

MYSTAGOGY: TWELVE PRACTICAL STEPS

Eliot Kapitan

LONG RANGE PLANNING

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THE EASTER CATECHESIS OR MYSTAGOGY

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The Easter Catechesis or Mystagogy
Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

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(both prayers and Biblical readings)
with the chosen focus

to continue looking back
on the experience of the Easter Triduum

and to do our continuing reflection
upon the paschal mystery
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Mystagogy: Twelve practical steps¹

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This is not a pitch for snake oil, nor is it a swamp land concession. It is, however, a venture with a cost. The deal is this: mystagogy that works. I am not so bold to assume that what follows is the perfect parish plan. It is, however, a good beginning, a good first draft that served one parish well for its best mystagogy ever.

The Church of the Little Flower is an average parish of professional and working-class parishioners in an average Midwestern city. It has a small full-time staff, a school of 450 students, and a wide assortment of boards, guilds, clubs, and ministry teams. It has been about the task of initiation ministry for 12 years, attempting to implement the vision and norms of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. After making the jump from a school year plan to a continuing approach for initiation four years ago, the Christian initiation team gradually saw the need to move beyond a mystagogy of three to four weeks to one more faithful to the ritual text.

What this parish learned is that mystagogy does not have to be mysterious. It does not have to be overwhelming. It does not have to be so frustrating that everyone wants the summer off to regroup. Here are practical steps that can help any parish improve on the pastoral care provided to the neophytes and the newly received.²

¹ The article first appeared without the accompanying footnotes in *Christian Initiation: For those involved with the initiation of adults and children*, a Celebration Publication published bimonthly by The National Catholic Reporter Publishing Co. April/May 1994, pages 1-3, and 8.

² "Neophyte" is the new name given to those who have passed through the waters of baptism, passed under the oiling hand of the confirming minister, and now come to the Eucharistic table "which is the climax of initiation and the center of the whole Christian life" [RCIA, no. 243]. "Newly received" is the name given to those former candidates previously baptized who have been received into the full communion of the Catholic Church [RCIA, no. 594].

LONG RANGE PLANNING

- 1. Pump in new energy.** To bring out the excitement of this fourth period, those responsible for facilitating mystagogy must have the energy for the task. If these two or three people can have reduced planning responsibilities for purification and enlightenment in Lent, then they will be rested for the intensive work of the Easter season. Name a task group or period planning team six to nine months before Easter.
- 2. Begin with evaluation.** The work of the mystagogy task group begins long before Ash Wednesday. Remote planning begins in the fall with critical evaluation of the last Easter season. In addition to gleaning comments and opinions from team and parish staff members, consider talking with neophytes of two or three years ago. Ask: What was helpful? What needed more clarity? What was a waste of time? What made participation difficult? What could be done differently? Even anecdotal information can help point a direction for improved mystagogical care. Write down at least a summary of these findings.
- 3. Uncover the vision, discover the primary texts.** The best place to start reading is in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Although the material there is slim (RCIA, nos. 244-251, 330, 594; see National Statutes 22-24), it does present a compact vision for this period of postbaptismal catechesis. Careful rereading provides this list of focal elements: meditating on the gospel, eating and drinking Eucharist, doing works of charity (not beginning but continuing; see RCIA, no. 75.4), widening the contact with the community, understanding better the experience of the sacraments celebrated. Further, the main setting is the Sunday Masses of the Easter season, especially the readings for Year A. The neophytes and newly received are like icons of the risen Christ to the faithful. The faithful are a joyful welcoming community to them.

The next books to study are the volumes of the Roman Missal. The *Sacramentary* provides the opening prayers and other texts for Mass. The *Lectionary for Mass* gives the chosen Biblical readings. And as soon as ritual actions, psalm settings, and other songs are chosen by those responsible, they are added to the mix. Finally, since this mystagogical catechesis follows upon baptism, all the prayer texts of the Easter Triduum, especially of the Easter Vigil, are an essential part of the list of primary texts that hold the vision for mystagogy.

- 4. Review the secondary literature.** Few parishes have the luxury to start a plan for a period of Christian initiation from scratch. Fewer yet can afford to indiscriminately take the nearest, easiest, or cheapest book available today. After reading the primary texts, pick up the article, "Neophytes and the Easter Season," by Thomas J. Caroluzza (in *Ninety Days*, edited by Karan Hinman Powell and Joseph P. Sinwell; New York: Paulist Press, 1989; pages 10-22). Read it more than once. All other workbooks, textbooks, strategy books, and how-to-books should be read in light both of the questions Caroluzza raises and of the vision the Church has for this period.³

³ The Little Flower mystagogy task group did not discover Caroluzza's work until it had already read nearly a dozen books. The impact of the article caused the team to reread everything with new eyes.

