

## The Ritual Journey of Conversion: A Cosmic Turn toward God

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*We will examine the shape of modern Christian initiation rites, especially the scrutinies as emancipation from disorder, dis-ease, and chaos. How do the Lenten rites strengthen seekers to wrestle with personal, communal, and ultimate darkness and turn toward the light of Christ?*

### What is conversion?

What is conversion? An act of the Holy Spirit? A decision flowing from human free will? A single, dramatic, emotional event? A gradual, growing awareness that rises like the morning dawn?

Is conversion always a spiritual process? What do we make of sales processes that rely on the conversion of prospects to customers? How is the conversion of unbelief to belief different or similar to conversion from one Christian tradition to another?

The call to conversion is perhaps the most prevalent theme in both the Old and New Testaments. From Abraham to Paul, in the various conversion stories the constant experience is a radical change from an old life to a new life. Jesus's introduction to mission is a call to repent of our old lives and prepare for a new life as citizens of God's reign (see Mt 4:17).

Even in the New Testament, conversion never had a singular definition. However, William Harmless, author of *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, writes that even though the early church had various understandings of *conversion*, "more often they envisioned conversion in cosmological terms: it was marked by a metaphysical shift, a transfer of power from the reign of Satan to the reign of God. With this transfer of power came a change in status: the convert ceased to suffer Satan's tyranny and came to enjoy God's magnanimous rule."<sup>1</sup>

In recent times, meanings of *conversion* have proliferated so that it can refer to changing from unbelief to belief, to changing religious denominations, to changing from one's fan-affiliation from the Cubs to the Yankees.

For those of us engaged in catechumenate work, we have to recover the cosmic sense of conversion. Conversion has to mean a radical reorientation of one's life. Following Jesus's example, the church calls citizens of the world to become citizens of God's reign. If we are witnesses to the mystery of Christ, the good news we seek to share with the world is salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, William Harmless, SJ, Liturgical Press, 1995, p. 261.

But we are not the only ones offering salvation. Netflix promises to save you from boredom. Amazon will save you from waiting. Jenny Craig will save you from obesity. McDonalds will save you from hunger. Johnny Walker will save you from emotional pain. Advil will save you from the pain of too much Johnny Walker.

### **A cosmic battle**

What does Jesus promise to save us from? Jesus enters the great cosmic battle to save us from death. Left on our own, we are destined to lose this struggle. To be human is to die. But to be Christian is to live, eternally. Jesus offers us eternal life. Jesus saves us from death.

The evidence seems to be to the contrary. Climate change, the permanent status of refugees with no home, the growing sense of hopelessness, and the accumulation of wealth at the upper echelons of society—at the expense of the millions of people at the bottom of the economic ladder—all make salvation seem like a pipe dream.

Those who suffer most are those on the peripheries. Pope Francis says the church is a field hospital.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the church is a MASH unit, attending to those mortally wounded by the forces of darkness. We are dispensers of mercy, the most powerful healing agent in the cosmos.

The poor are all around us, but we often don't see them. Society has constructed invisibility cloaks to place over them to keep them out of our sight.

It is in this context that we speak of conversion. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) says that a key factor in the initiation of the inquirers is the renewed conversion of the Christian community (see RCIA 4). Our churches, our schools, our families, and our own hearts are in need of an ongoing and authentic conversion to Jesus Christ, whom Pope Francis called the Face of God's mercy.

### **A conversion to the mission of Christ**

This conversion of the converted is not meant to make us more spiritual or prayerful or knowledgeable of the faith. It is not meant to make our Sunday worship more beautiful. It is meant to open our eyes and hearts to the current crisis of poverty in the world. It is meant to impel us to mission.

That mission is clear from the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel—go and baptize. However, as part of our conversion process, we have to let go of misunderstandings of

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<sup>2</sup> "A Big Heart Open to God: An interview with Pope Francis," *America: The Jesuit Review*, September 30, 2013; <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>

what it means to baptize. We are not issuing bus passes to heaven. We are proclaiming liberation—as Luke has Mary do when she exclaims that the humble will be lifted up, the hungry filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty.

