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THE FIRST FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF CATECHESIS

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The Church's long catechetical history has been an evangelizing history of bringing the Word of God into the hearts of people, their culture, and their history. As such, the catechetical formation of the Christian people in every age and situation has always had its own character, style, and stress. Despite changes in pastoral approaches across the ebb and flow of time, the Church has always striven nevertheless to be faithful in proclaiming the Gospel message, handing it on, and forming Christians in it. Catechesis has always occupied a pride of place throughout the history of the Church in this endeavor.

Sources of Catechetical Legislation

From its very beginnings, the Church has developed institutions and laws—especially regarding organization, liturgy, and moral life—that regulated the life of the community. During the first centuries, these norms were found in sources like the *Apostolic Tradition*, the *Didaché*, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, etc. However, one obviously cannot claim the existence of a precise juridical science at

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that early point in time.[1] Such a development culminated only later, around the mid-twelfth century, with the *Concordia discordantium canonum*[2] in which Gratian organized norms that existed during the early period of the Church down to his day.

With the peace of Constantine and the granting of religious freedom to Christians beginning in the fourth century, legislations of councils and popes became sources of laws in response to new situations and new problems concerning doctrine, discipline, and organization, including catechesis. Bishops of the empire convened synods and councils and issued norms for their local Churches. Popes wrote decretals in response to concrete questions regarding matters of discipline and law.[3] Over the course of the fifth century, popes no longer limited themselves to the resolution of concrete difficulties but issued, on their own initiative, general norms for entire regions. This trend continued during the Middle Ages and down to the present day.[4]

After the conciliar canons and papal decretals, the texts of the Fathers and other Church writers occupy a third but important place. In addition to being considered as the most complete and reliable transmitters and interpreters of apostolic teaching, they also established

[1]B. Ferme makes an insightful observation that

> è anche importante vedere che questo genere letterario delle collezioni canoniche era un modo di fare teologia. Le varie istituzioni, la disciplina liturgica e le norme etiche rispecchiano anche una teologia e un'ecclesiologia che vengono comprese anche attraverso le fonti stesse. (B. Ferme, *Introduzione alla storia delle fonti del diritto canonico. Il diritto antico fino al Decretum di Graziano* [Roma: Pontificia Università Lateranese, 1998], 41–42)

[2]Cf. E. Friedberg & E. Richter, *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, Pars prior: *Decretum Magistri Gratiani*, Editio Lipsiensis, reprint (Graz: Akademische Druck, 1959).

[3]Cf. Ferme, *Introduzione*, 43.

[4]Cf. C. Van de Wiel, *History of Canon Law* (Louvain: Peeters, 1992), 16.

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liturgical and moral rules on the basis of apostolic teaching.[5] In this sense, their writings formed an authoritative source of canon law although not as constitutive or legislative sources. This means that although the Western Church has never granted the force of law even to positions held unanimously by the Fathers, they were a source of inspiration nonetheless for the legislators of the time, i.e., the bishops and the popes. They were important witnesses of the discipline and of the law in force, both universal and particular. Nevertheless, the writings of the Fathers were recognized in the East as having the force of law from the sixth century onwards.[6] The fact that Gratian utilized and included the writings of the Fathers in his *Decretum* attests to their unique value.[7]

Catechesis in the Apostolic Age

The first four hundred years of Christianity saw the beginnings of catechesis and its more formal organization in the catechumenate, which generally consisted of four phases: the missionary phase, the

[5]For the West, the four great Church fathers and doctors are Ambrose (†397), Jerome (†420), Augustine (†430), and Gregory the Great (†604). For the East, they are Athanasius (†373), Basil (†379), Gregory Nazianzen (†390), and John Chrysostom (†407). Cf. G. Groppo, "Catecumenato antico," in J. Gevaert, ed., *Dizionario di Catechetica* (Leumann: Ed. Elle di Ci, 1986), 133–136.

[6]Cf. Van de Wiel, *History of Canon Law*, 21.

[7]The *Decretum Gratiani* (early 12th century), being a compilation made by private initiative, had no legal character. Each document included in it retained its own individual value. Van de Wiel writes:

> In spite of the renown and the great authority of the *Decretum Gratiani*, it remained a private collection with no universal force of law.… Nevertheless, some of the texts, even the *dicta*, acquired the force of universally applicable law.… The *Decretum* was publicly and generally taught in the schools, enriched with glosses, summaries and commentaries, and used by popes and tribunals in the drafting and application of laws. This universal and manifold use, however, did not change its private character. (Van de Wiel, *History of Canon Law*, 102)

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catechumenate proper, the reception of the sacraments of initiation, and, finally, post-baptismal mystagogical catechesis. This primordial educational institution in the early Church, however, later fell into disuse. Eventually, a new form of catechetical formation emerged in the Church—catechetical preaching.

