



The ancient catechumenate. A brief liturgical-historical sketch

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Abstract

In this article the development of the ancient liturgical-didactic practice of the catechumenate is explored by making use of both primary and secondary liturgical-historical sources. The aim is to sketch a liturgical-historical overview regarding the rise, the flourishing, and the demise of the catechumenate; describing what the catechumenate involved, why it existed as well as reasons for changes to this Christian practice from the late fourth century AD onwards. The description commences in the first decades of the history the Christian Church and ends in the later medieval period and before the onset of the Reformation when what was known as the catechumenate ceased to exist and disappeared as Christian liturgical practice of initiation. In conclusion, the potential value of this ancient practice for current day liturgical praxis is summarised.

Keywords

catechumenate; liturgy; ritual; worship; church history; initiation

1. Introduction and background

Internationally and locally there has been much interest in the ancient practice of the catechumenate over the past decades (cf. Jensen 2012; Kavanagh 1991; Kreider 1999; Webber 2001; Wepener 2007a, 2007b, 2014; Yarnold 2001). This interest and the concomitant publications resulted in the development of the so-called Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and renewed interest in the practice of Christian baptism and initiation in especially post-Christendom contexts (cf. Browning & Reed 1995; Burger 2007; Johnson 2003; Van der Merwe 2009; Wepener & Burger 2007). In this article the development of the catechumenate is explored by

making use of both primary and secondary liturgical-historical sources. The aim is to sketch a liturgical-historical overview regarding the rise, the flourishing, and the demise of the catechumenate; describing what the catechumenate involved, why it existed as well as reasons for changes to this Christian practice from the late fourth century AD onwards. The description commences in the first decades of the history the Christian Church and ends in the later medieval period and before the onset of the Reformation¹ when what was known as the catechumenate ceased to exist and eventually disappeared as a Christian liturgical practice of initiation. In conclusion, the potential value of this ancient practice for current day liturgical praxis is summarised.

2. The catechumenate in the first centuries of Christianity (60–312 AD)²

The word ‘catechumenate’ refers to a long process that involved liturgy, teaching and service in which persons had to participate in the first centuries in order to be formed as a Christian and to acquire membership of the church. The Jesuit Yarnold describes the catechumenate in his book *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Christian Initiation* as “calculated to inspire religious awe, to make these rites the occasion of a profound and life-long conversion”. And Baldovin (2006:85) describes it as “a period of instruction, training, and rituals leading up to the sacramental rites of baptism, anointing, and participation in the eucharist.” The short-term aim of this practice was baptism, anointing and access to the eucharist and

1 See Wainwright (1992) regarding the periods of the history of liturgy as is also followed in this article.

2 In 2007 a series of five articles entitled “Die lang pad van bekering” (Burger & Wepener) was published in the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*. These articles focused on the catechumenate. In the fifteen years since the publication of that series, much liturgical-historical and practical theological research has focused on the catechumenate and been published internationally. This article revisits the series from 2007, focuses specifically on the historical parts of that series by reworking the content in the light of newer insight, additional sources and is aimed at the formulation of ritual-liturgical route markers for the liturgy in the making. This article also forms part of a research project on the theme of faith formation funded by the Western Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Het Jan S. Marais Fonds, which will publish a book entitled *Om te word wie ons is. Oor geloofsvorming in en deur gemeentes* (Burger et al. eds. 2023).

along with that membership of the church. The longer-term aim was the (life-long) formation of Christians.

It is rather difficult to provide a precise and faithful image of this practice in the Apostolic Period, which this article focuses on first. It is in fact somewhat anachronistic to speak of the catechumenate in this period and thus the focus here falls on how Christians were baptised and what the practice of baptism entailed in this era. In these early baptismal practices, the seeds of what later developed into the catechumenate can be found.

What can be said about baptism in this period, namely around the year 100 AD, with reference to the work of scholars such as Kavanagh (1976:118–137), Noakes (1992: 118–127) and White (1993:40–52), is that it consisted of a shorter period of preparation for baptism, followed by a water ritual consisting of either sprinkling or immersion, and lastly possibly also an anointing and/or laying on of hands. Baptism in this period most probably entailed more than just a short ceremony and the use of water, as it is quite unlikely that only one century later a complete and expanded process would have appeared out of nowhere as part of the liturgy.