The conversion of those of us inside the church is meant to send us outside, into the streets, to proclaim the awesome good news that God is madly in love with each and every person we encounter. If it is possible for God to be *more* in love with some of us, that preference is for the invisible, the marginalized, those so far out on the periphery, we cannot see them without eyes opened by grace. The conversion we offer is not an exchange of one set of rules for another. It is a rescue from alone-ness—from chaos—to a life of love, security, and peace.

When I feel the occasional conviction to match my actions to my words, I immediately become like one of the disciples confronted with feeding the masses and having no resources. Lord, where will we get enough food for so many? Send them home. Make them disappear.

Before we mount our white horses to ride into Dodge with a ten-point rescue plan, we would do well to remember who had faith in the loaves and fishes story. A child—one of the invisibles—stepped forward with his own meager gifts, and that was sufficient for all the people. I don't think our job is to rescue the poor. Our job is to introduce Jesus.

When we examine the rites of initiation, then, what in God's name are we doing? To the outsider—and to many insiders—our formulas and ablutions can seem to be a series of complex hazing rituals that induct an outsider into our private club.

What those of us inside the walls of the church say that we mean, however, is different. We say that this is initiation into Christ. Where we go wrong is that we sometimes confuse initiation into Christ with entry into heaven or validation of God's love. We stumble when we think we alone are the elect, headed to heaven, and they are not. We are loved by God in a special way much like the folks who sit in first class on the plane, and everyone else is in coach. Or on Greyhound.

The conversion we are seeking is conversion to the Person of Jesus Christ. All of us are on a journey of faith that leads us to deeper conversion. But those who most need to hear the good news of Jesus's offer are those who are in darkness. Those who are dying. Those who are hopeless. Those who are profoundly lost and alone.

### **How the Rite of Christian Initiation leads us to conversion**

The process for initiating the newly-evangelized into the Christian community has varied widely over the ages, even in the very beginnings of the ancient church. However, every age is marked

by a consistent pattern: proclamation, conversion, and baptism.<sup>3</sup>

The modern catechumenate continues this pattern in a ritual-sacramental journey consisting of a series of steps and stages. *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living* says the four stages that shape the catechumenate are *inquiry, exploration, intense preparation, and baptismal living*. The Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, using language from the pre-Nicene traditions, identifies these as the periods of *evangelization and precatechumenate, catechumenate, purification and enlightenment, and mystagogy*.

Except for the first stage of evangelization or inquiry, the candidates enter each period through a ritual “doorway.” *Go Make Disciples* identifies these as rites of *welcome, enrollment, and Baptism*.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has:

- Acceptance into the Order of the Catechumenate
- Election or Enrollment of Names
- Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation

Before the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults became the normative process in the Roman Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council, initiating adults generally consisted of private meetings between the inquirer and priest during which the Catholic faith was taught. Once the inquirer learned the requisite material—prayers, dogmas, commandments—he or she was baptized in a private ceremony.

On the other hand, the modern catechumenate developed out of an initiatory process that is marked by the movement of the inquirer within Christian community through definable stages of deepening faith. The model of catechesis is relational rather than informational, though information is indeed transmitted. The goal is formation into discipleship rather than the acquisition of intellectual knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

### **Specialized catechesis for each period**

Each of the periods of the catechumenate journey requires a type of catechesis suited to each phase. *Catechesis* is not to be understood as doctrinal instruction or religious education. It is instead a process of conversion to the Person of Jesus Christ. The locus of encounter with Christ is the community at prayer and the Word embodied within that community.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, Aidan Kavanagh, OSB, Pueblo Publishing Company, 1978, p 36.

<sup>4</sup> For further reflection on these two different paradigms of modern-day Christianity as either a relationship with Christ or as intellectual assent, see *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, Marcus J. Borg (HarperOne, 2004).

Evangelization is the initial proclamation or introduction to Jesus Christ. It is the announcement of the good news of salvation. Catechesis at this stage is concerned with an initial conversion that will become evident in small but certain changes in the behaviors of the evangelized. These include an initial repentance, the beginnings of a prayer life, some association with the Christian community, and a willingness to publicly profess their desire to follow Christ.

The period of the catechumenate is the time that most of us think of as the time of teaching and learning. And so it is. But the learning process is a hands-on training in the Christian life—a learn-by-doing apprenticeship in four major cornerstones of discipleship. The catechumens come to live a life centered on the Logos, the living Word of God. They practice the skills of living a Christian way of life, shown to them by fellow Christians who give example of bearing witness to the faith, turning to God in prayer, keeping their hopes set on Christ, and loving our neighbors, even if it requires sacrifice to do so.

