

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MYSTAGOGY

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Mystagogy is the last stage of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. It is postbaptismal catechesis. Many people complain that it is the weakest part of the RCIA, but it is probably working better than they think.

Many catechumenate ministers are deservedly proud of their liturgies, but unnecessarily embarrassed by their mystagogy. Their experience of elaborate prebaptismal catechesis makes them hunger for elaborate postbaptismal catechesis. Seeing the former as model, they fear they fail the latter. They hear that neophytes defect from parish life. Guilt, which disturbs saints more than sinners, settles in.

However, postbaptismal catechesis does not resemble prebaptismal catechesis. Mystagogy is probably going along all right. People are expecting the wrong thing from mystagogy.

A liturgical text

There is precious little information about mystagogy in the RCIA, which summarizes it in a handful of paragraphs (244-251). These describe a period when neophytes deepen their grasp of the paschal mystery “through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing works of charity.” The main setting for mystagogy is the Sunday masses of Easter Time. The RCIA also suggests a closing near Pentecost, a gathering with the bishop, and a celebration on the baptismal anniversary.

The catechumenate blends liturgy and catechesis. But the RCIA is a liturgical text more than a catechetical one. Its liturgical interest offers few guidelines for catechesis before and after baptism – just as the *Rite of Marriage* offers no detailed guidelines for marriage preparation or post-wedding catechetical reflection. It is not that kind of a book. It is a liturgical book. The RCIA offers little guidance on mystagogy, but it is not supposed to.

Terminology

Another problem with expectations about mystagogy is the terminology. The framers of the restored catechumenate retained much of the ancient language, but they did not retain all the ancient meaning.

The scrutinies are one example. Prior to the publication of the RCIA, those experimenting with the rites discussed the word “scrutiny”. Many people found the word impenetrable or offensive. Within the scrutiny lurked an exorcism, exacerbating the linguistic problem. In the end, the framers kept the word “scrutiny” and completely rewrote the exorcisms. Formerly the exorcisms

addressed Satan. Now they address God. Scrutinies of intense spiritual and psychological purification became prayers akin to blessings.

The restored catechumenate brought back other terms but reshaped their meaning – including the word “catechumen”, which happily has more focus now than formerly. To the point, the RCIA kept the term “mystagogy” for something that does not entirely resemble its ancient antecedent.

Historical differences

The differences between ancient and modern mystagogy concern catechetical content, location, the catechist, and the time frame. There are also some differences in method.

The difference in **content** pertains to sacramental catechesis. Due to the secretive nature of its teachings, the ancient church did not routinely catechize about baptism and eucharist before initiation. Catechumens did not receive catechesis on the creed until shortly before their baptism. In mystagogy, the neophytes received their first instructions on the initiation rites. Early mystagogy succeeded partly because it covered new material for people experiencing the eucharist for the first time.

It would be hard to imagine a parish today proposing a similar approach to catechetical content. Before initiation, ministers want catechumens to understand and accept belief in the eucharist, so close to the heart of Christian faith. Without that belief, a catechumen would likely not be initiated at all. But this approach to prebaptismal catechesis came late in church history. It has eviscerated the content of mystagogy. All the content that used to come after baptism now comes before.

In addition to the content, the **location** and **catechist** were different in ancient mystagogy. The early descriptions of the rites of initiation show them at the cathedral where the bishop presided. The bishop also served as the mystagogue. Today, the preparations for initiation all take place within very local church communities. So do the rites. The catechist is usually someone from the local community. Rarely is it the bishop. But in the ancient church, the bishop catechized. If bishops led mystagogical catechesis today, it would become more popular. Even if the pastor led the sessions, one might expect stronger attendance, even though a competent catechist can offer equally deep conversation or insight.

Another difference between mystagogical catechesis ancient and modern is the **time frame**. In the early church, mystagogy took place during Easter week. The time frame was highly concentrated. In some churches and parishes, an attempt is made to have mystagogy on weeknights, extended over a period of weeks or months. The American Catholic bishops have encouraged monthly meetings for a full year. There is no precedent for that in ancient mystagogy.

The **method** of mystagogy held some similarities. The bishop explained the elements of the initiation rites for the benefit of those who had experienced them. A similar method may be in use today, but usually the neophytes have heard an explanation or rehearsed the rites prior to their celebration.

In short, the early church held mystagogy in conjunction with the principal liturgies of the Easter Octave. A bishop presided over the eucharist, during which he preached about the sacraments the neophytes had just experienced. That is what they called mystagogy. We use the term, but not in the same way.

Preaching: the Source of Mystagogy

The real similarities to mystagogy ancient and modern lie in preaching. Ministers may not realize this, but the principal setting for this catechesis then and now is the eucharist. The lectionary for the Easter season invites reflection on some of the principal teachings of the faith: that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is risen, and that Jesus is present in the eucharist. These foundations, together with the neophytes' experience of the initiation rites, will provide the substance of mystagogy.

A lively celebration of the Easter sacraments will help. It will give the neophytes something to ponder. Without good liturgy, good catechesis will be hard to achieve.

This is why ministers concerned about the success of their mystagogy can relax a bit. When the assembly gathers for Easter, when the word is proclaimed and preached, when the sacraments are celebrated, mystagogy is happening, whether or not it was planned that way.

Other elements

The other ritual elements of mystagogy in the Catholic ritual book are a peculiar mix of things. The mass with the bishop is recommended because it did not happen at Easter. Today if catechumens go to the cathedral once during their formation, it is for the rite of election. But there is no precedent for this in history. Yes, the rite of election took place at the cathedral, but so did all the other rites. One has to wonder, if catechumens are going to make one visit to the cathedral, should it not be for baptism? But that will not happen because so much of their formation takes place in the local parish. This has changed the rite of election into a new-fangled prebaptismal "rite of meeting the bishop" at the cathedral, which, in turn, established the need for a postbaptismal eucharist with the bishop, where he can more fully exercise his ministry. The mass for neophytes with the bishop is a good idea, but it became advisable only because bishops no longer baptize all the catechumens in the diocese.

The recommended anniversary gathering probably exists in the RCIA because the texts for such a mass appear in some ancient liturgical books. They no longer do, but such a mass is still recommended.

Oddly, what is missing from the RCIA's description of mystagogy is the presence of the neophytes at daily eucharist during the Octave of Easter. Throughout Easter week the Roman Missal includes prayers presuming that the neophytes are present, but the RCIA never makes the recommendation. Consequently, even the liturgical books offer no uniform approach to mystagogy.

So, preaching at the Sunday eucharist remains the main touchstone for twenty-first century mystagogy. Anything that parishes accomplish beyond that exercises admirable charity. Indeed, the neophytes deserve some special attention during this time. (How is it going? Is it what you were expecting it would be? What is the reaction from your family and friends? How well are you living the Christian life?) But we can all use these spiritual conversations from time to time.

The basic needs of mystagogy – reflection on the rituals, proclamation of the beliefs of the Christian community, and exercising charity – can happen very simply in the local parish church. All it requires is good preaching.

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