

The Early Church (1/3)

Dr. Catherine G. González



Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo)
Puerto Rico

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Spirituality has to do with the inner life. It refers both to the experience of the presence of God and the practices that make us more open to such experiences. It includes the life of prayer as well as the life of love and action that stem from such prayer. The question we are asking is how this spirituality has been centered in different ways in the life of the church over the centuries, and what we can learn from this history for our own time.

What was “spirituality” for Christians in the second century? We need to remember that they were gathered in very small groups in various cities. By the second century most of the new members were gentiles who had never been related to Judaism. Before their conversion to Christianity they had been very much involved in the life-style of the empire. Few were members of the upper classes, although there were some—especially women. Some were slaves. Many were involved in trades. They may recently have come from the countryside in order to find a new life in the city. They had left behind extended families and now were strangers in the city.

Most of these people had little status in the city, and the church offered them a sense of belonging. Becoming part of this new group was not an easy matter however. Gone were the days of the New Testament when those who wished to join the church were either Jews or

God-fearers—those like Cornelius who accepted the monotheism and moral laws of Israel but had not converted to Judaism. For these people, the church needed to do a great deal of teaching and training, so those who finally were baptized clearly had made a break with the ways of the Roman society. Jesus was not to be added to the already existing pantheon of household gods. Monotheism was an absolute requirement, along with an understanding of covenant faithfulness, both with God and within marriage. This was no easy matter. The decision to become a Christian could not be made lightly. A tradesman involved in a craft would probably be part of a guild that governed all so involved in the city, and they had their own gods and feasts at the temples dedicated to those gods. Becoming part of the church could mean a great disruption in family and business life. Imagine the difficulty a slave or a wife might have in trying to be part of these meetings. The conservative sounding advice given to slaves and wives in the New Testament is a way of telling them to avoid conflict where possible so that their participation in the life of the church could continue.

Therefore, in the second century the church generally had a period of training—the catechumenate—that might last for two or three years. During that time, a catechumen would be part of the worship of the church up to the point of communion, at which time they were blessed and dismissed. They were in classes with others, and also had sponsors who helped them in their daily lives. Church gatherings were in private homes, if possible. If no one in the group had space for such meetings, then they met in a place outdoors. Meetings were at least daily, and often involved a meal. Once a week, on Sunday, all the groups in the city met together

to celebrate communion: the Lord's Supper at the Lord's Table on the Lord's Day.

What of our own day? As secularization grows, there are many people in our society who have little or no idea of what the church really believes. And yet, they may well be attracted to a congregation.

Christians felt a necessity to meet together as often as once or twice a day. For the catechumens, it was clear from the very beginning that meeting with other Christians was part of what it meant to belong to the church. While the worship of the gods of the surrounding society was an individual matter, Christianity was corporate. There were no "congregations" in a pagan temple. One might go to a temple with other people, or hold a feast if it was the god of a particular guild. But what was essential for Christians was to be with the congregation as well as worshipping God. Spirituality included such meetings. To be a solitary Christian was not even a possible thought—unless one was physically completely separated from other Christians because of prison or exile. Even then, the church would probably find ways to include you, and you would constantly think of them.

On a Wednesday, three and a half weeks before Easter, those catechumens whom both the bishop and the teacher believed were ready for baptism were brought before the church. The congregation was asked if anyone knew any reason why any of these people should not be baptized on the night before Easter. If any had questions, it probably would be something like a

man still keeping a mistress or a woman who was seen going into the temple of a local god with her in-laws. This meant that they had not yet made a clean break with the lifestyle of the wider society. They needed another year or so to see if they could change. Spirituality therefore clearly involved one's whole life. How one treated other people; how one earned one's living; life within the family; all of these things were part of the spiritual life of Christians, and it would take time to practice and learn this new behavior.

Finally, for those who were approved for baptism, the time finally came on Saturday night before Easter Sunday. They were not told what was to happen, simply given some basic directions. In the days before Easter they had been taught the early form of what we know as the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. On Easter eve, in a place apart from the congregation, baptisms were held. It might be at a river if there were no house available. The reason for the separation was that they were to enter their new birth in the same manner as their first birth: naked. In separate groups, the men, the women, and the children were baptized. Before they entered the water, they were asked **to reject the rule of evil [more]**. One could not simply accept Jesus without rejecting whatever lords had previously been given loyalty. Then, when they entered the water, they were asked three questions. These were interrogative forms of the Apostles' Creed: "Do you believe in God the Father almighty. . . .?"

After the candidate answered, "I believe," water was poured over them. Then they were asked the second question about the Son and the third about the Holy Spirit. After positive responses

twice more water was poured over them. Baptism was clearly Trinitarian!

