CATECHUMEN GUIDE

Saint Mary Magdalen Orthodox Church

1. **Inquirers and Seekers** The catechumenate is preceded by a period of inquiry. People in this phase of their spiritual life are usually referred to as inquirers or seekers. Several weeks of regular church attendance is standard before being officially made a catechumen, but this period of serious inquiry can also last up to a few months depending on the readiness of the individual.

2. **Catechumenate Induction** Once someone has decided they want to officially begin the catechumen process and have a sincere desire to become Orthodox they should speak with the parish priest. One is made a catechumen, usually at the end of Divine Liturgy, with a special prayer and blessing by the priest. Once an individual has become a catechumen they are *no longer permitted to partake of communion* from their previous tradition or any other church not in communion with the Orthodox Church. A catechumen is considered a part of the Church, even if they are not a full communicating member yet, as demonstrated by the right to an Orthodox funeral if they repose before reception into the Church. In such cases the catechumen is considered to have received what is called a Baptism of Desire

3. **Catechesis** The process of catechesis generally *lasts for one year*. It is important to experience a full calendar year of living and praying the Orthodox way. Catechesis is primarily about having a meaningful and transformative spiritual experience and learning to belong and commit to one's new faith, not merely acquiring religious information. For this reason, the word 'formation' is often used to describe this process.

   Participation in the Life of the Church

   Education is a part of the process, and is provided through preaching, classes, and other events like retreats or Coffee & Theology talks. But the overall process is one of belonging to a worshiping community and learning a new way of life lived together with other Orthodox Christians. The Divine Liturgy is always followed by an Agape (Coffee Hour) which is understood as an extension of the Divine Liturgy. The catechumenate is not merely about attending services but also holding fellowship with one's brothers and

sisters in Christ. The process of catechism and its fulfilment in baptism and chrismation is one of radical change in identity and belonging. This is why the catechumen is encouraged to participate as much as possible in the life of the parish and this participation is the primary way one prepares to be received into the Church. This includes the following spiritual disciplines: volunteering, fasting, practicing a private prayer rule, regular liturgical attendance (both Sundays and weekdays), regular financial stewardship, attending catechism classes, meeting with the priest for spiritual guidance, personal spiritual reading, and developing friendships with fellow parishioners.

Catechism Class and Check-Ins

There are two main programs designed for catechumens. The first is *Catechism Class*. A session of catechism classes is offered twice a year, usually in the Fall and in the Winter/Spring for 6-8 weeks each. These classes are usually taught by a lay catechist and have the purpose of introducing the catechumen into basics of theology and Church history. The second is the *Catechumen Check-In* which is conducted by the parish priest and occurs once or twice a month. It is held after the Divine Liturgy and focuses on personal and spiritual guidance.

A Few Rules and Expectations

Catechumens are encouraged, in addition to spending a year as a catechumen, to *refrain from entering into new romantic relationships* during this period so as to better focus on their catechumenate. Too many other significant life changes at the same time has the tendency to derail the catechumen process. They are also asked to *abstain from consuming online Orthodox content*. The internet is full of good and bad. Orthodox content online is no different. Because one is just starting out it can be hard to properly discern between what is good and what is harmful, and it is best to think of this abstention as a kind of digital fast. Lastly, Catechumens are asked to let the priest know when they will not be in attendance, especially when the period is more than one week.

Catechumens are strongly encouraged to experience the full breadth and diversity of the Orthodox Church. This includes attending other special services like funerals or weddings, as well as feast days which fall during the week. Participation in the life of the Church as a catechumen is not a Sunday only affair. Catechumens are also encouraged to

occasionally attend Orthodox churches from different ethnic backgrounds and to participate in the annual Catechumen monastery retreat that occurs prior to Lent.

Fulfillment of all expectations of the Catechumenate mentioned are required for receiving baptism and chrismation.

Some exceptions to this process are often made when an entire family or the spouse of an Orthodox Christian are converting.

4. **Reception** It is the sole discretion of the priest to determine when one is ready to be brought into the Church. Once an individual has fulfilled the requirements of the catechumenate they are received in one of three ways: Baptism, Chrismation, or Confession of Faith. Those who have never been baptized or who did not receive a Trinitarian baptism must be baptized and chrismated. Those who have received a Trinitarian baptism from a non-Orthodox tradition must be Chrismated and are not permitted to be re-baptized. Only the confirmation/chrismation of Non-Chalcedonians and Roman Catholics are accepted by the Orthodox Church. All other Christian traditions which practice confirmation/chrismation must be Chrismated. Non-Chalcedonians (Oriental Orthodox) are received into the Church by a public confession of faith, though sometimes they are received simply by private confession. It is common for Roman Catholics to be received either by a confession of faith with a single anointing of Chrism or by the full Chrismation ritual. The exact method of reception will be determined by the parish priest following the canons of the Orthodox Church and the ruling of his hierarch.

   As the period of the catechumenate draws to its end and in preparation for their reception into the Church the catechumen will need to, in consultation with their priest, 1) choose a sponsor, 2) select a patron saint, and 3) make a life confession.
   It is customary for the sponsors to provide the baptismal cross as well as food for the reception following the service.

   Sponsors, also known as godparents, must be Orthodox. However, an allowance is sometimes made for one of the godparents (who is not Orthodox) to be an honorary

godparent while the other godparent is an Orthodox Christian in good standing. Good standing means they are not under any communion ban and are a regularly practicing Orthodox Christian who attends services, partakes of communion, makes confession, and gives alms.

Life confessions are heard a few weeks prior to the catechumen's reception into the Church and cover the entirety of their life with a focus on the major sins they may have committed which have shaped their life, longstanding habitual sins, significant harm and sin committed against them by others, and an intimate sharing of their spiritual journey so far.