

Mystagogy: content and context

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“We haven’t seen you at our mystagogy sessions, so I’m checking to see how you are.” I was a fairly new pastor when I said this to some of the newly baptized in our parish. They had faithfully come to the preparatory sessions, and had participated fully, consciously and actively in the many ceremonies leading up to their baptism, especially during Lent.

After that, it seemed weird. They quit coming to sessions. Members of the team were dispirited. They had worked hard to form a supportive Christian community among those preparing for initiation. They had assumed that when initiation was over, the people who had faithfully attended sessions beforehand, would faithfully attend them after.

They didn’t. They were busy.

So I jumped in. I needed to learn more about the situation. It was one thing for us to speculate why the neophytes were no longer attending sessions. It was something else to hear the reasons directly from them. So I asked. And the answer surprised me.

“We’re fine. Don’t worry about us. We understand we still need to learn more about being Catholic, but we’re coming to mass and loving it.”

Our neophytes knew more about mystagogy than I did. I had always assumed that mystagogy meant going to sessions. They taught me something different. Mystagogy means going to mass.

We had seen successful mystagogy sessions before. We based them on a remembrance of the initiation rites. We talked about the symbols and all the different meanings inside them.

This technique was inspired by preaching of early church fathers such as Augustine and Ambrose. They would take an element of the rites and explain its full significance, peeling off the layers of meaning like a cook dissecting an onion. Water, fire, oil, bread and wine are natural components of a healthy mystagogical reflection. Think of all the different ways that water naturally brings life or threatens destruction; how fire ranges unpredictably yet supplies warmth; how oil provides healing and perfume; how bread and wine are formed from many grains and grapes through difficult processes that result in sources of delight and companionship. The early mystagogues worked out these natural symbols as a means of stepping into spiritual realities.

By its nature, mystagogy is incarnational. It shows how the mystery of God can be discerned through God’s own handiwork. It provides a background for our appreciation of the sublime incarnation of the Word made flesh, and it helps us plumb the great mystery of baptism, which grants us a share now in the eternal life to come.

You'd think the neophytes would get into that. They can. Ask them to share memories of the Easter Vigil. What parts of the ceremony stood out for them? What became memorable and why? What did the signs actually mean to them? What actually happened at the font and at the table? Did anything unexpected take place in a liturgy that was otherwise planned so carefully? Did God speak to them through the surprises of the evening? What was the message? Why was it important?

With the right questions, the neophytes can offer some beautiful reflections, and they will probably be anxious to share the news about their closeness to God. Have they got photos and videos? What did other people say to them about the liturgy? What music struck them? What message did it speak?

All these are helpful ways for the team and the neophytes to explore the rites of initiation in Easter Time catechetical sessions. If the catechists focus on the symbols and tease out their meaning, they are standing on the shoulders of great mystagogues of the past.

Except for one detail. Those mystagogues did not have mystagogical sessions. They had mass.

All the evidence we have of early mystagogy is from homilies preached by bishops during the celebration of the eucharist. In reality, there was probably much more mystagogy than that, but history has only handed down this evidence - partly because the talks were so good, and partly because the preachers were bishops who had access to scribes and distribution systems. Those exceptional and saintly bishops were probably the best catechists of their day. That probably influenced the Church's choice to have them serve as bishops. They shared their gifts generously, and the newly baptized gained deeper spiritual insight because of their work.

Startling to us is both content and context. The content revealed the meaning of baptism, anointing and eucharist for the first time. Imagine telling your catechumens nothing about the real presence of Christ in the eucharist until *after* they were baptized. We wouldn't dare do that. We want to make sure that the catechumens shared our faith in the eucharist before sharing it with them. But they did it a different way in the early Church. They looked at the catechumens' way of life and their gradual understanding of the creed. Once catechists were assured of these points, catechumens were initiated, and *then* they learned about the sacraments.

Also startling is that the entire context of mystagogical preaching was within the celebration of the eucharist during the Octave of Easter. It did not extend for seven Sundays, nor was there any attempt at having monthly gatherings for a year. Mystagogy was much more compressed. In those first days after the rites of initiation, the memory of the event was still fresh, the enthusiasm still high, and the joy of Easter feasting (following Lenten fasting) pervaded the air. Neophytes were so excited to be sharing the eucharist that they came again and again for a full eight days. During that time they received a rich catechetical instruction on what they were experiencing.

