

# I Will Tell You a Mystery

Paul Turner

Southwest Liturgical Conference

Thank you, gracias a todos. Hace siete meses estoy trabajando en una parroquia donde la mayoría de la gente habla español. Estoy aprendiendo mucho del idioma y la cultura hispanica. Pero necesito aprender mas. Bienvenidos a los aquí que hablan español, y gracias por tu servicio a la iglesia.

Thank you all, and a special thanks to the people who served on the local committee. I was here just two weeks ago for the meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy, which happened to gather in this same city in this same month. You have hosted back-to-back annual liturgical conferences. I cannot think of another example where so much responsibility has fallen upon so few. Thank you for your love of the liturgy and gracious hospitality.

The Academy meeting that I attend opens each year with a prayer service that includes a remembrance of members who died in the past year. One of those we just called to mind was Gloria Weyman, who promoted sacred dance, and who served as the personal ambassador of Father Lucien Deiss - musician, composer, liturgist, biblical scholar, and spiritual writer - on his many visits from France to lecture in the United States.

I first met both of them when I was in high school, and then again as a student at Conception Seminary College. Because I was part of the seminary liturgy committee, I was invited to join Gloria and Lucien for dinner one night, along with the director of the diocesan liturgy office - heady company for a college seminarian interested in liturgy. We drove up to Maryville, Missouri, and took a table at The Hitching Post, the only cloth napkin restaurant within a 50-mile radius of Conception Abbey. The waitress asked if we'd like anything to drink. Lucien said he would like a glass of wine. "I'm sorry," the waitress replied. "We don't serve alcohol here." Father Deiss spoke English, but not all that well in those days, and one reason Gloria Weyman was on hand was to rephrase questions and comments so that he could understand them well enough to respond. At this announcement from the waitress, Lucien turned to Gloria with a quizzical look. Those of us from Missouri seated at this table explained that this had nothing to do with the restaurant. We were eating dinner in a dry county. The French priest then asked Gloria, "What is a dry county?" Another round of explanations ensued, many of us talking at once to make the best of the situation. Finally, Lucien interrupted the chatter and announced, "All right, all right, all right." Then turning to the waitress, he sighed and said, "I'll just have a scotch." More confusion erupted at the table, but somehow we made it through our meal.

At the end, the time came to order dessert, and upon hearing the options, Father Deiss selected apple pie. The waitress asked him, "Would you like that *à la mode*?" Lucien turned to Gloria and asked, "What is *à la mode*?" I was probably 21 years old at the time, and I said to Father Lucien Deiss, "That's French for pie with ice cream."

The initiation rites into the restaurants of Nodaway County, Missouri, have changed over the years. But in the 1970s, any visitors from France probably went home needing time with a catechist to unpack the mysteries they had experienced abroad.

In this talk, I've been asked to turn our attention to the foundations of our faith in the paschal mystery, focusing on scripture and ritual experience. I will do this through a reflection on the practice of mystagogy, which relies on the scripture and rituals of Christian initiation, our sacramental participation in the paschal mystery.

The word mystagogy is of course related to the word mystery. But before I go any farther, I confess to you that when it comes to certain words, I have become a snob. I'm not happy with it, but there it is. "Catechumenate" is one of those words. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that after infant baptism, Christians enter into a kind of postbaptismal catechumenate. I'm like, no, "postbaptismal" is exactly what a catechumenate is not. After baptism, you have catechesis, but not a catechumenate. That is what comes before baptism. In the same way, I feel protective around the word "mystagogy", which refers to a postbaptismal catechesis on the sacraments. However, people also use it today to describe any process of reflection after any ritual prayer. People who have encountered something in the words or ritual gather afterward to recall what happened and to derive further meaning from it. Prior to our generation there is no historical precedent for this use of the word "mystagogy". Rather, mystagogy always described a postbaptismal event. It isn't just a method of catechesis that can be equally applied to non-baptismal situations. At least, that's what a word snob like me would say. The mystagogy that immediately follows the initiation rites is different from any other kind of mystagogy-as-method. Think of it the way dictionary definition number 1 differs from dictionary definition number 2. The first and dominant meaning of mystagogy is linked to the sacraments of initiation. Not everybody uses the term that way; maybe it's because not everybody has that kind of mystagogy. It may be that we have such little experience of dictionary definition number 1 of mystagogy that we apply the word to other circumstances, where in my view it doesn't fit as well.