Whitaker's (2003) *Documents of the baptismal liturgy* is a collection of primary sources, specifically printed liturgies and texts describing liturgical practice, which were in use in early baptismal liturgies as well as in the catechumenate. In this article I specifically selected for this Apostolic and early Patristic period to work with the *Didache*, Justin Martyr's *Apology*, Tertullian's *De Baptismo* and some of his baptismal sermons as well as the *Apostolic Tradition* by Hippolyte as they are often considered to be sources containing valuable information on how the catechumenate was practiced. These sources are considered among the most important on the themes of baptism, initiation, and the catechumenate, and are fairly representative of roughly the first three centuries. It also is apparent from these sources – like the sources that will be examined later in this article – that, as one cannot speak of *the* early church with a definite article, it is similarly not possible to speak of *the* practice of baptism in this period as there was no uniform rite in this regard and the same hold true of the catechumenate that developed later. In the different congregations around the Mediterranean in this early period there was a great diversity of practice, even though the sources do signify that a number of practices and phases are to be found in most of

the sources. Baldovin (2006:77) writes on the diversity and uniformity of liturgical celebrations in the Apostolic, Patristic, and subsequent eras: "... an original diversity began to come together in remarkably similar ritual patterns in the fourth century only to diversify subsequently into the major rites still known in the early twenty-first century". To develop a sense of the developing complexity of the process and to provide a diachronic liturgical-historical description of the practice, we first look at the so-called Teaching of the twelve Apostles, also known as the *Didache*.

3. *The Didache*

There is relatively little information on baptism and initiation in the *Didache*. We do read in this source: "Baptize as follows: after first explaining all these points ..." (7.1). This is an indication that the liturgical ritual of baptism was preceded by a period of instruction and explanation. The previous sections of the *Didache* leading up to the description of how baptism should be administered are about two roads and a choice that must be made between them; according to Noakes (1992:119) these two roads were used as a key metaphor in teaching during baptismal catechesis. In the *Didache* there is also a request that the liturgist, those undergoing baptism as well as all others who can, should fast for two or three days before the baptism. The water to be used in this liturgical ritual is also described and prescriptions on the use of the water are outlined, for example to baptise if possible, in running water (7.2). According to the *Didache*, only those who have been baptised have access to the meal of thanksgiving (eucharist) (9.5). It is already evident in this very early document that the liturgical ritual practice of baptism involved a process of liturgy and teaching consisting of three phases. Firstly, there was fasting and instruction, secondly the baptism with water, and thirdly admission to the meal of thanksgiving (cf. also Hawkins, 1992).

4. *Justin Martyr's First Apology*

In Justin Martyr's *First Apology* people who were to be baptised included those who were convinced and who believed that what Justin taught them was true; that they would live accordingly and be instructed in fasting and prayer so that that they would ask God for forgiveness of their sins. It is

thus clear that it was not possible for anyone to get baptised based on only their desire to undergo this liturgical ritual, but that it was reserved for people with a certain conviction and who were prepared to confess their guilt. After the confession of their sins, those to be baptised were taken to a place with water. There they were washed with water in the name of the Father and Lord of all, the saviour Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit. This washing with water, Justin writes, was called “enlightenment”, “since they who learn these things become illuminated intellectually” (Whitaker 2003:3).

Justin also describes what happened after the baptism with water, namely that the newly baptised (called neophytes) were taken to a place where their so-called brothers and sisters waited for them to pray for them. After these prayers they all greeted each other with a kiss and then they celebrated the eucharist (cf. Whitaker 2003:3–4). The structure and phases of the practice of baptism in Justin’s *First Apology* are similar to what is described in the Didache, namely teaching (accompanied with fasting and prayer), baptism with water, followed by the celebration of the Eucharist.³

5. *De Baptismo* and other baptismal sermons of Tertullian

Tertullian,⁴ a theologian of North Africa, famously declared that “Christian are made, not born” (Senn 1998:1). This conviction is also discernible in the way that he structured the catechumenate. Tertullian lived and worked in the second century and by this time it is no longer anachronistic to speak of the catechumenate – a much longer and formalised period of liturgy and teaching which included, amongst other aspects, baptism, initiation and

3 In an argument against liturgists whose interpretation limited Justin’s understanding of Christian initiation to only the water baptism, Ratcliff (1948:133–139) argued that in Justin’s work a much larger pattern of initiation is discernible. In an article from the same time as Ratcliff’s work, Couratin (1952:458–460) also argued that Justin was familiar with a much larger pattern for baptism that included anointing and the Eucharist. And by combining his own argument with that of Ratcliff, Couratin posits the following pattern in Justin’s *First Apology*, namely water baptism, anointing with oil, prayer for the Spirit (epiclesis) and celebration of the eucharist.

