



# Word on Worship

Newsletter of the Worship Office, Archdiocese of Newark, NJ

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The Easter Vigil marks the celebration of the sacraments of initiation for those journeying in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Through this final step, the elect are admitted into the people of God and enter into the community of the Church. The entire RCIA, – its pastoral notes, prayers and actions, – signals incorporation and beginning; in practice however, the celebration of the sacraments seems to signal the end for new members. These endings show themselves in a variety of ways: new members recently initiated cease being a visible presence; new members terminate their participation in the life of the parish; new members stray from the sacramental life of the Church. In addition, parish RCIA coordinators are reluctant to enter this post-baptismal period because they are unsure of what a post-sacramental catechesis looks like or simply because they have expended all their energy journeying to the celebration of Easter and find themselves too exhausted to go beyond the Easter event.

In the Church’s restoration of the ancient catechumenate, it is the post-sacramental period of mystagogy that is usually short lived and/or often eliminated.

Mystagogy, traditionally and historically a period of great catechesis in the Church, has become the “weakest aspect of the RCIA.”<sup>1</sup> The text of the RCIA concerning the final period of mystagogy is brief. The section provides the spirit and nature of this period of formation but offers little assistance regarding the shape of mystagogy. What needs to be remembered is that the catechumenal process provides the model of faith formation and development. The initiation process not only provides the basis for Christian living but also indicates how to continue to embrace the Christian way of life. In planning mystagogy what has to be considered, explored, and maintained is what supports and nurtures the prebaptismal journey. These rhythms must continue in the lives of the newly initiated.

### THE COMMUNITY GATHERING ON SUNDAY

The entire process of initiation takes place “within the community of the faithful”<sup>2</sup> and this community support continues to be of “great significance”<sup>3</sup> as the fifty days of mystagogy gets underway and continues on. Even with the prebaptismal dismissals from the assembly, the gathering with the believing community on Sunday is the key formative experience in the initiation journey. Mystagogy has as its setting and source the Sunday eucharist. This period names the Sunday gathering as the moment through which all the baptized are continually led ever more deeply into the

mystery of God revealed in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The Sunday eucharist is vital to the life of the Church and the spiritual formation of the people of God. During this formal period of mystagogy, the neophytes should be gathered together for eucharist on Sunday *donning* the white garment of the believer. The presider should acknowledge their presence during the appropriate introductions and during the homily. The general intercessions should take into account their presence and their needs. The newly initiated should continue to be seated in a place of prominence.

Mystagogy is a communal experience, a time for the community and neophytes to grow together. The believing community continues to influence the neophytes and the neophytes continue to influence the community. The assembly needs to encounter adult people *in the baptismal garment*, people seated up front, hungry for the word of God, and hungry for the eucharist. The formal gathering of neophytes for Sunday eucharist for the fifty days of Easter is crucial if the Church is to reclaim the period of mystagogy in its initiation process.

### MYSTAGOGICAL CATECHESIS

In addition, the paschal 50 days is the season to gather the neophytes for mystagogical catechesis. Mystagogy is catechesis of the baptized, which has a “distinctive spirit and power.”<sup>4</sup> For the neophyte the Easter season is the

# TOO TIRED FOR MYSTAGOGY?!

Emmaus walk,<sup>5</sup> –sharing scripture, remembering all that has happened, discussing, reflecting, leading to a recognition at the breaking of the bread and an empowerment for witness and mission.

- **Sharing Scripture**

During the catechumenal experience, the celebrations of the word of God in both ritual and catechetical settings “are foremost.”<sup>6</sup> Hearing the word of God proclaimed well arouses faith and moves the heart to conversion. Proclamation, evangelization, and conversion are always a part of the dynamism of faith in every stage of life. For the neophytes and for all gathered Christians, the experience of the Church assembled to listen to the proclaimed word of God “increases and sustains them.”<sup>7</sup> The Church needs the liturgy of the word celebrated well and mystagogy depends on it.

- **Remembering, Reflecting, Discussing**

The RCIA reminds us that this post-baptismal time is a period of catechesis that is mystagogical, that is of a paschal nature,<sup>8</sup> gradual and dependent on the experience of the rite. A catechesis dependent on the rite denotes a dynamic not immediate to the actual sacramental experience – that is “(W) hat is unseen is much greater than what is seen.”<sup>9</sup> Simply feeling good about a sacramental moment is not enough. Sacraments not only celebrate the presence of the risen Lord; they cause that presence. Indeed Christians themselves become sacraments of the divine presence to one another and the world. Thus the rite can speak of the

Christian experience as something that increases as it is lived.