This time of learning to live in a new way will be gradual and progressive. And it will not be easy for most. The RCIA says, “Since the Lord in whom they believe is a sign of contradiction, the newly converted often experience divisions and separations, but they also taste the joy that God gives them without measure” (RCIA 75.2).

The catechumens also learn from us how to pray, in particular by celebrating with us in the liturgical assembly on the Lord’s Day. The catechumens are dismissed after the homily, prior to the liturgy of the eucharist, to reflect more deeply on the word they have just encountered. And finally, even before their initiation, the catechumens are taught to work actively to spread the good news of Jesus’s offer of salvation to the world. Through this lengthy and demanding training process, the conversion of the catechumens that was begun in the period of evangelization is brought to maturity.

The period of purification and enlightenment begins a new phase in the life of the catechumens. On the First Sunday of Lent, those catechumens who have demonstrated a mature faith are elected or chosen for initiation at the next Easter Vigil. At this point, formal training ends, and the Elect enter into a new style of catechesis—an intense spiritual preparation for the celebration of initiation. We will return in a moment for a closer look at how this spiritual preparation is accomplished.

In the final stage, the period of mystagogy, the neophytes are introduced to a fuller, more effective understanding of the mystery of faith by doing what they have been trained to do. The difference is that they enact the disciplines of Christian life now as sacramental people and as full members of the baptismal priesthood. The main setting for this introduction is the Sunday Masses of the Easter season.

## Scrutinies today and yesterday

So let's return to the conversion process set out for the period of purification and enlightenment. While no formal catechesis is offered, this time is filled with powerful ritual celebrations. The core of these rituals is the three scrutiny rites which are "meant to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good." (RCIA 141)

The *Apostolic Tradition* cites an examination of the catechumen's conduct at the beginning of proximate baptismal preparation followed by daily handlayings and exorcisms.<sup>5</sup> The scrutiny began preparation while the exorcisms confirmed it. Augustine reports daily exorcisms with some taking place within a scrutiny. The increase of infant baptisms distorted the purpose of the rite as the preparatory exorcisms and scrutinies were condensed in time. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the elect participated only in an exorcism on the Saturday morning before baptism. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, even this was moved to the beginning of the baptismal rite itself.

Paul Turner summarizes the history of scrutinies best:

They consistently served as a way of ritually assessing one's readiness for baptism, but what they investigated changed from one generation to the next. They scrutinized spiritual development, moral behavior, intellectual understanding, and even the intelligence of godparents....By the time of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council the scrutinies had been transformed into a series of exorcisms invoked within the baptismal liturgy, in Latin, where no real scrutinizing was expected.<sup>6</sup>

Modern sensibilities are squeamish about exorcisms and the implication that any of us might be inhabited by demons. There is a thread of Christian practice that deals with the exorcism of demons from possessed individuals. That is not, however, the meaning or practice of exorcism in the initiation rites. The prayers of exorcism in the scrutiny rites are prayers of strength for the sake of the elect so that they will be better able to resist evil and fight off the powers of sin. In fact, the word *exorcism* is never mentioned in the rite. Although these prayers have been prayed tens of thousands of times since the establishment of the modern catechumenate, most parishioners would not describe what they witnessed as *exorcisms*.

## What do the scrutinies do?

So if we have scrutinies that don't ask questions and exorcisms that don't cast out demons, what is it that these rites do on the conversion journey of faith? To answer that, let's turn to

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<sup>5</sup> The majority of the following information is based on Paul Turner's "Scrutinies Scrutinized" found in *Liturgical Ministry*, 8 (Spring 1999) 68-77, [www.paulturner.org/scrutinies.htm](http://www.paulturner.org/scrutinies.htm).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

the word. We would argue that the proclamation of Scripture, especially the gospel, serves to scrutinize the elect, for it is in the word proclaimed that we encounter Christ.