I think we have three problems with how people view mystagogy: its purpose, its timeframe, and its context. In 1997 our national bishops' conference authorized a study of the implementation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* in the United States of America. The report was published in the year 2000 under the title *Journey to the Fullness of Life*. On the whole, the report is positive, but it takes a dim view of mystagogy, which it calls "the weakest aspect of the RCIA." The word "weakest" appears 3 times in this 50-page report, always in reference to mystagogy.

Yet, here again, there wasn't much agreement on the meaning of the word. Bishops saw mystagogy as a way of keeping new Catholics active in the community of faith. Participants felt the need for something beyond initiation. Parishes thought mystagogy was successful when it involved new members in ministries or small faith communities. The report believes mystagogy offers

reflection on the conversion journey and the development of active discipleship. When parishes explained their mystagogy they described one or two sessions or social gatherings after Easter, or perhaps a period of one to three months. The report concludes, “most do not have a period as envisioned by the Rite either in length or in content. This period needs to be restored in practice and better utilized as a time of catechesis and of a deeper incorporation into the mysteries already celebrated as well as the life of the local parish. Perhaps parishes can use regular activities and events in parish life as the basis for special work with the neophytes.”

This report is nearly 13 years old, and my guess is that most everybody today still agrees with its conclusions about mystagogy. Most everybody, that is, except me. I think it missed what mystagogy is.

A few months ago when I made my travel arrangements to fly here, I was at the same time checking out flights to Phoenix for a different event in March, which had less to do with liturgy and more to do with a certain stitched horsehide sphere. I made the correct booking here, but I emailed Linda Krehmeier and carelessly told her I had just bought the ticket and things worked out great with my departure time from Phoenix. She wrote back immediately: “We’re having this conference in Albuquerque.” She didn’t use the words, “you idiot,” but she could have. That is how I feel about mystagogy. I hear people claim that mystagogy is supposed to make people more committed Catholics. Well, that might be a byproduct, but that is what the scrutinies and baptism are for. I hear people say that mystagogy is learning more about one’s faith. But all of religious education has that intent. I hear people say that mystagogy is a reflection on nearly any liturgical experience you have. Well, not in dictionary definition number one. I think people who say mystagogy is a method or a session or a ministry or a picnic or the weakest aspect of the RCIA are confusing Phoenix with Albuquerque. They are evaluating mystagogy based on some very fine ideals, but I’m not convinced that they’re the appropriate ones. Mystagogy is still weak, don’t get me wrong, but it’s weak for totally different reasons than most people think.

When St. Paul explained the resurrection to the Corinthians, he said, “Listen, I will tell you a mystery.” So, let me tell you a mystery, a paschal mystery, but a different kind of paschal mystery. First of all, the word *mystagogue*, referring to the catechist, comes from two Greek words - *μυστηριον*, meaning mystery, and *αγωγος*, meaning leader. So, a *mystagogue* is someone who leads you into the mystery. “Roll up, roll up for the mystery tour. The magical mystery tour is waiting to take you away. Hoping to take you away. Dying to take you away.” *Mystagogy* is what *mystagogues* give you. But here’s the wrinkle, and many of you know this. The Greek word *μυστηριον* gets translated into Latin with a different word: *sacramentum*. Wherever the Greek texts speak about a participation in the mysteries, that translates out through Latin as a participation in the sacraments. *Mystagogy* is about mystery, but more specifically it is about sacraments. It’s the kind of catechesis people receive after they participate in sacraments. It pertains not only to the content of the catechesis they receive, but to their own nature as the Christians who they are. Their personal experience of the sacraments enables them to go more deeply into their meaning, their origins,

and their expectations. The one who gives mystagogy its meaning is not just the mystagogue; it's also the neophyte. The newly baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, are not just learning the abstract meaning of the sacraments; they are reflecting on their experience of the sacraments.