Mystagogical reflection is anamnetic; it probes the memory of the body of Christ and makes present the event and the graces necessary to increase our participation in it. Mystagogical catechesis is the invitation into deeper meaning, a sacramental adventure. It is a reminder that sacraments are not graduations but inductions into a communion. The difficulty of mystagogical reflection comes in poor celebrations of the rites of the catechumenate, especially the sacraments of initiation. The distinctive spirit and power of the post-baptismal catechesis or mystagogy is derived from the new, personal experience of the sacraments,<sup>10</sup> especially the Sunday

Eucharist. Because the sustaining rites of the ongoing post-baptismal state of life are the Sunday Masses and mystagogical catechesis is dependent on the experience of the rite, Sunday must be celebrated well. The symbols, gestures, actions and words of the liturgy have to be unleashed. Sunday must be worth remembering.

- **Deeper Participation in Sunday**

Full, conscious and active participation in the Sunday Eucharist is the right and duty neophytes by virtue of their baptism. This aim should be considered before all else. This period of mystagogy with the formal gathering of the neophytes, their families and godparents not only provides for reflection on the new experience of sacramental life but also fosters deeper

participation in the community of faith gathered on Sunday. In text and praxis, the RCIA holds Sunday as the “primary and indispensable source” of the true Christian spirit, but it is in the doing of mystagogy that Sunday is particularly proclaimed as “the day that is at the very heart of the Christian life.”<sup>11</sup> For the newly initiated, the formal gatherings of the Easter Sundays are the beginning of the ongoing rhythm of the Christian life. Without Sunday there is no mystagogy and without Sunday there is no Christian life. Therefore pastors, RCIA coordinators, and team members must be zealous in this regard, for baptism is the way the Eucharist begins for the newly initiated and Sunday Eucharist is the way that baptism is sustained in their lives.



• **Witness and Mission**

The RCIA is a process of gradual conversion to Christ that leads to an involvement in his missionary spirit. The newly initiated have been clothed in Christ<sup>12</sup> and now share in his mission. An empowerment for witness and mission is a gift of initiation. Those in our initiation process should be introduced to the community's works as an ongoing dimension of the RCIA, but it is especially during mystagogy that the neophytes are invited to grow in their grasp of the Paschal Mystery by doing works of charity. Mystagogical catechesis arouses a living faith that is expressed in action. To know and be part of the works of the local community and the Church leads to a deepening of knowledge and greater experience of the communal nature and spirit of the Church. This should never take the shape of a requirement for the reception of the sacraments, but rather the neophytes should be led to understand that the fullness of the Holy Saturday "redditio" (giving back) of the faith is charitable works. Faith without works is lifeless.<sup>13</sup>

**BEYOND FIFTY DAYS?  
WHY? WHAT?**

The deepening of one's grasp on the Paschal Mystery continues beyond fifty days. Incorporation continues beyond fifty days. Forming disciples takes a lifetime. While mystagogy is a formal period of the RCIA with its gatherings of the neophytes for the duration of the Easter season it is also named the *final* period, not signaling the end but rather naming the post-initiation season of life,

mystagogy. The idea of faith formation as a lifelong process needs to be developed in our parishes because it is an issue of pastoral care. "Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States" stresses that the participants, themselves after having gone through such an intense initiation process, had a felt need for something beyond the formal process of initiation.

Mystagogical catechesis needs to continue beyond Easter's fifty days. Spiritual development is at risk if formal faith formation is seemingly terminated. This ongoing, beyond the fifty days, faith formation requires a catechesis inspired and based on the principles derived from the baptismal catechumenate.<sup>14</sup> Some of the fundamental tasks of this catechesis are as follows:<sup>15</sup>

- To enable an ongoing participation in the sacramental life of the Church. There should be RCIA team members that are responsible for not only the fifty days of post-baptismal catechesis but also responsible for preparing the neophytes for post-baptismal sacraments. For example, since baptism forgives all sin, the celebration of the sacrament of penance is celebrated with the neophytes some time after baptism. The sacrament of reconciliation needs to have a systematic catechesis, that is "planned to be gradual and complete in coverage, accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the word."<sup>16</sup> There should be time before hand to review and explain the theology and the rite and afterward a time of mystagogical reflection.

The desires expressed by many (newly initiated) for more formation should demonstrate the need for parishes to have ongoing faith formation opportunities for all adults. The U.S. bishops' publication in 1999 of *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States* should be a means of developing and strengthening this effort as it is implemented in diocese and parishes across the country.

From "Journey to the Fullness of Life"  
United States Catholic Conference

Neophytes should never be simply told when the next parish communal celebration of reconciliation is taking place and asked to attend. The initial experience of reconciliation should be according to the first form, individual penance, and eventually the neophyte participates in the parish's communal celebration. The neophytes should also be prepared and have the chance to participate in the other post-baptismal sacraments, – marriage, orders, anointing of the sick, in the same way.

