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A Reason-Endowed Sheep

By Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

"Make him (her) a reason-endowed sheep of the holy Flock of Your Christ, and honorable member of Your Church, a hallowed vessel, a child of Light, and heir of Your Kingdom. So that, having ordered his (her) life according to Your commandments, and having guarded the Seal and kept it unbroken, and having preserved his (her) garment undefiled, he (she) may attain unto the blessedness of the Saints of Your Kingdom."

– From the Service of Making a Catechumen

In early August, the Commission of Missions and Evangelism held its seventh Evangelism School (see article on page 4). The subject was catechism, and each of the five speakers offered a different perspective on effective catechesis. Yet, what struck me most were two points on which they all agreed: the necessity of formation and the importance of integrating catechumens into a worshipping community.

We shall cover the former here and the latter in the next issue.

Catechism can sometimes be seen as a simple transmission of information: "Here's what we believe – accept it and you are in." Historically, that is how it is often presented. But what has become clear is that information is quite different from formation. Catechesis is not merely about absorbing information, but about forming Christians, disciples of Christ. We cannot simply rely on *knowing* but must focus on *doing*. So very often the seeker is allowed to form themselves rather than the Church forming them. This can cause confusion. This year's Catechism School confirmed the need for catechists to focus on what it means to live an Orthodox Christian life amid the demands of today's world.

The formation of Christian disciples should be of utmost priority, not only for those preparing to enter the Church, but for all who already belong to it. Otherwise, the theology, liturgical life, practices, Feasts, and Fasts of the Church can have little meaning or application in our life. Each can become "just another thing." Rather, our formation as disciples should form the very basis of who and what we are, reaching to the very core of our being. Discipleship is not just a way of life; it is life itself.

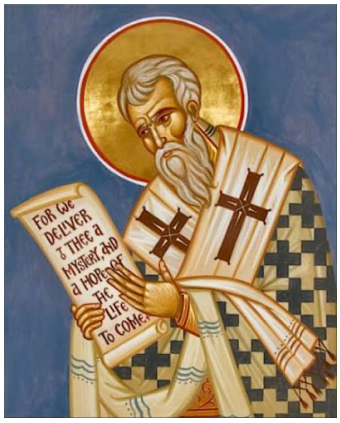
Any catechetical program should seek not merely to impart knowledge, but to give meaning and new life to the person, helping them draw closer to God in a deeper and more meaningful way. It is not just about learning about the Church, but living the Church!

Instructions to Catechumens

By St. Cyril of Jerusalem

"Prepare your own heart for reception of doctrine, for fellowship in holy mysteries. Pray more frequently, that God may make you worthy of the heavenly and immortal mysteries."

I shall observe each man's earnestness, each woman's reverence. Let your mind be refined as by fire unto reverence; let your soul be forged as metal: let the stubbornness of unbelief be hammered out: let the superfluous scales of the iron drop off, and what is pure remain; let the rust of the iron be rubbed off, and the true metal remain. May God sometime show you that night, the darkness which shines like the day, concerning which it is said, *The darkness shall not be hidden from you, and the night shall shine as the day*. Then may the gate of Paradise be opened to every man and every woman among you. Then may you enjoy the Christ-bearing waters in their fragrance. Then may you receive the name of Christ, and the power of things divine. Even now, I beseech you, lift up the eye of the mind: even now imagine the choirs of Angels, and God the Lord of all there sitting, and His Only-begotten Son sitting with Him on His right hand, and the Spirit present with them; and Thrones and Dominions doing service, and every man of you and every woman receiving salvation. Even now let your ears ring, as it were, with that glorious sound, when over your salvation the angels shall



chant, *Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered*: when like stars of the Church you shall enter in, bright in the body and radiant in the soul.

Great is the Baptism that lies before you: a ransom to captives; a remission of offenses; a death of sin; a new-birth of the soul; a garment of light; a holy indissoluble seal; a chariot to heaven; the delight of Paradise; a welcome into the kingdom; the gift of adoption! But there is a serpent by the wayside watching those who pass by: beware lest he bite you with unbelief. He sees so many receiving salvation, and is *seeking whom he may devour*. You are coming in unto the Father of Spirits, but you are going past that serpent. How then may you pass him? Have *your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace*; that even if he bite, he may not hurt you. Have faith in-dwelling, steadfast hope, a strong sandal, that you may pass the enemy, and enter the presence of your Lord. Prepare your own heart for reception of doctrine, for fellowship in holy mysteries. Pray more frequently, that God may make you worthy of the heavenly and immortal mysteries. Cease not day nor night: but when sleep is banished from your eyes, then let your mind be free for prayer. And if you find any shameful thought rise up in your mind, turn to meditation upon Judgment to remind you of Salvation. Give your mind wholly to study, that it may forget base things. If you find any one saying to you, Are you then going in, to descend into the water? Has the city just now no baths? Take notice that it is *the dragon of the sea* who is laying these plots against you. Attend not to the lips of the talker, but to God who works in you. Guard your own soul, that thou be not ensnared, to the end that abiding in hope you may become an heir of everlasting salvation.

