The Rule of Catechumens

at St. John the Merciful Orthodox Church

Preface

These rules are not a checklist for worthiness, but a guide for healing. The catechumenate is a hospital, not a courtroom. Everything here is lived out with patience, mercy, obedience, and personal pastoral guidance.

The Orthodox Church forms Christians deliberately and slowly. This rule exists to help catechumens grow in repentance, humility, faithfulness, and love, so that when they are received into the Church, they enter not as spectators, but as disciples.

Rules for Becoming a Catechumen at SJTM

1. The highest calling in the world is to be an Orthodox Christian. The world does not need any more lukewarm or mediocre Christians. There are plenty who wear the name and do not live the life. The prayers of the Catechumenate call catechumens "newly enlisted warriors" for Christ. Warriors are committed and vigilant. This rule is not about perfection, but about direction, repentance, and faithfulness.

2. If the inquirer is fornicating or committing adultery, he or she must cease before becoming a catechumen.

3. If the inquirer is cohabitating with a boyfriend or girlfriend, he or she must cease before becoming a catechumen.

4. If the inquirer is tempted by same-sex attraction or suffers gender dysphoria, he or she must commit to the Christian virtues of chastity, purity, and holiness, according to the long-standing Christian tradition. Fornication of every sort is completely contrary to the Christian life.

5. If the inquirer is engaged in idolatry, he or she must cease before becoming a catechumen and confer with the priest about a special prayer rule. Idols, statues, images of foreign gods, etc., should be destroyed discreetly and with pastoral guidance.

6. If the inquirer is a member of a secret or fraternal order (Freemasons, etc.), including organizations whose oaths or teachings conflict with the Orthodox Christian faith, he or she must formally resign from that order before becoming a catechumen.

7. If the inquirer suffers addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex, or pornography, he or she should ask the priest for advice on how to fight these addictions and should follow that advice.

8. Prior to becoming a catechumen, the inquirer must confer with the priest on how they will be received into the Orthodox Church at St. John's, and they must abide by that decision in obedience and peace.

9. Prior to becoming a catechumen, the inquirer must confer with the priest to find a suitable sponsor. Sponsors are Orthodox Christians of the same sex as the catechumen who are regular participants in the mysteries of confession and communion and who have been Orthodox Christians for at least one year.

10. Prior to becoming a catechumen, inquirers are welcome to visit any of the Orthodox churches in the area. After becoming a catechumen, however, it is important that they attend services at St. John's until they are received, so they receive a single formation in a single parish. Visits to neighboring parishes for events and feast days are an exception to this rule. This is not a prohibition on fellowship, but a safeguard for unity and clarity of formation.

How Catechumens Participate in the Life of the Church

1. Catechumens are enrolled on Sundays at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy in the presence of their sponsors (godfather or godmother).

2. Classes for catechumens are held during the Nativity Fast and Great Lent on Saturdays before Vespers at 4:30pm and on Sundays during the Divine Liturgy. Catechumens should therefore be present at every Sunday Divine Liturgy as possible and strive to attend every Saturday Great Vespers during the fasting seasons.

3. In the Augmented Litany, the catechumens should be prayed for by name and by category, and this category should be last on the list:

"…and for the Catechumens Amy, Barnabas, Catherine, and David, and for the pardon and remission of their sins…"

(This prayer refers to God's mercy and preparation for repentance, not sacramental absolution.)

4. In the Litany for the Catechumens, catechumens will come forth for a blessing and be dismissed into catechism class while classes are in session during the Nativity Fast and Great Lent, and then return to where they stand during the rest of the year.

5. Catechumens must attend all formal instruction during the Nativity Fast and the Lenten season. If a class is missed for an unavoidable reason, the catechumen must listen to the recording of the class that was missed.

6. Catechumens should do their best to engage in the classes and ask questions. It is okay to be wrong. No one is being graded. Catechumens are learning how to approach Christ in repentance and to shed the baggage that has kept them mired in sin. This takes time and patience.