Origin of the Term "Catechesis"

The term catechesis is derived from a rarely used Greek verb (κατηχέω) that is translated literally as "to sound towards," "to sound down upon," or "to resound." Its noun form does not occur in the New Testament; only its verbal form is found there, although not in the technical sense it would acquire later on within the context of the catechumenate. The New Testament authors give it the meaning "to inform by word of mouth" or "to teach orally, to instruct." For example, James informs Paul in Acts 21:21[8] that there is a rumor concerning him circulating among the Judeo-Christians in Jerusalem. The text reads: "They have been informed (κατηχήθησαν) that you are teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to abandon Moses and that you are telling them not to circumcise their children.…"[9]

In other contexts, the verb takes on a religious coloring.[10] Paul often employed the term in the sense of giving instructions or information concerning the content of the faith. For example, he used the verb κατηχέω to refer to the instruction of the Jews in the Law (cf. Rom. 2:17–21) and of the Christians in the inspired word (cf.

[8]All Scriptural citations and abbreviations of the Biblical books are taken from Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, *The New American Bible*, trans. Catholic Biblical Association of America (New Jersey: 1970).

[9]Cf. M. Bryce, "Catechesis," in I. Cully & K. Cully, eds., *Harper's Encyclopedia of Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 98. Cf. J. Audinet, "Catechesis," in K. Rahner, ed., *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, Vol. I (New York/London: Herder and Herder, 1968), 263.

[10]Cf. Audinet, "Catechesis," 264. Cf. F. Murphy, "Catechesis I: Early Christian," in W. McDonald, ed., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. III (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 208.

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Gal. 6:6; 1 Cor. 14:19). Nevertheless, the term has always emphasized its oral nature and especially its being a handing on of the word that has been received.

The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles

The *Acts of the Apostles* is a witness to the core experience of the first Christians as a community: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). In this passage, one sees the image of the Church as feeding on the Word of God through the teaching of the apostles, celebrating that Word in the Eucharist, and bearing witness to it before others by the charity they share as a community.

The twelve apostles were witnesses to everything Jesus taught and did (cf. Acts 1:1). They taught and preached to others especially about the salvific meaning of the Lord's death and resurrection (cf. Acts 2:22–36). The apostles eventually transmitted to their successors the task of teaching the early Christian community. They entrusted it also to the deacons (cf. Acts 6:8; 8:26) and to many others whom they enjoined to join them in preaching the Word (cf. Acts 15:35).

The preaching of St. Paul from Antioch to Rome, including his numerous letters, and the letters of Peter, John, James, and Jude are evidence of catechesis in the apostolic age; moreover, and perhaps more importantly, is the use of the Gospels as primary avenues of catechizing. Before being written down, they were passed on to others as oral teaching even as they displayed some catechetical structure and elements, although with varying degrees of clarity.[11]

The Early Church's Identity and Mission

During the first two hundred years of the Church's existence, the Christian community was concerned with its own separate identity in

[11]According to Pope John Paul II in *Catechesi tradendae*, St. Matthew's account has been called the catechist's gospel and St. Mark's the catechumen's gospel. Cf. Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Catechesi tradendae* (October 16, 1979), in *AAS* 71 (1979): 1277–1340 (cited hereafter as *CT*). Cf. *CT* 10–11, 22.

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relation to the synagogue and the pagan world. Gathering in houses, the community concerned itself with catechesis, the liturgy, other aspects of their life in common, and the proclamation of the Gospel. Upon the rock of this self-understanding as followers of the Risen Christ, this early generation of believers built a missionary enterprise that had a profound charismatic character owing to their overpowering baptismal experience.[12] In fact, the early Christian community lived on the basis of its missionary mandate (cf. Mt. 28:20; Mk. 16:20), which the early Christians expressed through the preaching of the apostles, itinerant missionaries, catechists, and simple Christians, and also through their personal contact with others and witness of faith and charity, especially the witness of the martyrs. Hence, missionary action during this early period of Christianity was aimed at bringing new disciples to Christ and initiating them into the Christian faith. This action, however, was characterized by flexibility and a variety of personal initiatives; one cannot yet speak of a programmed initiation process.[13]

The early Church directed her missionary action toward adults: "They were invited to make a personal and responsible decision: to believe, express sorrow for their sins, desire to be baptized. Therefore, to choose to be Christians."[14] After an initial attraction to the faith of Christians, they were assisted in a process of maturation in the faith and Christian behavior. Their response in terms of their acceptance of the Word of God and their conversion was the core of that experience (cf. Acts 2:37–41). It is in this perspective that one situates the Church's

[12]Cf. L. Meddi, *Catechesi: Proposta e formazione della vita cristiana* (Padova, 2004), 20. Cf. U. Gianetto, "La catechesi nella storia: Dagli inizi fino al rinnovamento conciliare," in E. Alberich & U. Gianetto, eds., *Andate e insegnate: Manuale di catechetica* (Leumann: Elledici, 2002), 60.

[13]Cf. G. Cavallotto, *Catecumenato antico: Diventare cristiani secondo i padri* (Bologna: EDB, 1996), 30–31.

