

Five powerful discernment practices for catechumenate teams



by Nick Wagner

One month after my 16th birthday—and one month after I got my driver's license—I made a date with a girl I had a crush on. When I got home from school, I asked my dad if I could borrow his sports car for my date. He said no. We had just had an ice storm, and some of the roads were not safe, especially for a new driver. This logic was lost on me, of course, and I threw a fit. So my dad handed me the keys and told me we were going for a test drive. We were barely three blocks from home before I put the car in a ditch. Even though I was sure I was ready to drive in any weather, my dad knew I wasn't.

One of the biggest challenges for catechumenate teams is discerning the readiness of catechumens to navigate a life of faith. At one end, we have people who are clearly ready for initiation. At the other end, we have people who are clearly not ready. And often, most people are somewhere in the middle.

In this article, I want to talk about finding and welcoming inquirers. The truth is, you probably have potential inquirers showing up at your parish every weekend. And even though it likely says something in your mission statement about being a welcoming parish, most of those potential inquirers do not come back for a second visit because they didn't feel a welcoming presence.

I have some personal experience with this. Before the pandemic lockdown, Diana and I would travel to ten or more locations a year to lead catechumenate training institutes. That means that over a span of ten years we were in at least ten different parishes a year for Saturday evening or Sunday morning Mass. So 100 parishes or more.

Discerning Readiness: A Pastoral Challenge

These middle people are almost always initiated before they are ready. Because we are unsure, we tend to give them the benefit of the doubt. We pray that the Holy Spirit will pick up the slack and that somehow the grace of the sacrament will carry them through to a lifetime of Christian commitment. While this sometimes happens, more often the newly initiated soon fade away, leaving team members wondering why they aren't coming back.

The most common reason we okay these middle folks for the celebration of the sacraments is we don't want to judge them negatively. When it comes down to it, who are we to say if someone is ready or not to be initiated? We don't want to hold someone back if he or she really feels God is calling them to this next step.

It is true that we cannot judge someone else's spiritual readiness. However, discernment is not a judgment about an individual person. Discernment is a communal process of listening to the Holy Spirit. Discernment is, as the rite says, a process to "help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously."

Are we being too judgmental?

One thing that gets in the way of a good discernment process is our own fears about being judgmental. We don't want to be in the position of telling someone they are not ready. We don't want to be responsible for holding them back. For those of us who think that way, we need to change our mindset. Think of yourself as a skydiving instructor. If you push the novice skydiver out the door of the airplane before she is ready—or allow her to jump on her own when you know she's not ready—you are putting her at great risk.



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The same is true with initiation. If we ask someone to follow the cross—to live a life of sacrifice modeled on Christ—before he is ready, the risk that he will fall away from his commitment is great. Fortunately, there are some simple steps that catechumenate teams can take to assure a good discernment process without seeming to be an overly strict parent.

1. Never promise a time certain for initiation

Don't even hint that an inquirer might be initiated at the next Easter Vigil or in time for their wedding. You can't know and they can't know until they have been in the catechumenate for a while.

2. Abandon the small faith community model

Many catechumenate teams think of and promote the catechumenate as a small faith sharing community. They speak of a group of inquirers who began the process at roughly the same time as a "class." They place a great deal of emphasis on the members of each class journeying together. I am reluctant to challenge this notion because it is so firmly embedded. Some teams believe it is a principle that is found within the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults itself.

Nevertheless, here is my challenge. The value is good, but the emphasis is misplaced. The inquirers and catechumens are on a faith journey with a community, but the community is the parish, not the folks who are in the catechumenate process. By envisioning the catechumenate as a class or as a small faith community, we amp up the pressure for everyone to "finish" at the same time. So in our discernment process, we are likely to let someone who is not ready to proceed anyway so she won't be left behind by her class.

3. Discover the true need

Each inquirer comes to us with needs. They have a question they want answered. We all know that the question they first ask is often not the real question, and we need to do a lot of active listening to get at the root of what has drawn them to our parish. Our discernment process goes awry when we fail to hear the deeper question. For example, many of our catechumenate processes are set up to answer the question: "How do I become Catholic?" And very few inquirers really have that question—even though that may be what they literally ask. Their real questions are more often along the lines of how can I find peace in my life, or can God ever forgive me, or what hoops do I have to jump through to get married here?

4. Create a formation plan

Once we know what a person's real question is, we can then begin to create a formation plan for that individual. This will be a joint project the team and the individual. It is not us telling the inquirer what he needs to learn. It is the team and the inquirer working together to come up with an individualized process that will answer the inquirer's true question. One thing that is important in developing a plan is that it doesn't end with initiation. A formation plan is lifelong. So an inquirer who does not yet have a post-baptismal plan might not be ready to celebrate the Rite of Acceptance.

5. Discern weekly

Discernment, then, is a process of reviewing the plan each week—the plan the inquirer created with you. So the catechumenate team is never telling the inquirer or catechumen "you can't have the keys." The discussion is always centered on where the individual is on her formation plan. Initiation is just one milestone on a lifelong plan. Some will reach that milestone sooner than others, but no one is "left behind." Once a person begins a journey of faith, they are always on the journey.