Liturgical scholar Rita Ferrone writes: “A scrutiny is...very different from submitting one’s conduct to the judgment of the church. Better to say that Jesus is the one who scrutinizes the elect, whom he loves and has called to himself.”<sup>7</sup>

Further, Michael Marchal writes “next to the proclamation of the word, the intercessions are the crucial element within the ritual, for within them the cutting edge of the word is concretely focused on the human heart.”<sup>8</sup> Keeping in mind the scrutinizing role of the word, let us examine the three scrutiny gospels to see what is being asked of us by Jesus.

The RCIA makes three Johannine pericopes the focal points in the Lenten scrutiny rites. John’s gospel begins with the prologue, and immediately the Word brings division (1:10-13)—not surprising if one imagines the *Logos* to be not just the *Word* but the *Question* of God.

However, this Christ-Question does not fit the conventions of the modern Q & A world. Rather, the Christ-Question that pierces human history does not have tidy answers packaged into a textbook, Web site, or index. The “answer” that the Question of God seeks is an action, a verb enfleshed in the human life it encounters and revealed through the mutual give and take of human relationship. The Christ-Question is adequately answered only by intimate, faithful friendship with Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

This uniquely Johannine Christological image<sup>10</sup> and paradigm of discipleship, implicitly present in the catechumenate and central to the scrutinies, must be the basis for formation of new disciples and the ongoing mystagogy of Christians.

Next, we will examine the question/answer dialogues of the three scrutiny pericopes and connect the implications of their examination to some current catechetical and liturgical practices.

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<sup>7</sup> Rita Ferrone, “Lazarus, Come Out! The Story and Ritual of the Third Scrutiny” in *Catechumenate: A Journal of Christian Initiation* (Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, January 1992) 3.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Marchal, “Scrutinies: Words That Cut” in *Catechumenate: A Journal of Christian Initiation* (Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, January 1993) 21.

<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II states that “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in community, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ...” (*Catechesi Tradendae* [1979], #5).

<sup>10</sup> In the Gospel of John, New American Bible translation, within its 21 chapters, there are 175 questions. Mark, the shortest Gospel, has 117; Matthew, six chapters longer than John, has 173; Luke has 159. It should be noted that in the Greek text, punctuations such as question marks were not employed. A question would be identified by the presence of an interrogative pronoun. However, the lack of punctuation in the original text in no way should distract us from the fact that John’s Gospel in most standard English translations today includes an unusually large number of questions compared to the Synoptics.

## Boundaries redefined

The Church proclaims the Johannine pericope of the Samaritan woman at the well (4:4-42) on the Third Sunday of Lent whenever elect are present for the first scrutiny.<sup>11</sup>

This and the other two Johannine pericopes are so integral to the rite that they are required to be proclaimed regardless of liturgical year, even when the scrutinies are celebrated outside of Lent, and always in the order of woman at the well, curing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus.

In this “type scene” of well-meetings between a groom and his future bride,<sup>12</sup> the contemporary hearer is connected to the long line of ancestors whose destinies were changed by a conversation at a well.

In this scene, eight questions are asked:

<b>Interrogative Structure of John 4:4-42<sup>13</sup></b>	
Woman to Jesus:	How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?
Woman to Jesus:	Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?
Unspoken thoughts of Disciples:	What are you looking for? Why are you talking with her?
Woman to Townspeople:	Could he possibly be the Messiah?
Disciples to each other:	Could someone have brought him something to eat?
Jesus to Disciples:	Do you not say, “In four months the harvest will be here”?

Notice that only the woman and Jesus ask boundary-breaking questions while the disciples

<sup>11</sup> This and the other two Johannine pericopes are so integral to the rite that they are required to be proclaimed regardless of liturgical year, even when the scrutinies are celebrated outside of Lent, and always in the order of woman at the well, curing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Cf. International Commission on English in the Liturgy and Bishop’s Committee on the Liturgy, *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1988), #146.

<sup>12</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), 138; Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 135.

<sup>13</sup> All Scripture quotes are from the New American Bible translation.

remain in their own clique. Their questions reveal a defensiveness that seeks only to fortify the boundaries.

R. Alan Culpepper names four boundaries that are crossed in this scene: 1) gender (male/female); 2) nationality (Judea/Samaria); 3) race (Jew/Samaritan); and 4) religious (Jerusalem/Mt. Gerizim); and by their crossing, Culpepper states, “community is created.”<sup>14</sup>

If life comes out of breaking the accepted social boundaries, were those boundaries life-giving to begin with? This is the main question Jesus, the Question, poses. In order to understand fully this dynamic, let us explore what we mean by calling Jesus “the Question of God.”

