

## **What is a Catechumen?**

Priest Colin Bower

Christianity is an inherited faith. It is not something we can claim for ourselves, rather it is something given to us by those who have it, the Church. It is in and through the Church that one becomes a Christian, as the Church is the Body of Christ and all who wish to become like Christ must be united to His Body. The Church, desiring as God does that all be saved and come to a knowledge of the Truth, desires to prepare those who desire to be a Christian for the life in Christ, which is not of this world and is often at odds with the life of the inquirer when they first enter a parish seeking to become a member. It is for this reason that we have catechism, and call those who have made known their desire to become Orthodox catechumens.

Once you have made a decision to receive baptism, we will make you a catechumen (one who is taught). This is done on Sunday during the Divine Liturgy, which signifies to the parish community that you are someone preparing to enter into the Church. There are three prerequisites for this to happen: choosing a patron saint, a sponsor, and being willing to depart from former delusion.

A patron saint is a saint of the Church who you are establishing a unique relationship with. This could be someone whose name you already share (this is preferred), but this is not always the case. For example: my name, Colin, is Gaelic for Nicholas, and my patron is Saint Nicholas of Myra. This will be a saint you invoke for prayer on a daily basis, as they are taking a special role in your spiritual life and praying that you too might join them in the heavenly kingdom. At baptism you will be given their name, and will be identified as such in the Church and by other Orthodox Christians. If your name is shared with that of a saint, this will be your name in baptism, and the saint whose name you bear will become your patron.

A sponsor is someone in the Church who has established themselves as the person who introduces you to the Church- i.e. they present you for baptism and guide you out of the font. They are someone who can help you in your Christian life, and should play an active role in both your catechism and Christian life, as far as is possible. This will be someone who, while struggling for the kingdom alongside you, prays for you, and you for them. It is ideal that this person is of the same sex and either a similar age or older than you. The bond of baptism is identical to the eyes of the Church as the bond of blood, and as such degrees of relations (siblings, cousins, etc) with one's sponsor are in force (in short: you cannot date or marry anyone related to your sponsor either by blood or baptism).

One desiring to become Orthodox must understand that the Church is the Body of Christ, established by Christ, and it is in the Church that all who wish to be saved are made one with Christ and have the grace-given means of inheriting eternal life. Such a reality is not present outside of the Church. The catechumen is one who is willing to depart from that which hindered them from Christ, whether it be from heresy (Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Monophysitism, etc), schism, paganism, or any other system of belief foreign to Orthodoxy. To become Orthodox is to make a decisive break from what was previously believed, to depart from error and be cleaved to truth. One who wishes to become Orthodox must be willing to depart from their previous faith and not look back, lest temptation draw them into apostasy from Christ's Church.

In practice departing from the former system of faith consists of ceasing to participate in the life of the religious (or ideological, etc) body you were once a part of. One who wishes to become Orthodox is professing that the Orthodox Church is *the* Church, it is not possible to affirm this while still praying with heretics and partaking of their sacraments or engaging in any other non-Orthodox spiritual practices. This does not mean that we are to become hostile or judge our former religion, in fact we are to fervently pray for those who we were once united with in faith, that they may be united with us once again in the Orthodox faith.

The expectation is that catechumens will struggle to live the life of the Church- pray, keep the fasts, keep the commandments, attend Divine Services, etc. It is good to build a solid foundation before entering into the Church, something that takes time. One critical aspect of this is repentance- struggling against those things that keep us from God and finding freedom from them in Christ. For those in the Church this predominantly happens in the Sacrament of Confession, for the catechumen this is begun through discussing these struggles with your parish priest, who will guide you and prepare you for the absolution that comes in the Baptismal Font.

While the catechumen cannot receive absolution in confession, it is still highly encouraged that they regularly examine their conscience and discuss this with either myself or Fr. Gregory. This can happen during the usual parish confession times, or it can be scheduled outside of the services. The Christian life is one of repentance, something that must begin before baptism and continue throughout the life of the Orthodox Christian. Establishing the habit of confession as a catechumen will better prepare you for your life in the Church, as the Holy Apostle James attests to, "confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed" (James 5:16).

What you will discover is that we are in no hurry- the Church moves slow, and this stands for those who are working to be received into the Church. As you begin to live this life in the Church we will pick a baptism date and work towards it. This date is unique to each person. This is something that Fr. Gregory and I will discuss then propose to you when it is deemed appropriate. That being said, this is up to you to accept- we will be happy to discuss this.