4 Tertullian converted to Christianity in 195 AD. His *De Baptismo* was written early in the third century (Whitaker 2003:8; Noakes 1992:121) and was a polemical work defending baptism against a Gnostic sect lead by a “certain female viper” (Noakes 1992:121). For a discussion of Tertullian’s baptismal ritual and how he made use of aspects of the existing manumission ritual, see also Stewart-Sykes (2001:130–141).

church membership. The description that follows draws mainly on his *De Baptismo (DB)*⁵ and some of his baptismal sermons, as well as on the work of scholars such as Yarnold (2001).

Before the liturgical ritual of baptism, as it is also described in the *Didache* and Justin's *First Apology*, those to be baptised had to pray, fast, kneel, participate in vigils, and confess their sins. However, with Tertullian more liturgical rituals can be discerned, for example, that the devil was sworn off at least twice, that the water was blessed, and that after the people to be baptised had entered the water, they confessed their faith in the water, after which they were immersed in the water three times in the name of the three Persons of the Trinity and the candidates had to respond audibly after each immersion. After that the neophytes, as the newly baptised were called, were anointed with blessed balm and Tertullian explains that this practice goes back to Aaron, who was anointed by Moses with blessed oil from a horn and why Jesus has the title "Christ". He furthermore describes the laying on of hands and blessing that followed and how the Holy Spirit was invited and welcomed, which was preceded by making the sign of the cross (cf. Whitaker 2003:8–11).

After the baptism the neophytes were welcomed with milk and honey that they had to drink and eat, and for one week after baptism they were not allowed to bath. According to Tertullian, Easter is the most appropriate time on the liturgical calendar for baptism, "for then was accomplished our Lord's passion, and into it we are baptized", although he deemed Pentecost also to be appropriate, even though any day could work as every day is the Lord's Day (*DB 19* in Whitaker 2003:10).

With Tertullian there is thus a development in the direction of an expanded ritual-didactic process that can be called catechumenate and that was spread out over several phases. It is striking to note that liturgical rituals such as baptism, confirmation and eucharist form a liturgical unity and are part of one liturgical-didactic initiation process. Noakes (1992:123) remarks in the light of Tertullian's writings that anointing, laying on of hands and the sign of the cross later developed into a separate liturgical ritual, namely

5 Whitaker (2003:8–11) also includes extracts from *De Spectaculis*, *Adversus Praxean*, *De Corona* and *De Resurrectione Carnis*.

confirmation. And Wegman (1995:81) indicates that the gift of the Spirit as part of this liturgical process here received a special emphasis.

From roughly the same period as Tertullian's baptismal sermons, comes the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolyte, which correlates closely with the image of the catechumenate that can be reconstructed from Tertullian's writings.

6. The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolyte

One of the most comprehensive descriptions of the catechumenate is found in the *Apostolic Tradition* (AT) (cf. Whitaker, 2003:4–8).⁶ It is such an extensive description that only the main phases are highlighted here to describe the process. Firstly, persons who wanted to be considered for baptism had to report with witnesses to a catechist. They were then interrogated on the reasons why they wanted to become Christians and members of the church. The witnesses were also interrogated and had to bear witness to the probity of the prospective members' lives. The aim of the questioning was to determine whether these prospective members were serious about this step they wanted to take, and the questions served as a kind of screening process.

After acceptance into the catechumenate, prospective members were called catechumenates. These catechumenates were then allowed to hear the word in the liturgy and in other spaces in the life of a congregation (AT 15) for a period of three years (AT 17). In the liturgy they had their own separate space where they were seated (AT 18), and they were not allowed to partake of the eucharist, which was reserved for baptised members.

After the years of instruction those who were to be baptised were chosen and allowed to continue with the process. Their lives and conduct were again scrutinised. So, for example, there were enquiries to ascertain whether they had visited the sick during this period and their witnesses had to testify to their honesty in this regard (AT 19). When there was doubt about the life and conduct of a catechumen, he or she was allowed to continue with the

6 It is traditionally accepted that Hippolyte worked in Rome during the first part of the third century AD and that he was the author of the *Apostolic Tradition*. Both the origin and the authorship, however, have been questioned in recent years and an argument for a redaction history with multiple authors has been posited. See Whitaker (2003:4) and Jones *et al.* (1992:87–89) for discussions of various viewpoints in this regard.

process but was not baptised (AT 20). Those who were indeed chosen to proceed were then during this next phase separated from the congregation and received specific teachings, daily exorcisms, and the laying on of hands. Those who were to be baptised had to bath on the Thursday, fast on the Friday, gather at a designated place on the Saturday to kneel and pray whilst the bishop performed exorcisms, laying on of hands, blew in their faces, made the sign of the cross on their foreheads, ears and noses, and then allowed them to stand up straight again. For the rest of that Saturday they received further instruction, participated in an all-night vigil, and received teachings throughout the night (AT 20).

