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Eucharistic Mystagogy

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Introduction

When teaching students about the history and theory of catechesis, I hold up the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) by the two pages entitled “Period of Postbaptismal Catechesis or Mystagogy” (no. 244-51). The book dangles in the air momentarily. Perhaps students wonder if the 375-page volume will break apart, and maybe some wonder if mystagogy is deserving of all the attention.

The point of the exercise is to demonstrate that the “language” of mystagogy, inclusive of the powerfully rich witness of the RCIA in the section named above, goes beyond the written page and penetrates the realm of sacred mystery for days, months, and years after sacramental celebration.

The term “mystagogy” and its rich and inherited meanings are not new to the catechetical life of the Church. In the fourth century, St. Cyril of Jerusalem identified his preaching to the newly baptized as mystagogical when he spoke of “these daily instructions on the mysteries” (Edward Yarnold, SJ, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The*

Origins of the R.C.I.A [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994], Sermon 2:1).

Enrico Mazza notes that “in both the Antiochene and the Alexandrian Fathers, it [mystagogy] means the oral or written explanation of the mystery hidden in the Scriptures and celebrated in the liturgy” (*Mystagogy* [New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989], 2).

More than a millennium and a half after the great age of the mystagogical Fathers, and just five years before the Second Vatican Council, Johannes Hofinger, SJ, would note that

Religious instruction is, from the very beginning, not so much history as “mystagogy,” that is, an introduction into the Mystery of Christ, the holy knowledge of our vocation to a new life in and with Christ, instruction in the practice and development of this life. In this central task of religious education, the proper training in Christian worship, that is, *the liturgy*, takes an important part. (*The Art of Teaching Christian Doctrine* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1957], 29-30)

An assessment of the last four plus decades since the Second Vatican Council would likely identify mixed reviews about mystagogy and its

implementation as part of the restoration of the baptismal catechumenate. (For the restoration of the catechumenate, see, for example, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 64; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 6; *Ad Gentes*, no. 14; and *Christus Dominus*, no. 14. For post-conciliar documentation and developed perspectives on mystagogy, see the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, and other sources, both liturgical and catechetical. For a recent examination of mystagogy, see James Schellman, “Mystagogy—The Weakest Period of the Initiation Process?” *Catechumenate* [September 2010]: 2-8.) However, Mark Francis, CSV, observes that “there is an increasing interest in returning to an ancient form of catechesis known as mystagogy in order to recapture the power of ritual and symbol” (“Liturgical Participation of God’s People,” in *With One Voice* [Washington, DC: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions (FDLC), 2010], 75).

I would propose that the implementation of the baptismal catechumenate includes a reality check on the “challenge of mystagogy.” Whether a parish’s lament is about exhaustion following the celebration of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation or uncertainty about ongoing conversion through eucharistic mystagogy, parish liturgical and catechetical leaders may struggle with “what to do.”

Yet eucharistic mystagogy is less about “doing” as time-consuming activity than it is about “transforming” as life event. “The mature fruit of mystagogy is an awareness that one’s life is being progressively transformed

by the holy mysteries being celebrated” (Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 64, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html).

Kairos: Transforming Time

Transformation has to do with fundamental change. It is a fruit of conversion gone right and testimony to the God who grants “the power to walk in newness of life” (Yarnold, Cyril of Jerusalem, no. 2:8; see Rom 6:4, RCIA, no. 244).

We read in the Gospel of Mark, “After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: ‘This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mk 1:14-15). The Kingdom of God, present in the Lord Jesus and given witness by his words, his signs, and his works, is here (see *General Directory for Catechesis* [GDC] [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 1997], no. 140; *National Directory for Catechesis* [NDC] [Washington, DC:USCCB, 2005], no. 28). Signs of the Kingdom, especially in the ultimate sign of eucharistic celebration, surround us. For Jesus Christ not only redeems us but also invites us into his redemptive presence through the gift of the Eucharist.

The time of *kairos* is “now” time, transforming time. Awakened and anticipated through the *fiat* of Mary, the divine gift of the incarnation (see Ambrose of Milan, *The Mysteries* 9:53), and the prophetic work of John the

Baptist, this is time without an “off switch.”

The RCIA gives fresh meaning to “time” when it states that mystagogy is “a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing the works of charity” (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, International Commission on English in the Liturgy, Inc., 1985 [Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988], no. 244; see NDC, 35D).