– From St. Cyril of Jerusalem Prologue to Instructions to Catechumens

The Transformation of Christ

By Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemann

In the Orthodox ecclesial experience and tradition a sacrament is understood primarily as a revelation of the genuine nature of creation, of the world, which, however much it has fallen as "this world," will remain God's world, awaiting salvation, redemption, healing and transfiguration in a new earth and a new heaven. In other words, in the Orthodox experience a sacrament is primarily a revelation of the sacramentality of creation itself, for the world was created and given to man for conversion of creaturely life into participation in divine life. If in baptism water can become a "laver of regeneration," if our earthly food – bread and wine – can be transformed into partaking of the body and blood of Christ, if with oil we are granted the anointment of the Holy Spirit, if, to put it briefly, everything in the world can be identified, manifested and understood as a gift of God and participation in the new life, it is because all of creation was originally summoned and destined for the fulfillment of the divine economy – "then God will be all in all."

Precisely in this *sacramental* understanding of the world is the essence and gift of that *light of the world* that permeates the entire life of the Church, the entire liturgical and spiritual tradition of Orthodoxy. Sin is itself perceived here as a *falling away* of man, and in him of all creation, from this sacramentality, from the "paradise of delight," and into "this world," which lives no longer according to God, but according to itself and in itself and is therefore corrupt and mortal. And if this is so, then Christ accomplishes the salvation of the world by renewing the world and life itself as sacrament.

"Everything in the world can be identified, manifested and understood as a gift of God and participation in the new life..."

Created in Worship

By Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko

But I came to believe, on the basis of my teachers, that this is not the deepest way, this is not the truest way, this is not even the rightest way, so to speak, the most correct way of understanding what's going on. We have to understand what we are doing there, what's happening to *us*, what *we* are going through, why we are doing what we are doing and what it means for *our* life, because *leitourgia* – the word *leitourgia* – means a common work, a common action. It's a work. It's a work that we do, and the Liturgy is not simply an audiovisual aid that we just look at and get some explanations. In fact, I think that many of the great teachers of Liturgy – certainly people like Fr. Schmemann, maybe even the great scholar Robert Taft – would say you do it first, and then you understand afterwards what you have done and why you are doing it. The words are put into your mouth. St. Benedict said that, way back in the fourth century. When you go to church to pray, you don't put your mouth where your mind is; you put your mind where your mouth is. You go through rituals, you say things, you do things, and then you come to understand what they mean and why you do them; but you can't understand them until you do them. And then you understand that there's all levels of meaning, there's all kinds of meaning that are there once you do it. But the first thing you have to do is do it.

"When you go to church to pray, you don't put your mouth where your mind is; you put your mind where your mouth is."

Diocese of New York and New Jersey
His Eminence
Archbishop Michael
33 Hewitt Avenue
Bronxville, NY 10708

Phone: 914-779-6580
Fax: 914-779-6581

Commission on Missions and Evangelism
Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, DMin
1500 Route 376
Wappingers Falls, NY 12590

Phone: 845-462-3887
Cell: 516-314-0836
Email: egtosi@gmail.com

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Diocese Holds Annual Evangelism School

By Archpriest Jason Vansuch

It was a most blessed two days in the life of our Diocese as nearly 25 clergy and lay leaders representing all three Deaneries gathered around our beloved Diocesan Hierarch, His Eminence Archbishop Michael, for the Annual Diocesan Evangelism School at St. Gregory's Church.

The Evangelism School is an initiative blessed by His Eminence Archbishop Michael, fully funded by the Diocesan Council and in conjunction with the Commission on Mission and Evangelism. This year, the School focused on Orthodox Catechism, particularly catechism for the new wave of young converts. The main theme for the School can be summarized as follows:

"Catechesis is not merely the communication of information about Christ; it is the formation of the whole person into the life of Christ through Holy Tradition – the Scriptures, the Divine Liturgy, prayer, and the sacramental life of the Church."

Over the course of the two intensive days, the participants gathered to learn and reflect on the necessary apostolic work in answering the call of our Lord to bring His love and faith to others and bring others to Him.

The coursework explored both the theology and practical application of Orthodox catechesis. Many of the presenters drew upon their own experiences in parish life and ministry, sharing the various methods and practices they have used to catechize the faithful and bring others into the Orthodox Faith. Among the instructors were His Eminence Archbishop Michael; Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, Director of the Commission on Mission and Evangelism; Archpriest John Parker, Dean of St. Tikhon Orthodox Theological Seminary; Archpriest Jason Vansuch, Rector of St. George Orthodox Church in Buffalo, NY; and Archpriest Matthew Markewich, Rector of Christ the Savior Orthodox Church in Ballston Spa, NY.

The value of such a gathering was summed up by one participant: "We came here to learn and we are leaving with knowledge. Knowledge and understanding that teaching Orthodox catechism to young people is often most effective when it is participatory rather than lecture-based. Young people tend to retain the faith better when they see how doctrine connects to worship, Scripture, and daily life."

Throughout the day, participants were provided with various tools, methodologies, and practices by the clergy presenters that they could bring back to their own parishes and ministries. His Eminence also shared his insights into the importance of taking the appropriate amount of time with each inquirer and catechumen as they are taught the basics of the Orthodox Faith. He expressly challenged the participants to bring the lessons learned and examples presented at the School back to their parishes.

He reminded the participants of the many examples of growth and renewed energy found in our parishes, emphasizing the need to focus on Christ and the building up of His Church. This growth is realized through participation in the spiritual and liturgical life of the Church, rather than simply through the transmission of information.

Fr. Eric Tosi concluded the Evangelism School by reminding participants of various catechetical strategies that can help foster a disciple "mindset" within their parishes, as well as practical tools for bringing Christ to others and others to Christ. The value of these sessions ultimately lies in bringing these tools back to our respective parish communities and answering the call of our Lord.