[14]"Coloro che si orientano a Cristo sono persone adulte, chiamate a una personale e responsabile decisione: credere, pentirsi dei peccati, desiderare di essere battezzati. Dunque scegliere di essere cristiani" (Cavallotto, *Catecumenato antico*, 30 [English translation is author's own]).

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eventual organization of the catechumenate and its object: conversion to Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel message. For all the new disciples of the Lord, the key event in their itinerary of faith was their process of conversion, assisted normally by the preaching of the Word and the witness of Christians.[15]

Authors distinguish two principal moments in the proclamation of the Good News that developed in primitive Christianity. The first was missionary preaching to the Jews and the pagans, announcing the great event of the resurrection of Christ with a view toward their conversion. Then, around the second century, the kerygma or the message of the proclamation developed into evangelical narrations and instructions of a moral and doctrinal character. Called the *Didache*,[16] this form of teaching evolved eventually into other types: the homily or liturgical preaching, catechesis imparted to catechumens prior to baptism, and mystagogical catechesis imparted to neophytes. Nevertheless, one still cannot speak of a true organization of the instructions that were given to new converts to prepare them for baptism by the second half of the second century. That developed later with the organization of the catechumenate toward the end of the century.[17]

The Catechumenate

The late second century marked an important phase in the history of the Church and of catechesis in particular with the organization of the catechumenate as a pastoral-liturgical institution. By the end of the third century to the beginning of the fourth, the Christian community organized in a more structured way whatever they had been doing in preparing converts to receive the sacraments, thereby giving birth to

[15]Cf. Cavallotto, *Catecumenato antico*, 29–30.

[16]Cf. P. Schaff, ed., *The Oldest Church Manual Called the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885).

[17]Cf. G. Groppo, "Patristica (Catechesi)," in Gevaert, ed., *Dizionario di Catechetica*, 482–484. Also cf. Meddi, *Catechesi*, 22–23.

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a process of intense preparation and testing before admission into the Church. The catechumenal practice spread rapidly as a formally organized institution in all the early Churches during the third century and the first half of the fourth. It remained in practice until the fifth century, then underwent decline until its disappearance in the sixth and seventh centuries.[18]

The catechumenate was a period of formation directed at the maturation of the conversion of candidates on the level of doctrinal faith and especially of Christian life. An effective conversion was required, one that entailed a true change of behavior: putting an end to sinful actions, developing the cardinal virtues in one's life, abandoning bad attitudes, growing in honesty and in solidarity with the weak. The process of formation culminated in the catechumens' reception of the sacraments of Christian initiation. The means involved in attaining the goal of effective conversion were a series of structured curricula called catechesis and a system of cultural and liturgical practices (imposition of hands, exorcisms, etc.) situated within a whole process of apprenticeship in Christian life.[19]

The oldest, most noted, and most systematic among the principal sources for a reconstruction of the different phases of the catechumenate as it was practiced in the third and fourth centuries was the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome.[20] It described the

[18]Cf. Groppo, "Catecumenato antico," 134. Cf. Gianetto, "La catechesi nella storia," 61.

[19]Cf. Cavallotto, *Catecumenato antico*, 73. Cf. Groppo, "Catecumenato antico," 134.

[20]St. Hippolytus of Rome must have been born in the second half of the second century. He became a presbyter of the Church of Rome and died later as a martyr, probably around 325. While his original work, the *Apostolic Tradition*, has now been lost, fragments of the text can be found in Book VIII of *Constitutiones Apostolicae*, a collection of eight books containing rules of Christian life and attributed to Clement I of Rome. Cf. Clemens Romanus, *Constitutiones Apostolicae*, lib. VIII, caput XXXII, in J. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, *Series Graeca*, Book I (Paris: Garnier, 1886), 1127–1134. English translations of the original Latin text are taken from P. Bradshaw, M. Johnson, & L. Phillips, in H. Attridge,

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experience of the Roman Church, although it most probably also had some influence, directly or indirectly, on the other local Churches. Hippolytus used the word "catechesis" in its precise sense, referring to the teaching given to someone preparing for baptism—in other words, to a catechumen, as the candidate came to be termed: "Qui erit catechumenus, per tres annos catechesi informetur."[21]

The third and fourth centuries produced a voluminous collection of pre-baptismal and mystagogical catechesis. These were the works of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and St. Augustine of Hippo.[22] St. Augustine's *De catechizandis rudibus* is considered today to be the first manual of catechetical pedagogy.[23] The fundamental themes of these works, and

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ed. *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), cited hereafter as Attridge, ed., *The Apostolic Tradition.* Cf. M. Simonetti, "Ippolito," in Gevaert, ed., *Dizionario di Catechetica*, 359.

[21]The original text is found in Clemens Romanus, *Constitutiones Apostolicae*, 1131, 1134. "Let the one coming to be catechized be instructed for three years" (Attridge, ed., *The Apostolic Tradition*, 97).