Mystagogy is about the paschal mystery because it is about the paschal sacraments - the Easter sacraments. Easter equals paschal; sacrament equals mystery. In this context, "paschal mystery" means "Easter sacraments." For a mystagogue, "I will tell you about the paschal mystery" means "I will tell you about the baptism, confirmation and eucharist that you have just experienced." The paschal mystery is indeed the dying and rising of Christ, but in the liturgy we enter that mystery through the sacraments.

Mystagogy is not merely a technique. It is yoked to initiation. The great fourth-century mystagogues had great technique. They took symbols like water, oil, fire, bread, and wine, and got people thinking about all the different ways they encounter these symbols every day, in order to derive meanings of life, death, birth, and nurture. You can do the same thing with the altar, the chair, ashes, candles, music and wedding rings. But if you call that mystagogy, that's dictionary definition number 2. That is a technique for religious education. What makes mystagogy mystagogy is the specific application of this technique to the Easter sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist.

The first problem with mystagogy today is that people confuse its purpose. The purpose of mystagogy is to focus on the paschal mystery, that is the Easter sacraments.

The second problem is the timeframe, and here is where I think the RCIA created a problem more than it resolved one. Fourth-century mystagogy was done relatively quickly - not weeks later, not months later, not years later. If you look at the historical record of the early church, you will see that mystagogy took place during the first few days following Christian initiation, when the memory was fresh, and the flesh was wet, when you could smell the chrism, and hunger for more of the banquet of life.

All of the evidence we have of mystagogy in the patristic period, whether it is from Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, or Theodore of Mopsuestia, instructions took place during the first week after Easter. However, the practice of a one-week mystagogy did not survive the post-Vatican II restoration of the catechumenate. When the Catholic Church released the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* in 1974, it was welcomed as the restoration of an ancient practice. It was, but with some updating as well. One way the framers of the RCIA got people on board was by retaining some of the ancient vocabulary for the rites. It was a way of saying, "We've done this before; we can do it again." That's why we have some peculiar words like catechumen, scrutiny, presentation, and mystagogy. Many have argued, "These are words for which we need other words." Some have asked, "Couldn't we at least come up with a better name for a scrutiny? It doesn't sound very inviting for those we want to welcome to baptism in a few short weeks." But the only other historical word we have is "exorcism". Suddenly "scrutiny" doesn't sound so bad.

So, we are using the word “mystagogy” - the same word that comes to us from the fourth century, but for a different reality. I’m sure the framers of the catechumenate thought they were being pastoral when they abandoned the one-week plan and gave us something else. In post-Vatican II mystagogy, neophytes are encouraged to attend mass on all the Sundays of Easter (247), especially Pentecost (249). They may celebrate the eucharist with the bishop sometime during the first year of their life as a Christian (251), and they should have a celebration on the anniversary of their baptism a year later (250). The mass with the bishop was a good idea to compensate for a sociological reality that had changed considerably since the fourth century. In those days, dioceses were smaller than they are now, and the bishop baptized all the catechumens of the diocese each year. Today that is impractical. We manage to get catechumens in front of the bishop for the Rite of Election, but this usually requires several opportunities at multiple locations in a ceremony that does not include the eucharist. The ideal, of course, is that the bishop as spiritual father would baptize new members and preside at the table for their first communion. In lieu of that, the RCIA proposed one post-baptismal mass with the bishop, so that the newly baptized could at least share communion with him sometime during the year of their initiation. Not many dioceses offer this, but it remains a practical way for eucharist and mystagogy to take place.

The RCIA expanded the meaning of the word “mystagogy” beyond its fourth-century origins. So did local legislation. Conferences of bishops established their own national statutes for the catechumenate. In the United States, our bishops encouraged parishes to provide monthly meetings of neophytes for the first year (NS 24). Think of this - monthly meetings with the newly baptized for one year. A lot of parish ministers, reading this legislation, wanted to respond to the bishops, “Well, you try it.” It’s very hard to get people out for meetings once a month. Now, to their credit, some have achieved it. However, it is hard, and this national statute interprets the word “mystagogy” differently from its presentation in the universal RCIA. This is the third problem with mystagogy today: the context. Both the purpose and the timeframe of mystagogy have expanded, and the context has shifted. In the fourth century, you didn’t gather neophytes for monthly meetings; you gathered them for the eucharist. You did not teach them a class; you invited them to hear a homily.