Because God creates, God’s nature causes division.<sup>15</sup> This division, however, is not chaotic but ordered, that is, in right relationship. In the beginning, the relationship between God and Chaos gave birth to creation—different yet ordered, distinct yet unified by goodness (Gn 1:31). Sin changed this ordering into disconnection, and each creature’s distinction became a cause for oppression. Thus, creation continually thirsts to place its chaos once again into relationship with God so that a new, rightly-ordered creation can be reborn.

When the Word became flesh in human history, its very presence was an enigma, a question that scrutinized the world’s division—above/below, divine/human, light/dark, sight/blindness, faith/unbelief. Yet, by engaging the societal boundary lexicon, the Christ-Question undermined it, reframing the chaotic language of disconnection into a new language that re-ordered the boundaries.

In the story of the Samaritan woman, the borders were redrawn not with the language of gender, nationality, race, or religion, but with the language of mission, dividing people into those who would cross the lines to bring others into relationship with God and those who would reinforce the walls to keep others out. For as compelling as an encounter with the Word may be, Jesus can only create if there is an appropriate response.

To re-establish right relationship, Jesus can only do so *by* relationship, since “[r]evelation is the dynamic of manifestation and response, or, as John says, divine witness and human believing, both of which are constitutive of the reality.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Immersed into salvation**

The pericope of the man born blind (9:1-41) proclaimed on the Fourth Sunday of Lent portrays

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<sup>14</sup> Culpepper, *The Gospel*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> This material is developed from Charles Bobertz, class on “Johannine Tradition”, summer 2004, Saint John’s University, Collegeville, Minn.

<sup>16</sup> Schneiders, *Written*, 70.

this manifestation/response dynamic in action. Jesus has just proclaimed himself to be “the light of the world” and that whoever follows him “will have the light of life” (8:12). The remainder of chapter 8 sees Jesus sparring with the Pharisees who remain “impervious to revelation”<sup>17</sup> and are ready to stone him. Their rejection of the manifestation juxtaposes the moment in the following chapter where the Christ-Question finds a faithful answer.

<b>Interrogative Structure of John 9:1-41</b>	
Disciples to Jesus:	Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?
Neighbors/witnesses to each other:	Isn't this the one who used to sit and beg?
Neighbors/witnesses to Man born blind:	(So) how were your eyes opened? Where is he?
Pharisees to each other:	How can a sinful man do such signs?
Pharisees to Man:	What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?
Pharisees to Man's parents:	Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How does he now see?
Pharisees to Man:	What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?
Man to Pharisees:	Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?
Pharisees to Man:	You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?
Jesus to Man:	Do you believe in the Son of Man?
Man to Jesus:	Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?
Pharisees to Jesus:	Surely we are not also blind, are we?

Jesus' response to the disciples' opening question (who sinned?) “shifts the problem of providence and suffering but does not resolve it.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus avoids the easy answer and reorients our perspective to the real question at hand: What is sinful in the presence of the Word?

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>18</sup> Culpepper, *The Gospel*, 175.

We find a clue to the answer when Jesus commands the blind man, “Go wash in the Pool of Siloam” (9:7). Through washing, healing occurs and sight is created. Raymond E. Brown reveals the baptismal undercurrent in this command by reminding us that “[t]his pool, bearing a name interpreted as ‘sent,’ stands, in John, for Jesus, who is the one *sent* by the Father.”<sup>19</sup> Salvation is not simply something we receive, as sight might be given by a miracle-worker. Rather, it is something into which we are immersed, like water, by entering into relationship with Jesus. Only by that relationship are we healed.

