their use of the Rite to the first English edition in 1974.

The study reveals some remarkable insights into the RCIA and its pastoral practices.⁵ I will outline them here and invite you to see how they are woven into my reflections on the Protestant adaptations of the rite that have emerged over the last 15 years.⁶ The insights that can be drawn from *Journey to the Fullness of Life* are useful as prompts for understanding and improving these less well-developed adaptations of the RCIA.

First, the results of the study are both encouraging and challenging for Catholic communities of faith. The study gives a snapshot of how the Rite has been enflashed in parishes across the US.

² *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (International Commission of English in the Liturgy, 1986), p. ix. Emphasis added.

³ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁴ *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, Publication No. 5-392, 58 pages)

⁵ See “Direction for the Future Implementation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* in the United States and Canada” by James M. Schellman in *Catechumenate* (November 2002).

⁶ I am grateful to James Schellman, director of the North American Forum for the Catechumenate for his assessment of the first generation of renewal of the catechumenate in the US. He provided me with his unpublished paper, “First Generation of Renewal: U.S. National Study of RCIA,” an insider analysis of the *Journey to the Fullness of Life*.

Second, the key positive findings of the study are these:

- a. *Evangelization/Renewal*: The study revealed a remarkably positive and often enthusiastic acceptance of the Rite in parish and diocesan life. This acceptance is accompanied by a realization that parishes have something very valuable to share with others (life in Christ and Christ's Body, the Church) and strong sense that the Rite is a means of renewing parish and diocesan life.
- b. *Liturgy*: The interviews of participants found that the liturgical celebrations were a primary way they heard the invitation to make a further search for faith. Catechumens and candidates experienced that the liturgies of the Rite were powerful catalysts for growth in relationship with Christ and with his Body, the Church. Participants in the study affirmed that the liturgy is a key means of evangelization.
- c. *Adaptation: Journey Into Fullness of Life* indicates that there is strong evidence that Catholic communities "understand that the Rite must be enfolded in and adapted to their circumstances..." Adaptation is particularly understood in terms of how the liturgies of initiation are enacted. The study notes that parishes desire guidance in how to adapt the Rite.⁷

Third, the key challenges of the study, according to Schellman, are:

- a. Adaptation: "Adaptation of the Rite must take its cue from the Rite."⁸ When parishes shorten the period of the catechumenate or otherwise make adaptations that undermine the central assumptions of the RCIA, the process of conversion and responsiveness to the many forms of God's grace is compromised. About 75% of parishes and dioceses reduced the duration of the catechumenate. Adopting a "program mentality" in implementing the Rite and viewing the sacraments of initiation, as end points (i.e., Easter Vigil as "graduation") rather than full immersion into life in Christ are challenges to fullest implementation of the Rite.
- b. In terms of community, several questions are raised by the study: How does the whole community exercise its role in the ministry of initiation? How does the whole community achieve this role across the duration of the Rite's ministries and moments? How does the community initiate catechumens into the whole body of Christ and avoid merely initiating them into the catechumenal ministry or group?
- c. In terms of evangelization, what does it mean that only about a third of participants in the Rite are unbaptized (i.e., truly catechumens)? The data notes that many of the participants are "candidates" for full communion and are married to Catholic spouses. This suggests, as James Schellman points out, that the

⁷ I am indebted to James Schellman for the key affirmations and challenges gleaned from the US and Canadian studies. See "Direction for the Future Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States and Canada" by James Schellman published in *Catechumenate* (November 2002), pp. 14-23.

⁸ "Direction," p. 18.

Catholic community conducts the Rite largely for “those already in some respects among us” and that the challenge is to live as an evangelizing community reaching out in neighborhoods, workplaces, and the larger community where people yearn, often inarticulately for Christ.

Protestant adoption of the rites

Here I want to be clear about my use of “rite” and “rites” in relationship to the adult initiation. Since for English speaking Roman Catholics “rite” is a shorthand way of saying “the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults” I will use it when referencing the Catholic usage. By contrast, when I speak of others churches use of the catechumenal process, I will use the term “rites.” Hopefully this will not be too confusing and will help us to be clear about reference to similar practices, while at the same time recognizing that there are some very different assumptions and ecclesial practices at work.

