

Baptized for Life (BFL) Training Summary of the catechumenate videos

By Juan M.C. Oliver

Videos: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1pac6QyrFGTTbVbk6mopg2h2ym32qwZ88>

Baptized for Life is a program designed to support processes to form Christian lives of meaning and purpose. Participants are encouraged to mark the stages of their growth with rites inspired by discipleship practices in the early church. The following is a summary of the main points made by Dr. Oliver in his videographed talks introducing the catechumenate at the BFL training retreat in Western Maryland, in 2018.

Numbers in **RED** refer to the time in each video that expands a given section.

General Introduction

00:13 It is urgent to make disciples. Urgent, because disciples do not grow on trees. Tertullian, writing as early as the third century, already noticed that “Christians are made, not born.” [Baptized for Life \(BFL\)](#) seeks to provide its participants with the tools to make disciples and deepen the discipleship of those who are already Christians.

Lots of people claim to be Christian. But they do not worship, do not regularly interpret the Bible, do not engage in a deliberate life of prayer, and do not work for the poorest and most vulnerable. They are at best, beginning Christians because they were baptized, but their lives do not yet exhibit the qualities of *mature* Christians. Additionally, I do not know a single person who goes to church out of a sense of obligation or out of fear of burning for all eternity. People do so today because *they want to*. So, it is important for us to find out what makes people *want* to go to Church, and how *we may help them* to become

committed members of the household of God that is the Church.

- **3:15** **Baptized for Life is a process** based on the ancient Christian method for making disciples, [the catechumenate](#), for ancient Christians had the wisdom to recognize that belonging takes time, and that it does not happen immediately – like acquiring a friend on Facebook – but gradually. Becoming a disciple is a process of turning to God day by day as we learn to live in community, accompanied by sponsors and group facilitators. This process leads to a full and dramatic celebration of **baptism**, and in our time, it may also be used toward a full and meaningful celebration of ways of reaffirming our faith and commitment: **confirmation**, **reception** into the Episcopal Church, or **reaffirmation** of the baptismal covenant.
- **4:51** Candidates journeying towards their baptism through this process were thus ritually reborn to new life, not by some ineffable magic or Christian fairy dust, but because they had been responding to God’s Word, allowing it to **transform their hearts** (the literal meaning of the Greek term *metanoia*, usually translated as conversion or repentance). So, baptism expressed not only the forgiveness of sins by washing, but this spiritual rebirth with a new, transformed heart – a process of transformation that goes on throughout our whole lives.
- **7:38** Discipleship is best understood as a process of orienting ourselves toward God. In the case of adults to be baptized, this process begins well before the baptism. In the case of infants, it begins through their parent’s own process of discipleship, until we bring the child into the fellowship of the Church on the strength of her parent’s promise to raise her as a Christian disciple.

- BFL is an excellent process to employ to welcome and pastorally support new members, as well as renew the discipleship of those already among us.

8:29 Summary – Baptized for Life is:

- A clear, *sustained* **process** of belonging and deepening one’s call/vocation
- By **stages**, marked by liturgical **rites**
- In conversation with **scripture**
- Led by **lay group facilitators**, coordinated by the local priest.
- With the support of **sponsors**
- **Supporting transformation**
- In a **safe**, supported environment characterized by **vulnerability and respect**.

9:40 The BFL Process: Four Stages

STAGE I: Announcing Good News and Inquiry

Ends with **the Rite of Welcome** (May be celebrated any Sunday)

STAGE II: Formation (catechumenate)

Ends with the **Rite of Enrollment** (Usually on the first Sunday of Lent).

STAGE III: Intense Preparation

Ends with **Baptism, Confirmation, Reception or Reaffirmation of Baptismal Covenant**. (At the Easter Vigil, Easter Day or soon afterward).

STAGE IV: Reflecting on Sacramental Experience

includes a **celebration of Vocation**

Lasts seven weeks and continues throughout our lives. In most parishes, it may be convenient to plan to begin shortly after Labor Day.

FIRST LECTURE

STAGE I: Announcing Good News and Inquiry

9:40 Evangelization is not only about sharing our faith in Jesus, but about proclaiming and announcing the *evangel*, that is, the Gospel, or Good News of God proclaimed by Jesus.

So, what is the Gospel? First, it is not the biography of Jesus, since when he proclaimed it in Galilee two thousand years ago he did not say, “I was born in a stable and three magi came to see me with weird gifts.” Rather, as Mark, the earliest gospel writer put it, “*Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good tidings of God: that the proper time has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn near: change your hearts and trust the good news.*” (Mk 1:14-15, Hart translation).