[22]St. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, was born around 315 and died around 386. St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, was born probably in 340 and died in 397. St. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, was born probably between 340–350 and died around 407. Theodore of Mopsuestia was ordained a priest in 383 and became bishop of Mopsuestia in Cilicia near Tarsus. A friend and contemporary of St. John Chrysostom, he died around 428. Examples of their works relevant to this study will be noted in the process of the discussion in this chapter. Cf. F. Bergamelli, "Cirillo di Gerusalemme," in Gevaert, ed., *Dizionario di Catechetica*, 155–156. Cf. F. Bergamelli, "Ambrogio di Milano," in Gevaert, ed., *Dizionario di Catechetica*, 29–30. Cf. O. Pasquato, "Crisostomo Giovanni," in Gevaert, ed., *Dizionario di Catechetica*, 185–186. Cf. O. Pasquato, "Teodoro di Mopsuestia," in Gevaert, ed., *Dizionario di Catechetica*, 629–631.

[23]St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, was born in 354 and died in 430. He is surely one of the most important figures in the history of Western Christianity. Cf. Augustinus Aurelius, *De catechizandis rudibus*, ed. I. Bauer, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, Aurelii Augustini Opera Pars XIII, 2, Book XLVI (Turnhout, Belgium: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontifici, 1969), 115–178. Augustine wrote *De catechizandis rudibus* as a response to a deacon in Carthage who had implored

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of catechesis in general, were the Symbol of Faith, the Our Father, and the sacraments of Christian initiation, and they offered both doctrinal and moral teaching. Another source was the journal of the pilgrim Egeria or Etheria, called the *Itinerarium Egeriae*.[24] Egeria is usually described as a Spanish nun who visited Jerusalem on a pilgrimage in the late fourth century (ca. 380).

Throughout the third to fifth centuries, the catechumenate system in the early Church developed into slightly different forms in the different churches of the East and West. Nevertheless, the phases of formation can be delineated as follows: the missionary phase, the catechumenate proper, the reception of the sacraments of initiation, and the period of Easter mystagogy.

Missionary Phase

A time of direct proclamation of the Gospel while in personal contact with pagans preceded the formal period of the catechumenate. In addition to those engaged directly in missionary preaching, there was also the mass of Christians who announced the Good News in an informal way to those around them. They did this spontaneously in their daily lives on the basis of their relationships with their relatives, friends, and co-workers.[25] Centered on the basic tenets of

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him to write some guidelines for instructing candidates for the catechumenate. It presents an introductory instruction for inquirers which is, in fact, a survey of salvation history. It is not catechesis itself but only the opening instruction, which aimed to encourage candidates to begin the course of instruction in preparation for Baptism. Cf. O. Pasquato, "Agostino," in Gevaert, ed., *Dizionario di Catechetica*, 23–25. Cf. B. Marthaler, *The Catechism Yesterday and Today: The Evolution of a Genre* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 10.

[24]Cf. A. Franceschini & R. Weber, eds., *Itinerarium Egeriae*, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, Itineraria et alia geographia, Book CLXXV (Turnhout, Belgium: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontifici, 1965), 87–88. For the English translation of the text, see J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971).

[25]Cf. C. Schönborn, "Iniziazione cristiana e catechesi," in T. Stenico, ed., *Evangelizzazione, catechesi, catechisti: Una nuova tappa per la Chiesa del Terzo Millennio*

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the faith, the initial proclamation of the Good News of Christ was oriented primarily toward awakening personal faith and leading to conversion. Those who expressed interest were examined concerning their manner of life. Those known today as sponsors or godparents were the Christians who established initial contact with these pagans, accompanied them to the Church, and served as witnesses to their aptitude to become catechumens.[26]

Even the early period of admission to the catechumenate was already a selective process based heavily on the quality of the candidates' lives and how they concorded with Christian values. To illustrate, the elders of the Christian community conducted initial inquiries concerning the trades and professions of prospective candidates. Those engaged in occupations considered unsuitable for Christians were advised to renounce such; examples of these were those occupations considered immoral or which involved any sort of participation in formal pagan worship, such as the making of statues of the pagan gods or even the teaching of classical literature.[27] Upon positive evaluation of their

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(Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 143. M. Dujarier rightly observed that the term "pre-catechumenate" used today referred precisely to this sort of living contact of the early Christians with the pagans. Cf. M. Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries*, trans. E. Haasl (New York: Sadlier, 1979), 60–61.

