

VERONICA ROBBINS

Rite of passage

Initiation into Catholicism can be a lonely business for the catechumenate, and support is vital

A few weeks ago, three young mothers were welcomed during Mass into the catechumenate in our parish. During the catechumenate, catechumens (unbaptised people) and candidates (baptised people) prepare to join the Catholic Church by learning and doing what Catholics learn and do.

Ours is an ongoing catechumenate that meets weekly and is accommodated to the liturgical year – as set forth in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (the RCIA). It has neither beginning nor end so that, when anyone feels prompted to say that they are thinking of becoming a Catholic, we are able to welcome them then and there.

The main goal of the catechumenate period is a deeper conversion of both mind and action to both Christ and the Church. The period may last for several years, and four graced dynamics facilitate their conversion, according to the rite: a suitable catechesis, living the Christian way of life and prayer, taking part in liturgical rites and becoming involved in apostolic works. No one dynamic is more important than another, and all are needed.

But what the rite does not prepare any of us for is that this period of the catechumenate is profoundly unsettling. As a result, there is a temptation by parishes, on seeing the suffering, to want to rush the catechumens through, not realising that it is through surrendering to the ordeal that they are able to encounter God in a deeper way.

The Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase “rite of passage” and identified three stages in any rite of passage. The first is moving away from one’s previous group or way of life. The second is a time of transition, a liminal state, where one no longer belongs to the previous group but has not yet been absorbed into the next group. The third is the movement into the new group or way of life. The catechumenate belongs to the second of these stages.

The anthropologist Victor Turner took Van Gennep’s second stage, the liminal period, and drew out several characteristics that we can also find in the catechumenate period. The first of these characteristics is what he calls invisibility, when initiates are removed from their tribes to a hidden place and given a common name. Young girls, ready for marriage, are locked away with a matriarch; young boys are taken into the forest to

prove their manhood. They lose any sense of individuality or social status. Something of the same is found in the catechumenate. Though not physically removed from the parish, the group does meet separately and is given an exclusive name that belongs to them alone. Within the group all are equal, status does not count – the alcoholic psychiatrist, the 18-year-old single mother, the newsagent, the stockbroker, the elderly and the young.

In the second characteristic, Turner shows how we often use symbolic language to express this period of transition. In our parish we say that they are now in the “womb” of Mother Church, being nourished and nurtured. Biblical metaphorical language is used of baptism, where we enter into the tomb with Christ and rise with him into a new life; it is a process of dying to the old way of life before being born again into a new way of life.

The third characteristic in the liminal period is that it is a very precious time. Catechumens and candidates genuinely look forward to their weekly sessions, removing themselves for a short time from their worries and responsibilities. Prayer begins to touch their inner being. For the first time, many are moved to spend time alone at home with God and their Bible. After experiencing the group’s yearly retreat for the first time, one man commented, “You have taught me how to pray.” Deeply moved, they have begun to meet what Turner calls the “threshold”, an encounter with the divine.

Another characteristic, one that can be very painful for some, is the giving up of roles that formerly identified them. This particularly applies to already practising Christians. I remember a lady who, as an Anglican, suffered deeply when asked to let go of receiving regular Communion in her former church during the process, for she was being asked to give up her sense of belonging and security before being absorbed fully into the Catholic Church. Some were identified by a special ministry, often with power and responsibility, like the woman who was both a churchwarden and a member of the General Synod. Now they are

powerless and have to trust in the process.

A further characteristic that Turner notes is that of submission. He writes that when tribal groups are locked away with their instructor, they become completely submissive to him or her. Similarly, we can find a form of dependency in the catechumenate. The team needs to be consciously aware of this. It is vital that the catechetical team have had proper training in catechesis, group skills and objectivity so that the catechist does not fall into the trap of thinking that conversion is conformity to the catechist’s views and devotions.

The final characteristic is what Turner calls “*communitas*”. Because everyone is going through the same process, the group members bond and become intensely loyal to one another. A trust builds which allows intimate sharing. Lasting friendships form, and there is a genuine care for each other. As one of the three young mothers put it after the Rite of Welcome, “I feel that I now belong.” This bond within the group was noticeably evident when Simon, a convert from Judaism, was promptly rejected by his mother when he told her that he was becoming a Christian.

Despite the rite not preparing us explicitly for these characteristics, there is an implicit understanding of their existence in the rite’s recognition of the power of rites along the way and its insistence that the Sunday liturgy is the primary catechetical formation. That is why reflection on the Scriptures and the homily are a critical component. When the catechumens are dismissed in a friendly manner after the homily, the community is left to reflect upon what a humbling honour it is to be present at the greatest of all mysteries. We are all led to look at the meaning of our lives and to offer to live in a new and transformed way. Together, all become powerfully aware of the incredible, eternal love of God. For it is God alone who initiates, transforms and brings everyone to completion.

■ Veronica Robbins is the RCIA coordinator in the parish of Christ the Prince of Peace, Weybridge, Surrey, in the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton.

TO DO
Offer an ongoing or year-round catechumenate in your parish
Consider dismissal catechesis – dismissing the catechumens after the homily at Mass on Sunday to reflect upon the Word and the homily
Ensure that your catechists are properly trained