5. **Set goals and objectives.** Now the mystagogy planning team is ready to set some goals and objectives for review by the whole initiation team. Goals are big and broad. Objectives need to be specific and measurable. The Church of the Little Flower set one goal (with several parts), printed it in sense lines and made it widely available.

The Easter Catechesis or Mystagogy
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In addition to the goal, some guiding principles (objectives) were also established:

- (1) We will meet each week of the Easter season.
- (2) We will use the Sunday texts, both prayers and readings, to look back on one part of the Easter Vigil experience to begin assessing meaning.
- (3) We want neophytes and newly received to talk more, and the team and sponsors to talk less.
- (4) We will invite other parishioners week by week to enter into the sharing.
- (5) We want to open up the possibilities for everyone to "go where God took them" and not close down possibilities with questions or a direction that is too narrow, too focused.
- (6) We will limit the session time to one hour.
- (7) We will use the following elements in each weekly session:
 - (a) provide ways for the neophytes and newly received to touch and name that part of the Easter Vigil experience relating to the chosen focus of the day's texts;
 - (b) provide time for the questions, issues, concerns they have;
 - (c) allow ways for "old" Catholics (team, sponsors, spouses, guests) to share the wisdom they have experienced, not didactically but as persons who have been longer on the Catholic journey;
 - (d) sum up briefly with a response to "This is what Catholics believe about today's focus";
 - (e) pray; and
 - (f) end at the promised time, even if we started late.

6. **Agree on the weekly focus.** The final step of the long-range planning is to write down the focus for each week. Begin with the Roman Missal and Lectionary texts. Then name the part of the Easter Vigil experience to which you will return and the mystagogical catechesis you wish to share. Do this in an attitude of prayer. Finish this by Ash Wednesday.

⁴ The Little Flower plan for the Year A Easter season 1993:

Solemnity	Sacramentary and Lectionary Focus	Mystagogy Focus
Easter Sunday	Christ is risen	Easter gathering for story telling
Second Sunday of Easter	Easter peace Abiding presence of Jesus Doubting Thomas, doubting community	Recalling the Easter Triduum
Third Sunday of Easter	Eucharist Emmaus story	Abiding presence of Jesus Christ & the Eucharist
Fourth Sunday of Easter	The good shepherd The sheep gate, the sheep Abundant life	Pot luck meal Mass of Thanksgiving at the Cathedral Church with the bishop
Fifth Sunday of Easter	The way, truth, life Living stones Journey continues	Baptism Profession of Faith & the Christian life
Sixth Sunday of Easter	Holy Spirit Another counselor Commandment keeping	Confirmation & the gifts of the Spirit in my life
Ascension Thursday	Always with you At the right hand of God	
Seventh Sunday of Easter	Christ's priestly prayer Caught in the glory of God	Ongoing prayer & faith development
Pentecost	Breath – Holy Spirit Baptism for the life of the world Mission Next steps on the journey	Witness to what? How mystagogy continues

PROXIMATE PLANNING

After the research, done in prayer, is finished for this year, the mystagogy team becomes very practical. These proximate, practical steps occur in the 40 days prior to Easter. Care must be taken to build a growing interest and excitement for the Easter season (which is not optional) without diluting the impact of the rites and events of Lent.

7. **Negotiate time for the Easter gatherings.** To increase participation and ownership of the postbaptismal catechesis, involve those who will soon be neophytes and newly received in day and time selection. At any early Lenten session, either on Ash Wednesday or as part of the reflection on the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion, take five minutes to do the following: briefly discuss the purpose of mystagogy; state there will be weekly gatherings of neophytes, godparents, spouses, children, and team each week of the Easter season; suggest some alternatives for meeting (after Sunday Mass, late Sunday afternoon, Wednesday night, etc.); let the elect and the called candidates select the day and time that best suits their schedules.

8. **Provide special care, widen the circle.** To help parents relax and spouses to participate, provide child care to ease some concern and expense for their children. Arrange for competent parishioners to be the care providers (from the junior high, ladies' guild, last year's neophytes). Provide age-appropriate toys, games, and activities. Ask about special diets and see that healthy drinks and munchies are available that appeal to children and adults.

To further widen the circle and increase contact with the rest of the faithful (RCIA, no. 246), invite three to four different parishioners to come each week. Find a way to broach the offer that gives them time to think about it (perhaps a letter is best).⁵ Then follow up with a phone call or face-to-face conversation for clarity and an answer. Make it easy for them to come by having them share from their experience and not be responsible for a prayer or a talk.