At cock crow on the Sunday morning a prayer was said over the baptismal water. The *Apostolic Tradition* describes the baptismal liturgy at length and in detail, for example, that the bishop prayed over the oil of thanksgiving (which is then taken from him by a deacon who then stood on his right-hand side), also over the oil of exorcism (which is then taken by a deacon who then stood on his left). Then followed the baptism with water. Candidates undressed completely and children were baptised first, then the men and lastly the women.⁷ Baptism was administered by pouring water over the candidate three times and before every immersion a candidate responded to a confession of faith regarding one of the persons in the Trinity: “Thus I believe.” When the candidates appeared from under the water after the third immersion, he or she was anointed by a presbyter with the oil of thanksgiving. Then they dried themselves and got dressed to go to the church building (AT 21). Before they left, the bishop first laid his hands on each neophyte and addressed them (AT 22). And in the church, they participated for the first time in the eucharist with the rest of the congregation. During this eucharistic meal they first received bread, then milk and honey, and lastly the cup of the eucharist (AT 21).

7 According to the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, women anointed other women. If no other woman was available, then a man could do the anointing, but only on the woman’s head. Baldovin makes a connection between the practice of baptising naked adults with the development of the baptistery as a separate building specifically devoted to the liturgical ritual of baptism. “The practice of baptizing naked adult candidates made it necessary to initiate them in a distinct building. Such buildings were often octagonal in shape, to symbolize the Christian conquest of time – beyond the perfection of seven. The also typically had antechambers where the candidates undressed and made the renunciation of evil” (Baldovin 2006:84).

Several other sources also shed light on the catechumenate in the early period, for example, the letters of Cyprian, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (chapters 9 and 16) and the *Acts of Judas Thomas*. The *Apostolic Tradition*, however, provides ample information for the purposes of this article, namely, to provide a diachronic liturgical-historical description of the catechumenate in this period in order to identify ritual-liturgical route markers for a liturgical praxis theory.

7. The catechumenate in a state church (312–600 AD)

The liturgist Keith Pecklers (2003:49) calls the fourth century the golden era for the catechumenate. And Yarnold (1992:130) notes that there are many sources on the catechumenate from the fourth century and onwards. Even though there were a wide variety of liturgical and ecclesial traditions within Christianity in this era and many developments occurred, several general practices, phases, and patterns relevant to the catechumenate can be identified. Firstly, there was the admission, then the enrolment and preparation, followed by initiation rituals that included baptism, and lastly a phase after baptism. This section draws on the travel narrative or pilgrimage of Egeria as a source, as well as baptismal sermons of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Ambrose of Milan.

8. The pilgrimage of Egeria

Egeria was a nun, probably from Spain or France, who in roughly the year 381 AD travelled to countries that are mentioned in the Bible (cf. Baldovin 2006:86–87; Ledegang 1991; Whitaker 2003:33; Yarnold 2001:95–96). Her travel journal contains valuable descriptions of the contents of the teaching of the catechumenate in Jerusalem as well as the accompanying liturgies and other practices. Those who wanted to be baptised during the Easter period had to provide their names the day before Lent commenced to a priest who wrote them down (45.1). The following day the bishop, accompanied by the priests and other clergy, met in the Martyrium Church (Church of Suffering) and all the candidates with their family members had to appear one by one in front of them. Questions on the candidates' conduct were then posed to them and their family (45.2,3). When the

bishop was satisfied that a candidate was not guilty of any misconduct, the person's name was written down, but if he was not satisfied, the person was turned away. According to Egeria, a witness was critical for a person to be accepted as candidate for the catechumenate and eventually baptism (45.4).