Mystagogy promotes faithful participation in the time of *kairos* offered in the “eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life” (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). How a community promotes the Christian life of ongoing discipleship can make all the difference, for eucharistic mystagogy takes us into territory ever familiar yet ever new. St. Ambrose, fourth-century bishop of Milan, preached to the newly baptized that they were no longer “blind of heart” as a result of their sacramental experience: “through the font of the Lord and the preaching of the Lord’s passion, at that moment your eyes were opened” (Yarnold, no. 3:15).

How privileged we are to live during this time of fulfillment, of opportunity for Christian witness to the world.

Eucharistic Mystagogy: Four Points

The mystagogical path is one of ongoing participation in the life of Christ through the common witness of the Christian community, centered on and drawn from the eucharistic celebration (see Schellman, 6). The following points serve this mystagogical notion.

1. Eucharistic mystagogy expresses our acceptance of an invitation to love as Christ has first loved us.

The experience of mystagogy leads us to Eucharist and leads us from Eucharist, “the heart of Christian life for the whole Church” (NDC, no. 36). Beauty and wonder converge as our ongoing conversion to Jesus Christ is affirmed and renewed. Through the Eucharist, all the faithful continue to participate in the life of the Redeemer. The life of grace prevails.

Eucharistic mystagogy is ongoing. It is neither fragmented nor defined by a momentary good feeling. To propose such a view would seem to suggest that there are limits to God’s love for us. We read in Scripture that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16). Pope Benedict XVI reiterates this ageless teaching in his first encyclical letter (*Deus Caritas Est*) and later states in *Sacramentum Caritatis* that “the causal influence of the Eucharist at the Church’s origins definitively discloses both the chronological and ontological priority of the fact that it was Christ who loved us ‘first.’ For all eternity he remains the one who loves us first” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 14).

Jesus reminds his disciples, “As the Father loves me, so I also love you” (Jn 15:9). Thank God for the fire of the

newly baptized who reignite the sometimes flickering faith of cradle Catholics struggling to live out Jesus' command to "love one another" (Jn 15:17).

Birth into sacred mystery, including that of persons fresh from immersion in saving waters and now "restored to the grace of life" (Yarnold, no. 2:22), is not a gift to be hoarded or hidden under a bushel basket (see Mt 5:15). The ongoing dynamic witness of all the faithful is an essential and non-tangential aspect of mystagogy. "Out of this experience, which belongs to Christians and increases as it is lived, they [neophytes] derive a new perception of the faith, of the Church, and of the world" (RCIA, no. 245). Notice the clear link between the neophytes and the already baptized.

All the faithful are stewards of God's love. St. John Chrysostom, the great fourth-century preacher and mystagogue, spoke boldly to the newly baptized, telling them to "imitate him [Christ], I beg you, and you will be able to be called newly baptized not only for two, three, ten, or twenty days, but you will be able to deserve this greeting after ten, twenty, or thirty years have passed and, to tell the truth, through your whole life (P. W. Harkins, trans., *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* [New York: Newman Press, 1963], no. 5:20).

2. The Paschal Mystery is at the center of the sacramental experience out of which eucharistic mystagogy emerges.

"The Church was born of the paschal mystery" (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de*

Eucharistia [EE] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003], no. 3).

The Paschal Mystery of Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection is a mystery of eternal love offered freely and unequivocally for all. "The Church celebrates in the liturgy above all the Paschal mystery by which Christ accomplished the work of our salvation" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1067).

Eucharistic mystagogy is an invitation to reflective engagement on this saving mystery, through which the faithful are united to Christ's sacrificial memorial of his Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Whereas mystagogy incorporates "my" memory of a powerful experience, it is more than that and more than the collective memory of my fellow parishioners. Rather, it offers to all the faithful the opportunity to embrace anew the word proclaimed in Scripture and the renewal of the sacramental events in their lives.

It is wise for us to recall the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23-26)

The Mass, the sacrifice of Christ present here and now, “is also the sacrifice of the Church. The ordained priest in the Mass links the eucharistic consecration to the sacrifice of the Cross and to the Last Supper (cf. EE, no. 29), thus making it possible that the sacrifice of Christ becomes the sacrifice of all the members of the Church” (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* [USCCA] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006], 221).

Resting in the awareness of Christ truly present under the appearances of bread and wine, we come to an even deeper sense of what we are privileged to experience. Indeed, it is Christ himself who offers us ongoing engagement in his life. It is Christ himself who is one with us and who shatters barriers of time down the centuries. Such love finds expression in the language of faith and worship.

3. The content of eucharistic mystagogy is derived from the “language” of the liturgy.

This language of the worshiping assembly is spoken through gesture, sign, symbol, movement, word, ritual action, silence, song, and more. The participation of the believing community, gathered together from a diversity of cultural (see CCC, no. 1204) and experiential milieu, is key in this regard. As Pope Benedict XVI asserts, “More than simply conveying information, a mystagogical catechesis should be capable of making the faithful more sensitive to the language of signs and gestures which, together with the word, make up the rite” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 64).