7. When the communion of the faithful begins, an altar server will open the classroom door to signal that it is time to finish the class so the instructor may be among the last to receive the

Eucharist. When the instructor leaves, all catechumens will return to the church for the final prayers of the Liturgy.

8. Catechumens go last in all things: to venerate the cross, last in the coffee hour line, last in line to receive anointing at Vigil or Litya, etc. This is not a punishment, but a school of humility and love.

Catechumens as Servants of the Church

9. Catechumens help take out trash and tidy the bathrooms on Saturdays and Sundays, and assist the coffee hour team in clearing plates and cups.

10. Catechumens tend the candle stands. At the beginning and end of each service, they should ensure the candle stands are neat and tidy and that the oil lamps in the nave are properly managed.

11. Catechumens should develop a ministry of love with the older members of the congregation. They should make a regular point of greeting elders and the elderly and speaking with them.

Standards of Conduct

1. Catechumens will meet with the priest to establish a rule of prayer, fasting, and doing acts of mercy.

2. Catechumens are to learn the discipline of listening before teaching. They should listen to instruction and ask their teachers (priests, deacon, lay catechists, sponsors) questions, but they should not opine or enter into theological disputes or debates with others.

3. Catechumens may invite others to church to "come and see," but should not instruct heterodox or non-Christians in dogmatic or spiritual matters.

4. Catechumens may not post theological opinions or enter into theological discussions or debates on social media, discussion groups, Reddit, 4chan, Discord servers, etc. Online theological debate often leads to confusion, pride, and scandal. Want to discuss Orthodoxy? Do it in person together, where we can all learn.

5. Catechumens may and ought to bear witness to "all the good that God is doing" in their lives. When asked about differences in belief or practice, they should say, "Others are more qualified for that—come and see," or "Come and ask the priest."

6. When a person is serious and wishes to be received into the Church, he or she commits to tithing, according to ability, if this has not already begun, offering the first and best ten percent to God, for "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

7. Catechumens should take their time and be patient. They will be baptized and/or chrismated in due season at the discernment of the priest and with the agreement of their sponsor. God is good, and every good thing takes time. Trust the process, and let God's grace do its work.

8. When the priest, the sponsor, and the catechumen have agreed upon a date for reception, the sponsor will obtain a baptismal cross, an icon of the patron saint, and a candle for the catechumen.

9. Prior to their Holy Illumination through Baptism and/or Chrismation, the catechumen will prepare a Lifetime Confession of Sins and make that confession before joining the Church, usually following Vespers a few days before reception. This is not meant to induce fear, but to bring healing, clarity, and freedom. The priest will provide materials to aid in this preparation.

Rules for the Newly-Illumined

1. On the day of their Holy Illumination, the Newly-Illumined receive Holy Communion first in line after the altar servers and together with their sponsors, in their baptismal attire. They do this at all liturgies for forty days.

2. The Newly-Illumined also go first in all lines for forty days: to venerate the cross, receive food at coffee hour, and receive anointing at Vigil or Litya.

3. The Newly-Illumined continue their instruction in the meaning of the Divine Services through Pentecost or according to the parish schedule.

4. The Newly-Illumined confess their sins not less than monthly for the first year, and thereafter according to the established rule.

5. The Newly-Illumined remain active in discipleship—the life of the Student, Servant, Steward, and Sharer. They stand ready to serve in the parish as Orthodox Christians and are prepared in due time to be sponsors for others.

Additional Comments

Catechumens should read through this binder thoughtfully and prayerfully. If any part is difficult or confusing, they should not be anxious. This is a journey of learning and growth. We crawl before we walk, and we walk before we run.

Fr. David and/or Fr. John, Dn. Mark, and Subdeacon Peter are always available to help clarify and walk through the material together. This binder is intended to serve both as the materials for catechism class and as a collection of articles that teach the Orthodox way of life.

Patience is key. No rule in this document is applied mechanically. All are lived in obedience, discernment, and pastoral care. May God bless you all as you make your way home into the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Eastern Orthodox Church.