

The History of the Catechumenate

✠ **Early Church** “And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” -Acts 2:47

The New Testament records the early history and practices of the apostles who initiated individuals and entire families into the new faith through baptism, sealed them with the gifts of the spirit, and shared with them Eucharistic meal. As Christianity spread through out the Hellenistic world a process to introduce pagans and philosophers to the revealed God started to formalize.

✠ **150-200 A.D.** “we also praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water” -Justin Martyr Apology 61.

The records of both cynics and saints show the early church initiating converts in the Christian faith. The beginnings of a more comprehensive process started to appear. The works of Justin Martyr depict both the early catechumenate process and the grandeur of a Sunday liturgy, while works attributed to Hippolytus show the formal process and liturgical aspects of initiation.

✠ **3rd-4th Century** “But if he says 'Yes', ask him again, 'Are you a catechumen or one of the faithful?'” - St. Augustine "In Joan.", xlv, 2

By the beginning of the third century, a new normative process for the integration of new members into the Church was developed to aid in this gradual conversion process. Various catechetical schools incorporated processes to instruct and prepare Catechumens. Various rites both formal and informal appear. A basic form took shape which included first a presentation to the community followed by several years of formation. These catechumens (“one is instruction” Gal 6:6) would be allowed to the Liturgy of the Word but dismissed after communal prayers and before the Eucharistic rite.

✠ **5th Century** “now any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly,” - Edict of Milan 1

Early during the 4th Century Christianity became legal and there were a large number of Catechumens who had less commitment than those of early years who risked their lives to enter the faith. As Christianity became the religion of the empire, many sought to be baptized simply to gain the title of “Christian”. This large number of converts and the common practice of infant baptism soon lead to a decline in the Catechumenate and by the 6th Century a formal catechumenate process had all but disappeared.

✠ **16th Century** “they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic Faith..... they desire exceedingly to receive it” -Paul III “S.D.”

Encouraged by the counter-reformation various groups engaged in missionary activity saw the need to have a formal and gradual initiation into the faith. Missionaries found their way to the New World, Africa, and Asia and theologians and pastors began to struggle with how to develop the most thorough-going approach to initiation.

✠ **20th Century** “help the missionaries in their work... instructing and preparing catechumens for baptism” Pious XI Rerum Ecclesiae 27

Throughout the missionary territories and the modern world there was an increasing need to have a formal process for those entering the faith, and those who after Baptism did not have an opportunity for continued catechesis. Regions in Africa and other parts of the world began to revive the structures of the Catechumenal process.

✠ **Vatican II Council** “The catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps, is to be restored and brought into use”-S.C. 64

The occasion of the council gave the church an opportunity to investigate the need for restoration of the Catechumenate. Overwhelmingly approved, a provisional rite was distributed in 1966, followed by a 2nd edition for provisional use. In 1972 the Vatican promulgated Ordo initiationis christianae adultorum (Order of Christian Initiation of Adults) and in 1986 the United States Bishops approved the US additions to the Rite as well as National Statutes and a plan for implementation. By 1988 the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults was mandated for use in the US.