The Holy Spirit moves us toward Eucharist and guides us from Eucharist, for we cannot live without this gift of life. To suggest otherwise would be akin to proposing that we can breathe without air. The prayerful and active participation of the gathered assembly, awe-filled and attentively disposed to the eucharistic sacrifice and memorial meal of the Lord Jesus, is essential (see Mark R. Francis, CSV, “Liturgical Participation of God’s People,” in *With One Voice* [Washington, DC: FDL, 2010], 54-85). The language of the liturgy summons us beyond the predictable into the realm of the holy and of mystery, into a participation in the very life of God with us, now and forever.

Eucharistic mystagogy serves as a reminder that “as the work of Christ liturgy is also an action of his Church” (CCC, no. 1071). “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people’ (1 Pet. 2:9, 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism” (Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 14).

Eucharistic mystagogy promotes lively incorporation into the catholicity of the entire Church and leads to a reinvigorated ongoing formation in the way of Christ. This type of continuing mystagogical catechesis is a liturgical catechesis that “aims to initiate people into the mystery of Christ (It is ‘mystagogy.’) by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the

‘sacraments’ to the ‘mysteries’” (CCC, no. 1075). This effort promotes “a deeper understanding and experience of the liturgy” (GDC, no. 71).

With fresh insight born of eucharistic celebration, we turn in a spirit of conversion toward the Savior’s journey to Jerusalem and the gathering in the upper room two millennia ago, for eucharistic mystagogy engages all the baptized in the living Tradition and in living the Tradition. The Holy Spirit unites us, not only among today’s living, but also with all who have gone before us in faith. Pope Benedict XVI notes that the mystagogical process “*interprets the rites in the light of the events of our salvation*, in accordance with the Church’s living tradition” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 64).

The celebration of the Eucharist disposes us to live as renewed and recommitted disciples despite being removed by hours and days from physical proximity to the altar. Distance evaporates as the rites affect all of life. Liturgy, “the work of the Holy Trinity” (CCC, above no. 1077), propels us beyond the walls of the church. Long after the final verse of a recessionary hymn is sung, the faithful continue to live Eucharist in street and neighborhood, work and community. One reason: rites count. Active participation moves us to express the effects of our worship as witnesses to Christ present in all of life.

4. As members of the Church, our desire to thank God our Father for the gift of Jesus in the Eucharist is itself an act of thanksgiving along the Way of faith and of life (see Acts 9:2; 18:25) and calls for our vigorous response to the movement of the Spirit in our lives.

Eucharistic mystagogy serves to remind all of the effects of Christian Initiation—including the realization that we remain lifelong apprentices in faith (see GDC, no. 67). Truly, we become that which we receive. As St. Augustine proclaims

If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond “Amen” (“yes, it is true!”) and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, “the Body of Christ” and respond “Amen.” Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your *Amen* may be true. (CCC, no. 1396, quoting St. Augustine, *Sermo 272*: PL 38, 1247)

Motivated by active participation in the liturgy, the community of faith moves from worship to witness, proclaiming “amen” in day-to-day interactions with others, including during unpredictable and least desired moments.

Our “amen” must be true as active participants living justly and mercifully not only within a comfort zone of friends and family, but also in offering compassionate care for others, such as during a severe economic downturn or times of sudden illness or loss. Our “amen” must be true when hearing of seemingly routine acceptance of societal “norms” that seem to imply an

assumed secularization as foundational for all of life. And our “amen” must be true in the daily encounter with those who do not know Christ, resist Christ, or have abandoned Christ. That is part of the hard work that eucharistic mystagogy prepares us to embrace in love as the Church, for our transformation is not just as individuals but as the Body of Christ.

“Joyously, fearlessly, and gratefully embracing freedom from sin and death, the enlivened community demonstrates from ‘nine to five’ and in home and neighborhood its claim of resurrection and new birth. Simply put, mystagogy enables dispersion of the sweet aroma of faith derived from the experience of the sacred mysteries, realized and renewed all during the liturgical year in the ongoing worship of the parish community” (Gerard F. Baumbach, “The Baptismal Catechumenate: Inspiration for Catechesis,” *Antiphon 7*, no. 3 [2002]: 25).

Catechetical Outcomes of Eucharistic Mystagogy

The faithful are living examples of an enduring Catholic identity that the entire parish celebrates, cherishes, and exemplifies. This is no disconnected identity, for “the Church draws her life from the Eucharist” (EE, no. 1).