Today, mystagogy is supposed to last for the entire Easter season, but that was never the original idea. By the time the fifth Sunday of Easter rolls around, people have long forgotten the details of the Easter Vigil, and the excitement of sharing communion has begun to wear off because other responsibilities needed attention, and because the neophytes have been growing in their general sense of community ever since Easter Day. Hence, the reaction of my test group of neophytes: “We’re fine. Don’t worry about us.” They were coming to mass. That was the most important thing. They were enjoying the company of other Catholics. They were sharing communion with the Church.

So, when planning mystagogy, you might think less about sessions and more about preaching. What themes should the homilies explore? How can they further unpack the mystery of initiation? How can the neophytes and the rest of the assembly become better Christians simply by participating in the liturgies of the word and eucharist at Easter?

Thoughts immediately turn to the readings. There are exceptional passages throughout the three-year cycle. The Sunday after Easter always presents the triumph of faith over incredulity in the hapless life of the apostle Thomas. The third Sunday presents some aspect of communion and eucharist. The fourth meditates on the nature of community through the lens of its good shepherd. The remaining Sundays present excerpts from Jesus’ final discourse and prayer at the Last Supper. To meditate on them is to uncover the implications of the eucharist from its very origin.

The first readings from Acts of the Apostles tell about the beginnings of the church. This sequence sounds a counterpoint for the beginnings of the Christian life in neophytes. The second readings throughout the cycle draw from three New Testament books that are classics for living a faithful Christian life. Sections of the First Letter of Peter sound like a baptismal homily. The First Letter of John commends the early Christian community to a more loving way of life. The Book of Revelation pulls back the veil on the destination of our lives. The responsorial psalms from the Easter lectionary were sources for catechesis ever since biblical times. These psalms foreshadow the mystery of the resurrection, and they will help bolster the gift of faith that baptism crowns.

Preachers also have the option of speaking about other texts of the mass. They need not limit their remarks to the lectionary. For example, the Easter collects and prefaces are filled with complex images. They hold up well under repetition and meditation. Neophytes and the faithful will even benefit from reflections on parts of the mass that they will hear year round, such as the creed and the eucharistic prayers. All these can form the grist for mystagogical preaching.

There are practical challenges to mystagogical preaching. The weeks after Easter are usually filled with other civic and ecclesial observances: first communion, confirmation, Mothers’ Day, annual appeals, weddings, anniversaries, graduation exercises, and vacations, to name a few. The preacher

will have to juggle mystagogical themes with those that relate to what families and communities are experiencing throughout the weeks of Easter.

So, here are some preaching and catechetical tips to keep in mind:

* Do reflect back on the Easter Vigil. Talk about what happened that night. It will keep the mystery of Easter alive, and it should encourage participation at next year's vigil. It will also help explain why the decorations are still up and the paschal candle is still lighted. Preaching or catechizing on these elements of the Vigil is appropriate throughout the season.

* Do talk about the meaning of baptism and the eucharist. All of us who share in these sacraments are challenged to share our faith with others. To appreciate the meaning of these sacraments we can effectively meditate on their natural components. All these carry implications for the spiritual and evangelical life. If water has saved us, it inspires us to tell others about Christ. If oil has anointed us, it commissions us to be the pleasing fragrance of Christ in the presence of all whom we meet. If bread and wine nourishes us, it challenges us to feed a world hungry for Christ.

* Do invite the neophytes to regather. Even though the best mystagogy is taking place in the context of the parish Sunday eucharist, the newly baptized may enjoy a little time together by themselves. Let them share their enthusiasm and their memories. Let them speak of their new insights and the feeling of belonging. Let them also speak about any disappointments. Did they think life would be easier now than it really is? Did they expect more involvement with the parish community than they currently have? Did they expect to leave sin behind, but instead find it still lurking in the shadows? A new Christian life won't be completely rosy. Neophytes may know that in their head, but the reality may shake their spirit. Nonetheless, they should take comfort that they have new tools for overcoming sin and disappointment - tools that they did not have before: the sacraments of the church. These will bolster their faith and support them through any difficult days ahead.

If the newly baptized are not coming to scheduled mystagogy sessions, the problem may be with the sessions, not with the neophytes. Contact them. Listen to them. See how they're doing. And be sure they know that the most important weekly session to attend is the one for which they have been longing the most: the Sunday eucharist. There they join the community of other believers, where they hear the Word of God proclaimed and preached, and where they partake each week in the body and blood of Christ.

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