In the fourth century, when the church was no longer persecuted and could build its own buildings for worship, it created structures that reflected its theology. This was especially true in the baptistries that were constructed. They remained separate from the sanctuary where the congregation gathered. The shape was sometimes rectangular, like a coffin, to emphasize that in baptism one died with Christ. Some were round, to emphasize that baptism was a new birth. But the most common shape in the West was octagonal. What had been very important to early Christians was that Jesus was raised on the first day of the week. There was a tradition in Judaism at the time that when the kingdom finally dawned, it would come on the day after the Sabbath. In other words, now history continues one week at a time, and after every Sabbath on the seventh day comes the start of a new week on the first day. But after one Sabbath there would be an eighth day—not a new week but the dawn of the eternal kingdom of God. Jesus rose on the first day of a new week, but to Christians, it was also the eighth day, the beginning of the new creation. What was totally unexpected to Judaism was that the old creation continued. But Christians knew that they lived now both in the old creation and the new. They lived in a foretaste of the final kingdom, awaiting its full appearance which would come with the return of Jesus. Baptism therefore was a sign of living in this new age, and so the octagonal baptistry reminded them of this. Baptism was individual, but the major import was that it made one part of a new community, joined to other Christians who tried to live a life very different from the world around. Within this community, the usual divisions found in the surrounding

society were overcome, at least briefly. In Christ there was neither slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor Greek.

We need to ask ourselves what are the major divisions in our society? Does our experience of the church give us an experience that, at least within the congregation, we have overcome the divisions that sin has created in the world around us?

This sense that Christians already lived at least partly in the new age was soon lost. The Middle Ages had very little awareness of this, even though many of their baptistries continued the octagonal shape. The Reformation did little to revive such an eschatological meaning for baptism. But much of that has been recaptured in very recent times, and this has enormous significance for a congregation's spirituality. The early Christians were well aware that they lived most of their lives in the old, fallen world. But on Sunday, on the Lord's Day, they celebrated their foretaste of the new creation. On that day they did not kneel for prayer, nor did they bow their heads. Rather, like children of the King, they appeared before God who was their father. Their baptism had made them adopted children of God, brothers and sisters of the only-begotten Son of the Father.

Going back to Easter Eve: after a candidate was baptized, they were clothed with a white robe. Then the bishop anointed their forehead with oil in the sign of the cross. Within Israel, the priests and the kings were anointed with oil. These new Christians were now made part of the

royal and priestly people of God. When all had been baptized and anointed, they processed into the gathered congregation. Easter had arrived! These people clothed in white were the new ones who had been raised with Christ.

For the first time, they could stay for the celebration of the Lord's Table. Part of this service that they had never been a part of before were the Prayers of the People. The earlier part of the service, the Service of the Word, had included preaching and also some prayers. But these prayers were different. They were prayers of intercession for the whole world. Christians were a priestly people, engrafted into Christ, the one High Priest. The task of a priest is to approach God on behalf of those who cannot so approach Him. Therefore, the Prayers of the People included prayers for the emperor, even when he was persecuting them, and prayers for all people, especially for those who were sick or dying, for those in other sorts of difficulty. There were prayers for the whole church, especially congregations that were suffering. Only the baptized were part of the priestly people, and therefore, these prayers occurred only after others had been dismissed.

Then came communion. It was not so much a looking back to the Last Supper in the Upper Room as it was a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in the Kingdom. There was very much the sense that they were in the presence of the Risen Christ who was the one actually inviting them to His Table and serving them. It was a joyful occasion, especially on Easter, but every Sunday was a mini-Easter. Those who had just been baptized were served communion but unlike the

others, they were served three chalices: one of water to baptize the inside just has water had baptized the outside; one of milk and honey mixed, so show that by baptism they had crossed the river Jordan and entered the Promised Land, and the final one of wine, just as the rest of the congregation received.

Augustine was a bishop when this pattern of the catechumenate and the baptisms at Easter were still practiced. We have transcriptions of sermons that he preached to the newly baptized on the night of Easter, explaining some of the meaning of what they had experienced the previous night. I want to read briefly from two of these sermons, in both cases the text he was using was I Corinthians 10:17, which reads: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf."

He then said:

In this loaf of bread you are given clearly to understand how much you should love unity. I mean, was that loaf made from one grain? Weren't there many grains of wheat? But before they came into the loaf they were all separate; they were joined together by means of water after a certain amount of pounding and crushing. Unless wheat is ground after all, and moistened with water, it can't possibly get into this shape which is called bread. In the same way you too were being ground and pounded. . . [He then mentions the activities of the catechumenate.] Then came baptism, and you were, in a manner of speaking, moistened with water in order to be shaped into bread. But it is not yet bread without fire to bake it. . . . So the Holy Spirit comes, fire after water, and you are baked into the bread which is the body of Christ. (Sermon 227, pp254-255 in The Works of Saint Augustine, Vol III/6, translated by Edmund Hill, O.P.: New Rochelle, New York: New City Press, 1993).

In another sermon he adds:

In order not to be scattered and separated, eat what binds you together; in order not to seem cheap in your own estimation, drink the price that was paid for you. Just as this turns into you when you eat and drink it, so you for your part turn into the body of Christ when you live devout and obedient lives. (Sermon 228D, p 262)

Fairly soon after Augustine, the pattern changed. Almost everyone was born into a Christian family and they were baptized shortly after birth. The catechumenate disappeared. The Middle Ages kept the idea of baptism at Easter, but included a renewing of baptismal vows in the service for Easter Eve. Even that disappeared as a congregational event until very recently. In many churches, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, there has developed a service for the renewal of baptismal vows to use on many occasions, but especially at Easter. The United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian, the Lutheran, the Episcopal, and many others use such a service. At the seminary where I taught it was used at the opening convocation of the school year. We would like to use a form of this service as part of our worship together today.