

**Reception into the Church as an Older Child or Adult:  
Sacramental Guidelines for St Nicholas Orthodox Church**

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“Christians are made, not born” (*Liber apologeticus* 15.4). With these words, the early theologian Tertullian sets forth an important truth of Christianity: Ultimately, there is no such thing as a ‘cradle Christian.’ Rather, if one is a Christian, that is only because of a deliberate choice that has been made. In the case of an adult or older child making this decision, from her earliest years the Church has required that a person seeking entry into the Church first be enrolled as a **catechumen**, and then to complete a period of preparation for reception called the **catechumenate**.

For the sake of clarity in setting forth what the Church’s current practices are, and how the process of being received into the Church takes place in our parish, the following guidelines are offered. These are based principally on the regulations found in the official Service Books of the Church, on the Clergy Guidelines that govern the celebration of the divine services in the Orthodox Church in America, and on the accepted practices of many of our parishes.

**A Preliminary Point: What is a Catechumen? / What is the Period of the Catechumenate?**

A catechumen is one who, having made a firm, resolute decision to enter the Church, is going through a period of catechumenate in order that reception might take place.

What is this period of the catechumenate? This term comes from the Greek word *catechesis*, which means “learning by word of mouth” or “word of mouth instruction” (cf. Romans 10:17: “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”). According to its received usage, the term ‘catechumenate’ refers to a period of learning about the faith and about how to practice the faith before one is fully received into the Church. The qualification ‘fully’ is critical to note here: Even though they are still in the process of being received into the Church, the Church considers catechumens as being within her bosom (see, e.g., the remarks made by St Cyril of Jerusalem to his catechumens: “You who have been enrolled have become sons and daughters of one Mother”). Being enrolled as a catechumen, therefore, has serious ramifications for one’s status before God. For this reason, once a person has become a catechumen, he or she may no longer participate in the sacramental rites of another Christian body or of any other religion.

**The Process of Becoming a Catechumen**

How, then, does one become a catechumen? As with all things in the Church, one does not do this on one’s own. Rather, a person becomes a catechumen—or better, a person is *given* this new status—liturgically: One is made into a catechumen through a rite of the Church. During this rite, a priest says several prayers over the person, thus claiming him or her for Christ, and thus marking him or her out as someone who is bound to be received fully into the Church.

In light of how serious becoming a catechumen is, it is not something that should be rushed. For this reason, it has become customary that a person who is interested in coming to Orthodoxy first spend a period of time attending the services regularly and of otherwise getting some acquaintance with the beliefs and practices of the Church. There is no formal name for this process that precedes the catechumenate, although many refer to it informally as the period of being a seeker (or inquirer). Depending on one’s background, the time required for this period of seeking (or inquiring) might vary. In our parish, it typically lasts from three to nine months.

### **The Purpose of the Catechumenate: Intellectual and Spiritual Formation**

After becoming a catechumen, the person then begins a process of intellectual and spiritual formation in the matters of the Church's faith. Thus, during this time, the catechumen should acquire a basic understanding of the major dogmatic teachings (i.e., doctrines) that one has to accept as an Orthodox Christian believer. During this time, the catechumen should also begin to practice the faith more actively, especially through a regular rhythm of **prayer, fasting, and almsgiving**. Finally, during this time, the catechumen should become more active within the local church. What does that entail? At a minimum, being active includes attending the Church's services as regularly as possible. The catechumen should find a parish activity to contribute to (something simple at first, but regular and doable).