[26]Hippolytus wrote: "Qui primo ad mysterium pietatis accedunt, episcopo vel presbyteris per diaconos adducantur; et causas exquirantur quare se ad verbum Domini adiunxerint: quique obtulerunt, testimonium eis praebeant, diligenter exploratis que ad eos spectant. Examinentur autem eorum mores ac vita…" (Clemens Romanus, *Constitutiones Apostolicae*, 1127). The English translation reads:

> Those, that first come to the mystery of godliness, let them be brought to the bishop or to the presbyters by the deacons, and let them be examined as to the causes wherefore they come to the word of the Lord; and let those that bring them exactly inquire about their character, and give them their testimony. Let their manners and their life be inquired into.… (Attridge, ed., *The Apostolic Tradition*, 83)

[27]Cf. L. Mitchell, "The Development of Catechesis in the Third and Fourth Centuries: From Hippolytus to Augustine," in J. Westerhoff & O. Edwards, eds.,

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motivations and personal disposition, candidates were admitted to the catechumenate and called "catechumens" in the East and "hearers" in the West.[28]

Only adults were allowed as participants in the catechumenate; there was no official catechesis for children. Nevertheless, children were guided within the family, with the parents taking a central role by presiding over the process of initial introduction into the basics of the faith and the living out of Christian life.[29]

Catechumenate Proper

The catechumenate proper lasted for about three years. Hippolytus wrote that the duration was contingent upon the progress of the catechumen: "Qui erit catechumenus, per tres annos catechesi informetur: quod si studiose se gerit, et rei desiderio tenetur, admittatur: quia non tempus, sed vitae institutum perpenditur."[30] The Council of Elvira, in its canon 42,[31] required two years of formation except for urgent cases arising from illness. While this was a little less than the prescriptions of Hippolytus, grave faults could prolong the catechumenal period up to three or five years or even to the moment of death.[32]

A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1981), 50. For a detailed list, cf. Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate*, 60–61.

[28]Cf. Gianetto, "La catechesi nella storia," 61.

[29]Cf. Schönborn, "Iniziazione cristiana e catechesi," 143.

[30]The original text is found in Clemens Romanus, *Constitutiones Apostolicae*, 1131, 1134. "Let the one coming to be catechized be instructed for three years. But if anyone is eager and has zeal for the task, let [them] be received, for it is not the time but the way that is judged" (Attridge, ed., *The Apostolic Tradition*, 97).

[31]Cf. Concilium Eliberitanum (Elvira), cap. 42, in J. Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Graz: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1961), 12–13.

[32]Cf. Concilium Eliberitanum, 12–13, 17. Dissenting from the mainstream opinion with regard to the standard period of the catechumenate, Johnson maintains the position that the exact length of the pre-baptismal catechumenate

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The catechumenate was a period of formation under the guidance of a competent person whom the community had prepared and delegated for this ministry. Called the *doctor audientium* or teacher of the hearers, this person could also have been the layperson who served as the official catechist of the community.[33] The catechumens, who were undergoing formation in doctrine and apprenticeship in Christian life, were allowed to participate in the liturgy of the Word during the celebration of the Eucharist together with the community of the faithful.

At the end of this period, a new scrutiny was held to evaluate the fruits of the dual approaches to catechumenal formation: the catechumen's knowledge of basic Christian truths and a life conformed to it. The decision is then made concerning the candidate's admission into the next phase. Later Latin authors called this group of *electi* (chosen) the *competentes* (seekers) in contrast to the simple *audientes* (hearers); in Greek, they were called φοτίζομενοι (*photizomenoi*—those being enlightened). During this whole process, the witness of the sponsors was required to attest to the candidates' conversion.[34]

The Sacraments of Initiation

The third phase took place during the time of Lent and was the preparation immediately before the reception of the sacraments of initiation. During a special liturgical celebration at the beginning of Lent, the bishop listed the names of the candidates and then delivered a homily called the πρωτοκατηχησις (*protocatechesis*). From that point onward, this immediate preparation began, which consisted of three means of formation.

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in pre-Nicene Christianity is not known with any degree of certainty. For his argumentation, see M. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 90–91.

[33]Cf. Schönborn, "Iniziazione cristiana e catechesi," 143. Cf. Groppo, "Catecumenato antico," 135. Also cf. Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate*, 51.

[34]Cf. Groppo, "Patristica," 484. Cf. Mitchell, "The Development of Catechesis," 51.

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The first was teaching or instruction. The bishop met with the candidates on a daily basis during the initial weeks of Lent and explained the Scriptures to them. Beginning on the fourth week of Lent (the sixth in the East), formal doctrinal catechesis was provided, beginning with the *traditio Symboli* (the teaching of the Symbol of the Faith or the Creed) done as an act of handing over, a kind of official transmission of the faith of the Church to the candidate. The Creed,[35] which was explained with many Scriptural references, was the real core of the instruction for baptism. It had to be memorized because it was a summary of Scriptural teaching, embracing in a few phrases much of the religious knowledge contained in the Old and New Testaments, a guarantee of fidelity to the Gospel. Outstanding examples of instruction on the Creed were Augustine of Hippo's *Sermo de Symbolo ad catechumenos*[36] and Ambrose of Milan's *Explanatio Symboli ad initiandos*.[37] The importance of the Creed can be seen in the letter of Pope Leo I[38]

[35]Various local communities of Christians adopted their own creeds during the period of the early Church. Denzinger gathers more than forty of these formulations from the second to the ninth centuries. Cf. H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. P. Hünermann (Bologna: EDB Edizioni Dehoniane, 1995), nn. 1–76 (pp. 1–47). For a description of these creeds, cf. C. Cortéz, L. Outes, & J. Calvo, "Símbolo de la fe (El Credo)," in V. Arés, M. Puerto, R. Recalde, & J. Garcia, eds., *Nuevo Diccionario de Catequética*, Vol. II (Madrid: San Pablo, 1999), 2086–2097. Cf. R. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe*, *c.1215–c.1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 15–18.