The questions of the neighbors and witnesses show they are distracted by the superficial appearances and mechanics of the sign—this man *looks* like the one they know to be blind; how did Jesus do it?. Perhaps they represent those who notice only the “magic moment” and miss the deeper transformation taking place. The neighbors’ confusion recalls too the question of outward appearances after an encounter with the Word. In our sacraments, the appearance of things does not change—bread still looks like bread, neophytes still look the same—but something *has* changed. As in the sacraments, Jesus in these scrutiny stories continues his subversive transformation of creation: he changed the Samaritan woman (she is still Samaritan, she is still a woman, but now she is on mission); he changed the blind man (he still looks the same, but now he sees); soon, he will cause the greatest change in a human body that will turn the sleep of death into the consciousness of life.<sup>20</sup>

Connected to this relationship between outward appearance and inner transformation is the growth in likeness of the blind man into the image of Christ. After he washes and gains his sight, his neighbors debate his identity. With Christ-like undertones, the man, now able to see, proclaims, “I am [the one who had been blind]” (9:9). His attempts to explain who Jesus is incite the anger of the Pharisees in a similar way that Jesus’ teachings cause anger among those who hear him. The Pharisees’ accusation that the man was born in sin is similar to what they say about Jesus who some believe must be a sinner because he worked on the Sabbath (9:16).

Those transformed and re-imaged into the likeness of Christ are they who have seen Jesus’ signs, made themselves vulnerable to their transforming mystery, and have responded with faith in the one who manifested the signs. This process of engaging the sign and responding to it is similar to what is called mystagogy. The mystagogical quality of the man born blind pericope—in which the healing is not the climax of the scene but its catalyst—makes this Johannine healing unique from other similar scenes in the synoptics.<sup>21</sup> The mystagogical steps

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<sup>19</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 56.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 175. Brown notes the allusion to God’s creation of humanity in Jesus’ re-creative act of molding clay.

<sup>21</sup> Culpepper, *The Gospel*, 175.

in this pericope can be outlined in this way:

<b>Mystagogical Structure of John 9:1-41</b>	
1) Experience of event:	Jesus cures the man born blind (9:6-7).
2) Remembrance of sensory elements of event:	Man recounts how Jesus made clay, anointed his eyes, and told him to wash (9:11).
3) Questioning of meaning and tradition:	Pharisees debate how Jesus can come from God if he does not observe Sabbath (9:16).
4) Connecting with the larger story and teaching:	Man recalls tradition that teaches that God does not listen to sinners (9:31).
5) Conversion or renewal:	“I do believe, Lord” (9:38).

Though the Pharisees seem to play a role in this process, they are not really participating in it, and this is what is sinful in the presence of the Word: refusal to engage and participate in the relational dynamic of Jesus.

Theologian Sandra M. Schneiders states that “the Pharisees in the encounter with the man born blind are usually precisely those who do not know who Jesus is and are not really open to finding out even though they may seem to be inquiring.”<sup>22</sup> There is a difference between being a witness to and being a participant in a sign. The neighbors and Pharisees witnessed the sign; the man participated in it.

That is not to say he participated in the sign because he received the healing. Rather he received the healing *because* he participated in the sign.

Schneiders continues: “By nature, the symbol demands involvement....[T]he initiation commitment that enables one to encounter the transcendent in the symbolic is only the beginning of the relationship that must develop in a continuously deepening commitment or die. It is this relationship of ever deepening commitment that gradually transforms the person.”<sup>23</sup> The Pharisees could not participate in the sign they witnessed because they could not “be shaken loose from the convictions, the verities, the prejudices, the commonsense assumptions that constitute [their] everyday ‘knowledge.’”<sup>24</sup>

For them, the sign did not reveal truth but attacked what they already knew. Again from

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<sup>22</sup> Schneiders, *Written*, 53.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

Schneiders:

The conflict, according to the Gospel, is between an idolatrous attachment to the Jewish religious institution and the inbreaking of divine revelation to Jesus. Attachment to their own interpretation of the law rendered the officials of Judaism incapable of responding to divine revelation, impervious to the truth to which the Law and the Prophets witnessed. The Jewish authorities had become committed to their commitment rather than to God.<sup>25</sup>

The Christ-Question of God asks for commitment to a person, not to an answer.

### Faith in a person

The final pericope in the scrutiny rites is the raising of Lazarus (11:1-45) proclaimed on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Here, Jesus asks the most questions of all the characters.

<b>Interrogative Structure of John 11:1-45</b>	
Disciples to Jesus:	Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?
Jesus to Disciples:	Are there not twelve hours in a day?
Jesus to Martha:	I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?
Jesus to those weeping at the tomb:	Where have you laid him?
Some of the Jews to each other:	Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?
Jesus to Martha:	Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?

