

Rites For VICTIMS

The year 2012 will be a marker event for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. It's not too late to begin thinking about a 40th anniversary year celebrating the promulgation of the Order of the RCIA by Pope Paul VI on January 6, 1972.

Vatican II called for the restoration of the catechumenate to the modern church. The vote of the council fathers was 2,165 Yes, 9 No, and 1 null and void. Subsequent to this mandate, a provisional rite was distributed in 1966. After consultation with local episcopal conferences, a second draft was issued in 1969, with the final promulgation on January 6, 1972. The United States bishops approved a national plan and implemented it in 1986. The use of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* became mandatory in the United States in September 1988.

The rites of initiation are designed to be a process, not a program. The process is meant to be a lived experience of coming to faith in Jesus Christ, not an adult religious education. It is more about questions than answers, seeking rather than finding, an ongoing journey rather than a final destination. The process is designed to evangelize people into faith, not educate them about the tenets of a religion. The "curriculum" is connecting the life of an unbaptized adult with the life of Jesus Christ. The objective is to enable the adult to develop a personal relationship with Jesus so that as the formation process unfolds, he or she grows from inquiring faith to elected faith to owned faith.

This process includes several distinct stages: inquiry, catechumenate, purification and enlightenment, initiation, and mystagoga. As the catechumens and community of

sponsors move slowly through the stages, the seeds of faith are laid to be the foundation of the awakening and nurturing of new interior lives. When faith development, not an academic curriculum, is the focus of adult initiation, then discouragement and frustration, the enemies of faith development, are held in check. With attention focused on process, not content, the rites of initiation become a model of ongoing faith development for both the catechumen-neophyte as well as the community being reinitiated and renewed in faith.

For the August 2009 issue of *ML*, I wrote an article entitled "Tabernacles and Victims," which was triggered by the vandalism of a local church and the desecration of the Blessed Sacrament. I developed a reasoned argument for the reconsecration of victims of clergy abuse that would be based on a ritual that has long existed for the reconsecration of church buildings when they are violated and desecrated. The supportive e-mails I received from readers inspired me to write this follow-up article. The objective is threefold:

1. Define who I mean by "victim."
2. Make a case for the reinitiation of victims into faith communities that is based on the theology of the RCIA's model of adult Christian formation.
3. Develop parallel rites for the reinitiation of victims, using the RCIA's worthy paradigm.

Defining the victims

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (11th ed.) defines "victim" as

- 2 : one that is acted on and usu. adversely affected by a force or agent ... as
a (1) : one that is injured, destroyed, or sacrificed under any of various conditions

... (2) : one that is subjected to oppression, hardship, or mistreatment.

For the purpose of this article I will focus on definition a(2) as it applies to victims who have been spiritually wounded or emotionally oppressed by church leaders or ecclesial structures. Mistreatment includes being scolded by angry clergy, being shamed by an attitude of pharisaical righteousness on the part of some church leaders, feeling hurt by the rejection of an annulment petition, being ridiculed for disclosing in confession that one is gay, feeling emotionally conflicted by sexual rape that happened in childhood, being unjustly accused as a priest pedophile, and so on. This is a short list of the long list of human dysfunctions that create victims.

I will confine my focus to the spiritual dimension of a victim's story — specifically, helping victims connect their stories with the story of Jesus the victim. *How* that is done is as important as that it *is* done. I would argue that the RCIA's process of forming a non-Catholic adult into a faith-centered adult Catholic has merit in helping adult victims embrace the victim-hood of Jesus so that their stories of hurt and abuse become the path that brings them to the redemptive side of their victim-hood. I will begin with the certainty that many victims no longer go to church, while other victims are sitting in the pews of every church. People are at different stages on the spiritual path of struggling with being victims. Since no one's spiritual DNA is the same, we all do different things to deal with the unplanned experience of being victimized. Ultimately, what we do with it shapes and defines our spirituality. Let me advance a vision of how the RCIA's stage model of faith formation can fit an outreach and formation for renewal of faith with victims.