In contrast to the *magisterium* of the Roman Church and Rome’s power to hand down a decree for pastoral and congregational practice, Protestant churches come to the party with more *ad hoc* approaches. To my knowledge the following denominations are actively engaged at some level of preparing interpretive pastoral and liturgical resources for the rites of initiation and are inviting congregations to implement the catechumenal process in their communal life: (listed roughly in the order of their diving into the effort) Episcopal Church in the USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Anglican Church in Canada (Diocese of Ontario and Toronto at least), Mennonites in the US and Canada, The United Methodist Church, the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church in the USA. Currently the United Church of Christ and the United Church of Canada are exploring what steps they will take.

The churches have taken different pathways toward introducing the rites to their congregations and judicatories. In some cases, national denominational offices formed working groups and published books and other supportive resources (ECUSA, ELCIC, ELCA, UMC). Some denominations have made use of resources that other churches produced and offered training initiatives to invite congregational leaders to take up the challenge of forming disciples using the rites of initiation (RCA, CRC). Still others are using a combination of approaches: the PCUSA, for example, recruited a group of fifteen pilot congregations, paid for their leaders to participate in an ecumenical introductory event, encouraged them in initiating the process, and now has a working group developing resources yet to be published. In the case of United Methodists, I found that as I talked about the catechumenate around the country, there was enough interest that the decision was made by the working group⁹ and The General Board of Discipleship to publish resources and then to offer training events in various venues to introduce the process.

The results to date in the Protestant churches are much more modest than those reflected in the study, *Journey to the Fullness of Life*. Of course we Protestants would tend to say, “A forced kiss is not really a kiss,” but I sometimes wonder if we were forced

⁹ The working group included Craig Gallaway, William McDonald, Karen Westerfield Tucker, Grant S. White, and myself. There were numerous other persons who played roles in the process of developing the rites. See the Preface to *Come to the Waters* by Daniel T. Benedict, Jr. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996).

to kiss would we not discover that it is quite natural and that we would soon give in to it, making it an embrace that finds its passion. Wherever that tempting imagery may lead us, ecclesially the Protestant efforts are 1) subsequent in time to the Roman Catholic implementation, and 2) much more limited in judicatory directives and support. So, we can say that we are still in the infancy of implementation and—and *we are at risk*. The risk is that the effort will be stillborn in all but a few places. Where thoughtful pastors and laity see the rites of initiation as essential to and inherent in the very fabric of the church as a sacramental missionary community there is hope of faithful adoption and adaptation.

There are encouraging signs. The fact that several seminaries of the UMC and perhaps others are teaching courses on the sacraments or on Christian initiation in which the catechumenate is explored in some depth is gratifying. Several denominational leaders from various churches are actively pursuing the possibility of establishing a center for Christian initiation studies. The North American Association for the Catechumenate holds annual gatherings of practitioners from all over Canada and the US each summer, offers ecumenical training events, and hosts a very useful website. Another source of encouragement is the growing wealth of books, videos, and other interpretive resources available for illuminating and guiding pastoral and communal practices in the churches.

The expressed intent and understandings of the non-Roman churches in implementing the rites

Here I draw upon a sampling of the basic resources from the Protestant offshoots of the RCIA.¹⁰ As a way of considering the expressed intent and understandings in these sources, I will cluster them around eight headings:

1. *The rites as a mission-oriented model of congregational life:* (*Welcome to Christ*, p. 9) “Today we live in an environment where the Christian church must argue and witness and compete for its place in the life and culture of human beings [in contrast to the church in the Constantinian context]. Unlike established folk churches from the time of Constantine in the late fourth century through the reformation of the sixteenth century and through the religious revivals of the nineteenth century, the church in North American can offer only Christ and the fellowship of his suffering and the power of his resurrection.”