The only mention of mystagogical “meetings” in the entire RCIA is from the National Statutes in the US. The RCIA itself never proposes meetings. It calls for “meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing the works of charity” (244). But not more sessions. Instead, it says the neophytes are “introduced into a fuller and more effective understanding of mysteries through the Gospel message they have learned and above all through their experience of the sacraments they have received” (245). They “should experience a full and joyful welcome into the community and enter into closer ties with the other faithful” (246). All the mystagogy in the RCIA takes place during worship and in church life. Where does the RCIA want the neophytes to be? At mass. What is the context for mystagogy? It’s not a separate catechetical session. Mystagogy takes place at mass. To be specific, mystagogy is the homily at the eucharist. That is

dictionary definition number 1 of mystagogy: a homily about the sacraments of initiation. If you're beating yourself up because neophytes aren't coming to your sessions, you're looking at Phoenix instead of Albuquerque. Phoenix is a wonderful place. Going there is a great idea, but it's not where this meeting is. The RCIA expects the neophytes to be at mass, and the homily to address what they have experienced.

Now, we have practical problems with this vision of mystagogy in the post-Vatican II RCIA because it abandoned the one-week plan in favor of a seven-week plan. Of course the newly baptized should be at mass on the Sundays of the Easter season, but after a couple of weeks, it's hard to keep alive the memory of the Easter Vigil. Even the lilies are wilting. We have absolutely no historical record of mystagogical preaching on, say, the Fifth Sunday of Easter. Nobody did it. They got everyone together for a blitz during the Octave. Think about this: The place was the cathedral. The entire community gathered together with all the neophytes of the diocese. The catechist was the bishop - and not just any bishop - from the evidence we have. He was a saint, one of the great doctors of the Church. He had star power. His mystagogical catechesis was his homily. It was a spiritual and practical context.

We still have some vestiges of this practice in the prayers of the Easter Octave. Go to mass that week and listen. Monday's collect begins this way: "O God, who give constant increase to your Church by new offspring." The same day's prayer over the offerings refers to those gathered as those "renewed by confession of your name and by Baptism." The prayer after communion asks God to "make those you have set on the way of eternal salvation worthy of your gifts." Tuesday's collect recalls that God "bestowed on us paschal remedies." The prayer after communion speaks of "the perfect grace of Baptism." The collect for Thursday asks God, "grant that those reborn in the font of Baptism may be one in the faith of their hearts and the homage of their deeds." The prayer over the offerings asks God "to accept the sacrificial gifts we offer joyfully ... for those who have been reborn." Saturday's collect begins with this: "O God, who by the abundance of your grace give increase to the peoples who believe in you, look with favor on those you have chosen and clothe with blessed immortality those reborn through the Sacrament of Baptism." The prayer after communion prays for those God renewed "by eternal mysteries." (Remember the word "mysteries" means "sacraments".) And on the Sunday after Easter, a day formerly known as *Dominica in albis*, or the Sunday concerning albs, because the newly baptized came back in their white garments, we hear this intention in the collect: "that all may grasp and rightly understand in what font they have been washed, by whose Spirit they have been reborn, by whose Blood they have been redeemed." The prayer over the offerings includes an optional phrase, "and of those you have brought to new birth," in case the newly baptized are present to offer themselves together with the other gifts at that eucharist.

In fact, that's the presumption behind the special insert for the first Eucharistic Prayer during the Easter Octave. The section known as the *Hanc igitur* of the Roman Canon includes an intention "for those to whom you have been pleased to give the new birth of water and the Holy Spirit, granting them

forgiveness of all their sins.” That prayer may be said for eight consecutive days starting on Easter.