13:00 Kingdom of God (or Reign of God) By this phrase the New Testament does not mean another realm somewhere else, but God’s rule over *this* world where we live, transformed by God into a new world of truth-telling, justice-doing, peace-making, and love. It is the new “Messianic Age” that Jesus inaugurated with his proclamation and his rising from the dead.

14:11 But Good News for *whom*? Who do you know that lives day today, in a *bad news* situation? Who stays up at night yearning that God would show up and rule? Not the rich – they do not stay up all night praying for the Reign of God to come. They go shopping for gold toilets.

16:49 The Gospel of the nearness of the Reign of God means that **yes, we can** have a country immersed in justice, truth, peace, and love. *Yes, we can* narrow the income gap, support the empowerment of girls, fight the opioid epidemic, and so on. *Yes, we can* improve education in this country. *Yes, we can* combat climate change locally and globally. *Yes, we can* organize the parish to care for Alzheimer’s patients, feed the homeless, open a nursery so mothers can go to work, and many other ways. For the Gospel affects *everything* and is hope for *everyone*, especially for those living daily in bad news.

16:39 So the proclamation of the Good News of God is not so much talking *about* our faith in Jesus (that will come later), but of *working to heal the world*, freeing it from its slavery to selfishness, greed, exploitation, lies, etc. The gospel for the hungry woman is food. For the abused wife, a shelter. For the HIV/AIDS patient, medical care. For the addict, rehabilitation. For the ignorant, education.

18:37 Actually, I suspect in most congregations the **newcomers** at our door are *not* the poorest but folks with a premonition, a feeling or inchoate sense, that there is more to life than paying one’s student loans. And yes, they are poor and needy too. So, the operative question for the congregation about their neighborhood is not so necessarily, “who needs a meal” (that would not hurt!) but “**who is living in a bad news situation?**” and mobilize the congregation to serve *them*.

The process of proclaiming the Good News in deeds (with words if necessary) is best organized by **deacons**, who are ordained to make the needs of the world known to us in the parish.

23:33 WELCOME: THE PARISH AS HOST

Sooner or later someone is going to get curious about what goes on at St. Swithin's. And they will sum up all their courage and bravery to approach the door of our church. Are we ready for them? Back in the '80's researcher Arlin Rothauge found that congregations that do not have clear, intentional processes for welcoming new members did not grow as fast as those that did. Too much was left to chance, to Father's charming personality, to the altar guild's network of friends, or whatever.

Someone in the neighborhood has noticed the Good News. Let us call her Sally. A single mother of three, she found church through our nursery where she dropped her daughter on her way to work. Her ex-husband was an evangelical, verbally and emotionally abusive, and so she was extremely wary of anything having to do with Church. For twenty-years has had not been to a service. Today she gathers up her courage and shows up.

26:00 How to **take responsibility** for welcoming her?

If the usher only smiled and sat her unaccompanied, she was left to try to make sense of all that flipping back and forth. If someone did help her to follow the service, perhaps no one said even "hi" at coffee hour. If someone said "hi," perhaps no one called her afterward. It will be a miracle if she returns. The sticking rate especially since she is suspicious of Christianity to begin with.

So, in BFL we take responsibility for welcoming. We do not leave welcoming to chance, for newcomers need a **proactive welcoming process** – taking several months to a year – in which people like Sally are pastorally accompanied as they explore the Christian life in community. And you'd be surprised at the number of people who have been in church for years who would *also* like to be welcomed!

A PROCESS IN WHICH WE TAKE RESPONSIBILITY:

1. **12:27** Sally is welcomed at the door *by **the priest***, and passed to a **friendly greeter**,
2. Who sits her next to someone who he knows is going to **help her participate**.
3. After the service, she greets the priest again, and the **same greeter is standing** next to the priest to pick up a conversation with her, introduce her to a couple of people and invite her to... coffee! In this process, if it is natural, he *may* ask her for her **phone number** and/or **email**, to keep her informed. The info is given to the **priest that day and she calls Sally mid-week**.
4. Upon opening the bulletin on Sunday, Sally found this announcement: *Welcome to St. Swithun's! We are honored to have you with us today. Please do not hesitate to ask anyone for anything. If you would like to meet Mother Smith she is **available to share her story every Sunday during the hour before the service**, in her office. (Or at some other time and place, but they must *always be the same*).*
5. So, the next time Sally feels like going to Church she may shyly look into the priest's office. And there she is, Mother Smith, talking with two other newcomers, getting to know each other. The priest welcomes Sally and explains that they are just **sharing their stories**, and begins, "**this is who I am and how I got here.**" It goes off from there, each sharing in turn. The process roughly takes 45 minutes to an hour per person. They meet for **several weeks**.