¹⁰ The sources cited include: *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1991), *The Catechumenal Process: Adult Initiation & Formation for Christian Life and Ministry* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), *The Catechumenate: Forming the Body of Christ in the 21st Century* (Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission, no date given), *Come to the Waters: Baptism and Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers and Making Disciples* by Daniel T. Benedict, Jr. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996), *Journey to Jesus: The Worship, Evangelism, and Nurture Mission of the Church* by Robert Webber (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), *Making Disciples: Serving Those who Are Entering the Christian Life* (Toronto: Hoskins Books on Worship and Mission, 1991), *Renewing Worship 3 Holy Baptism and Related Rites* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

Here the rites are seen as a faithful response in a cultural context that no longer privileges the Church and in which there are increasing numbers of persons who have no experience or knowledge of the gospel or the church's way of life.

2. *The rites as a way of restoring authenticity of practice in incorporating others into the Body of Christ.*

In light of the Anglican Church in Canada renewed order of Holy Baptism, John Hill in *Making Disciples* writes, "We face a crisis of credibility in our practice of baptism. Only a radically renewed vision of the Church, and the role of the community of faith in incorporating others into its own distinctive way of life can resolve this crisis. It is the hope for that renewal which motivates this proposal for an *Order of Catechesis*." Earlier he argues: "We now find ourselves deeply challenged whenever baptism is celebrated in our midst: is it possible for those who enact this mystery [both candidates and congregation] to mean what they are saying? Is it possible for us who witness these vows to enter into the kind of discipleship proclaimed here? This book is intended to serve those who are entering, or re-entering, the new life given through baptism. It is offered to those who prepare them for baptism...." He then defines the purpose of the "*order of catechesis*":

1. To serve more faithfully and effectively those who turn to the Church seeking a new life in communion with God.
2. To restore to the community of faith its proper ministry as the principal agent of the initiation of new members into the Church.
3. To restore to those turning to Christ *their* proper ministry as signs of conversion and of the journey of faith.
4. To restore in the whole Church an awareness of the journey of faith which is implied in baptism itself. (*Making Disciples*, p. v)

The United Methodist book, *Come to the Waters*, puts it this way: "This book is about a way of welcoming people as they are, listening to their stories and questions, mentoring them as they listen to God, forming and initiating them into a life of discipleship by using the means of grace, and commissioning them to live lives of continuing conversion and service to God in their daily relationships." (p. 8.)

Elsewhere the book asks, "How can the church gracefully introduce people to the grace-full life?" and then asserts, "That is the concern of this book."

3. *The rites as a reconciliation of poles of conversionism and sacramentalism in a process centered in the paschal mystery.*

Come to the Waters, using the image of a porch between the steps and the front door, raises as a primary question, "Is your congregation prepared to offer an in-between place to persons whose lives have 'been upended by the grace of conversion'?" (p. 23) The reference to "in-between" grows out of Aidan Kavanagh's observation that there is an inherent and necessary weaving together of evangelization, catechesis, and sacramental initiation.¹¹ *Come to the Waters* proposes to offer congregations "a vision

¹¹ Aidan Kavanagh, "Catechesis: Formation in Stages" in *The Baptismal Mystery and the Catechumenate*, ed. by Michael W. Merriman (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), p. 38.

and a process for creating the crucial middle element to this three-part movement” that climaxes in baptism at the Easter Vigil. (p. 23) Kavanagh that catechesis is fundamentally conversion therapy.

4. *The rites as a recovery of a biblical and ancient church pedagogy suited to the post-modern, post-Christendom, post-secular context (i.e., an experience and reflection loop, rather than a modernist analytical, linear instructional approach).*

A pamphlet of the Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission states: “The purpose of catechumenal ministry is to enable new Christians to become joyful inheritors of the Church’s tradition and responsible, competent participants in the Church’s liturgy and mission.... Reflection on the experience of participating in the liturgy [and other basic Christian practices, including prayer, hearing and responding to scripture, daily life ministry and resisting evil structures] emphasizes the cultivation of an imagination alive to symbols, rather than foreclosing on imagination by reciting pat answers. The voice of tradition and scholarship is important; but it cannot take the place of the person’s own response.”¹²

Paul Nelson in the introduction to the ELCA rites puts it this way: “[The catechumenate] does not bind the Spirit to a single recipe for the Christian life. Rather, the catechumenate provides a rich pattern of congregational life that keeps the church focused on God’s mission to the world by welcoming people to Christ.” (*Welcome to Christ*, 1997, p. 11)