Every morning during Lent and right after the morning liturgy in the Anastasis Church (Church of the Grave and thus of the Resurrection) the bishop's chair was placed in the middle of the Martyrium Church. All the catechumens then gathered around him for instruction (46.1). The content of this teaching, according to Egeria, was the Law, which included the whole Bible⁸ with first a literal explanation of the meaning of a text and the spiritual meaning of the text was revealed (46.2). After five weeks the candidates were taught the Confession (Apostle's Creed) and each of the twelve articles was explained, once again first the literal and then the spiritual meaning of the articles (46.3). This instruction went on for three hours per day for the first seven weeks of Lent. During Holy Week the candidates again appeared before the bishop to recite the Apostle's Creed from memory (45.5). He then addressed them and explained they have received instruction in Scripture and faith but were still only catechumens who were not yet baptised and who have thus not yet received teaching on the deeper mysteries of God (45.6).

Concerning the liturgical ritual of baptism during Easter, Egeria does not provide much information. She writes that the Easter vigil was held in Jerusalem in the same fashion that they did it at home. Ledegang (1991:23) remarks that Egeria was indeed more interested in differences regarding liturgical and other practices in Jerusalem than she was in similarities. The only significant difference she points out is that the "children", after they were baptised and dressed again, first went to the Anastasis Church (38.1) with the bishop, who went with them to behind the gate in front the site regarded as the grave of Jesus where they sang a hymn together and he prayed for them (38.2). This practice is obviously closely related to the context of Jerusalem and the symbolic meaning such a visit to the grave of Jesus could have had for the neophytes. This liturgy and the catechumenate as a whole were thus in Jerusalem not only temporally connected to the

8 According to Bradshaw (1999:145) "the whole Bible" should not be taken literally as there would not have been enough time to do so.

life of Jesus through making use of the liturgical year (especially Lent and Easter), but also spatially in relation to the two churches mentioned above which were used during the catechumenate, and thus with significant sites in Jerusalem connected to Jesus' death and resurrection.

During the Easter Octave (the eight weeks after Easter Sunday), the newly baptised went daily to the Anastasis Church where they sang hymns. They were prayed for in the church, the bishop blessed them whilst standing at the gate of the Anastasis cave and explained to them what happens in baptism (47.1). This teaching that took place after baptism was available only to those who had been baptised and the church's door was locked during this period of teaching (47.2).⁹

As is discernible in the *Apostolic Tradition* as well as in Tertullian's writings and the sources that will be discussed later in the article, there are clearly four phases in the catechumenate as described by Egeria. Firstly, there was the so-called pre-catechumenate which focused on scrutinising those interested in becoming Christians and the aim was to ascertain how serious their intentions were. Secondly the catechumenate phase itself, which lasted for several years, often three years, and which focused on teaching. The third phase occurred during Lent and was called the Enlightenment, when the teaching was more intense and done in combination with a variety of liturgical rituals and spiritual exercises. The fourth and last phase occurred during the season of Easter and after baptism; it was called Mystagogical Catechesis and is the phase in which the meaning of baptism and the eucharist was explained to those who have been baptised and partaken of the eucharist. The next section will provide more detail on each of these phases with information not only from Jerusalem, but also other places where the catechumenate was celebrated.

9 What Egeria shares in this regard is most probably an eyewitness report on Cyril of Jerusalem's liturgy, as Egeria visited the city during his last years as bishop of the city (Yarnold 1992b:95).

9. The baptismal sermons of Cyril of Jerusalem,¹⁰ John Chrysostom,¹¹ Theodore of Mopsuestia¹² and Ambrose of Milan¹³

The sources used in this section include sources from both the fourth and fifth centuries. Yarnold (2001; 1992a) reconstructed the catechumenate by making use of the baptismal sermons of preachers. In this period the overarching structure of four phases as described above is still in place. The work of Yarnold and the sermons mentioned here shed light on these phases.¹⁴

The pre-catechumenate consisted of the request for membership on the side of candidates and evangelisation on the side of the church. The main elements included only a few liturgical rituals such as the sign of the cross on the forehead, administration of salt, laying on of hands (probably symbolising receiving a special assignment, or exorcism); according to Augustine, candidates received the sign of the cross when they first came to believe (Yarnold, 2001:3–6).

The succeeding catechumenate phase was a period of roughly three years of instruction. In this phase the candidates were liturgically in a liminal space, as they were included in the synaxis, or Word-service, but had to leave the liturgy before the service of the table commenced. During the intercession prayers the congregations also specifically prayed for the catechumens (Yarnold 20017). During the fourth century the final preparation for baptism were conducted during Lent with the actual baptism on Easter Sunday and with a few exceptions this happened during the season of Pentecost. This part marked the third phase of the catechumenate.