All these words have been part of our prayers during the Easter Octave for hundreds of years. The missal today still preserves them. The missal presumes that the newly baptized are present at church every day during the Easter Octave. But the RCIA never even mentions it as a suggestion. When it speaks about mystagogy, it completely overlooks this historical practice. I’m sure the framers thought it was more likely that the newly baptized would come for eight consecutive Sundays than for eight consecutive days. But that has placed an unrealistic burden on preachers.

Homilists carry the main responsibility for mystagogy. And let me tell you, this is hard to do. In my parish last year we had first communion on the Second Sunday of Easter. On the Third Sunday of Easter I announced that after 11 years the bishop was moving me to a new parish next month. On the Fifth Sunday we had high school graduates present. The Sixth Sunday was also Mothers’ Day. You get the idea. If you preach about the confirmations that took place over a month ago at the Easter Vigil, it’s very hard to make the connection with so many other topics to address. In practice, this has stretched the meaning of the word “mystagogy”, and created a vacuum into which other meanings have crept.

Mystagogy is about the mystery, the paschal mystery, the Easter sacraments. Our experience of them has been so profound that we feel compelled to tell the mystery to others.

The foundations of our faith in this paschal mystery are in the bible. You know the classic biblical texts in this regard: Paul to the Romans 6:3, “we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.” Second Corinthians 1:21-22: “the one... who anointed us is God; he has also put his seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.” John 6:35 “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” You can find biblical passages that foreshadow our practices for all three sacraments of initiation. But I want to propose to you some passages that I think foreshadow mystagogy. I don’t want to force these texts, but I do think there is something about them that shows in narrative form how the Christian community of the bible needed a little time right after baptism to let it all sink in.

In Acts of the Apostles two passages offer the strongest analogy. In chapter 10, Peter has an experience of the Holy Spirit that even surprises him. The entire chapter tells the amazing story of his meeting with the Gentile centurion Cornelius in Caesarea. You remember this. Peter and Cornelius each have a vision. Cornelius sees an angel who tells him to send some people to Joppa and look up Peter. Peter sees a large sheet coming down from the sky, filled with profane and unclean birds, reptiles, and other animals. He hears a voice telling him to eat, and Peter is repulsed at the idea. I don’t blame him; I have a thing about eating reptiles too. Even *à la mode*. A knock at the door shakes Peter out of his reverie. It’s Cornelius’s people. They inform Peter that an angel told Cornelius to invite Peter over and listen to whatever Peter had to say. How

can you say no to an invitation like that? Peter goes. The meeting is emotional - Cornelius treats Peter like a god, and Peter feels strangely at home in a Gentile residence because of his own peculiar dream about eating unclean food. Peter then gives his speech, his pre-baptismal catechesis, to Cornelius and all the people of his household. Then someone else joins the party. The Holy Spirit falls upon everyone, and Cornelius's household starts speaking in tongues. Peter says in Acts 10:47 that this family received the Holy Spirit exactly as he had, referring to Pentecost. There was one problem. These were Gentiles, and no one had even been baptized yet. Peter was thinking, this is not how the RCIA is supposed to go. First you get catechesis, then you get baptized, then you receive the Holy Spirit. Then you speak in tongues, glorify God, heal the sick, and raise the dead, but no baptism, no Holy Spirit. Well, Peter learned something about the Holy Spirit that day. He asked rhetorically, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?" After the baptism in verse 48, Luke writes this in verse 49, and this is my point in bringing you through this entire story: "They invited Peter to stay for a few days." They needed time with a catechist to unpack the mysteries they had just experienced.

Acts 16, in Thyatira, Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, sees Paul walk up. The Lord opens her heart to what Paul had to say. She and her household were baptized, and immediately she says this to Paul in verse 15: "Come and stay at my home." After their baptism, Lydia's family needed time to talk over what had happened.

This reminds you of the Emmaus story, doesn't it? After the risen Jesus catechized the disciples who did not recognize him on the road to Emmaus, he acted as if he were parting from them. But, Luke 24:29, they say to him, "Stay with us." After encountering Christ, not in the sacrament of baptism, but in his risen presence, they needed time with him. "Stay with us."