5. *The rites as a recovery of continuity with the deep structures of Christian tradition.* Robert Webber’s *Journey to Jesus* writes: “The model of evangelism proposed in this book is a resurrection of the seeker model...that originated in the third century...” (p. 9)

When Robert Webber explained the model to a member of the pastoral staff of church in Minnesota, the reply was this: “It resonates with me....The talk among my friends in ministry goes like this: ‘We like the seeker concern, but we want to know, is there a way to reach the seeker without the radical changes required by the seeker service model?’ The process you’ve described sounds like it could fill that need.” (p. 9)

6. *The rites as a way of enacting baptism as the center of a life-long process:* In provisional volume of *Renewing Worship 3: , Holy Baptism and Related Rites* (ELCA, 2002) we read: “There is a growing appreciation that the rite of baptism is at the center of a lifelong process of growth in Christ rather than being a singular act.” (p. xi)
7. *The rites as a way for congregations to accompany those exploring faith and preparing for baptism.* The same ELCA volume declares that the catechumenal rites are provided to “enable the congregation to accompany such persons [exploring the Christian faith and

¹² “The Catchumenate: Forming the Body of Christ in the 21st Century”

preparing for baptism] and to mark with them important milestones in a journey of discovery and conversion to Christ.” (p. xiii).

The Episcopal Church’s *Book of Occasional Services* asserts “The systematic instruction and formation of its catechumens is a solemn responsibility of the Christian community. Traditionally, the preparation of catechumens is a responsibility of the bishop, which is shared with presbyters, deacons, and appointed lay catechists of the diocese.” (p. 112)

8. *The rites as an adaptation of the historic catechumenate to needs of baptized but uncatechized persons.*

Fading Christendom has left in its train many baptized persons, either uncatechized or otherwise seeking to be more deeply obedient to the baptismal covenant, who seek participation in experiences that recapitulate and parallel the deep formative stages and rites of the catechumenate.

A. Wayne Schwab in the introduction to *The Catechumenal Process*, the first resource for the Episcopal Church, wrote, “Twentieth century use of the catechumenal process presents a challenge unique to our times. Originally, the Catechumenate was developed specifically—and solely—for people seeking baptism.” Summarizing the various circumstances of the unbaptized and of congregational limitations of “human” resources, he observes that congregations look for ways to include the unbaptized, *properly called catechumens*, and baptized persons in various stages of catechesis, into one group. He cautions, “When the two groups meet as one, however, there should still be a distinction made between the needs and goals of the two groups and in the choice of rites to accompany their journeys. The fact of baptism must not be overlooked.” (p. x)

Embrace of the Rites

This helps us grasp something of the intent of churches adapting the RCIA, but what has been the actual use of the rites. To what degree have these churches embraced the practice of the catechumenate? Quantitatively, outside of the Roman Catholic implementation of the rite, Protestant churches are practicing the catechumenate in very few local faith communities.

The quantitative contrast is largely due to the systemic differences in the Roman and non-Roman churches. The former can decree that the Rite will be implemented in every diocese and congregation, while the latter can only encourage and recommend it. Hence, there is nearly total implementation in Roman churches (though not all with the same quality), but much less than one percent in any of the other denominations are currently implementing the rite. So, in terms of embrace among Protestants we must speak in qualitative terms.

I will confess to you that I have some sense of personal disappointment, even embarrassment, that we in The United Methodist Church have only a handful of churches actively practicing catechumenal ministry. I also confess my deep gratitude to Hoyt L. Hickman for his steady encouragement to work with “early adopter” churches to see how they are adopting and adapting the process and to believe that, like the old Farm Bureau

approach to getting adoption of hybrid seed corn, you must find someone willing to try it and then after the harvest you point to the “success” to win others to its use.

Here I want to point to some anecdotal material that hints at the embrace of the rites: one from a United Methodist context and one from the Uniting Church of Australia. I share the latter, though not North American, because my most recent engagement was with the UCA this past August.

