

6. A Brief Guide for Inquirers and Catechumens at St. Nicholas

Thanks be to God, we often have visitors to St. Nicholas who are not members of the Orthodox Church, and are perhaps experiencing Orthodox worship for the first time. Eventually, if they continue visiting, some of these people inevitably inquire about how to become members of the Church. Here is a brief explanation of that process.

Those who are more than casual visitors, and are beginning to attend services regularly are what we call “inquirers.” Being an inquirer can be compared to being in the state of “courtship.” The inquirer has not yet made any commitment. He or she can decide at any time to stop visiting and look elsewhere. However, this is someone who is at least somewhat serious about trying to figure out whether or not to join the Church. At some point, if an inquirer decides to join the Church, he or she will express that desire to the priest. At this point, the priest may suggest reading an introductory book. Depending on the length of time it’s been, he may encourage the inquirer to visit for a while longer. Eventually, however, it will be time to discuss enrolling the inquirer as a catechumen.

The *Catechumenate*, or period of preparation for baptism, has a long history going back to the early centuries of the Church. For adult converts to Christianity coming from pagan backgrounds in the 4th Century, for example, it was usual to spend a three-year period of learning and preparing for baptism. There was a lot of unlearning of pagan practices and thought-patterns that had to happen, as well as learning the basics of the Gospel and Christian way of life. In the early Church, and today, the period of catechumenate entailed frequent attendance at services, repentance for past sins and sinful modes of life, practical integration into the Christian community, and formal instruction from a catechist.

In our Antiochian Archdiocese, the standard length of the catechumenate is normally one year (or longer). If being an inquirer can be compared to courting, the catechumenate can be compared to engagement. It is considered a real commitment, and one should not take this step until one is ready to commit to becoming Orthodox without looking back. Anyone who is ready to take this step should discuss this with the priest and arrange with him to do the *Prayers for the Making of Catechumens*.

The primary way of learning our Faith is to attend services regularly. This includes of course the Sunday morning Divine Liturgy, but catechumens are strongly encouraged to attend as many other services as possible. We pray what we believe, so attentive participation in Divine services provides us with theological and spiritual formation. Catechumens come forward after the sermon during each Liturgy, for the “Litany of the Catechumens,” after which they return to their place. They attend Catechism classes whenever they are offered. They also read a short list of books. They make a life confession before their baptism and/or chrismation. At some point during their catechumenate, they choose a sponsor, or godparent (of the same sex), and choose a patron Saint. Additional details for catechumens, including a reading list, are available upon request from the priest.