- To promote knowledge of the faith based on the various aspects of the Paschal Mystery as it unfolds in the celebrations of the liturgical year, as it is proclaimed at the table of the word and professed in the creed. It should be remembered that the neophytes' experience of catechesis is a ministry of the Word in an ecclesial context. It would be detrimental to faith development if the neophytes' ongoing catechesis was solely an informational experience and not integrated and comprehensive.
- To promote faith development that leads to ongoing conversion. Opportunities for promoting this would include parish missions, retreats, and spiritual direction.
- To have all activity permeated with a spirit of prayer. The newly-initiated need to be introduced to the Church's rich tradition of other forms of prayer, such as Morning and Evening Prayer, stations of the cross, the rosary, devotion to Mary and the saints. This formation must also include patterns of family prayer, popular devotional practices, the family's seasonal customs and the way Sunday is celebrated in the domestic church.
- To form genuine Christian communities. Such catechesis directs neophytes to a deepening of their baptismal identity and to the realization that in gathering for the liturgy they stand as the Church, the people of God! Involving newly received members in parish ministries and incorporating them into small faith communities are some of the ways used to achieve this deepening and incorporation. It should

be remembered that incorporation into parish liturgical ministries should be initially focused on the ministry of the assembly. Participation in and incorporation into the worship of the assembly takes time. Inviting the newly baptized to be special ministers of the eucharist or readers should be reserved for a later time. In the same way to invite the newly initiated to be catechists for any age group would be premature because their own need for catechesis is great.

- To educate to a missionary dimension. Catechesis arouses a living faith that is expressed Sunday after Sunday in the dismissal mandate of the Eucharist: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

### THE CHURCH NEEDS MYSTAGOGY?

The Church needs to do mystagogy not only because the neophytes need it but because the Church needs it. Our catechesis needs mystagogy. The restoration of the practice of mystagogy offers the Church an opportunity in making post-baptismal catechesis an ongoing enterprise for **adults**. The catechesis of adults is the “principal kind of catechesis.”<sup>17</sup> Maintaining the mystagogical principle will birth catechesis for adults as a means of pastoral care. This will eliminate our previous practice of scheduling optional parish adult education to inform people about various areas of theology.

The Church’s system of sacramental preparation needs mystagogy. Because the mystagogical principle belongs not only to the post-baptismal catechesis of the RCIA but

the entire sacramental life of the Church, exploring mystagogy is a means of unleashing our sacraments from graduations to thresholds, a means of giving sacramental preparation programs the dimension of process. To omit a mystagogical reflection on the experience of the sacred mysteries as ritualized in the sacrament of first communion, confirmation, marriage, reconciliation or orders is to omit the opportunity for the translating of the sacramental moment to every day life. To omit post-sacramental catechesis perpetuates the notion that sacraments are a moment in time and that sacraments are ends and not beginnings!

Mystagogy rekindles an ancient role of the bishop. The RCIA calls for a comprehensive participation of all levels of the parish and the Church. The rite calls for priests and deacons, catechists, the assembly, the entire parish community to a responsibility and participation in initiation. But in the tradition of mystagogical catechesis it is the bishops who were and are the “principal dispensers of the mysteries of God... those who lead others to holiness.”<sup>18</sup> The fourth century golden age of the catechumenate saw an engagement of bishops in the catechumenal process that has never been surpassed. Their participation in the faith journey of the whole people of God is of extreme importance. Episcopal shepherds must interpret the sacramental experience empowering all for mission.

The more the Church becomes reacquainted with mystagogy the more we will understand faith formation as ongoing, as belonging to cradle Catholics and those who are initiated during later seasons of their



lives. The more the Church does mystagogy the more we deepen our grasp of our participation in the paschal mysteries of Christ. Mystagogy is the time that the newly initiated and all the baptized derive new perceptions of faith, of the Church, and of the world. It is vital to the ongoing faith formation of the newly initiated and it is vital to all the baptized people of God. Mystagogy is about life after baptism.

Sister Sandra DeMasi, SSJ  
Director Worship Office

grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Ambrose S1,10

<sup>10</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 247.

<sup>11</sup> Introduction to *Dies Domini*, Pope John Paul II.

<sup>12</sup> See *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 229.

<sup>13</sup> James 3:26

<sup>14</sup> See *General Directory of Catechesis*, 68,91.

<sup>15</sup> These fundamental tasks are based on the directives of the *General Directory of Catechesis* and the concluded findings of “Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.”

<sup>16</sup> See *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 75.

<sup>17</sup> See *General Catechetical Directory*, 20. The GCD stated that catechesis for adults “must be considered the chief form of catechesis” to which all other forms are oriented. The 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* emphasizes that adult catechesis is the reference point for all catechesis by treating it first, even before catechesis for infants and children.

<sup>18</sup> *Christus Dominus*, “Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishop”, 15.

<sup>1</sup> “Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults,” USCC, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, no. 151.

<sup>4</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 237.

<sup>5</sup> See Luke 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 79.

<sup>7</sup> *Lectionary for Mass*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> RCIA, 244: This is a time for the community and the neophytes to



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