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# Training Adults to Become Christians in the Catholic Church 

## François PONCHAUD

After Jesus rose from the dead he instructed his eleven disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20).

Many biblical scholars conclude that the gospel of Matthew gives more attention to church organization than do the other synoptic gospels. In the verse cited above, Matthew points to the baptism that the early church conducted for new converts in A.D. 80. Maybe Jesus himself did not speak as clearly as does this passage, but it confirms what the churches practiced forty to fifty years after his death. According to Matthew, Jesus did not only send the apostles to evangelize, but charged them with "baptism" and "teaching the people to obey what he had commanded them to do." The baptism and deeds expressed the faith of those who gave their lives to Jesus as Christ and Lord.

Therefore since the beginning of the church, we can see in the Acts of the Apostles Christians who have concentrated on two tasks: sharing the good news of salvation brought by Jesus, and training others to become disciples.

After Peter proclaimed Christ's resurrection, "with many other words he warned them, and he pleaded with them" (Acts
$2: 40$ ). The early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship . . . and prayer" (Acts 2:42). After Paul converted to faith in the Jesus whom he had persecuted, he was educated and baptized by Ananias (Acts 9:5, 17-19).

From the second until the fourth centuries there were not many Christians, and this minority suffered persecution under the authorities. Therefore the church was eager to teach adults to be Christians. Tertullian (A.D. 150), Origen (A.D. 180), and Cyprian (A.D. 250) were famous in teaching people. Later, after the state became Christian, believers did not pay much attention to instructing and converting adults. They only performed baptism for newly-born children. Then in 1963 the second Vatican council decided to teach adults who wish to become Christians in accordance with the ancient way. This way is appropriate to the situation of Cambodia, since there are a small number of Christians living among a majority of Buddhists who hold to a faith very different from Christianity.

Normally the Catholic Church does not quickly perform baptism for those who ask to become Christians, but waits until they have gone through these four phases of formation:

1. initial evangelization
2. educating them to become disciples (catechumenate)
3. preparing them to receive the sacrament of baptism and the body of Christ
4. having neophytes reflect on the new life that they have received (mystagogy)

## 1. First phase-Evangelization

Every Christian has an important obligation to preach the gospel of salvation through Jesus. As the apostle Paul said, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). This is the task every one of us must do. If we know the way that provides happiness for us, we must share it to others. We cannot keep it only for ourselves! We preach the gospel through various ways, such as visiting people and caring for their living situation, just as Jesus took care of the living situation of people. We share with them and inquire about their faith. What do they want? What do they
understand of the meaning of their lives? How does their religion solve their problems? How do they experience their spiritual lives? Usually our Catholic brothers do not like to stress verbal religious proclamation because faith is a kind of love story. It is mysterious; we cannot share it with friends in a public area. On the other hand, we believe that the Holy Spirit-who is the spirit of Jesus risen from the dead-dwells in those who are devoted to their religion. He called them and exhorted them through the various ways of their own religion as well. We just try to be a witness to the way that leads to God, whom people are seeking through their own religions. We try our best to understand their deep desires and pay attention to respond to their needs as well.

The people who convert to Jesus are most likely to become the ones who change the direction of their lives. They change their minds not because they learned a theory or studied the Bible, but because they met Jesus-the living God-and accepted Him as their refuge. He leads them to change their thinking, behavior, relationships with others in society, relationships with men and women, manner of living as husband and wife, way of loving others, etc.

Sometimes those who accept the gospel believe immediately in Jesus as their savior, but they do not obey the good news as described in the parable of Good Seed (Mk 4:1-9). Sometimes it will take a few years-or ten to twenty years-for them to really depend on Jesus according to the Father who "draws them" (John 6:44), and according to their answer also. In this phase the candidate reveals his ${ }^{1}$ desire to become a Christian. Perhaps a person met a Christian who proclaimed the gospel in a confusing way-for example that the church saves mankind through giving money or rice, etc. In this case the church should help purify their desires and teach them to entrust their lives to Jesus, who shows the new way to the Father. That person then accepts Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). He is willing to turn away from his old way, to know Jesus, and live for Him. If the person gains

[^0]some kind of understanding then the church will conduct a ritual called "entering the church ceremony."