For the sake of clarity, it should be emphasized: Especially if one comes from a western Christian body, there can sometimes be an unconscious sense that becoming Orthodox is a primarily matter of exchanging one set of beliefs for a new set. And in fact, it is true that becoming Orthodox will necessarily mean rejecting some beliefs as erroneous and embracing others as salvific. Still, beyond anything else, it must be remembered the purpose of this period is that the catechumen has the opportunity to come to a better understanding of the *content* of the Church's teaching *so that* he or she can appropriate in his or her own life Christ's transforming grace. The purpose of catechesis, in other words, is the same as the ultimate purpose of everything that we do in the Church: salvation unto deification, because this is the reason why Christ became incarnate and suffered his saving passion for us. As noted by Hieromonk Gregorios in his catechism: "Orthodox catechism is not simply a theoretical exposition of the truths of the faith, but also seeks to purify man's soul. It is the therapeutic treatment used by the Church to heal and restore 'fallen' man and lead him gradually towards deification (*theosis*). Herein lies man's purpose and the purpose of the Church as well" (*The Orthodox Faith, Worship and Life*, p. 6).

### **Length of Time Required**

How long will this period of the catechumenate take? At the present time, the Church (i.e., the Orthodox Church in America, and, even more specifically, the Diocese of the Midwest to which our parish belongs) does not require any set period of time for this process. Rather, our diocesan bishop has delegated the process of bringing the person into the Church to parish rectors.

In line with the custom received by many of our parishes, at St Nicholas the length of the period of the catechumenate will vary depending on the background of each person, and also on other factors (e.g., participation of the catechumen in parish life, etc.). As some examples: In the case of a person who comes from a completely non-religious background and who has no knowledge of the Gospel, the process might take more than a year. By way of contrast, in the case of someone who is married to an Orthodox Christian and who has been regularly attending the parish for many years (but without formally being received), the process might take significantly less time. In light of how many variables are involved in this process, then, the rector (parish priest) will help the catechumen to discern the appropriate level of readiness to be received.

### **The Process for Asking to be Received**

What if a catechumen thinks that he or she might be ready? In a case like this, the catechumen should communicate this desire to be received to the rector. At that point, the rector will then make an appropriate decision according to the Church's norms. In some cases, where no impediment

exists, a blessing to be received might be given at once. In other cases (e.g., in the case of a catechumen whose decision to be received requires a major change in lifestyle, serious repentance for past sins, etc.), a longer catechumenate might be required before reception. For the sake of clarity, it should be said: A decision to delay someone's reception for one of these reasons is not punitive. Rather, it is intended to allow a longer period of healing in preparation for reception.

In any case, once a person has been blessed to be received into the Church, he or she needs to choose a saint's name. In cases where a catechumen already bears the name of a recognized saint, it is permissible to keep the same name. In some places, a new name is chosen regardless. Some hierarchs discourage that practice, but in this parish the decision is left to the discretion of the catechumen (in consultation with the parish rector).

### **How Reception into the Church Takes Place**

As part of the process of being received, the catechumen must make a life-confession—i.e., a confession of all of the sins that he or she can remember having committed throughout his or her life. Before the life-confession, the rector will meet with the catechumen to provide guidance on how to prepare. The primary purpose of the life-confession is therapeutic: Confessing one's sins is a way of ending the power of those sins, so that one can be healed so as to begin a new life in Christ. In this sense, preparing for one's life-confession is one of the most important aspects of the period of the catechumenate.

Having made a life-confession, the catechumen is then finally received into the Church by the appropriate means. Those who come from a non-Christian background (i.e., those who were never baptized in any Christian body) are received by baptism. Those who come from a Christian background (i.e., those who were raised as Christian in some way, even nominally) may be received by **baptism**, by **anointing with chrism (i.e., chrismation)**, or by **confession and absolution**. The decision for how to receive a person is not at the discretion of the individual priest. Rather, over the centuries the Church has canonized normative practices. What is at the basis for these practices? Most simply put, in case of those coming from a non-Orthodox Christian background, the manner of reception depends the doctrine/theology of one's previous Christian body, and also (in the case of those previously baptized in some way) on the way in which, and formula by which, one was previously baptized.

In the current practice of the Orthodox Church in America (which are based, e.g., on canon 95 of the Council *in Trullo*), Roman Catholics and some Protestants (namely, those of shared Nicene faith) are usually received by anointing with chrism, whereas other Protestants are received by baptism (namely, those who reject Nicene faith in some fundamental way, or those who reject the reality of sacramental grace). Typically, non-Chalcedonian Eastern Christians (i.e., the 'Oriental Orthodox') are received by confession and by profession of Orthodox faith.

