

Christian Initiation of Adults

Mystagogy

Diocese of San José

“Out of [mystagogy, all Christians] derive a new perception of the faith, of the Church, and of the world.”

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 244

Savoring the Mystery of God

Whodunit? Secret? Science?

God is a mystery, but not like an Agatha Christie novel, or a secret reserved only for special people, or a math problem to be solved.

God is a mystery in the way that grandma’s love is a mystery; in the way you look at your child and can’t imagine anything more beautiful; in the way you marvel at how deeply you still love your spouse even after so many years of being together.

The mystery of God is something that makes us feel so immensely close to God and at the same time so in awe of the tremendous, incomprehensible wonder of God. There is no way to completely, fully express this feeling or describe it to another person. We can only say the same thing we tell children who ask us how they will know when they’re in love—“you’ll know it when it happens to you.”

The word “sacrament” comes from the same Greek root for the word “mystery.” Often, at the beginning of Mass, the priest will say, “to prepare ourselves to celebrate these sacred mysteries....” Every time we gather to celebrate the sacraments, we enter deeply into the mysterious love of God.

We experience this divine mystery most fully in the Eucharist—that intimate act of eating and drinking together with those named after the one we love the most: Christ.

Who do you love so completely that your love for them is a mystery—something you can’t fully explain yet you know is absolutely real. How would you describe that love?

Reflecting on the Mysteries

Those who have been preparing to be initiated into the Church and are then baptized, confirmed, and welcomed to the Eucharistic table at the Easter Vigil are the newest members to be “christened,” that is, named “Christ.” They are those who have most recently and fully been hit by God’s mysterious love. Now, they know what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ because they have experienced it for themselves.

Anyone who is new to love and the overwhelming nature of it needs time to reflect on what happened to them. This “looking backward” to a specific moment when they experienced God’s mysterious presence gives them

This is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery (RCIA, 244).

direction and renewed commitment for moving forward. Just like looking back at wedding pictures can give us more hope and joy

for the future, reflecting on the experience of the “mysteries”—the sacraments—can renew our commitment to live according to Christ’s name which was given to us at baptism.

The neophytes are those who were recently initiated into the Church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. During the Easter season, and often throughout the year after, they spend time reflecting on the mysteries. This process is called “mystagogy.” But their practice of mystagogy is simply a participation in what all baptized Christians are called to do. All of us who are baptized, whether last year or many years ago, are called to constantly reflect on our experience of God, discern its meaning, renew our commitment to our baptismal promises, and commit ourselves to living those promises in the ordinary events of our daily life.

Words to know

assembly: the baptized and catechumens gathered together in prayer, especially for the sacraments

catechumen: Greek, meaning “one in whom word echoes”; one who celebrated the Rite of Acceptance

discernment: from Latin, *discernere*, meaning “to cut away”; a lifelong process for listening and responding to God and being the person God intends us to be

conversion: a lifelong process of seeing and choosing a new path in light of God’s call; an internal process revealed in external practice

mystagogy: a lifelong process of reflecting on the experience of God, especially in the sacraments, discerning its meaning, and converting one’s way of life to reflect one’s baptismal commitment

mystagogue: a person who practices and is skilled in mystagogy

RCIA: stands for “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults;” process for becoming Christian

neophyte: a person who has recently celebrated the three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist; comes from the Greek word for “new plant”

Diana Macalintal

408-983-0136

Macalintal@dsj.org
dsjliturgypot.blogspot.com

© 2007, Diana Macalintal.
All rights reserved.

(continued on next page)

Mystagogy My Mother Could Do

The content of faith is the content of my mother's or any mother's life. That is because faith happens in and through our daily life. What we do on Sunday is simply one expression of our faith. We need to connect the messy un-"holy" events of daily life with God and all the things we call "holy." But the most common mistake people make when trying to make sense of life and faith is they go into "Hallmark greeting card" mode. That is, when they talk about faith, they often give religious platitudes like "God loves me," or "Jesus answered my prayer." Though these are true, they won't necessarily lead to conversion or renewed commitment to our baptism. In other words, it won't change the world; but mystagogy will. This way of reflecting makes faith relevant to daily life and makes daily life an expression of faith. But you don't need a theology degree to be a "mystagogue." Here are some simple steps to uncovering the mystery of faith that even my mother could do.

Step 1: Choose an event

Sharing faith starts with an event that engages us or makes us feel deep emotion. Family reunions, Easter dinner, graduation, a child's birth, friend's death, the shared experience of watching a movie or hearing a song—these are ripe with moments where the mystery of faith can be uncovered. Pay close attention to all your senses (what you see, hear, touch, taste, smell) and to what you feel. Engage fully in the experience.

Step 2: Remember what happened

After the event, gather with others who experienced the same thing. Ask these questions: What did you see? What did you hear? What do you remember most? How did that make you feel? Be very concrete in your memories. For example, "I smelled bread baking when I came in the door, and that made me feel welcomed, like I belonged there."

Step 3: Reflect on the bigger picture

What else is going on in your life that needs to be connected to this concrete experience and memory? What issues is your family dealing with? What concerns do you have at work?

What are some major events happening in your community or in the world? For example, "That smell of bread baking makes me think of my own family and how I worry about making sure they have enough to eat. I worry about my job and if I'll still have it next month. I think also of the man I see every morning on the street corner asking for money for food."

Step 4: Connect with your faith

Ask what this memory teaches you about God, about Christ, about church, about community. For example, "My feeling of belonging when I smelled that bread baking teaches me that family can be anyone I share food with. It reminds me of all those Bible stories of Jesus eating meals with others and how we share bread and wine with strangers at Mass every Sunday. These strangers we call brothers and sisters because we eat together. It teaches me that no matter what, I can depend on my family, my community." Find out what the Church and your parish teach about your insight. Connect it to a story in the Bible, and find out what Scripture teaches about this.

Step 5: Make a change

This is the "so-what" step. What will you do differently in your life now that you've made these connections with your faith? Perhaps you might decide to participate in Communion with different eyes, really looking at each person in the Communion procession as your family. Maybe you'll choose to begin each dinner with a simple prayer. You might get others in your family or parish to talk more about issues of homelessness and hunger. You can start a support group for those who have lost jobs or are looking for work.

When we reflect on our everyday life experiences in this way, our faith can and will change the world, one mother at a time.

[Through mystagogy] the neophytes...experience a full and joyful welcome into the community and enter into closer ties with the faithful. The faithful, in turn, should derive from it a renewal of inspiration and of outlook. (RCIA, 246).

St. Augustine says "look over there!"

From Augustine and the Catechumenate, by William Harness, The Liturgical Press, 1995.

On Easter morning, St. Augustine would direct the assembly's attention to the white-robed neophytes who stood in a special section of the church. He would exclaim that if the assembly wanted to see the Scriptures enfleshed, it need only gaze at the neophytes: that on the night before, as at the dawn of creation, the Spirit had moved over the waters and God had said, "Let there be light," such that the neophytes themselves had become the first day of a new creation; that they who "were once darkness" were now "light in the Lord"; that "it is about them we sing, 'This is the day which the Lord has made: let us be glad and rejoice.'"

St. Augustine would point to what lay on the altar,

that is, bread and a cup of wine:

"The food you see here on the Lord's table you are used to seeing on your own tables at home—as far as outer appearance go. It has the same look, but not the same worth. Once the sanctification is added, this bread will be the Body of Christ, and this wine will be the Blood of Christ."

He then would point to the neophytes:

"You are the same people you were before; nor do you bring new faces before us here in the assembly. Yet you are brand-new: your old selves on the outside; but new by the grace of sanctity, something—as it were—utterly new."