10 His sermons were delivered in Jerusalem roughly between 348 and 387 AD (Yarnold 1992c:92; Whitaker 2003:26–32).

11 He probably delivered the sermons used in this study as a priest around the year 390 AD in Antioch (Yarnold 1992c:94; Whitaker 2003:40–46).

12 He became bishop of Mopseustia in 392 AD and delivered his sermons as priest in Antioch (Yarnold 1992c:94; Whitaker 2003:47–50).

13 Ambrose was elected bishop of Milan in either 373 or 374 AD and delivered his sermons even before he himself was baptised (Yarnold 1992c:98; Whitaker 2003:176–197).

14 For an outline of the four phases in the work of Augustine, see Kreider (1999:57–63).

Those who wanted to be considered for baptism gave their names to the bishop at the beginning of Lent in order to enter this third phase called ‘Enlightenment’. According to Yarnold (2001:8), this step of giving the bishop your name was called the “petition” and those whose applications were accepted were then known as “applicants” (*competentes*), the “elected” (*electi*) or “destined for illumination/enlightenment” (*photizomenoi*), depending on the exact location where they participated in the catechumenate. During this period of enlightenment there was a strong emphasis on teaching as well as spiritual preparation for baptism (Yarnold, 2001:9).

Throughout this phase teaching and spiritual exercises were embedded in liturgical rituals. This third phase was simultaneously a rich symbolic as well as intensively didactic phase because, as Yarnold writes, “as faith grows, the area occupied by the devil contracts” (Yarnold 2001:11). The candidates received daily instruction and the content of this teaching was kept secret and disclosed only to the group of so-called *electi* during this phase of enlightenment. In later periods this secret instruction came to be known as the *Disciplina Arcani* (Secret Discipline), the last part of which consisted of an explanation of the baptismal liturgy. According to Yarnold (2001:57), “secrecy was felt to increase reverence and to attract the curious”. In the rest of the teaching in this phase a variety of themes were addressed, such as interpretation of Scripture as well as the Apostle’s Creed. Clarification of the words and meaning of the Apostle’s Creed was an important part of the *Disciplina Arcani*. *Electi* “received” the Creed, which meant that they had to learn the twelve articles and this process of learning the Creed was called *traditio*, which entailed a kind of handing over of the content to the *electi*. Later during Lent the candidates had to “give back” the Creed, meaning that they had to be able to recite the Creed from memory and this was called *redditio* (Yarnold 2001:12–13). A similar process occurred regarding the Lord’s Prayer. Along with teaching, the matters of penance and confession of sins were also addressed during this phase and on Maundy Thursday (the day before Good Friday) the *electi* took a pre-baptismal bath.

This period of enlightenment as described here culminated in the vigil on Holy Saturday (the day after Good Friday). During the vigil passages from Scripture were read, there was preaching, and baptism commenced with the

first crowing of the cock on Easter Sunday. The extensive liturgical ritual of baptism that followed has many similarities with the descriptions from Egeria's pilgrimage and included the following elements, chronologically: the Ephphatha ritual¹⁵ (the lips or the nose is touched in order to sensitise candidates to the fragrance of Christ and to open their minds); renouncing sin (with stretched out hands in a praying position candidates looked towards the West and renounced the devil by blowing in his direction or spitting in his face and reciting a list of issues in their lives that they renounce); confessing Christ (turning to the East and confessing obedience to Christ); undressing; anointing with oil (the whole body was smeared with oil like a wrestler before a fight); prayer over the water (among various actions performed during this prayer, the baptismal candle was dipped in the water as a symbol of the presence of the resurrected Christ); baptism (triple immersion), along with a trinitarian confession of faith); anointing (oil was poured on the heads of the baptised so that the oil streamed over their whole bodies); washing of feet (the bishop washed the neophytes' feet); all the baptised were dressed in a white baptismal garment (which they wore for the whole Easter Octave); and candles were lit (each neophyte received a burning candle) (see Yarnold 2001:17–34). These baptismal liturgical rituals were followed by another anointing, as well as a procession into the church building, a welcoming in the building, tasting of milk and honey and participation in the eucharist for the first time.

After the third period encompassing the enlightenment and the baptism of candidates, the fourth and last period of Mystagogical Catechesis followed during which the baptised persons received teaching concerning the content and meaning of the sacraments. This period lasted for the whole of the Easter season.

