

SUCCESSFUL MYSTAGOGY

What Mystagogy Is

Mystagogy is the period after the rites of initiation into the Catholic Church. It's a time for settling in. Have you ever started a new job? A new school? A new family? It's exciting to begin, but those first steps can be wobbly. We rely on people around us to help us feel at home. That's the purpose of mystagogy.

Mystagogy affects new members and old members alike. Newcomers deepen their understanding of what happened to them at Easter. Their presence in the community brings new life to those who have been members for a while. In your kitchen you may have followed the same recipe a hundred times. But when your friends taste the results for the first time, their enthusiasm brings new pride to your work, new joy in the meal, new life to an old dish. Mystagogy enriches the whole community.

Technically, the word "mystagogy" refers to catechesis for the newly baptized. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults does not use the term for those baptized in other Churches and now in full communion in the Catholic Church. The RCIA presumes that the unbaptized will need more care settling into a Catholic environment than Christians will need.

Pastorally, we've discovered in the United States that some of the baptized may need as much or more care as the unbaptized. Settling in can be difficult no matter your background. Individuals bring their own set of needs, and we respond as best we can.

Pastoral Care

Successful mystagogy depends on successful pastoral care. The people we serve have many needs. As ministers, we try to discern their needs and respond to them. New Catholics bring a set of special concerns. Successful pastoral care for them can be measured in the same way we measure it for other ministries: How well do we understand the needs? How well do we respond? Are we faithful to the Gospel? Faithful to the Church?

Mystagogy, then, is part of the parish mission. It will thrive if the community thrives. An active parish tries to build its community through a network of concern. If the parish diligently strives to care for others, it will naturally possess the spirit necessary for successful mystagogy.

What are the needs of new Catholics? Ask them. "Do you feel like you belong? Are we what you expected? Do you have dreams for improving our community? Are you exhausted? Charged up? Unmoved? Now that you are receiving the sacraments, what do you notice?" Some newcomers may have been struggling with sin or questionable moral behavior before joining the Church. Did they expect temptations to go away? Does receiving the sacraments give them new strength to fight old battles? Or are they worried that their behavior hasn't changed yet?

These questions may be explored individually or with the group.

Perhaps the most important person in this period is the godparent. Godparents have stood by the newly baptized in the months preceding baptism. Now they have a difficult responsibility: helping the newly baptized feel at home in the new Catholic community. Godparents will help

immensely if they check up with their godchildren. "How are things going? What did you think of the liturgy this week? I want you to meet some friends from church."

One more tip on pastoral care. Be especially sensitive in the early days after initiation. Many newcomers will be exhausted. The Christian life should be a symbol not of weariness, but of heavenly rest.

The Liturgy

How and when does mystagogy happen? The possibilities are endless. But if you harmonize with the rhythms of the liturgy, you'll be able to blend the prayer of the Church with the life of the Christian.

Easter. The liturgy presumes that the newly baptized will celebrate their initiation at the Easter Vigil. Of course, there will be occasions when this is not possible: Someone's job takes them out of town; an unexpected illness arises; annulment papers are delayed. In unusual circumstances, initiation may be celebrated at unusual times, and mystagogy would follow its own course. But, Easter, the springtime season of new life, is the day par excellence for celebrating the new life in Christ.

Easter Week. The first week of Easter is a special week of prayer for the newly baptized. This is an ancient custom in the Church, and you can still see its remnants in the liturgy. Centuries ago, the newly baptized, dressed in their white robes, would attend Mass each day during the Easter Octave. (We used to call the Sunday after Easter "in albis," a reference to the white garments of the newly baptized. It was also called "Low Sunday" because we toned down the liturgy after the extravagance of Easter.) To this day, all the Masses of Easter week resemble a Sunday liturgy: We recite the Glory to God, the Easter sequence is optional, we hear the preface of Easter Day, and we are dismissed with double joy--"Go in peace, alleluia, alleluia!"

In addition, there are many prayers just for the newly baptized. Check the presidential prayers in the sacramentary for Easter Monday through Saturday and watch how often the priest prays for the neophytes. Then look at Eucharistic Prayer I. For Easter week it carries special inserts for the newly baptized, and presumes that they are present at the Eucharist.

What does all this mean for you? You could encourage the newly baptized to be present for daily Mass sometime that week, fully understanding this will be not be possible for many to do.

The Sundays of Easter. The RCIA (247) encourages the neophytes to attend the Sunday Masses of the Easter season together. The readings of Year A are especially appropriate for them. If your group has been meeting on Sundays to "break open of the Word," this would be a natural extension of their sessions. Now they can reflect on the readings in the light of the mysteries they have celebrated.

Pentecost. Pentecost closes Easter season and, hence, the period of postbaptismal catechesis. The RCIA (249) suggests that a celebration be held near Pentecost Sunday. The liturgy shows the relationship of Pentecost to Easter. The service concludes with the double alleluia, reminiscent of Easter week. (We used to call Pentecost "Whitsunday" because on that day the newly baptized returned to Mass wearing their white garments again. We also used to bless the baptismal font again, using the formula from Easter.)

Meeting with the Bishop. The RCIA (251) suggests that the bishop meet with the newly baptized for Eucharist sometime during the year. This may help them feel part of the diocesan Church.

The Anniversary. Finally, the RCIA (250) proposes that the neophytes be brought together on the anniversary of their baptism "to give thanks to God, to share with one another their spiritual experiences, and to renew their commitment." This could happen at a time independent from Easter, or you may invite them to take part in the celebration of the Easter Vigil. They may wish to help with prayer and reflection on the morning of Holy Saturday. They may wish to provide a reception for the new members after the Vigil.

There are many opportunities for successful mystagogy. A blend of pastoral care and liturgical celebration will help the new members of our communities feel right at home.

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