

# **The Orthodox Church in America**

## *Department of Evangelization*

Catechism and Evangelization: *An examination into the issues and process of receiving converts into the Orthodox Faith*

### **Slide 1**

The process of receiving people into the Orthodox Church is a critical issue in every parish. Parishes must have a solid plan and formula to follow so that new inquirers can become stable and faithful members in the parish while integrating into the community at large. While there is no standard model for such a plan, there are some basic guidelines and principles that a parish can follow.

### **Slide 2**

Catechism is, simply put, the preparation of people for reception into the Church. The method of reception is clearly outlined in the *Clergy Handbook* as well as in the Canons and Statutes of The Orthodox Church in America. Unfortunately, not every parish has catechumens; yet it is our calling as a Church to bring all people to the Church. If a parish does not have any catechumens, then it must “draw them in.” The parish should also remember to use the Prayer for Catechumens found in the Divine Liturgy. Parishes that use this prayer report that they actually have catechumens coming and finding them.

### **Slide 3**

True catechism brings in solid members of the faith who participate in the life of the Church. These five points should be the guideline on how to approach and begin the instruction of catechumens.

### **Slide 4**

Unfortunately, some people are received into the Church before they are properly prepared. Such people usually do not stay in the Church for long or become so fixated on “issues” that they lose the true joy of being a part of the Church. Thus, parishes should proceed slowly and carefully in their instruction of catechumens, approaching the task with the awe appropriate to it. After all, they are not merely “padding the parish rolls” by adding converts; they are bringing living souls into the embrace of the Holy Orthodox Faith.

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### **Slide 5**

Some catechumens can be “problem students.” While they obviously need instruction, they also need to be handled with care. Their instructors have to be sensitive as to where these people are “coming from” and alert to their motives for becoming Orthodox.

“Catechumens with baggage” come to the Church because they have a problem with the faith tradition they are leaving behind. They often want to focus more on the issues that troubled them in their old denomination than on the Orthodox Faith they are receiving.

Then there are the “culture seekers.” These are people who want to become Orthodox because they are enamored with a particular culture, be it Russian, Greek, or whatever. One needs to guide them from that superficial, ultimately secular fascination to the heart of the Faith.

“Wanderers” are people who have gone from denomination to denomination without ever staying for any significant period of time. In each of their successive church affiliations, they often focus on one issue that bothers them, and use it as a pretext for leaving and moving on to their next stop. They need to know that Orthodoxy is the end of their “church-hopping” search and the beginning of a new, infinitely more significant journey – the one to salvation.

The “apathetic” are those who enter Orthodoxy not out of any conviction but rather because they may, for example, be marrying someone who is Orthodox. These people need to learn the joy of the Faith and be given time to learn what they are receiving.

The “forevers” are those who come to church, yet never make the commitment to become Orthodox. They are often very dedicated to the parish but never take the “leap” into Orthodoxy. This may be due to family allegiance or other factors. They also need to be helped along – with patience and love – until they reach a point where they can finally make the decision to join the Church.

### **Slide 6**

This graph was presented at the All-American Council in Toronto in 2005. It shows the shifting demographics and dynamics of the OCA since our Church was granted autocephaly in 1970. Of particular note is the change in the number of parishes, the

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makeup of the OCA, and its modes of growth. Most of this growth has come through the conversion of individuals to Orthodoxy, in some cases the conversion of whole parishes.

### Slide 7

This slide shows how many of our clergy are converts who have been received into the Church over the past ten years. Convert clergy are now a sizable portion of the OCA's clergy ranks, and seminarians who are converts comprise the majority of the students in the OCA's seminaries. This makes catechism an even more pressing issue.

### Slide 8

This slide, drawn from a recent clergy survey, illustrates the different programs that are being employed for teaching the Faith. While most parishes have a set catechism program, fully 15 percent have either a minimal program or no program at all. This is a cause for concern, since what this slide demonstrates is that there is no standard way of receiving people into the Church.

### Slide 9

This is from the first ten points of St. Innocent's "Instruction to Missionaries." These points are as applicable today as they were when written. They contain solid advice on how to begin instruction in the Faith.