[36]Cf. Augustinus Aurelius, *Sermo de Simbolo*, ed. R. Plaetse, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, Aurelii Augustini Opera Pars XIII, 2, Book XLVI, 179–199.

[37]Cf. Ambrosius Aurelius, *Explanatio Symboli ad initiandos*, in J. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, *Series Latina*, Book XVII (Paris: 1862), 1193–1197.

[38]Concilium Chalcedonense, *Epistula Papae Leonis ad Flavianum ep. Constantinopolitanum de Eutyche*, in G. Alberigo et al., eds., *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta* (Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane Bologna, 1991), 77.

> [One] who has not the most elementary understanding even of the Creed itself can have learnt nothing from the sacred texts of the New and Old Testaments. This old man has not yet taken to heart what is pronounced by every baptismal candidate the world over.

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to Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, concerning the monk Eutyches who was a proponent of an extreme form of Monophysitism:

> Quam enim eruditionem de sacris novi et veteris testamenti paginis adquisivit qui ne ipsius quidam symboli initia comprehendit et quod per totum mundum omnium regenerandorum voce depromitur, istius adhuc senis corde non capitur?

As the outline of the whole instruction, the repetition and memorization of the Creed called to mind the entire content of the instruction given about it.[39] In a later period, the giving and explanation of the Our Father were added either to the catechesis for those about to be baptized or as part of the post-baptismal mystagogy, and not only as a prayer to be memorized and recited but also as a model for the candidates' own life of prayer.[40] The process of instruction concluded with the ceremony called the *redditio Symboli* or the recitation of the Creed by the candidates for baptism. Canon 46 of the Council of Laodicea (363) attests to this practice of the fourth-century catechumenate. The catechumens about to be baptized learned the Creed and recited it before the bishop or the priests on Thursday of Holy Week.[41] For her part, Egeria observed in her *Itinerarium* that in the practice of the Jerusalem Church, the ceremony of the *redditio Symboli* took place on the Saturday before the beginning of Holy Week. The candidates went up one by one to the bishop and recited the Creed,

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The English version of the text is found in Council of Chalcedon, *Letter of Pope Leo to Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, about Eutyches*, in N. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* Vol. I (London/Washington DC: Sheed and Ward/ Georgetown University Press, 1990), 77.

[39]Cf. Mitchell, "The Development of Catechesis," 61.

[40]Cf. Gianetto, "La catechesi nella storia," 61. Cf. Meddi, *Catechesi*, 25. For an in-depth study on the use and interpretation of the prayer from the primitive Church to the contemporary period, see K. Stevenson, *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).

[41]Cf. Concilium Laodicenum, sub Silvestro, *Canones SS. Beatorum Patrum, qui Laodiceae Phrygiae convenerunt anno Domini 363*, in Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, 571 (can. 46).

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after which the bishop reminded them about what they had learned about the faith and the content of the Creed.[42]

Another important element of formation during this period of Lent was spiritual formation, which connected closely with the third aspect of formation: the living of an upright life. The candidates were exhorted to live a life of penance and intensive prayer as means of struggling against sin and living up to the Christian truths in which they were instructed. Since this period was a time of spiritual struggle, i.e., of renouncing Satan and adhering to Christ, the catechumens were assisted in the liturgical life of the community through various rites, exorcisms, and scrutinies. In Rome, these were held on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent.[43]

Easter Mystagogy

The Lenten preparations of catechumens culminated in the Easter vigil with the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. During the week of Easter, mystagogical catechesis was imparted to the neophytes. The symbolism of the rites, the Scriptures and sacraments, and practical morality were explained to them, and they were exhorted to live in accordance with their Christian beliefs. For example, in *In catecheses primam et secundam ad illuminandos*,[44] St. John Chrysostom exhorted neophytes to a deep resolution to live as true Christians should, explaining that the power and love of the Master were great enough to make the sinner shine more brightly than the rays of the sun. Other examples of this mystagogical catechesis were

[42]Cf. *Itinerarium Egeriae*, 87–88. Cf. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 145.

[43]Cf. Schönborn, "Iniziazione cristiana e catechesi," 144–145.

[44]Cf. Joannes Chrysostomus, *In catecheses primam et secundam ad illuminandos*, in Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, *Series Latina*, Book XLIX, 226.