Several catechetical benefits accrue to the parish as a result of eucharistic mystagogy. “In the broader sense, mystagogy represents the Christian’s lifelong education and formation in the faith. By analogy it signifies the continuous character of catechesis in the life of the Christian” (NDC, no. 35).

Emerging from the experience of the Eucharist, mystagogy builds links

between mystery and methodology. It does so by a catechetical probing of both divine and human methodology. “The action of the Holy Spirit in the Church continues the pedagogy of God. . . . God’s own methodology inspires a plurality of methods in contemporary catechesis” (NDC, no. 28).

For example, a mystagogical perspective for lifelong catechesis sets a sacramental context for both formal and informal catechesis. This context frees up the individual’s and community’s gifts of multiple intelligences for understanding, thereby offering a predisposition to methodologies that otherwise might be overlooked (see Ronald Nuzzi, *Gifts of the Spirit: Multiple Intelligences in Religious Education* (Washington, DC: NCEA, 1999). As with liturgy, “language” comes in a variety of forms within the Church’s ministry of catechesis. (See NDC, no. 20, on six principal tasks of catechesis and RCIA, no. 75, for a multidimensional perspective on a comprehensive approach to catechesis.)

When applied with awareness of mystagogical perspectives, catechetical methodologies enliven the entire catechetical enterprise through the vigorous witness of the community of catechists. For example, catechetical witness is active when catechists “firmly believe in his [Christ’s] Gospel and its power to transform lives” (NDC, no. 29). Other elements of human methodology that benefit from heightened mystagogical awareness include learning through human experience, learning by discipleship, learning within the Christian community, learning within the Christian family, learning by heart, making a commitment to live a

Christian life, and learning by apprenticeship (see NDC, no. 29).

“Mystagogy provides a ritually expressive and experientially rich bridge of Christian discipleship between essential creedal intentions of ‘living, explicit, and active faith’ (Flannery, *Christus Dominus*, no.14) and ‘full, conscious, and active participation’ (Flannery, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 14) goals of liturgy. The living, active *traditio*, nurtured all during catechesis, is ‘given back (*redditio*), enriched by the values of different cultures. The catechumenate is thus transformed into a center of deepening catholicity and a ferment of ecclesial renewal” (GDC, no. 78, adapted from Baumbach, 25).

Eucharistic mystagogy “contributes in no small measure to such fermentation. It stirs things up, unsettling static impressions of the life, meaning, and mission of the Church for all who have accepted the risk of entering into life-altering mysteries of faith. Praise for the God who saves saturates the liturgical moment. So rooted, the believing community continues to offer praise in subsequent ‘moments’ in the days, weeks, and months that follow” (adapted from Baumbach, 25). As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, the Eucharist is “a mystery to be offered to the world” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 88).

Conclusion

Participation on the sacred walk of new life, movement that calls us to Christ and that is the path of Christ, is accomplished by the Christian community’s walk together in faith. This lifetime mystagogical walk—an expression of what new evangelization

can be for the community of believers—engages us individually and collectively in the enduring legacy of Christian initiation into the Church.

Some ways of opening the door to mystagogical reflection include prayerful meditation on a passage from the word proclaimed during Mass, awe-filled awareness of the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion, and individual or corporate adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Other ways may include community movement toward just living “away” from a usual comfort zone, reflection directed by recurring melodies of an inspiring hymn embedded in community memory, overflowing silence inviting contemplation, and enriched understanding by the community of a doctrinal point come alive during a homily.

Even when derived or extended meanings of mystagogy are put forth, they find their way back to the experience of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Shared and even spontaneous exploration of what was seen and heard during Mass can become a regularized means of opening the door of mystagogical reflection.

Eucharistic mystagogy, by virtue of its being rooted in Christ’s redemptive love poured out for us (see Mk 10:38; Lk 12:50), encourages ongoing sacramental participation and periodic reflection on sacramental experience. In doing so, it finds its lifetime expression and home within daily movement of all the faithful toward Christian discipleship. “To the familiar *lex orandi, lex credendi* (law of praying, law of believing) we necessarily link *lex vivendi* (law of living)” (adapted from Baumbach, 26-27; see also GDC, no. 122,

and its discussion of the structure of the *Catechism*).

As recognition of the fruit of ongoing conversion born of the saving waters of Baptism, eucharistic mystagogy relies on movement in faith together.

Neophytes become part of the seamless fabric of the faithful. Sustained by the

experience of the Eucharist, the Christian community seizes the compelling opportunity to risk self-examination while demonstrating with profound humility willing acceptance of what needs to change to conform to the Gospel.

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