To determine the correct way of receiving a catechumen into the Church, the rector will consult with each catechumen at some point regarding previous Christian background, whether or not one has received a baptism that the Church recognizes, what documentation attesting to a previous baptism might exist, etc. On matters where there is ambiguity, the rector will consult our diocesan bishop, who will make the final determination regarding how reception is to take place.

### **Occasions When Reception Might Take Place**

Historically speaking, the main day on which unbaptized adults would be received into the Church through baptism was at the Vespertine Liturgy of Holy Saturday (this service being the

ancient vigil service for Pascha—the most important feast of the Church year). Over the centuries, baptism also came to be served on a number of major feast-days throughout the year (e.g., Lazarus Saturday, Pentecost, Theophany). And then again, as the Church continued to grow over time, the practice developed of celebrating baptism on other days, even apart from a major feast.

According to the Church's received Tradition, the services of baptism and chrismation may now be served on almost any day. Moreover, since reception into the Church is not completed until a person has received the holy Eucharist, it is normative for baptism or chrismation to be done in close proximity to the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

In light of the variety of practices found throughout the Church's history, and given that, in contemporary practice, many come to the Church from heterodox or nominal Christian backgrounds, or from not having any religious practice at all (instead of paganism, as in past times), reception into the Church might take place on any number of days. In some places, Holy Saturday remains the norm. In others, Lazarus Saturday (the last Saturday before Holy Week) has become a typical day for reception. At St Nicholas Church, we do not currently have a fixed occasion on which to receive catechumens as a group. Instead, the rector will work with individual catechumens to determine a fitting day for reception (taking account of the pastoral needs of both the catechumen, and also of the entire parish community).

### **An Important Note about the Sacramental Sponsor**

From the earliest centuries, the Church has required that a person seeking entrance into herself must have a **sponsor**. This person has several critical tasks to play in the process of receiving the catechumen into the Church. First of all, the sponsor is the person who formally vouches that the person is ready to be received (e.g., by attesting that he or she is trying to live a genuinely Christian lifestyle). And then, when it comes time to be received, the sponsor is the person who presents the catechumen and stands with him or her during the liturgical service.

According to the Church's Tradition, serving as a sacramental sponsor is a very serious matter. Indeed, according to the Church's canonical tradition, the relationship between the sponsor and the one sponsored is understood to possess a sacrosanct character that is stronger even than the natural bond of family members (e.g., in speaking of the relationship between sponsor and the one sponsored, canon 53 of the *Council in Trullo* comments that "the spiritual relationship is greater than fleshly affinity"). The relationship between a sponsor and the one sponsored is thus considered to be irrevocable. For this reason, a sponsor cannot be changed after the fact.

Since a sponsor will have to vouch for the catechumen, he or she and the catechumen should have a familiar relationship. The best way for the catechumen to find a person to establish this kind of relationship with is to start integrating into the life of the parish as much as one can during the catechumenate. As this happens, a likely candidate for the someone who might serve as one's sponsor for baptism will almost certainly emerge.

**In terms of requirements:** In the Church's current canonical practice, the sponsor must be of the same sex as the person to be baptized. (It is to be noted here: In the case of infant baptism, having two sponsors is common: one of the same sex, and another of the different sex. In the case of adult baptism, however, the typical practice is for the catechumen to have a single sponsor.) Practically speaking, the sponsor must be an Orthodox Christian whose practice of the faith is well-established. In other words, the sponsor must be a **regular** participant in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confession.

When the time comes to choose a sponsor, the catechumen should speak with the rector about

the names of those who might potentially serve this role. For the sake of clarity, it should be emphasized: Given the seriousness with which the Church treats this role, the selection of a sponsor may not be finalized without the blessing of the parish rector.