Making the case for reinitiation

The underlying theology of the rites of initiation is that faith is the foundation of life. This foundation is laid as adults "consciously and freely seek the living

God and enter the way of faith and conversion" (RCIA Introduction 1). The operative dynamic of formation in the rites is that faith is caught rather than taught. The preferred pedagogy is storytelling and faith sharing by sponsors and leaders and witnesses in the community. These co-operators companion the nonbaptized, preparing them for the sacraments of initiation, which include the dignity of baptism as "the first sacrament of the New Law, which Christ offered to all, that they might have eternal life (see John 3:5)" (RCIA General Introduction 3); the gift of the Spirit in confirmation, in which they bear witness to Christ to the world; and coming to the table of the Eucharist to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man — to have eternal life (Jn 6:55) and show forth the unity of God's people. This formation process has a paschal character: the initiation of Christians is their first sacramental sharing in the death and rising of Christ, and postbaptismal catechesis during the Easter season is a form of ongoing conversion, immersing the newly baptized deeper into the mysteries of faith.

Pre-Vatican II Catholics were formed in the faith chronologically rather than catechumenally; they are sometimes labeled "cradle Catholics." Post-Vatican II Catholics came to faith through the rites of initiation. The disparity between the two processes is that the former was a paradigm that emphasized a private spirituality; the latter emphasizes a communal spirituality. The RCIA's stage-model of formation is done in the midst of the community of faith. Based on the stages of the spiritual formation journey of adults, the following are comparable stages of reinitiation of victims into faith communities.

Comparable rites of reinitiation for victims

Stage 1 (Inquiry). Storytelling: Victims as evangelizers

The precatechumenate stage is a time of searching and questioning. People are seeking paths other than what the secular culture offers, moving away from sin and being drawn into the

mystery of God's love (RCIA 37). The evangelizing community proclaims Jesus Christ to the searching nonbaptized adults, and the doors of their hearts are opened by the Holy Spirit so they may be converted to the Lord (36).

A comparable equivalent in the process of reinitiating victims would have a significant change of emphasis. Whereas in the precatechumenate stage of the rites of initiation the faith community evangelizes the seekers, in this first stage of their reinitiation journey the victims become the evangelizers. Their absence from the community because of their unique wounds, scars, and hurts implies an absence of Jesus Christ from the community. When the divine healer is not present in kind faces, caring voices, comforting outreach, and sincere hospitality, victims avoid these communities and seek healing through other venues. By extension, an uncaring, non-nurturing faith community may innocently fuel the fissure between the victim and the community.

Victims, therefore, evangelize when they enable communities to poignantly face the absence of a caring and healing culture in a parish. They evangelize when they awaken parishes to the sad truth that it values programs over people, doctrine over virtue, and righteousness over conversion. They evangelize when they speak truth to power by pointing out that a parish's preferential option for comfort and complacency are not the doors that victims are opening and seeking to find healing, growth, and a passion for reconnection. They evangelize when they teach liturgists and preachers that the absence of any "victim" language in worship and homilies implies the exclusion of victims in the community. They evangelize when they confront the walls of silence in faith communities that have sentenced victims to deserts of anguish.

Victims as evangelizers do most of the talking in this stage, although initially they may begin with more silence than talking. That silence needs to be revered as the sacred ground where victims draw courage from a new

well to share their stories. The sharing may evoke tears, which need to be revered, not dried away with Kleenex. The tears need to flow hard and freely like a dam bursting with the potential for new life to bud forth within where once there were only arid and dry plateaus in the soul. Selected members of a faith community, schooled in the art of contemplative listening, pastoral care, and counseling are evangelized as they listen to the victims and cry their own tears. A bond of trust is formed between the victims who share their stories and the faithful who listen and discern the presence of God-the-victim in those stories. This is not a time for proselytizing or being judgmental. It is a time for storytelling against the landscape of quiet prayer, gentle listening, honest affirmation, tears, courage, and spiritual care.

Stage 2 (Catechumenate). Redemptive storytelling: Scripture as evangelizer

In the catechumenate stage of the rites, inquirers discern their readiness to be "elected" by the community. They are then presented to the community for public rites that culminate in initiation at Easter.

A comparable experience would be for the listeners of the faith community to evangelize the victims. This is best achieved by the community's sharing their own stories of being wounded and hurt and how the stories of Jesus-the-victim redeemed them. In this stage, the faith-community-as-wounded-healers share the salvation stories that invite victims to engage God as divine healer. The focus is on helping victims identify with victims in the Scripture stories, which frees them to find God in their stories.

