

## Reception into the Catechumenate

By Fr. Lawrence Farley in Sacraments and Rituals

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We [have seen](#) how our present baptismal service is the result of long development, a part of which consisted of joining the rite for making a catechumen with the later baptismal rite proper. In this fusion, certain baptismal elements (such as the renunciation of Satan, the adherence to Christ, and the recitation of the Creed) were moved to the part of the service called “reception into the catechumenate,” whereas they were once not a part of one’s reception into the catechumenate, but rather a part of the later baptism itself. If one uses this part of the total service to receive candidates into the catechumenate with the intention of requiring them to spend some time as catechumens before baptizing them, it makes sense for these baptismal elements to be transferred back to the baptismal service proper.

In the early church, the line between the Church and the World was thickly and distinctly drawn. The world was the place of darkness, of corruption, of death. It lay in the power of the Evil One (1 John 5:19) who was the effective god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4), so that those turning to Christ were turning from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18). Those in the world were viewed as contaminated and oppressed by the devil. Because of this, certain exorcisms were required—not just before they were capable of becoming Christians, but simply to make them capable of becoming catechumens. These elements of exorcism abound in the Church’s preparation for initiation and in the rite for reception into the catechumenate.

This is why the priest begins the rite for making a catechumen by breathing gently into the face of the candidate. This hearkens back to Christ’s breathing new life upon His disciples after His resurrection (see John 20:22). In the baptism itself, the priest later breathes upon the water used for baptism and upon the oil used for anointing the candidates just prior to their immersion. The Church regards the very matter of the world as in some way infected and fallen, and this exorcistic breathing (called “expiration” in the books) reclaims it for divine use. Thus, when the priest breathes upon the candidate, he begins to cleanse him and take him out of the world, reclaiming him for the service of God.

This expiration into the candidate’s face is followed by a solemn signing with the Sign of the Cross and by a laying on of hands. Both of these actions are exorcistic in intent and continue to claim the new catechumen for Christ’s Kingdom. A prayer follows which refers to the candidate fleeing from the tyranny of Satan and from his former delusion (i.e. from the delusions of believing in the pagan gods), and taking refuge under the shelter of God’s wings (for this image of sheltering, see Psalm 91:4, a psalm which speaks of being delivered from evil). The one entering the catechumenate thus crosses a border, leaving one land for another, and fleeing from the service of Satan to the service of God. Becoming a catechumen is an act of rebellion against the devil, and of defection to God’s Kingdom.

In our present rite, after these early actions and prayers come three sizable exorcisms. In the first two, the priest addresses the devil directly, commanding him to leave the candidate. In the third prayer, the priest addresses God, asking Him to search the depths of the heart and drive out any unclean spirit lurking there. In our (somewhat) less pagan day, we may expect that many catechumens have not been infected by the demonic, so that the exorcisms have a largely confessional value only. But they are still essential, for by agreeing to subject himself to these exorcisms, the candidate declares his opposition to the devil. The exorcisms thus constitute a kind of poke in the eye of the Enemy as the catechumen leaves his service. Originally, the catechumens were exorcised repeatedly, especially as the day of the actual

baptism drew near. Nowadays, the Church gathers all of these exorcisms together here in one place as the candidate declares his desire to serve the Lord.

After the three exorcisms, a fourth prayer is said, containing another exorcism with a triple expiration into the candidate's face. After this, the candidate turns to face the west. Christians always offer their prayers facing east, the universal direction of the rising sun, just as Jews offer prayer facing Jerusalem, and Muslims pray facing Mecca. (This is why all our churches now have an eastward orientation.) By turning to face the west, the candidate symbolically turns to the land of sunset and darkness in order to face the devil directly, turning to his former master and three times renouncing him to his face. (In the early Byzantine rite, the candidate even raised his hands towards the west in a further visual act of renunciation.)

In this renunciation, the candidate renounces "Satan and all his works, and all his angels, and all his service, and all his pride." Satan's angels, of course, are the demons. But what about Satan's service and his pride? This refers to the cultic worship of the pagans, the catechumen's former religion, with its statues and its parades. The new catechumen thus equated the worship of the pagan gods in his culture with the worship of Satan. It was a bold and courageous act of cultural defiance. No wonder Christians were accused by the pagan populace of being haters of mankind. This renunciation is sealed, then as now, with a final contemptuous breathing and spitting upon Satan.

After this, the candidate turns to face the east, the direction of the rising sun and therefore a fit image of Christ, the light of the world. He three times joins himself to Christ, confessing Jesus as King and God, and reciting the Symbol of Faith, the Nicene Creed. As the renunciation of Satan was sealed with an act of spitting, this adherence to Christ is sealed with an adoring prostration.

In our present text, this renunciation of Satan and adherence to Christ completes the reception into the catechumenate. The new catechumen has been exorcised, delivered, and cleansed of pagan stain. He is therefore ready and eligible to become a Christian through baptism. It is essential today for the Church to recover a proper appreciation of the catechumenate as an institution, and not to simply regard these catechumenal preparations as an archaic and lengthy introduction to baptism. Since more and more people are converting to Orthodoxy as adults, there is an urgent need to reinvigorate and restore the catechumenate. The very word "catechumen" has fallen into disuse for way too long. I remember that the word "catechumen" was once used in a game of Balderdash (a game where the players guess the meanings of unknown words), because the creators of the game assumed that few people would understand what the word meant. The Church needs to understand afresh what the word means.

A proper restoration of the catechumenate as an important and visible component in the life of the Church would help us resist a particular temptation today in Orthodoxy—that is, the temptation to clericalism, which is the sin of regarding the clergy as the only insiders, and disdaining the laity as second-class, as outsiders. Clericalism has infected our very language, for the term "layman" has now become synonymous with ignorance—we sometimes hear people professing their ignorance of something by saying, "I'm a layman in these matters." The re-invigoration of the catechumenate would reveal that the laity are not the outsiders—the catechumens (and even more, the world) are the outsiders. The laity are the insiders (along with the clergy), for the laity are those who have completed their catechumenate and fulfilled their time of preparation. They are now the initiated, the ones who know by experience the Eucharistic goodness of the Lord. The catechumens are those who await that blessed sacramental experience; the laity are those whose waiting is over.

