

# Parish Practice: Help with the first steps

**Paul Turner**

Some parishes gather their neophytes in the weeks and months after their Easter initiation to experience mystagogy. Under the direction of a catechist, they share their memories of the Vigil. They learn more about the sacraments. They relate how their lives have changed since the day they were baptized.

But in many other parishes, this does not work. Those who have participated in the catechumenate are tired of meetings. They have reached the goal for which they longed. Now they want to get on with their lives. They love their new church, but, really, enough is enough. Even their catechists would like a break.

The National Statutes for the Catechumenate in the United States say that neophytes should meet “at least monthly” for mystagogy sessions throughout the first year after baptism (24). Many frustrated directors of the parish catechumenate would like to say to the bishops who passed that statute, “Well, you try it.”

In truth, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults seems to have something else in mind for mystagogy. It does not envision having people come to more sessions. It envisions their participation in the Sunday eucharist. There, they hear preaching about the sacraments they have received. RCIA 237 says that the “main setting” for mystagogy “is the so-called Masses for neophytes, that is the Sunday Masses of the Easter season.” All references to mystagogy imply that the faithful are there as well, not just the neophytes. During Year A, the second lectionary reading comes from the First Letter of Peter, replete with baptismal imagery. The logical place for presenting mystagogy is during the homily.

However, preaching mystagogy is not easy. The length of the Easter season makes it especially difficult to keep fresh the memory of the Easter Vigil. It is hard to refer back to the waters of baptism, the chrism of confirmation, and the taste of first communion to people who have juggled five or six intervening weeks of the distractions that come from a busy life.

Besides, the calendar is filled with other needs. In the United States, the Sundays of Easter Time can be occupied with Mothers’ Day celebrations, graduation parties, and wedding anniversaries. An active American family can find the month of May busier than the month of December. In addition, some parishes conduct their annual financial campaign during that same period. The news cycle does not slow down for mystagogy, so preachers may want to address the social, political, economical, and neighborhood concerns that relentlessly arise from week to week. In the midst of all these family, parochial

**and societal activities, preachers cannot guarantee a series of seven homilies based on the sacraments of initiation.**

**It wasn't this way in the early Church. All the evidence we have for mystagogy shows that it took place during the Octave of Easter - the very first week after initiation. The newly baptized gathered for daily mass at the cathedral, and the bishop preached eloquently about the sacraments they had just received. With speakers such as St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia in charge of local cathedrals, attendance was surely high.**

**Replicating the experience of the Easter Octave would prove difficult today. Few people are free to participate in daily mass even for one week. So the framers of Vatican II's restored catechumenate chose a more pastoral solution: if neophytes cannot come on seven weekdays, let them come on seven Sundays. The Roman Missal's presidential prayers for the Octave of Easter still assume that the neophytes are present every day, but the RCIA strangely never recommends it.**

**Perhaps this is why some parishes prefer to think of mystagogy as catechetical sessions rather than eucharistic celebrations. That is the environment with which the neophytes are most familiar, and during which some meaningful exchange of ideas can still happen.**

**So, here are some ways that mystagogy can work, whether it happens from the ambo in the church or in a room apart.**

**Those who preach on the Sundays of Easter may refer back to the sacraments of initiation whenever possible. They should think not only of what baptism, confirmation, and the eucharist mean, but also about what actually happened at the Easter Vigil this year. What did the water look like? How did the elect react to it? Did anything unusual happen during the confirmations? How did the chrism smell? What comes to mind about the first communion of the newly baptized? What emotions played across their faces? If preachers keep the answers grounded in the real experience of this year's Vigil, such questions will open the door to additional imagery for catechesis and evangelization.**

**Those who lead a mystagogy session following the eucharist may invite reflections first on the Easter Vigil itself. What did the new initiates see, hear, touch, smell and taste? Why did those experiences remain in their minds? How has life been at home, at work or at school? Has everything been the same? Or is there something different? Do they sense new confidence? Or are they surprised by some interior disappointment? Are they making Sunday Mass a regular part of their lives? How have they adjusted their daily and weekly routine, and why?**

**The great mystagogues of the early Church used the images of the sacraments to explore their deeper meaning. Water destroys and bestows life. Oil heals and attracts. Bread and wine bring unity and nourishment. Preachers and catechists can explore these same elements in the real lives of neophytes today.**

**How have they used ordinary water each day this Easter? For what purposes? Do those purposes tell them something about the meaning of baptism?**

**How have they used aromatic oils since their confirmation? On what occasions have they worn perfume? Where did they obtain these fragrances? Has anyone placed hands on their heads? Why? What does that say about confirmation?**

**On what occasions have they broken bread and shared wine? Where did they obtain the food and drink? Who joined them at table? What did they talk about? How exactly were they nourished? What do bread and wine reveal about the eucharist?**

**A thoughtful catechist can lead the newly baptized into a deeper encounter with the God who has come to them. All they have to do is scrutinize the experiences that they previously may have overlooked.**

- \* After the Easter Vigil, take note of what actually happened in the celebration of the sacraments.**
- \* Preach about the sacraments of initiation during Easter Time.**
- \* Gather the neophytes to review how their lives have changed.**

**Paul Turner is the pastor of St. Anthony Catholic Church in Kansas City, Missouri. He is the author of *The Hallelujah Highway: A History of the Catechumenate* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000).**

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