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St. Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechesis Mystagogiae Quinque*[45] and St. Ambrose of Milan's *De Mysteriis*[46] and *De Sacramentis*.[47]

On account of the intensive process of formation that the catechumenate provided during this period, Cavallotto writes that

> one understands why, according to Origen, this is a period of "combat" (*Hom* III on *Jer* 3) and according to Tertullian, an "apprenticeship of the hearers", during which, using the expression of Cyprian, whoever is disposed to learn the truths of the Church "learns in order to live" (*Ep* 73,22,3).[48]

The catechumenate, however, was not the only pastoral and catechetical means for the formation of Christians during this period of the Church's life. The rise of Christian buildings destined for communal worship, especially after the peace of Constantine in 313, paved the way for more frequent liturgical and Eucharistic gatherings of catechumens and the faithful, with the priests being able to offer catechesis to Christians in a liturgical setting. These instructions came to be known as the homily, i.e., comments on Biblical texts read in a systematic order to the liturgical assembly wherein both catechumens and the baptized faithful were gathered together.[49] With the decline of the catechumenate, the homily took its place progressively as the primary means of catechesis.

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[45]Cf. Cyrillus Hierosolymitanus, *Catecheses Mystagogiae Quinque*, in Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, *Series Graeca*, Book XXXIII, 1059–1127.

[46]Cf. Ambrosius Aurelius, *De mysteriis*, in Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, *Series Latina*, Book XVI, 403–426.

[47]Cf. Ambrosius Aurelius, *De sacramentis*, in Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, *Series Latina*, Book XVI, 427–482.

[48]"Si comprende, allora, perché, secondo Origine, questo è un tempo di 'combattimento' (*Om.* III su *Ger.* 3) e secondo Tertulliano un 'tirocinio degli uditori', durante il quale, usando l'espressione di Cipriano, chi si dispone ad apprendere la verità della Chiesa, 'impara per vivere' (*Ep.* 73,22,3)." (Cf. Cavallotto, *Catecumenato antico*, 73–74). The English translation is the author's own.

[49]Cf. Groppo, "Patristica," 484.

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The Decline of the Catechumenate

The peace of Constantine in 313 marked an important turning point in the history of the Church. From being an illegal religion, Christianity was not only legalized but even became the official religion of the Roman Empire. From being a persecuted Church, it eventually took on a privileged position. This change brought with it new pastoral problems.[50]

It was certainly true that large numbers of people wanted to join the Church after the conversion of Constantine, and not always for the right reasons. This increased the number of those who enrolled in the catechumenate. At the same time, many began to opt for an indefinite postponement of baptism,[51] even up until the point of death. Since, according to the thought and practice of the period, a person could obtain the forgiveness of sins that baptism conveyed only once, i.e., through the rigorous one-time post-baptismal canonical penance, many delayed their baptism to avoid this sort of penance. Many were content to be catechumens even without the true desire for baptism since catechumens were almost considered to be equals with baptized Christians.[52]

This era also saw the shortening of the period of the catechumenate from one that presumably involved years of general preparation to a

[50]L. Meddi analyzes the difficulties brought about by this new situation.

> Essa crea una situazione pastorale nuova segnata dalla libertà per il vangelo. Ma questo portò a un cristianesimo non più caratterizzato dalla libera vocazione e scelta del singolo perché si costruì presto un'equivalenza tra l'identità sociale e quella religiosa. La chiesa si trova a vivere situazioni pastorali nuove che chiedevano non tanto la formazione dei catecumeni, quanto la gestione di un'appartenenza ufficiale ma non convinta che creava una difficile identificazione comunitaria. (Meddi, *Catechesi*, 21).

[51]Cf. Cavallotto, *Catecumenato antico*, 202.

[52]Cf. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 89–90.

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limited period of one Lent. Johnson writes: "So it has been thought, the Church now had to accomplish in a short period of time what previous centuries had taken several years to do."[53] By this time, intensive doctrinal initiation and moral apprenticeship in the Christian life were no longer required. The gradual process of maturity from the time of the initial option of faith was substituted instead by a liturgical-pastoral institution that was inadequate, in fact, as a pastoral and pedagogical approach.[54] Thus, "the catechumenate has become less a school of formation and Christian life, giving way to a ritual catechumenate."[55] For Knowles,

> the conversion of Constantine brought about the swift transformation of the Church from a persecuted and fervent sect into a ruling and rapidly increasing body, favored and directed by the emperor, the membership of which was a material advantage. In the sequel, the standards of life and the level of austerity were lowered, and the Christian Church became what it has in large measure remained ever since, a large body in which a few are exceptionally devout, while many are sincere believers without any pretension to fervor, and a sizeable number, perhaps even a majority, are either on their way to losing the faith or retain it in spite of a life which neither obeys in all respects the commands of Christ nor shares in the devotional and sacramental life of the Church with regularity.[56]

In such a context, a more organized and massive arrangement of a pre-baptismal catechumenate would have been the most logical and effective response to a situation of rapid growth. Besides, given the privileged position of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church had at its disposal the means necessary to carry out such an organization. Nevertheless, whatever might have been the efforts of the Church to address the situation, the catechumenal process soon disappeared with the growing number of infant baptisms.

