

Alpha and Catechumenate Compared

by Andrew Harter

The growth in Alpha courses in the last five years has been truly astounding. There can be hardly a diocese in the land without at least some programme; and Alpha courses have spread from the Church of England to both non-conformist and Roman Catholic denominations. Whilst a number are used for the purpose of parish renewal, most support. The original Alpha concept of bringing unchurched adults to a knowledge of Christ.

Yet the Christian initiation of adults is nothing new. As revival of the methods of the early Church, when all initiates were adults, the RCIA or Catechumenate has been practised for decades. Catechumenate in France now brings 10,000 adults to baptism every year; there are catechumenal programs in every European and North American country and, although it has not enjoyed the mushroom growth of Alpha recently, Catechumenate has made steady progress in all areas where it enjoys the support of church people.

Since both Alpha and Catechumenate address the same task in broadly the same way — typically, house groups under lay leadership — can there be any point in any major denomination supporting both? Are Alpha and Catechumenate complementary? Or should the Church be putting all our energy into one of them? And, if so, which?

Alpha is easy to get one's hands round. Typically a short course of about six weekly sessions, plus a weekend, it is supported by punchy material, well-scripted to get the Christian message across quickly. Presenters have access to a reasonable body of material, which, subject by subject, raises the questions most frequently asked of Christians; and then answers them. Great emphasis is placed on the Bible as the source of Christian inspiration.

The material is written in positive and encouraging style and seeks to relate the experience of God to the experience of everyday living. Many of the books on the (short) reading list are strongly anecdotal in character; presenters are invited to be so too. When I covered the subject of prayer for our local Alpha group recently, the title I was asked to speak to was: "Why and how I pray" rather than, for example, "Traditional and modern prayer styles."

The groups then split into smaller groups, each led by a well-briefed presenter, who facilitates discussion about the subject for the evening. It is therefore important that the main presenter is faithful to the pre-prepared material so that continuity of the message is ensured.

Alpha is overtly and unashamedly about bringing the Good News to those who have not heard it.

The focus is on *telling* them what they do not already know.

Catechumenate is much harder to get one's mind around. Although superficially similar and equally reliant on Biblical sources, the emphases are entirely different: the key word is not so much *telling* as *listening*. This approach inevitably takes much longer. Whilst an Alpha group may be over in six weeks, a Catechumenate group will hardly have started.

Not only is it slower, it is by definition much less predictable. Whilst in Alpha the leaders set the questions, in Catechumenate it is the enquirers who do so. You cannot prepare in advance detailed presentations on subjects that have not yet been raised, so there must be a willingness to allow each session to develop.

People will not share with strangers the issues that matter to them, especially on a subject as personal as their inner religious life. The time taken to establish trust within a Catechumenate group adds further delay to the process. A typical Catechumenate group may spend as long as six weeks in get-to-know-you exercises and discussion of non-threatening topics.

In these, the leaders are as exposed as the enquirers. Far from the man with 20/20 vision inspiring others to open their eyes to what he sees, as in Alpha, Catechumenate is more of an exercise in which the partially-sighted lead the visually-impaired! The humility which this creates in both parties provides a forum in which there is ample room for the Spirit to work in and through the individuals present. This is often an experience new to all concerned.

Once participants find themselves capable of insights which they had never before imagined, confidence grows, and from that point the catechumenal process really begins to produce results. Real and outwardly visible spiritual growth occurs in both leaders and enquirers, based on a freedom to air their doubts and worries in a forum which will respect and debate them. Because this growth is generated from within, it is more deeply rooted than the surrogacy of others' experience imparted through anecdote.

Catechumenate groups thus also become occasions on which people experience Christian love, reinforced with strong simple Rites in which the whole congregation participates. That love persists between group participants after baptism and confirmation, and necessitates a cooling-off period while the group accustoms itself to dispersion. Many participants talk in terms of "withdrawal symptoms." It is a failure of Catechumenate that follow-up after this stage of Christian initiation is generally haphazard at best, and frequently non-existent.

It will be apparent that Alpha and Catechumenate are almost wholly dissimilar. Where Alpha tells, Catechumenate listens; where Alpha is a pep-talk, Catechumenate is an evolution; where Alpha is for external application, Catechumenate is for ingestion.

But which is better? Should one replace the other? Do we have resources to cope with both? If so, are they complementary?

In the richness and diversity of God's love, it seems to me inappropriate to label either Alpha or Catechumenate as better or worse. What is right for me is not automatically right for you. There is great danger in overlooking this in the white heat of enthusiastic evangelisation.

The very idea of assessing Alpha and Catechumenate *against each other* must surely be mistaken. Each should be rated uniquely against its ability (or otherwise) to help those who seek to move closer to God to achieve their ambition, at least to some degree. Whilst my preference as a slow learner is for the "slow-burn" thoughtful approach of Catechumenate, the very success of the evangelical movements in the Church of England and elsewhere demonstrates that others do not share my view. We should all, whatever our personal preference, rejoice in that.

Similarly, whether we can see it in our parish budgets or not, there must automatically be sufficient resources for Alpha and Catechumenate to run in parallel. There is huge untapped potential in all parishes for making better use of lay ministries, whether formalised or not. Both Alpha and Catechumenate have demonstrably released the frustrated and often unrecognised skills of lay members of the congregation, leading to general parish revival.

We have not scratched the surface of this deep mine of talent, as it stands. With both Alpha and Catechumenate capable of bringing new talents into the Church and of finding new roles for those talents to play, the process is self-regenerating. There is absolutely no risk in going ahead in faith, however limited we may believe our resources to be. However, there may be concern that Alpha and Catechumenate could be mutually destructive. Because they approach the same objective in outwardly similar, but in reality radically different style, this must be a risk. It is only too easy for the enthusiasts of one to become the antagonists of the other, which is obviously disastrous.

Equally limiting would be to regard the two methods as essentially sequential, for example to run Alpha only as a pre-Catechumenate, or to restrict the use of Catechumenate to a kind of "Beta" course. However, when the opportunity arises naturally, I believe the two can complement each other in this way.

Our Catechumenate groups this year took on some Alpha participants from the previous year. Of course there was culture clash initially and some people could not cope with that. The fall-out rate from Catechumenate was therefore above average. But the number of enquirers coming through to baptism and confirmation this month is also well up to average levels.

I believe that the parish which can use Alpha to sow the seeds and Catechumenate to give them deeper roots will indeed see an unparalleled movement of the Spirit.

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