In the case of those who will be received into the Church through anointing with chrism (chrismation), local traditions vary in requiring a sponsor. In the Orthodox Church of America, it is typical for a catechumen who will be received by chrismation to have a sponsor.

### Resources for Catechumens

Echoing what has been written above, the best resource for the catechumen to learn about the faith of the Church is the Church herself. In other words, the best way to learn about the Church is to encounter her at the ground level by participating in her life as much as possible (especially by attending the services).

At the same time, a catechumen should also be making serious efforts to engage in the matters of the Church's faith at home as well. What resources should he or she use, then? Three basic texts that all should read are **the Nicene Creed, the Anaphora of St Basil the Great, and the Service of Baptism**: The **Nicene Creed**, because it offers a summary of the Church's most essential teaching; the **Anaphora of St Basil**, because it offers a beautiful synopsis of the entirety of what God has done for us since creation and the fall; and finally, the **Service of Baptism**, because it offers a synoptic picture of what the Christian life of struggle and *ascesis* (discipline) is all about.

Beyond these texts, the catechumen should read Scripture regularly (especially **the Gospels and Psalms**) since, to echo St Jerome, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."

Passing from these texts, in terms of individual resources from contemporary authors, the following resources offer good treatments of the Church's teaching:

- (Metropolitan) Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*
- (Archbishop) Paul (of Finland), *The Faith We Hold*
- (Fr) Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*
- (Fr) Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith* (this is available in print; it is also available online for free: <https://www.oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith>)
- Recently, the Orthodox Church in America has published a catechism for use: *Essential Orthodox Christian Beliefs: A Manual for Adult Instruction*. It may be found online for free: <https://www.oca.org/cdn/PDFs/2023-0609-EOCB.pdf>

### Items to Procure Before the Service

For those being received into the Church through **baptism**, the following items must be procured by the catechumen (or sponsor) prior to the service:

- A new large white towel (this will be used to dry off after baptism)
- A small white towel (this will be used by the priest)
- A set of white church clothes (if they cannot be white, they should at least be light)
- *If baptism will be done by full immersion*: men must wear a t-shirt and knee length swim trunks, and women must wear a non-see-through light, long dress, or a non-see-through t-shirt and knee length swim trunks
- A baptismal neck-cross on a chain
- A candle (the St Nicholas parish bookstore keeps these on hand)

- The person may also bear his or her own baptismal robe. Otherwise, a robe from the Church will be used.
- It is traditional for the sponsor to give to the newly baptized an icon of his or her patronal saint, although this is not strictly necessary (since it is not bestowed during the service)

For those being received into the Church through **chrismation**, the only items needed are the neck-cross and a candle (and the icon, if desired).

### **Information to Send to the Priest Before *Baptism***

At least one week before the baptism, the person must send the following information to the parish rector (via **email**):

- Full name of person to be baptized:
- Baptismal name (if different):
- Date and Place of birth:
- Name of Father:
- Name of Mother (with maiden name):
- Address:
- Phone number:
- Name of sponsor:

### **Information to Send to the Priest Before *Chrismation***

At least one week before the chrismation, the person must send the following information to the parish rector (via **email**):

- Full name of person to be chrismated:
- Chrismation name (if different):
- Date and Place of birth:
- Address:
- Phone number:
- Name of sponsor:

### **A Final Note**

The period of the catechumenate (if taken seriously) will be a time of great blessings. At the same time, it will undoubtedly be a time of great spiritual struggle and difficulty. That is to be expected: One a new person is received into the Church, the Church grows. And as the Church grows, the kingdom of God grows. And as the Kingdom of God grows, the reign of the evil one becomes weaker and weaker. Therefore, catechumens should be on guard during this time, and they should take the spiritual component of their catechetical formation just as seriously as the intellectual formation. And finally, in the midst of their struggle, they should take great comfort in knowing that the Church is praying for them—both in her formal liturgical prayers around the world (at every Divine Liturgy, wherever it is celebrated, prayers are offered for catechumens), and also by her local members on a day-to-day basis (as parishioners at St Nicholas are asked to do).