David Hindman, the United Methodist chaplain of the Wesley Foundation at the College of William and Mary, has practiced the rites since 1998. He expresses his embrace and affirmation of the RCIA this way:

“This year [2003] I am working with a first year college student who has been mostly a C[hristmas]and E[aster] Christian, whose parents ‘wanted her to make her own decision about religion’. She has really gotten into the process quite well and is taking it incredibly seriously. That gives pause to other students who were born in the church and have not really thought much about it. Her . . . mentor has also taken this seriously. They both meet with me weekly in a time in which we have done a variety of things, including reading scripture, discussed our personal devotion time, shared prayer forms, understandings of Communion, etc. They also meet weekly as a pair and talk about faith journey, worship, doubts, struggles, etc. What is exciting about this for me is that the mentor has found herself needing to reflect more on her own faith and is increasingly aware of the importance of her living a Christian life of integrity because of the impact that it is having on the woman preparing for baptism.

“The more I do this, the more I am convinced this is a major way to make disciples. I regret that the institutional church still doesn't get it. Christendom is dead and gone, and we are in for a quite different need and opportunity for evangelization.”¹³

A woman who participated in a national training event for the Uniting Church in Australia in Adelaide this past August articulated her response to the model as presented:

My request for these books comes at least in part because of you [referring to Rob Bos and the other UCA staff] stirring us up so much at the “Becoming Disciples” conference. I found your conference enormously challenging and was a bit ticked off about the fact that you sent us off with the implicit charge “go and reform the church!”

Who'd of thought that reforming the church was [to be accomplished] through the processes that we have had, and then lost, as part of our Christian tradition. As simple yet as difficult [as] reviving baptism from some saccharine sweet moment in any Sunday in the year to the whole body drama that is competent to symbolise the most significant experience in our life – giving our life in discipleship to Jesus Christ.

So, just three people, including myself, have decided (actually we were already planning this . . . quite a synchronism . . . your ideas have given us a focus) to meet together weekly, being accountable to one another in the disciplines of prayer, spiritual growth, biblical study, and researching how to apply your model to the congregations in [our area].¹⁴

¹³ Quoted in the Winter 2004 *Christian Initiation Newsletter* published by The Center for Worship Resourcing, The General Board of Discipleship.

¹⁴ Excepted from an August 31, 2004 email from Dr. Rob Bos, Director for the Office of Theology and Discipleship, The Uniting Church of Australia.

I confess that I have tried to solicit stories of how the rites are being implemented in United Methodist Churches without much success. Such “thick” narratives are very important to the study of the embrace of the rites and could help to put “skin, warts and all” on a process described in the literature that congregational leaders tend to read in idealized and text book fashion.

Resistance to the Rites

Resistance to the rites and processes of initiation may be divided under two categories: resistance to employing the rites in any way, *rejection*, and resistance to the full adoption of the rites, i.e., *with reservation*.

A. Rejection of the rites

Rejection is sometimes expressed in overt and categorical ways. More often I sense that it is indifference (it simply does not register on their radar screen) or a lack of readiness for deep change in the way pastors and laity perceive the world and the gospel. Here I offer conjecture without hard statistical data to support my assertions. However, I have had a decade of conversations to draw upon. Here is my summary of the reasons for rejection:

1. Attachment to notions of instantaneous conversion as making disciples and failure to take seriously the necessity of transformation of behavior. As Alan Kreider so vigorously points out, “conversion [in the pre-Constantinian church] involved becoming the kind of person who belonged to [a community of compassion]. This could not happen quickly. It could come about only when candidates submitted themselves to a process of “resocialization” by which their new community superintended the transformation of their beliefs, their sense of belonging, and their patterns of behavior.”¹⁵ To date few are willing to think of and work toward such deep channels of conversion.
2. Perception that Christendom is still operative, and that the culture at large is still Christian, or pre-Christian, so that only a simple affiliation with the church is adequate for the making of disciples
3. Reducing evangelization to making church members rather than initiating people into the reign of God
4. Recognition that implementing the rites of initiation requires immense courage, discipline and will to change the way the faith communities order their life together (This at least is an honest confrontation with the reality of catechumenal ministry.)
5. Reliance upon non-sacramental understandings of ecclesiology and minimalist practice of the sacramental life

B. Embrace with Reservation

Here we are noting “resistance” in the form of internal and external constraints that tend to compromise a full appropriation of the catechumenate in congregations. It is worth noting here that most of the reasons for rejecting present day implementation are operative in the reservations congregations build into their adaptations of the process.