These descriptions based on sources from the fourth and fifth centuries are indeed descriptions of the era during which the catechumenate reached a peak and the practice flourished. In the centuries that followed there was a dramatic change in the way the catechumenate was understood. According to Wegman (1991:146), it is discernible from the work of Ambrose that by the end of this period the catechumenate was already starting to lose

15 See Mark 7:31–37.

its earlier meaning of a two- to three-year period of training and that it was often shortened or not practised. The motives for being baptised also changed and it was often no longer based on a conviction but, for example, on a need to attract Christian clients to your business. These changes should also be seen against the backdrop of the change in the status of Christianity during the fourth century, firstly from an illegal to a legal institution under Constantine and later to state religion under Theodosius. Thus a minority movement functioning in a hostile environment over time became the state religion of a powerful empire, which hugely impacted the way in which the catechumenate was conducted of which some of the reasons will be discussed in the next section. Of course, there were also theological developments in the period that impacted on these changes, especially the theology of Augustine and his emphasis on grace and the concomitant practice of infant baptism. These influences and variables should be kept in mind when developments regarding the catechumenate are described in the next section of this article.

10. The demise of the catechumenate in medieval times (500–1550)

As time progressed more people joined the Christian religion and more children of believing parents were born. Thus baptism, conversion and membership steadily started to follow a different route to the traditional conversion of heathens joining the Christian faith. According to Alan Kreider (1999:75), Augustine's theology initiated a kind of revolution in baptismal theology and theology always impacts on liturgical practice. His emphasis on the grace of God alone, rather than works of humans, meant it became a preferred practice to baptise new-born babies as soon as possible. Augustine viewed baptism as a sacrament of grace that had to be administered as soon as possible after birth, as his baptismal theology emphasised salvation as a gracious and undeserved gift of God (Rice & Huffstutler, 2001:54). Over time the idea also arose that baptism was essential for salvation, which strongly impelled the growing emphasis on and practice of infant baptism. Barnard (1998:288) remarked that there was no longer a place for a catechumenate with a forty-day period of enlightenment.

In places such as Arles, adult baptism continued to be practised and bishop Caesarius of Arles insisted that those who were to be baptised had to present their names before Easter in order to become *competentes*. However, the instruction that these candidates for baptism received was no longer the three year-long catechumenate of the *Apostolic Tradition*, but instruction in the faith a few days before Easter; as Kreider (1999:73–74) remarks, “very little catechism was now possible. But the focus of the baptismal preparation was not pedagogical but spiritual.”

The adults who were baptised during the medieval period still had witnesses or sponsors who supported them by fasting and staying awake with them during vigils. The parents and sponsors of children who could not yet speak for themselves also had to fast and join them in the vigil and had to make the baptismal promises on their behalf (Kreider 1999:75). Rice and Huffstutler (2001:55) write: “Sponsors became those who, rather than prepare the candidate for baptism, watched over the newly baptized, raising them in the ‘nurture and admonition of the Lord’”.

The liturgy of Arles has similarities to the *Sacramentarium Gelasium SG* (from the end of the sixth century). In the SG the writing down of the names at the beginning of Lent is still done, as well as the exorcism and the salt of welcoming. On the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent the candidates learnt the Gospel, the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer as acts of *traditio* and on Holy Saturday the *redditio* of these texts was done in combination with a devil conjuration. The biggest change that occurred in this period in the *Ordo Romanus II* compared to the SG, according to Wegman (1991:220), is that the infant candidates for baptism were carried by the acolytes on their arms and that the scrutiny of a candidate’s life and conducted was no longer necessary.

This description serves as an example from this period of the transition that occurred in the catechumenate. Adult baptism gradually gave way to infant baptism. With regard to the *Sacramentaria* from the eighth century Wegman (1991:222) remarks: “Zo is een ritueel ontstaan, volgens welk onmondige kinderen worden gedoopt, maar dat door het gebruik

van oude teksten en rubrieken volwassenen aanspreekt!”¹⁶ Questions that had been posed in earlier times to adults during the catechumenate were now posed to babies. This is an example of how liturgical practice changed at a grassroots level, but that the liturgical texts did not keep pace with developments. Baldovin (2006:89) quotes Taft on this point: “in the history of liturgical development, structure outlives meaning.”