9. **Give a draft schedule.** To build up interest and help people plan to attend, distribute a draft schedule or calendar with almost everything that every one will need for full and active participation in the Easter catechesis. The schedule should include days, dates, times, and places for every event. It should list the Lectionary readings for each Easter solemnity, as well as any focus or chosen theme. It should list the diocesan celebration with the bishop and parish celebrations of confirmation and first Communion with young Catholics. It should list potlucks, good times, and any other important parish events.

Do this by mid-Lent. Not only will the elect have something to put on the refrigerator, but the team will have one more opportunity to say that the Easter Vigil is not the end. Much more is on the horizon.

⁵ The Little Flower plan called for a letter to be sent to prospective parishioners extending the invitation, naming the neophytes and newly received, defining mystagogy, listing the Sunday in question and the time-lined agenda, and ending with: "We are not asking you to give a talk. We are asking you to spend time with the Bible readings for the Sunday and to come and enter the discussion and sharing that centers around these new Catholics' experience of the Easter Vigil and their ongoing reflection about its meaning for them and for the Church. I will call you soon about this invitation. I hope you will say yes."

10. Prepare and print a journal booklet. To facilitate a weekly return throughout the Easter season to some part of the Easter Triduum, prepare a mystagogy journal booklet. Reprint the parish Holy Week calendar in front and the final mystagogy schedule (with dates, times, and places) on the back cover. Inside, plan to give four to six pages for reflecting on the celebration of the Easter Triduum, then follow that with two facing pages for each of the weeks of the Easter season. This will provide room for printing the Lectionary citations, the opening prayers for Mass, art and sacred images, questions for reflection, and still leave plenty of space for writing. Do the booklet legally: respect copyrights.⁶

Print enough copies so that all the soon-to-be neophytes and newly received, spouses and family members, and invited parishioners have their own. Hand it out, along with a cover letter that explains its purpose, no earlier than the end of the session on Passion (Palm) Sunday; or, better, put it in the mail to arrive on Wednesday of Holy Week. This is one more opportunity to state, "Something special is coming."

11. Educate the parish. Careful use of the weekly bulletin can give all the faithful a better understanding of Christian initiation and a renewed appreciation of the impact of Easter. In two short paragraphs based on the Sunday's focus, parishioners can be reminded of a portion of the Easter mystery and given questions that provoke thought and even discussion.⁷

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⁶ To illustrate, here is an example from the Third Sunday of Easter, Year A:

1. THE 50 DAYS OF THE EASTER SEASON are set aside to revel in the power of the risen Christ. As Catholics, we know and we believe that baptism and confirmation begin us in the sacramental life. That is why there are two of the three sacraments of initiation. The third, of course, is the Eucharist and is the one that completes initiation and begins the life-long task of living life as faithful Christians.
2. THE EASTER CATECHESIS FOR TODAY: Why do we eat and drink at the table of the Lord week after week? Why is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ so important to the lives lived in faith? What is the abiding presence of Jesus?

Next year in the parish, the preacher may pose one or more of these questions after the homily for small group conversation before the preparation of the altar and the gifts.

THE EASTER CATECHESIS OR MYSTAGOGY

Good mystagogical catechesis will continually refer back to the experience of the Easter Triduum. The better that experience is,⁸ the better the mystagogy will be. Good communication between the parish Easter liturgy team and the mystagogy task group is essential.⁹

12. Doing mystagogy. If prior planning has happened, then the doing of good mystagogical catechesis is an easier task. The rooms still need setting up – with some Easter flair. The food and drink still need preparation – with some Easter fare. The session needs final designing. However, because attention has been paid to the steps outlined above (especially no. 5), the session is quite easily designed, thus:

- (1) name the focus,
- (2) recall part of the past experience using the journal work,
- (3) name “what I think about it now,”
- (4) sum up what Catholics hold and believe about it all, and
- (5) do it all in an attitude of prayerful thanksgiving.

Mystagogy Part A is the 50 Days filled with postbaptismal catechesis from the Easter Vigil to Pentecost (RCIA, nos. 244-251). Mystagogy Part B is the regular assemblies until the anniversary of Christian initiation (RCIA, no.250, and National Statute 24). Mystagogy Part C is the continuing living of the Christian life and the taking up of Jesus’ mission for the life of the world.

An image: Mystagogy is like a honeymoon. It is for a slow reentry into the faithful Christian life. It is the telling and retelling of the Easter Vigil experience. And the telling becomes better than the event because the story is fact now colored with meaning.

⁸ The American Bishops wrote in the 1983 document *Music in Catholic Worship*, revised edition, no. 6: “Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy faith.”

⁹ At Little Flower, quite by chance, the Easter Triduum liturgy team and the mystagogy task group shared a common member. That made the work of both groups that much more productive.