30:30 The reason for this meeting is to **know the priest** as soon as possible. It should be scheduled for a regular time and place, no exceptions. It is not left to happenstance since the priest takes responsibility to be present at the scheduled time and place *always*. If for some reason she must be absent, another priest or lay pastor takes her place in emergencies. The meeting is friendly. The priest models emotional availability and vulnerability – in other words, she is real, present, and friendly. There is no agenda except get to know each other's stories.

6. After four weeks or so Mother Smith breaks the news: "It's been wonderful, but I have a new group with even newer people – so this will be our last meeting as a group." They hate it. But Mother has a card: "Since you like getting together, I have asked Maria and Peter to come by. They **facilitate a group** which meets every week at to reflect together on the meaning of our Sunday bible readings. It's called **Baptized for Life**; Sally asks them, "What do you do in that group?" "It's great," Maria says, "we are about eight people, – we meet on Wednesdays at 7:00 PM, we hear a reading, and share what it means to us. Come see!" Sally smiles, pretty sure that she is not going to.

7. But a couple of Wednesdays later she decides to go and see. There she meets Bobby, 34, who is *considering* being **baptized**, Mona and Sue, a couple who want to **baptize their newborn**, Amanda; Tony, Roman Catholic exploring the Episcopal Church, thinking of **Reception**; and precocious Marilyn, who is 17 and graduating from High School. Her parents told her that she did not have to be confirmed, but she had to do this to decide whether she wanted **Confirmation or not**.

33:14 Here, in this group of disciples, Sally begins *her* discipleship. In a few weeks Sally, who has begun to make friends both in the group and in wider parish, decides she is ready to explore the Christian life in community during the coming school year. Peter and Maria, tell the priest. They will formally welcome Sally to the congregation as she begins her journey. Sally goes home excited and a little worried, because she does not have anything ironed. The next Sunday, before the Peace, the parish celebrates the Rite of Welcome, and Sally is off to a running start. End of Stage I.

SECOND LECTURE

0:15 STAGE II: Formation (Catechumenate)

4:09 The Bible reflection sessions facilitated by Maria and Peter are the heart of the discipleship stage – its motor. These sessions are *not* “classes” about theology, Anglican history or anything remotely alike. (There *will* be a need for such classes, but they are best scheduled separately). Participants allow the biblical narrative to shed light of on their own experience. In these sessions, everyone is a teacher, for everyone's an expert on their own life.

7:30 This stage of Discipleship is also not only a process of individual transformation, but a school for living in community. This is why it's important that the participants begin by knowing each other and creating a safe space where they can be open and vulnerable, *making friends*. To support this, BFL employ some basic “rules of the game.”

8:24 Rules of the Game

- What is said here remains here (confidentiality)
 - Do not share what you do not wish to share (responsibility for one's boundaries)
 - Speak in "I" statement only, about your own experience only (No cross-talk)
 - All opinions have room in the group. All are heard, no one is argued
 - The leaders make sure these guidelines are observed.
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Week by week the participants gather to reflect on scripture together. They use: **The Bible Reflection Method**

1. The leader welcomes all, checks how the week went for them, and opens with a short prayer.
2. A woman reads the Scripture reading – Leader asks, "Quickly, without elaborating, please share a word, phrase or image that moved or stuck with you, or intrigued you."
3. A man reads the same passage maybe from a different translation. Leader asks: When have you been in a similar situation? or, What experiences of yours does the passage bring to mind? (this may well be the longest segment).
4. A woman reads the same passage a third time. Leader asks: How is the passage inviting you to change? What is God asking of you in this passage?
5. Each participant prays by turn for the person on her right, starting with the leader. *OR* The leader prays over each person, laying on hands. The group may end with the Lord's Prayer.

10:08 Four Christian Skills

Throughout this process, assisted by the group leaders and clergy, the participants begin to develop or deepen the four main skills of a mature Christian— How to:

- **interpret** Scripture and apply it to one's life.
- **participate** consciously and actively in worship.
- **develop** personal habits of prayer and spiritual growth.
- **join** us in our lives of service to the poor and in need.

ONE: Interpreting Scripture

Bible Reflection leaders say little. They assist the participants in reflecting on the gospel for the following Sunday, Sometimes the gospel is too abstract, in which case an Old Testament passage may be a better choice. Week by week the participants internalize the three operative questions.

12:28 TWO: Full conscious and active participation in worship.

There are two aspects to this:

- a. Their participation week by week in worship. Simply by dint of getting familiar with the Eucharist, and being encouraged to ask questions, the participants begin slowly to practice not only reflection on the Bible, but upon their experience of worship as well.
- b. The **liturgy is designed** keeping in mind the needs of the **newcomer**, not assuming that everyone knows what goes on or what to do.