The church decides whether or not to accept this new member by considering some aspects of his faith and character:

- The person who applies for church membership must believe that Jesus is not the Father and not the Holy Spirit.
- Because he has met Christ the living God, he eagerly proclaims the Gospel to others.
- He must turn away from depending on the Buddha and trust in Christ instead. That does not mean we reject Buddhism, but rather that we Christians choose another way. We cannot reach Battambang by taking a bus and at the same time boarding a plane.
- He is not afraid of ghosts, and no longer consults with fortunetellers or mediums.
- He has started to care for other people who are poorer than he, striving for justice in society with all his strength.
- He is glad to join with other people who are seeking Jesus as he is.
- He is faithful to his spouse, no more playing cards, no more drunkenness, no more doing inappropriate business (especially oppressing others), no more receiving bribes, etc.
- If he is still young, the parents must be willing to let their child become a Christian.
Then the church accepts him as a Christian even though that person has not yet participated in a baptism ceremony.


## 2. Second Phase-Train Them to be Disciples.

Jesus told the group of his apostles "to make disciples of all nations" and "teach them to obey everything I have commanded" (Matt 28:19). The Church Fathers made a new word for that phase of "teaching them to become disciples": discipleship. It takes a long time to become a disciple. Baptism does not mean that a person is a disciple.

The person who is already a member of the church has to receive instruction in three major areas: knowing God's Word, knowing how to pray, and living according to Jesus' teaching.

According to the book of Acts, the early church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

The ones who received instruction in the faith "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." The person who hears the Word of God not just learns about the Bible, but gradually recognizes that God the Father loves him and calls that person to make a covenant with Him as if God were asking to marry him. When we study the Bible we discover a kind of love story, because the history of salvation in the Bible reads like a love story and the gift of life. The believer responds to God who loves him. Regulations come out of love also; therefore, the catechumen must consider his manner of living. He needs to bring his lifestyle in accordance with the love of God. The person who "teaches the Bible" must be a witness, who by his own living example shares his experience. A Bible teacher is not just one who teaches the Bible's words.
"They devoted themselves to prayer": the catechumen receives instruction on how to pray on his own as a Christian. Every religion teaches people to pray or to recite prayers, but only Jesus teaches people to have a spiritual relationship with the Father through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. So we have to teach them to pray the way that Jesus taught in Matt 6:5-13, particularly verses 9-13. The prayer was the "Our Father"; this is a model for Christian prayer. The person who receives instruction on prayer prays to the Father with love, using the words and the mindset of Jesus.

They "devoted themselves to fellowship." Members of the early church shared their possessions with one another. This means that Christian living is different from the lifestyle of other people. It is not preoccupied with earning for one's own consumption with no consideration for the poor. This is a very crucial point, showing that the candidate has experienced true conversion-not only lip conversion. The catechumen receives instruction on how to live according to his Master's teaching. People are to love others and forgive those who wrong them. Such practice is very different from what people normally do. Then they are to reflect on the message that Jesus shared on the mountain (Matt 5-7). He revealed that the way that leads to true happiness differs from the way of happiness
of the world. Everybody must obey Moses' law; only Christians obey the new commandment of Jesus.

This phase may take a long time-maybe one or two years. In this phase various rituals are performed, such as transmission of Jesus' prayer (Matt 6:9-13), meaning Christians should testify that they live according to the words of this prayer to let the seekers listen. Sometimes the ceremony of the giff of Jesus' word on true happiness (Matt 5:1-12) is held. Sometimes a ritual is performed using the brief Christian creed formulated by the church leaders in Nicea (A.D. 325). In this way the new convert understands that he has received the faith that was preached by the apostles and has been proclaimed from one generation to the next until today.

## 3. Third Phase-Candidates Preparing Themselves to Receive Baptism and Holy Communion

For many generations the church has celebrated Lent for all Christians to prepare themselves for forty days to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus. Then the church conducted a special teaching for the catechumens. During this time they read passages to remind them of baptism-Jesus tempted by Satan (Matt 4:1-11), Jesus undergoing a transfiguration (Matt 17:19), Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman (John 4:5-42), Jesus healing a man born blind (John 9:41), Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:44). The whole church teaches those who want to receive baptism during Lent so that they know the way of Jesus - that they need to fight Satan, but that this way leads to the glory of God. When they receive the sacrament of baptism Jesus gives them a source of life that will provide eternal life. He enlightens their minds and raises them from the dead.

