

Catechumenate: Basic Training in Christian Life

When the Second Vatican Council restored the catechumenate as the key part of a process of adult initiation that had lain fallow for many centuries, the bishops described most clearly what they intended it to be in the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad gentes*. They said: "The catechumenate is not a mere expounding of doctrines and precepts, but a training period in the whole Christian life, and an apprenticeship duty drawn out, during which disciples are joined to Christ their Teacher" (*Ad gentes*, 14). The bishops did not use the Latin word for "apprentice" but rather the word "*tirocinium*." The root word is "*tiro*"—a beginner, a recruit. The *tirocinium*, then, was the kind of "basic training" a soldier would receive, including a young soldier's first assignment under a trusted leader.

So what the catechumenate is supposed to be is something like a Christian *tirocinium*: introducing someone to the basics of Christian living and helping that person put those basics into practice. That introduction includes the foundation teaching that grounds these basics, of course, but it is so much more than that. Just as basic training in the military introduces a recruit to a whole way of life, so the catechumenate introduces someone into the four aspects of Christian living: the sacred Word of Scripture and the tradition of the Church; active membership in a Christian community; formation in a life of prayer; and formation as a disciple committed to apostolic witness and service. The way that catechumens are introduced to these four "pillars" of the faith is by doing:

They are formed in the way of discipleship by doing what disciples of Jesus Christ do.

Where does this basic training take place? Not primarily in the classroom, though there has to be some time for intel-

lectual formation and reflection. Rather, even before they become catechumens, inquirers should begin walking with the community in its gathering for worship and in its mission to the world as soon as they knock on our doors. That requires something of the community—not just of the parish staff or the catechumenate leaders or the catechists. It requires that the whole community be willing to spend time with inquirers and catechumens, walking with them as they come to know Christ in the Catholic Church and experience what it is to love and serve the Lord. The community, then, must believe in its power to influence and "infect" with a readiness to follow Christ those who come seeking to know more about us, the faith we profess, and the way we live.

If we are to offer this kind of companionship, we need to remember who we are and who we have been called to be in our Christian life. Only then can we offer people not just the

knowledge of what the Church believes but the way that the living Church puts that belief into practice. We need to ask ourselves—as individuals and as a community—the familiar question whether, if we were arrested for being Christian, there would be enough evidence to convict us. In what would that evidence consist? When we find that answer, then we'll know what to share with our catechumens and how to share it.



Signing a new catechumen with the sign of the cross. Photo by John Donaghy.