¹⁵ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), p. 21.

1. *Time the process takes*: This is wedded to the residue of revivalism and the notion of instant conversion. Steve Holdzkum, pastor of New Horizon's UMC in Anderson Indiana, has adapted the model called "New Beginnings: A Process of Formation for Christian Living and Ministry." The process has been followed twice a year since 1997. He notes that the congregation's reserve in adopting his proposal was rooted in their familiarity with the invitation to "join the church" at the end of every service, and so, inviting people to go on an open ended journey struck people as counterproductive at first.¹⁶ It is worth noting here that the average age of initiates and reaffirmers at New Horizons (as of 2001) was thirty-five in a congregations where the average age was sixty.
2. *Local realities*: In a 2001 consultation of United Methodists implementing the catechumenate, they shared how they adapted the process outlined in...*Come to the Waters*...and how they struggle[d] to be faithful to the process in light of local current realities. Some of the stresses shared were: closely timed services (no more than one hour, making it difficult to carve out time to present persons on the journey), student schedules that don't jibe with the Christian year, pastoral staff who are not 'on board' with the process, on the one hand, and the need to engage the laity in leadership so that it is not a pastor driven process, on the other."¹⁷
3. *Programmatic mindsets* that constrains more full-blown year round implementation. Most of the churches, both United Methodist and other traditions begin a schedule of meetings in the fall aimed at bringing catechumens and affirmers to journey's end at Easter and followed by a much abbreviated, less intensive period of mystagogy. Most of the churches seem to want to create a brochure in which they can capture the process as one of several programs and ministries of the congregation rather than seeking a fuller embodiment of Christ's hospitality in the church's worship and witness.
4. *Leadership styles*: in some congregations the process is overly controlled and driven by pastors and staff; in others it is almost exclusively lay driven and there is insufficient engagement by the pastoral staff in implementing the model. In the latter, the rites of initiation are not given sufficient attention due to indifference or ambivalence on the part of the pastoral staff. In the former, the integrity and messiness of "traditioning" (handing on) the faith by laity is obscured. Mark Stamm, Assistant Professor of Christian Worship at Perkins School of Theology and an observer in the consultation noted, "When the laity get involved it gets messier but it also gets more powerful when they are in the forming and leadership roles."¹⁸
5. *Ritual minimalism*: Actually, minimalism is a significant factor in the resistance to the model at all levels. When it comes to using the rites in worship, there is a tendency to play "safe" rather than recovering the fullness

¹⁶ "Churches Using an Ancient-Future Way of Making Disciples Hold Consultation"—an unpublished summary of a consultation of United Methodist local church catechumenate practitioners held in Nashville TN, June 28-29, 2001.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

of drastic ritual practices. Exorcizing old options and addictions and being caught up in rising to new possibilities that form individuals and communities of free people is something the liturgical movement and the proponents of the rites seek with holy passion, but we are not there yet—not even close!¹⁹ Challenging the consulting churches, Lester Ruth, Associate Professor of Worship and Liturgy at Asbury Seminary, said, “What if our congregations had youth who had tattoos and piercings express interest in exploring the life of discipleship? Can we resurrect some old things that make rituals of initiation more tactile and sensory like use of salt, giving crosses, lots of water, and use of oil?”²⁰ Central to the rites is a theology of symbols deeply lived. Such action is repentance and exorcism of our addiction to enlightenment thinking and practices that serve as barriers to those seeking Christ’s deliverance and grace. Practices that may seem crazy and outrageous to many Christians habituated to modernity’s agenda are eminently “logical” to those who inhabit our increasingly post-modern culture, particularly its younger people.