Here, the sign comes at the end of the scene while the preceding dialogue between Jesus and the various characters serve to “interpret the meaning of the sign before the raising of Lazarus is actually narrated.”<sup>26</sup>

Jesus plays the role of the “Good Catechist” by preparing his hearers to participate in the sign, as a catechist would prepare a catechumen for the sacrament of baptism. Yet, the catechesis that Jesus engages in is not textbook explication seeking a right answer. It is not head-

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>26</sup> Culpepper, *The Gospel*, 185.

knowledge or “a presentation of eschatological propositions but a self-disclosure calling for personal response.”<sup>27</sup>

Jesus teaches about eternal life not by explaining it but by revealing it: “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25). In response, he asks for faith. In the face of death, faith “is not theological assent but personal spiritual transformation,”<sup>28</sup> and what is required of the disciple at this moment of ultimate chaos is not “reflection on revelation [but] personal commitment to the one who reveals.”<sup>29</sup> When the elect stand at the font, they will be asked to profess *faith*, not *comprehension*. At the edge of that watery tomb, they will confess the Christian meaning of death not through explanation but by submersion into that death.

Yet, what is required is not perfect faith. At the last moment, even Martha who had made the highest profession of faith (9:27) is gently prodded by Jesus to deepen that faith (9:40).

Only after Lazarus is raised will she understand what she professed. It is her belief in and love for Jesus that allow her to be ready for whatever he will do despite her human logic that death is death, for “Martha believes not in *what* she understands but in the *one* who has the words of eternal life (cf. 6:68).”<sup>30</sup>

### **Parish: The place of encounter**

When the three scrutiny readings are examined in this way, we begin to understand what the RCIA means when it says that Lent “is intended as well to enlighten the minds and hearts of the elect with a deeper knowledge of Christ the Savior.”<sup>31</sup>

The catechesis for the scrutinies does not give answers about faith but asks the questions of the Johannine pericopes: Could he possibly be the Messiah? Do you believe in the Son of Man? Do you believe this? The things that keep the elect from saying “yes!” are the barriers that defend entrenched boundaries, the adherence to life-draining values, and the fear that the finality of death is definitive. The place where the elect peel away these protective layers and learn to answer “yes!” is in the parish community. “[T]he community is the place of encounter between Jesus and his disciples...[where] interpreting [the gospel] is a never-ending enterprise because it deepens as our experience of union with Jesus deepens.”<sup>32</sup>

Through participation in community life, the elect learn faith by hearing and seeing how

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<sup>27</sup> Schneiders, *Written*, 158.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 158, n. 26.

<sup>31</sup> ICEL, *RCIA*, #139.

<sup>32</sup> Schneiders, *Written*, 62.

believers profess “yes!” in the cosmic chaos of life. The order of the scrutiny pericopes reflects this progressive, relational catechesis

- of hearing and believing (Samaritan woman),
- seeing and believing (man born blind),
- and finally believing without proof (Martha and Lazarus) at the most chaotic moment of life—death.

As loudly as this type of catechesis speaks in these pericopes, too often catechumens are taught using catechesis that depends solely on textbooks and other written material to bring about the depth of vulnerability necessary for relationship with Christ. One reason some well-meaning ministers give for clinging to school-room style catechesis is the fear of teaching without some kind of manual, lesson plan, or quantifiable content.

To teach as Jesus taught is indeed a formidable task, and other challenges in parish life only make it more difficult. If the primary textbook for the catechumen is the liturgy and the liturgical year,<sup>33</sup> then mystagogical catechesis is almost impossible when the signs and symbols of the liturgy are meagerly manifested by inadequate preaching, mechanical presiding, unskilled musicians, halfhearted proclamation, minimalist ritual, and indifferent assemblies.

If the “parish is the curriculum”<sup>34</sup> and the primary aim of catechesis is intimacy with Jesus, then relational catechesis will be stilted if catechists are unable to convey the parish’s intimate personal stories of faith (including their own) as they are lived in communal life and connect these to the experience of the catechumens. If “[t]he ‘final examination’ in this ‘course’ on love is the willingness to lay down one’s life for those one loves after the example of Jesus”,<sup>35</sup> then revelatory witnessing through the apostolic life of the community will remain distorted until the entire parish itself, from top to bottom, passes the same exam.