13:07 THREE: Developing personal habits of prayer and responsibility for spiritual development. Conversations around Scripture will lead to questions about personal prayer and spirituality in general. From the Our Father morning and evening, to the Daily Office, to an annual retreat, to developing a Rule of Life, many ways of going about this may be shared. It is also very helpful for the bishop to meet on retreat with the participants from BFL parishes, during Lent.

13:36 FOUR: Serving the poor and needy and working for justice and peace. BFL assumes that the participating disciples will join the parish in its **ministries to the neediest**. It is up to the parishes to decide how and where these ministries take place. If there is more than one, the disciples should **experience them all**, to get a general sense of the congregation's outreach – an integral part of the Christian life.

Eventually, a participant in BFL will start noticing changes – some very tiny, some not, in her feelings, thoughts, attitudes and behaviors. This is a sign of **conversion**, and the participants are ready for the next stage: Intense Preparation. Lent nears.

17:42 STAGE III: Intense Preparation

This stage usually begins in the first week of Lent. It kicks off with the Rite of Enrollment or Election. **Disciples have begun to identify changes in their lives.** Now that their goal (Baptism, Confirmation, Reception, etc.) is in sight they prepare for it more intensely through reflection, prayer, serving the poor, almsgiving, and other personal practices, as they begin to live in however small new ways. Therefore, this stage appropriately takes place in Lent, but in any case Stage III should take about six weeks.

The central image of this stage is turning or returning to God more consciously. It is intense because at this stage the disciples need additional support as they identify the obstacles that prevent them from responding to God in love.

21:17 It is also an important time for sponsors to offer additional support and help. If the sponsors have not been chosen earlier, before the Rite of Welcome, they must be chosen now.

There is no limit to the number of sponsors or godparents, and it is helpful to make sure that at least one of them is a parishioner, ready to participate in the Bible reflection sessions. Several topics *may* arise in this stage: questions about God's forgiveness, confession, new beginnings, etc. Practical questions about changes that the person may feel called to bring about in her life; or a call for more support from the group as last-minute doubts arise.

23:20 Additionally, the participants should review the Baptismal Covenant and perhaps discuss specific applications of it in their lives. Those preparing for Baptism may be solemnly given the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, which they will profess at their baptisms. If there are candidates for baptism, the readings from Year A of the Lectionary may be proclaimed instead of those of the assigned year – with permission of the Bishop. Finally, the group leaders and sponsors may want to participate in the liturgical planning for the Baptisms, at Easter and or Confirmations and Receptions soon after.

00:13 THIRD LECTURE

STAGE IV: reflections on sacramental experience (Mystagogy)

After their Baptism, Confirmation or Receptions, participants and their sponsors continue to meet for seven weeks, to reflect now on their experience of the sacraments they have just participated in. *They have prepared deeply for a major experience, and now they begin to unpack its meaning for them.*

Why not before? Because they have not experienced it yet. It'd be silly to ask a couple, "let's talk about the meaning of your honeymoon" before the marriage!

1:28 Now, after experiencing the bath and anointing, of the laying on of hands by the bishop in confirmation, reception, etc., they can truly explore their meaning. Therefore, the group does not reflect now on the Bible, but on the *liturgy* – and not only on the specific sacrament they have experienced but more generally as well.

The operative questions are NOT “What is doctrinal position of the Church?” but things like, “So, after twenty years of not being in Church, what was it like to do this?” Or, “What was it like for you when... (stripping, plunging, etc.)?”

6:38 The whole congregation may be invited to observe these sessions. In reflecting on sacramental experience God gives us a double gift:

- The congregation, seeing and hearing the disciples share their

experience of the sacraments also see and hear the meaning of being a Christian, not in theories but in living flesh, thus renewing and feeding *their own* spirituality.

- The disciples, usually unawares, will voice profound theological understandings of the sacraments. They will cite Augustine (“I am what I eat”) or Cyril of Jerusalem (“I came out of the water and was like Eve in the garden, totally unashamed of my body”).
- It’s a great idea, to facilitate this sharing, to make a video of the liturgical event and play it among laughter and tears, during this festive period.
- **12:40** The whole community begins to be more aware of and appreciate what God is doing to it through worship: rehearsing, week by week, in how to live in the Reign of God. Here, now, in their neighborhood. For the rehearsal of the Reign that is liturgy is the symbolic acting-out of our vision of the Reign of God here and now.
- So, questions like, “Tell me, how will your neighborhood be different when the Reign comes?” may open-up a wider still meaning of the sacraments.

In all these ways, not only the Bible but worship itself becomes formative during the seven weeks of reflecting on sacramental experience, sometimes described as *Opening the Treasure*.

Finally, some of the participants or their sponsors may wish to be involved the next year or soon after in the program again. This is a good opportunity for them to sponsor someone else and thus continue deepening their own discipleship.