### Slide 10

Here is the standard terminology we use when we receive people into the Church. A *guest* is someone who visits the church and shows interest in learning about the Faith. An *inquirer* is someone who has met with the priest and has begun to ask questions about the Faith and is ready to make a commitment to attend services. A *catechumen* is someone who has begun formal training and is being prepared for reception into the Church. *Reception* is the actual means of bringing someone into the Church after their catechumen period has ended. Finally, *integration* is how we help the newly received person become an active, participating member of the parish. The goal is not just making contact, instructing, and receiving a person into the Church but rather making them an active member of the parish.

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### **Slide 11**

Outreach to the community is the key to attracting people to the Church. Evangelization is not marketing, nor is it proselytism, but rather preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. As such our parishes must be open to those around us so that they might someday become a part of the parish community. Use the wonderful “outreach tools” that are available so people can find the parish. These include the Yellow Pages, ads in local papers, and (most important these days) the internet. More people have found the Church through the internet than through any other source. Also note that a parish’s families are one of best assets for evangelization, as they may know others who are seeking Christ and can bring them to the parish. Remember, too, that there is no single source of converts. We must take every opportunity to evangelize. You never know whom God may send to you ... or from where they will come.

But all of this is useless if the parish is not open to outsiders and remains unwilling to welcome everyone who comes through the doors of the church. Remember, too, that programs in themselves do not attract people (though they are essential to evangelization). What attracts people is love ... the love of everyone in the parish, manifested toward anyone who walks through the front door. For it is these newcomers who will grow the Church. Make note of which parishioners are not accepting, those who would close the doors on all guests. These people need to be gently instructed, and not be allowed to close the doors!

### **Slide 12**

This is a list of useful tools and methods for reaching guests. Have simple visitor cards available and ask for a volunteer or two to hand them out. Make sure that the priest follows up with a phone call to every guest who filled out a card. A sample card may be found in the *Evangelization Handbook*.

One of the biggest turn-offs for visitors is to have their presence announced. Let them come quietly, and have someone ready to assist them, but do not announce that there are visitors in church ... because then everyone looks at them. It took courage for them to come to the church in the first place; give them time to adjust. Have material available for them to take home and peruse at their leisure. Do not charge any fee for this material. It is a small investment in evangelization.

Do not get into arguments or discussions with new people when they come to church. We are not here to sell anything. Instead, set up a time when you can discuss issues and questions they may have quietly and with patience. Greeters are a great asset. Select a few people who have the gift of establishing “instant rapport” to simply hand

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out books and guide people in the church. It is especially important that parishioners extend a hand of friendship at coffee hour.

No guests should ever sit by themselves at coffee hour. Through the conversation and fellowship they experience at coffee hour, guests should leave the church with a sense of acceptance and inclusion in the parish family – even after their very first visit. Use whatever people and resources you have available to make visitors feel welcome.

### Slide 13

Some visitors evolve into *inquirers*, people who have already been to the church, perhaps quite a few times, and now want to know more. Others are inquirers from the moment they set foot in the church. They may not be ready to become catechumens, but simply need to have questions answered. Set up a time to meet with them, talk to them, and let them ask any questions on their minds. Answer honestly what questions you can, and do not engage in polemical arguments.

Give them a simple introduction to what the Church is, and learn about their lives and their personal journeys. Listen attentively. An understanding of who they are and where they've been is essential. When you answer their questions, do not argue or point out deficiencies in other faiths.

Invite them to attend services and other events so they can meet more and more people in the parish. You can give them some books to read. Also start them on a simple cycle of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Make sure they are on the mailing list and send them the parish newsletter.

### Slide 14

Here are some selected readings that provide a good introduction to the Orthodox Church. Pastors who have used it report that it works well for inquirers. You might add a favorite volume or two of your own, but stay away from controversial books, or “subtle” books that require a solid, experiential grounding in Orthodoxy to be properly understood.

### Slide 15

The next step is to have the *inquirer* become a *catechumen*, one who is preparing to be received into the Church. Use the formal prayers and services for catechumens so that the whole community can gather and visibly show their support for them. Take

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your time; do not rush anyone through their instruction in the Faith. The standard period of preparation for a catechumen is typically six to twelve months. The time of formal instruction may last three to six months; the rest of the time must be spent integrating the person into the community. You will know when the time is right to receive them.

Catechumens must come to as many services as possible to get a solid liturgical foundation. It has been said that the Church's services are its best teachers. Try to work in groups, with several catechumens learning together, as this allows people to bond and journey as friends. Moreover, group sessions are more fun and livelier, since the group members bring their different perspectives with them to class.