The process regarding the catechumenate thus changed fundamentally, as infants were first baptised and only afterwards taught the significance of the ritual. According to Fischer and Yarnold (1992:151), by the end of the Middle Ages the original extended catechumenate and its combination of teaching, liturgy and spiritual exercises had been absorbed into one service. Baptism and teaching, liturgy and instruction, became two separate processes. By the year 1000 AD confirmation had also acquired an independent status also liturgical ritual and sacrament, to be administer once and only by a bishop (Baldovin 2006: 93; Browning & Reed 1995:11).

The unity of baptism, confirmation and eucharist that was referred to earlier in this article, specifically also with reference to the work of Tertullian, gradually turned in discrete elements and became separate liturgical rituals or sacraments. Confirmation became a separate and independent process and sacrament, which Wegman (1991:223) calls the most radical change in the liturgy during the Middle Ages. He furthermore thinks that not only theological convictions, but also misunderstandings, gave rise to separating Christian initiation into two separate parts, namely the ritual with water (baptism) and the sign of the laying on of hands and anointing (confirmation). One reason for this development was the conviction that only a bishop could do the laying on of hands and anointing after baptism and in a rapidly growing church it was no longer possible for a bishop to be present at each and every baptism and so congregations had to postpone the ritual until a bishop could be present. The result was that baptism and confirmation gradually became separate sacraments after the sixth century and over time this separation became the accepted practice in the church. According to Wegman (1991:224), the Lateran Council of 1215 determined that children should receive the sacrament of confirmatio when they reach

16 A ritual came into existence in which immature children are baptised but making use of old texts and rubrics that address adults.

the age of seven. In this way confirmation replaced baptism as a kind of rite of passage into the Christian faith. Fischer and Yarnold (1992:148) write: “To sum up, confirmation was in actual practice becoming more and more to be separated in time from baptism, and the interval was becoming longer”.

The earlier descriptions of the catechumenate during the Patristic era showed how baptism, confirmation and the eucharist function in unity as one rite of passage of initiation into the church. But as indicated above, these elements became separated over time. Because of the growing awe in medieval times for the elements of the eucharist in the light of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the participation of children in their first eucharist was also shifted to a similar age as when they were confirmed, namely seven.

In his older work Bijlsma (1962:52) speaks about the quality of catechesis in the medieval period as undergoing great deterioration and little remained of the meticulous teaching as part of the catechumenate during the early centuries. According to Dingemans (1991:170), the admission requirements for those who wanted to join the church were no longer in place and adds that “Grote getalle maakten meer indruk dan motivatie.”¹⁷ The main contents of the faith (creeds, law and sacraments) were watered down to mere formulas to be recited, while ethical prescriptions gained greater prominence (Bijlsma 1962:52–53); all that remained of catechesis was what was conveyed in families, which was relatively little.

11. Conclusion

What is presented in this article is a short diachronic liturgical-historical overview in broad strokes describing the rise, flourishing and decline of what is known as the catechumenate. In conclusion, the potential value of this ancient practice for current day liturgical praxis is summarised below as ritual-liturgical route markers for the *liturgia condenda*, the liturgy in the making (cf. also Wepener 2014:155–158).¹⁸

17 Large numbers made a bigger impression than motivation.

18 There are also criticisms of the ancient practice of the catechumenate. So, for example, the Reformed liturgist Old (2002:11) writes: “... it was far removed from the sort of

- The inherent liturgical-theological relation between baptism, confirmation and eucharist.
- The way in which liturgy and learning were combined with spiritual exercises and works of service to ensure thorough formation of candidates.
- There was an inherent creative tension between hospitality and acceptance of candidates into the catechumenate and protection and scrutiny with respect to the intention of candidates.
- The liturgies were, in the language of Yarnold (2001), “awe-inspiring” and ritual and symbolism were used in creative ways.
- In the words of Kreider (1999), the overarching structure of the catechumenate supports a process in which formation impacted on belief, behaviour and belonging.
- Conversion and faith formation were seen as life-long processes which were supported by a well thought out process in the church.
- The catechumenate worked with an anthropology in which human being were not only viewed as rational beings, but as bodies with five senses who learn and are formed in ways that not only entailed conveying information, but also bodily-sensory experiences such as touching, smelling, and tasting.
- Experiential learning was also practiced as the neophytes first had to experience certain liturgical rituals such as baptism and the eucharist before the meaning of these sacraments was explained to them.
- As contexts changed, liturgies were adapted accordingly.
- From a cultural anthropological perspective, the catechumenate serves as a well-thought-out rite of passage that included extended periods of liminality to form and initiate people to the Christian faith.

baptismal services held by the apostles ... Baptism had become a sign of salvation by works rather than salvation by grace.”

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