Normally the bishop performs water baptism for them in the night of the Passover ceremony to declare that those who receive baptism also share the death and resurrection of Christ. As Paul said, "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death. . . . If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Rom 6:3-5).

## 4. Fourth phase-Reflection on the Wonderful New Life that Christians Receive through Christ.

After the Passover ceremony the neophytes reflect together on the dignity of their new life for at least fifty days.

The Church Fathers frequently compare adults who want to become Christians to the conception of a baby in his mother's womb, or to an Israelite who left Egypt for Canaan.

Jesus compared the sacrament of baptism to a new birth (John 3:3-8, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. . . . I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit"). But infants stay in the womb for nine months before they are born. A wife receiving sperm from her husband resembles a believer receiving the Word of God. When he first receives the Good News, his faith is like the conception of a child, but it is still small like the fetus in the mother's womb. Then the catechumens show their behavior, meaning that they are willing to follow Jesus who called them. They want to know Him more and more as their good teacher, and they decide to totally give themselves to Him who is the real source of life. They begin to believe when they "join the church" with an auspicious ceremony. When they join the church that means they are "Christian."

The fetus spends a long time in the womb in order to grow physically. Similarly, a new convert to Jesus as savior needs time to grow spiritually. He must not only learn but also practice how to live like Christ and follow him whom he has met as the living God.

This comparison helps us understand that we need time to let faith grow, just as a fetus needs time to mature enough to become a baby. If a baby is born after sufficient time in the womb he will live. If he is born before adequate time he will either be premature or miscarry and will not live. If he is delayed in delivery he will die in his mother's womb. That is why we don't rush to ${ }^{\circ}$ perform baptism, but allow time to assure that the new faith is certain and not transitory. Nor do we delay too long, or the individual might lose interest and his faith die out.

This comparison also helps us realize that teaching catechumens does not consist simply of verbal "instructions," but
also of training in living the Christ's way. The whole church is like a mother who nourishes the fetus in her womb; it is not just two or three people who perform that task.

All Christians educate newcomers by setting the example of genuinely loving each other, and by conducting various ceremonies. The newcomer helps the church to realize her role of a mother who loves, educates, and feeds her son.

The Church Fathers also compare the instruction of catechumens to the exodus from Egypt toward Canaan. This was a very crucial event in the history of God's people. God called his people out of slavery in Egypt. He parted the Red Sea, led them through, and gave the Law on Mount Sinai. He seemed to say: "I love all of you, but do you love Me? I speak the Word, but do you obey it?" The Israelites sinned against God by worshiping the golden calf. Therefore God tested their hearts for forty years.

Origen, a second-century Egyptian, was a renowned teacher of the faith. He used to give this example to teach catechumens: "Brothers, you left the Gentile world and gave up the worship of other gods in Egypt! You became the people of God. You began to walk. You received instruction in the faith, just as the Israelites did when they wandered in the wilderness. You received the Mosaic Law and Jesus' commandments, and began living a life according to Jesus' instructions. When you attempted to live the new way of life, priests helped by leading you across the Jordan River. You will receive baptism in the Jordan like Christ. Then you will enter the Promised Land to rest with Christ."

This comparison helps us understand that faith is like a journey with Jesus-a journey consisting of phases. The catechumens walk with the whole church they listen to God's Word together with other Christians. This process is a little bit different, but we must try our best to live according to the Gospel of Jesus.

All the Church Fathers used to compare baptism to a wedding, which also has different phases such as the proposal, engagement, bringing presents to the bride, the wedding ceremony, and living together.

The way in which the Catholic Church instructs the catechumens is the way that Christians have practiced ever since the beginning. God touches the hearts so that people believe, but
we have the obligation to educate people in the faith. Origen stated that "They approach faith, enter faith, confess faith, and live by faith." Jesus also desires that believers unite themselves into one great family by living His new way of life and changing the world according to God's will. Faith influences the world.



















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