Be flexible with class times (sometimes conflicting schedules do not allow for group instruction) and with the direction the discussions take (sometimes they take an unexpected but very productive turn). But do have a general lesson plan and stick to it, so the classes don't just become genial occasions for "shooting the breeze."

### **Slide 16**

These are the essentials that every catechumen must learn. Plan your sessions around these topics.

### **Slide 17**

These are points that must be kept in mind when conducting the sessions. Attention to this checklist avoids many pitfalls and keeps the sessions lively and positive.

### **Slide 18**

This is Model One of Catechism, and it has been used successfully.

### **Slide 19**

This is Model Two of Catechism, and it has also been used successfully.

### **Slide 20**

This is Model Three of Catechism. It has been used successfully as well. None of these three models is complete, and there are other models out there. Note the major topics that are common to all the models. They incorporate the items from Slide 16.

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### **Slide 21**

The next step is to actually receive people into the Church. This is a great leap for many catechumens, and the whole community should rejoice in it. Follow the guidelines of the OCA for reception; do not improvise. Many parishes use either the fasting or festal seasons of the church for reception; for example, receiving people on Holy Saturday. This adds a “double significance” to the day for the person being received. Remember never to divide a family.

If one member is ready and another is not, then delay their reception until they can come in together. Never allow the reception of a catechumen to become an issue of controversy or division within a family. If one family member does not wish to become Orthodox, make sure the others are “okay” with that person’s decision. And *always* receive new Church members in conjunction with the Liturgy.

### **Slide 22**

These are some points to remember when preparing for reception. A few of these points need explanation. As a priest, avoid using your own family as sponsors. It may cause jealousy or anger among parishioners. The priest is the father for all the parish. Try to match catechumens with sponsors who have like interests. Often this happens organically as the person integrates into the parish. If the person has a Christian name, then use it. Don’t try to make them into something they are not. Work with them if they have to take a new name, trying to use family names or the names of saints who have special significance for the person.

### **Slide 23**

The actual day of reception should be a special day, and the community should rally around the person being received. Many parishes present the new Orthodox Christian with a nice gift such as a prayer book or an icon. Arrange a special coffee hour honoring the newly received parishioners.

### **Slide 24**

All of the following is useless if a person is received into the Church and then disappears. Remember that the goal is to have healthy, active members of the parish. Get new parishioners (and old ones) involved, and match their skills with the parish’s needs. Remember that follow-up is key! Stay in frequent touch with the newly received. During their days as catechumens, they spent a lot of time with the priest and developed a special relationship with him. The priest needs to keep that going. A

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good way to do that is to have new Church members come to confession once a month for a year.

Clearly, the sacrament of Confession was not made for “bonding,” but your ongoing discussions with the new parishioner can continue afterward, deepening both your relationship and his or her commitment to the Church. Sometimes new Church members get so excited about their newfound faith that they burn out. Keep tabs on this. Gently remind them, if needed, that the “race” that the Apostle Paul wrote about was more like a *marathon* and not a 100-meter sprint.

At the other extreme, some new Church members get complacent and disappear as their initial zeal wears off. Keep tabs on this as well. But also be open to pleasant surprises: Do not be shocked if extended families, seeing the joy of the new parishioner, start to inquire and join themselves.

### **Slide 25**

Catechism is not just for those who want to enter the Church. It can also help those already in the Church who want to grow in their relationship with Christ. Do not neglect them, as they also are a part of a healthy parish community. Know your people and instruct them all, so they can grow in the Orthodox Faith. Remember John 10 ... the Shepherd knows his flock!

### **Slide 26**

This is a partial list of ways to reach visitors, inquirers, and catechumens. Stay positive and instruct them in the Orthodox Faith. Sermons, services, and events are great ways to reach out to them. Keep your discussions simple and instructive. Avoid arguments and comparisons, but rather teach and preach the Gospel.

### **Slide 27**

Finally, remember what the goal is ... to build a healthy parish of the Church. It is not a numbers game. Rather, you want solid members of the parish. Remind new Church members that while their reception marked the end of their search, it was also the beginning of their journey. It will take a lifetime for that journey to unfold. All of them should grow in peace and joy as they develop a deeper relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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### **Slide 28**

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