This stage is a time to awaken the religious imagination so that everyone can begin to imagine what God imagines for the ongoing healing and reinitiation of victims into the faith community. It is time for dreaming. By filtering the stories of victims through the tradition of Scripture, those sacred stories of healing, when reflected on communally, can stretch hearts beyond hurts to dream God's dream for the next

stage in the victims' healing. Edward Schillebeeckx once said, "What we dream alone remains a dream, but what we dream with others can become a reality" (in Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* [Doubleday, 1999], 139). By de-privatizing our stories as victims and connecting them with the stories of Jesus as victim, the heart is free to imagine the possibility of Jesus the victim becoming Jesus the healer. This incarnational type of Christology lays the foundation on which a scarred interior life of victims can be resuscitated back to life. It culminates in victims' listening and discerning whom to bond with as they "elect" a particular wounded healer in the community as a companion for their ongoing healing and the journey toward reinitiation.

Stage 3 (Enlightenment). Writing the journey toward healing

In the rite of becoming catechumens, candidates make a public declaration of their intention, and "the Church in turn, carrying out its apostolic mission, accepts them as persons who intend to become its members" (RCIA 41). An important part of this rite of election includes writing their names in the Book of Catechumens along with the names of their sponsors and the date and place of admission (46).

A comparable piece of the victims' journey toward healing would include the practice of keeping spiritual journals — writing their stories of hurt and healing as a new gospel of their lives. Journals could include marker events such as the freedom to tell their stories; reflections on how the stories of biblical victims affected them and their gradual movement toward God as a healing presence; ponderings about their ability to carry the tension of their experiences as victims in new ways; expressions of desire to reconnect with a faith community and become wounded healers to other victims; and so on. This writing is the fruit of a victim's walk toward inner healing. It captures the spiritual movements of their conversion, which become a new

symphony playing inside their heads and hearts. Sharing those journal entries with a parishioner- evangelist can evidence their embrace of a new sense of worthiness before God. Each journal entry is a small step toward electing a faith community who will continue to enlighten the victim toward an awakening stage of faith.

The time of purification and enlightenment of the catechumens coincides with Lent, a time of penance and preparation for baptism. The "election" or admission of the catechumens culminates in writing their names in the Book of the Elect (118–119). The victims' spiritual journals are the equivalent of the Book of Catechumens, and their rite of election is sharing with the small community of evangelists and other victims their readiness to take the next step toward reinitiation.

The scrutinies, celebrated solemnly on Sundays, have a twofold purpose: revealing anything weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect so that it may be healed, and revealing what is upright, strong, and holy so that it may be strengthened (141).

A comparable rite of scrutinies for victims would focus on continued conversion from their demons and the voices of withdrawal and hopelessness. The evangelizers (like sponsors) are the voices of enlightenment and hope. They are the presence of a faith community who open doors of growth and freedom for victims trapped in the isolation of a past that has sentenced them to living in a dark, suffocating room. Scrutinies with victims might best be celebrated with mini-retreat days. The victim and the evangelist could spend quiet time just contemplating the movements away from old voices in order to empower new life-giving voices to rule the victim's life.

Stage 4 (Initiation). Reinitiation

The sacraments of initiation change a catechumen into a neophyte. This change highlights the new dignity received through anointing with chrism, washing with water, wearing a white robe, and carrying a lighted candle.

A comparable new name for "victim"

is "wounded healer." This suggests a potential new ministry as they discern a call to become agents of healing with other victims.

A comparable rite of reinitiation for victims may be less public than the initiation sacraments, depending on how the victim, evangelist, pastor, staff, and community negotiate this stage of healing. Reinitiation should include renewal of baptismal promises, anointing with oil, laying on of hands, and sharing the peace. These could be preludes to the celebration of the Eucharist or could be woven into the fullness of the sacrament.

Stage 5 (Mystagogia). Disciples continuing the journey

According to the RCIA, mystagogia "is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing the works of charity" (244).

The comparable stage for reinitiated victims would help them see themselves as disciples, walking as new evangelists in a new faith community, like those in the Emmaus story. Faith communities must practice charity, love, hope, reconciliation, and ongoing conversion in such a way that victims will want to transition into the parish life and be fed by this kind of virtuous living. This is how the desire for reinitiation will be caught more than taught. In the words of the great rabbinical scholar Abraham Heschel, "There are no final proofs for the existence of God; there are only witnesses." One day, may all victims be called by that name. ML

Rev. Paul G. Mast is a priest of the Diocese of Wilmington, Del., and is chaplain at St. Gertrude Monastery and the Benedictine School. He holds graduate degrees from Fordham University and The Catholic University and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Mundelein Seminary. He has recently published *Litanies & Legacies, Mystics & Mysteries: Themes for Living Life as a Spiritual Litany* (GospelSoft, 2009). Connect with him at his website, www.gospelsoftretreats.org.