### **Catechized by friendship**

Fortunately, it is the relational dynamic with Christ that continues to enable the faithful and catechumens to say “yes!” even in the face of chaos. Because revelation is an interchange and a process, it “is therefore never ‘complete.’ One does not collect the requisite information about

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Nick Wagner, *Introducing Liturgical Catechesis: Formation Sessions for the Parish* (San Jose, Calif.: Resource Publications, Inc., 2002). Cf. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* which states that the full and active participation by the faithful in the liturgy “is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit...” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [1963], #14).

<sup>34</sup> United States Catholic Conference, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1999), #118.

<sup>35</sup> Schneiders, *Written*, 55.

God and then go on to live one's Christian life accordingly."<sup>36</sup> We are initiated into lifelong friendship with Jesus. "The knowledge of Jesus that the disciple gradually achieves...is the kind of knowledge one has of a friend....It is, quite simply, a deep sharing in life with Jesus."<sup>37</sup> This sharing, as was the friendship between Jesus and his first disciples, is progressive. In the same gradual way that Jesus catechized his disciples through his signs, the Church is also being gradually catechized through the sacraments, for "[t]he church is a realization of the same relationship between history and symbol as was the earthly Jesus. This amounts to saying that the church as community is sacramental in a much more fundamental sense than simply being the agent of certain sacramental rituals."<sup>38</sup>

The meeting place of Chaos and Holy where relationship is re-ordered is the Church's sacramental life. Like Jesus who used the common language of separation to create a new language of community, we too can take what we already have before us—the community at prayer in the liturgy—to deepen our friendship and life in Christ who questions, reveals, and recreates.

Christian ritual is inherently relational (communal).<sup>39</sup> It requires the collaboration of several people exercising various roles and only their roles (ordered distinction).<sup>40</sup> Through spoken and sung dialogue and the question and answer dynamic, the relational character of worship is expressed and heightened (manifestation/response).<sup>41</sup> By attending to these dialogic and relational qualities of ritual, perhaps we can improve our listening skills to help us hear the Word not only in Scripture but also embodied in each other. Perhaps we can make our eyesight keener to see the dignity of all the body's members. Perhaps we can reframe the language of death into a life-giving word able to respond to the questions of our day.

### **Spirit and truth**

The questions of today's world cannot be addressed by an old way of thinking. "[T]he New Testament is not a catechism or an answer book supplying prescriptions for the solution of problems not ever envisioned by its authors."<sup>42</sup> The challenge of the modern catechumenate and the Christ-Question of God we encounter in the scrutiny gospels is faithful relationship even when there are no answers to the crises we face. Jesus came not to remove boundaries

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #26-27.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., #28.

<sup>41</sup> There are 16 questions found in the rites of acceptance into the order of catechumens, election, and baptism. Interestingly, the scrutiny rites do not contain any questions.

<sup>42</sup> Schneiders, *Written*, 95.

but to redefine them, not to teach us how to escape the suffering of human life but to transfigure it by his resurrection, not to negate the reality of death but to use it to “[serve] the purpose of God, which is to bring all believers into union with God in Jesus.”<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, we are being catechized by questions and not answers, by love and not law. Re-examining catechesis, liturgy, and parish life in this light would make our handing on of the faith more effective for catechumens and baptized alike. It would reinvigorate the commitment to liturgical reform and strengthen the bonds of friendship into which our catechumens are initiated. However we must be careful that we do not simply trade in one textbook for another, packaging the old ways of forming faith into seemingly new structures and calling that transformative relationship. Liturgical scholar Aidan Kavanagh writes:

One may turn an altar around and leave *reform* at that. But one cannot set an adult catechumenate in motion without becoming necessarily involved with *renewal* in the ways a local church lives its faith from top to bottom. For members of an adult catechumenate must be secured through evangelization; they must be formed to maturity in ecclesial faith through catechesis both prior to baptism and after it; and there must be something to initiate them into that will be correlative to the expectations built up in them through their whole initiatory process. This last means a community of lively faith in Jesus Christ dead, risen, and present actually among his People. In this area, when one change occurs, all changes.<sup>44</sup>

We must remain committed to this ever-questioning God who is incarnate in the ever-changing situations of human life. If our commitment is true and our response clear, a new generation of inquirers will be able to reply with faith to the Christ-Question of God because of what they have seen and heard and have come to believe in our midst.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>44</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, “Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar Catholicism: A Brief Report,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 8.