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[53]Cf. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 91.

[54]Cf. Groppo, "Catecumenato antico," 136.

[55]Cavallotto, *Catecumenato antico*, 238.

[56]D. Knowles, *Christian Monasticism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 12.

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The Emergence of Catechetical Preaching

In the context of a new situation, the Church continued to pursue its mission of gathering new members and forming those already baptized. The Christian community was and remained the key player in winning over to the faith the non-Christians living with them in the area and in confirming them in the new faith after their reception into the ecclesial community. In this sense, the total life of the community *ad intra* had a missionary orientation *ad extra*. The community's liturgy, piety, and charitable activity had a missionary function.[57]

If the participants of catechumenal formation during the period of the flowering of the catechumenate were adults preparing for baptism, now the recipients of catechetical preaching were adults who had been baptized as infants yet never had an intensive preparation for baptism as provided by the catechumenate of yesteryears. In the case of adult converts, an official of the Church catechized them over an abbreviated period with instructions on the Symbol of Faith and on the moral demands that ought to characterize their new life as Christians.[58]

There was clearly no special catechesis for children before the end of the sixth century, although the practice of infant baptism was steadily growing. Consequently, the formative efforts of the Church had to focus now on the needs and concerns of two general groups of people: those baptized as infants who had grown to be adults and adult converts. They became the focus of preaching, which retained to a certain extent the missionary character of the pre-baptismal catechumenate of the past. Preaching had to focus itself on freeing the new Christians from the stubborn grip of pagan beliefs and customs, which were obviously not easily rooted out from Christian communities due to a short period of baptismal preparation for adult converts and the lack of a systematic catechesis for children and adults. The homily

[57]Cf. H. Jedin & J. Dolan, eds., *History of the Church* Vol. II (London: Burns and Oates, 1980), 213.

[58]Cf. Jedin & Dolan, eds., *History of the Church* II, 213.

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thus took on a marked exhortatory character as it needed to address burning issues regarding Christian morals and behavior.[59]

Summary Observations

Primitive Christianity exercised its ministry of the Word through two complementary moments of one pastoral action, i.e., the initial proclamation of the Gospel or missionary preaching and the formation of converts and those already baptized through catechesis. In this one pastoral action, the Church endeavored to achieve her *goal and purpose* of proclaiming the Good News of Christ to non-believers with the goal of their conversion to Christ. Moreover, the Church taught the new converts not just the doctrine they needed to know but also the life they promised to live as Christians, again with the goal of strengthening these neophytes in their newly chosen Christian state of life.

The Church utilized the catechumenate as her primordial *means* of Christian formation. While maintaining the *traditio* or passing on of the deposit of the faith, catechesis never consisted purely in teaching. The catechumenate was an itinerary of continual conversion to Christ and thus of "giving birth" to women and men in the newness of Christ, an educative process with its double goals of maturity in the faith and initiation into the Christian life. It must be noted, however, that while pertaining to *ad intra* concerns, the process of initiation into the Christian community was also decisively *ad extra* in its overall intent. Driven by a strong missionary spirit, the early Christians proclaimed the Gospel to others, fully conscious that they were a community of faith.

The way of the catechumenate was indispensable for the Church's mission because producing behavioral and cultural change in those who converted in increasing numbers from paganism demanded more than just an intellectual exposition. It required a *privileged setting* and *pastoral agents* to facilitate the continuous and oftentimes difficult process of conversion and growth of new members in Christ. The setting and

[59]Cf. Jedin & Dolan, eds., *History of the Church* II, 308–311. Cf. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe*, 313–314.

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active agents involved were precisely the members of the Christian community, led by the bishop who was assisted especially by the sponsors. This community support was a crucial element in formation.

Yet the catechumenate was not the consummate institution that manufactured, as it were, perfect Christians. The Fathers of the Church always had to address the problems connected with Christian initiation among their ranks: delayed baptisms, the *lapsi* during the time of the persecutions, vestiges of pagan practices after baptism. This only means that even the most valid pastoral institution of the past always had to take into account the reality of sin and human freedom.[60]

After the decline of the catechumenate, the Church sought to ensure that her process of Christian initiation still would have some kind of integrity even though the candidates could no longer easily assume her catechetical goal of authentic conversion and faith.[61] To achieve this, the Church devised an abbreviated form of baptismal preparation and intensified her liturgical preaching. During this period, the Fathers produced some of the most outstanding baptismal and mystagogical homilies which served not only as catechetical *tools* for their own use. These homilies survived their authors and were used once again later by preachers and catechists for their own congregations in some other place and time.

[60]Cf. Groppo, "Catecumenato antico," 136.

[61]Cf. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 91.

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