



A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO MYSTAGOGY

Nick Wagner

Many of us think of mystagogy as the final period of the catechumenal process, occurring in the 50 days after the Easter Triduum. It is, however, a much broader reality. We need to shift our thinking a bit. Mystagogy is not only for the 50 days, but for all our days. From the very beginning, our encounters with the inquirers and later the catechumens should be mystagogical.

Defining mystagogy

It might help to break apart the word a little. The root of “mystagogy” is “agogy,” which comes from the Greek word “agogos.” That means “leader.” So pedagogy, for example, is about leading (or teaching) children. A synagogue is a gathering place (syn-“together”) to which people are led. Mystagogy is a process of leading (or training) into the mystery. Or, perhaps a better way to say that is that mystagogy is initiation into that which is not yet fully revealed. Seems clear, yes? Yet perhaps still not compelling enough a reason for those who ask our opening questions. So let's look at some reasons that may be more convincing.

Even more specifically, mystagogy is an initiation into God's self-revelation. We've all experienced God's revelation. If you think about it, you can probably recall something that happened to you just a moment ago that you'd identify as God acting in your life. Certainly you've experienced an act of God within the last 24 hours. God is acting all the time. God is in every breath we take and every blink of our eyes. It's not as though God chooses some obscure moment to break into our lives with thunderbolts or floods. Just the opposite. God is so present that we sometimes take the ongoing, constant revelation of God for granted. We have to actively remember how God has been acting in our lives to fully see.

So try this.

At your next team meeting, start out by asking everyone, **“How have you encountered God this week?”** That question is mystagogical. It leads us deeper into the mystery, or ongoing revelation, of God.

Mystagogy with inquirers and catechumens

If we are doing mystagogy with inquirers, instead of other Catholics, the inquirers set the agenda. We ask them, in various ways, how they have encountered God in their lives. We help them explore their experiences of God, and, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, gradually lead them to connect those experiences with the stories and traditions of the church. But this process is spontaneous and unstructured, led by the promptings of the Spirit.

When the inquirers move into the catechumenate, the process changes. Now, instead of spontaneous promptings of the Spirit that lead to revelation, we provide systematic and regular experiences of revelation. This happens in the celebration of the liturgical year in the Sunday assembly. The liturgical proclamation of God's Word over the course of the year “unfolds the entire mystery of Christ” (General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, 1).

When the inquirers move into the catechumenate, the question shifts as well. We ask more specifically, **“How have you encountered Christ in the liturgy this week?”** We can ask that question in a variety of ways, but the goal is to lead them into the mystery in a less spontaneous, more systematic way by beginning with the liturgy.



A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO MYSTAGOGY

Getting to the meat of it all

What happens next is very important. When we ask that question of catechumens, their responses will be true but incomplete. They are learning to experience Christ more fully, and they do not yet see and hear as clearly as we pray they might. We ourselves still have scales on our eyes and plugs in our ears, but we have been given the gift of sight and the gift of hearing through the grace of baptism.

Even more importantly, we have been schooled in the tradition of the church. So we rely not only on our own ability to discern God's presence, but also on the teaching of the saints who have gone before us. Our job as catechists is to bring all this remembering to bear in the exploration of God's revelation this week in the liturgy.

So the mystagogical process for the catechumens looks like this:

- An experience of Christ in the celebration of the Sunday liturgy
- A remembering and exploration of that experience that is prompted by mystagogical questions from the catechist
- A like remembering of the catechist's and sponsors' experiences-those who have been given "insight" into the mystery through baptism
- A clearer exploration of this encounter with Christ through the apostolic teaching handed down by the saints of the church (the "doctrine")

It is that last step, the "remembering" of the story through church tradition that is especially germane to the catechumenate period. It is the "meat" of catechesis. It is through this mystagogical catechetical process that we expect the catechumens to acquire an appropriate understanding of what it means to live as a Christian.

Ongoing catechesis

However, the basic outline of the process is intended for all Catholics as a lifelong catechesis. We still see only dimly, as St. Paul says, and it is through the ongoing liturgical celebration of the mystery and the systematic exploration of our encounter with the mystery that the scales are lifted from our eyes.

The final phase of the catechumenate is called "mystagogy" because it is through baptism that the catechumens are given the insight of the royal priesthood of Christ. With that grace, they are brought to the table to eat and drink the full presence of Christ in way they have not yet fully encountered. The 50 days of Easter is a time to focus specifically on remembering that initiation into the Banquet in a systematic way. However, this is not similar to the catechumenate process. It is primarily a liturgical experience that takes place in the midst of the Sunday assembly.

The neophytes might be gathered once or twice in the Easter season specifically to remember and explore the experience of their initiation at the Vigil. But the systematic, catechetical process of the catechumenate ended when Lent began. Now, we would hope, the neophytes would enter into the ongoing adult faith formation process of the rest of the baptized. And that process is, of course, mystagogical.