6. *Regional realities*: While the rites of initiation are taking root more strongly in some parts of North America because there are passionate leaders or communities of leaders, regional realities may make the catechumens more compatible in some areas than in others. For example, Lutheran, Episcopal and United Methodist practice is gaining some ground in the Pacific Northwest. Why? Could it be that the spiritual climate that *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* by Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk is a more fertile and receptive context for RCIA than Bible belt. The “none zone” is a reference to the census data in which the Northwest checked religious affiliation as “none” more than any other area of the United States.

The Future of the Rites

In conclusion, I offer a few brief “previews” of the future of the rites of initiation. Here, I confess, *ordo* gives way to *credo* and vision passes for sight.

A. *The catechumenate is inherent to the church in the world.* It is ancient-future. It is not novelty or neat innovation! I propose that the Holy Spirit who birthed the *ordo* of formation next to baptism (to cite Gordon Lathrop) in community in the early centuries of the church is again pointing to the catechumenate and saying to the church, “Come, walk this pathway. In struggling with what I am doing you will find this is something that is like a huge, immovable rock. You can’t put it in your pocket. You can’t haul it away. It is there and you will have to come to grips with it.” In other words, those of us who see this vision will need to hold steady and unapologetically offer as basic, normative, and wholesome this “way” for churches increasingly chasing rainbows in desperation. Implicit in the *order of Christian initiation of adults* is awareness that being disciples and forming disciples are part of the same process. It does not apologize for or compromise for being church with a deep and full tradition of liturgy, Scripture, sacraments, and bold and compassionate service with the poor and marginalized.

¹⁹ See Kreider, pp. 101-107.

²⁰ “Consultation,” p. 3.

B. Catechesis will shift from transmission of information to continuous loops of experience-reflection: As with all of ministry, particularly in this time of cultural change, faith communities and their leaders will need to practice continuous cycles of engagement, reflection, revision of practice and more engagement with the rites as lived mission in the world. The catechumenal process is never done. It is always in need of more robust implementation in dialogue: with the sacraments deeply and richly lived, and with our learning to be disciples besides those who don't have as much to unlearn as we do! And that is the beauty and blessing for churches that take up this cross: to see the triune God, the Scriptures, and the world through the naiveté and freshness of strangers works humility in us as gift and vocation. This humility allows learning congregations to go deeper and revise their practice of the means of grace to bear more fruit. Jane Vann Rogers explores this experience-reflection way of being church in *Gathered Before God: Worship-Centered Church Renewal* (Westminster/John Knox, 2004).

C. Practice of the rites will increasingly lead to forming disciples who are countercultural missionaries. Increasingly the Spirit will drive church members from the seclusion of the patio to be missionaries on the front porch. Forgive the anachronism! The porch that the Spirit likes best is festooned with flowers and baskets and furnishings that say, “ We are a communal project of deviancy for the sake of the world and we consistently embody an invitation to join this way of living.” Churches that have come out of hiding to live on the porch (or veranda as I learned to say in Australia) are determined to no longer live by the world's rules. As Bryan Stone says, “It is precisely in no longer playing by the world's rules that we discover a new openness to the world.”²¹ That is why we need the stranger, the outsider, the poor and marginalized as much or more than they need us. They can teach what it means to live on the outside where the Spirit's future for the church is!

Returning to where we began with the good archbishop, the most radical thing the church can do is to *be* the church. As Karen Ward reminds us in *Welcome to Christ*:

The foundational and primary resource needed to bring people to the church is the church: the church doing what it does, being what it is, and becoming what it is to be. Thus the primary resources for the catechumenal process are fourfold: scripture, corporate worship, prayer, and ministry in daily life.²²

As she goes on to note, when present day congregations devote themselves to the apostolic teaching, breaking the bread and the prayers, God will, as in acts, “day by day...add to [our] number those who [are] being saved.” (Acts 2:47) This is trusting the Spirit, being ourselves “*and not do anything at all*”. Let the church be the church—a baptized and baptizing people.

²¹ Bryan Stone, “The Spirit and the Holy Life,” *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 2001, p. 162.

²² Karen Ward, “What Resources Are Available to Assist Catechumenal Ministers?” in *Welcome to Christ: An Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), p. 57.

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