These stories from after the resurrection perhaps shed light on the vocabulary in the gospels when people encounter Jesus before his Passion. At the start of Jesus' ministry, two disciples of John the Baptist meet Jesus, who invites them to see where he lives. John 1:39 says, "They stayed with him that day." After the woman at the well invited other Samaritans to believe in Jesus, they came out to see him. John 4:40, "they invited Jesus to stay with them; and he stayed there two days." As a child, Jesus participated in a catechetical session at the Temple of Jerusalem. Luke 2:43 describes it this way: "the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem." He stayed there. When Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus pass by, Jesus' first words to him in Luke 19:5 were "today I must stay at your house."

When the disciples took up their missionary activity, Jesus told them, Matthew 10:11, "Whatever town or village you enter, look for a worthy person in it, and stay there until you leave." To introduce the miracle of the loaves, Jesus lays out the problem of the crowd to the disciples in Matthew 15:32: "they have been with me now for three days [they have stayed with me] and have nothing to eat." At the end of his life, in Matthew 26:38, was he distraught, or was he the

catechist when he asked Peter, James and John to stay: “Remain here, and keep watch with me”? (Mark’s gospel has parallels to these passages.)

Again, I don’t want to make too much out of this. You could argue that “stay” and “remain” are such common verbs that they are needed simply to tell the story, but in these instances the story is linked to catechesis or baptism or the eucharist or discipleship with Jesus. Once people met him in person, they wanted the encounter to last. Once the newly baptized encounter Christ in the sacraments, they want that encounter to last as well. They want a mystagogue, someone to lead them more deeply into the paschal mystery.

Look again to Acts of the Apostles and see where the words “stay” or “remain” show up - maybe just to drive the narrative, but maybe to say something more. Acts 9:43, after raising Tabitha to life, with many people coming to believe in the Lord, Luke writes of Peter, “he stayed a long time in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.” Acts 15:34-35, “Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others the word of God.” Acts 17:14, “Simon and Timothy remained” in Beroea while Paul went on to Athens. Acts 18:3, Paul arrived in Corinth and “stayed with” tentmakers. In 18:18 it says he “stayed for quite some time.” In verse 20, “they asked him to stay for a longer time.” In Acts 21:4, arriving in Tyre, Luke says they “stayed for a week.” in verse 7 they “stayed” with a group in Ptolemais. In the next verse they “stayed with” Philip the evangelist in Caesarea. In Acts 28:12 the group arrived at Syracuse and “stayed there for three days.” And in verse 14 in Puteoli they “were urged to stay with” some disciples for seven days.

Again, you can argue, well, it’s a narrative about a journey. Of course, they’re going to tell you where they stayed. But time and again we read that they stayed for a time, for some days, with other members of the community. Certainly they did more than play a round of chess.

In most of these passages the length of time is fairly brief, and the catechesis takes place because of something extraordinary that has happened. At its root, catechesis follows the making of a disciple, which in turn implies a meeting of Christ. As Jesus told the disciples in Matthew 10:40, “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”

Today in mystagogy the newly baptized are still meeting Christ. They are meeting him in the catechists and preachers who are his disciples, and they are meeting him in the sacraments. We use the word “receive” for sacraments as well. The neophytes receive baptism, receive confirmation, and receive communion. But they are not just receiving things. These are sacraments. Christ is present. “Whoever receives you receives me,” Jesus says.

The foundations of our faith in the paschal mystery are expressed in biblical testimony and ritual experience. Good mystagogy will happen if we remember three things: its purpose is to focus on the Easter sacraments. It works best if it is done immediately after initiation. Its context first and foremost is the homily when the neophytes and faithful are gathered together.

**One reason I have been interested in the liturgy since my youth, even before I was 21, is that again and again I have encountered Christ in the eucharist. When the people are gathered, when the word is proclaimed, when the music soars, when the prayer is sincere, and when communion is shared, I have found Christ. I'm sure you have too. You wouldn't be here today if you had not met Christ in the liturgy. There would be no mystagogy without this encounter. There must be mystagogy because of this encounter. A true encounter with Christ is never just for our own benefit. It is always for the mission of the Church. If you meet the risen Jesus Christ in person or in the sacraments, you have to tell someone. You have to tell the mystery.**