

# Recovering the Spirit of Mystagogy in the Contemporary Churches

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The restoration of the catechumenate in the Roman Catholic tradition since the promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in 1972 has been a most surprising pastoral success. Given its size and complexity one might have predicted that the RCIA would simply be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant.

On the contrary, what has occurred is a widespread interest and enthusiasm for rethinking our pastoral care in the making of new Christians. The ecclesiology underlying the RCIA has excited theologians, pastors, and baptized faithful by stimulating and stretching their understanding of Christian life and their image of what the Church is all about.

One can find today parishes throughout the United States and Canada where parishioners have taken responsibility for the initiation of new members into the community. These are not professional church personnel but lay men and women who have caught the spirit of what the RCIA is all about and have committed themselves to making the catechumenate a viable process of Christian formation. You will see these men and women by hundreds at initiation workshops and institutes throughout North America. And, of course, the interest in a more wholistic formation of new church members is not just a Roman Catholic phenomenon, as this fine institute proves.

The restoration of the catechumenal process and the dynamics of Church and conversion it represents has not come any too soon for the contemporary churches. There has been for a number of years a growing dissatisfaction with catechism class type learning and a growing need for new ways to interpret what Christian conversion means in contemporary society. There continues to be as well an alarming concern about the decline in active Church members, leaving pastoral prophets warning us that we've got to find new ways to communicate our timeless message because something doesn't seem to be working.

Although it may still be too early to judge whether the RCIA or its equivalent is here to stay, its initial reception and influence on many levels of Church thinking practice has thus far been a great success. Nevertheless, there is one aspect of the catechumenal process that has not been successful: mystagogy.

In the many workshops and institutes on the RCIA I have facilitated over the last few years there is always that most difficult question continuing to surface: "What can we do to make the period of mystagogy or the post-baptismal period more appealing and fruitful?" The question arises out of a frustration pastoral teams have experienced in trying to continue the formation process after the paschal vigil. Apparently, once people have celebrated the sacrament of initiation at the vigil they lose motivation for continuing with anything else. In their own minds they have evidently received what they wanted and so do not perceive a need for anything further. Even in communities which have been successful in drawing neophytes back after the vigil there seems to be some doubt about what to do with them.

All of this brings us to the matter before us today: recovering a spirit of mystagogy in the contemporary churches. Is it in fact a reasonable expectation for us to recover a spirit of mystagogy? What does it mean? What is its value?

Without jumping too far ahead at this point I believe it is fair to say that we have lost the sense of mystagogy which the early church, especially in the fourth through fifth centuries, seemed to take to so naturally. Let me also say that any attempt to recover a spirit, let alone a practice, of mystagogy cannot be considered outside of our own historical and cultural context, which subsequently presents us with a number of obstacles. Let me add that not all of what we might find in the mystagogy of the early Fathers is something we will want to employ. We will need to construct or shape our own experience and style of mystagogy.

Nevertheless, we need to return to that early period of the Church to hear for ourselves what the early Fathers were preaching. We must pay attention not only to the

content of these patristic writings but also study the style, method, and context of their delivery.

After a brief walk through some of the mystagogical literature, I would like to address the cultural problems we face in doing mystagogy today and then conclude with some hints of where we might begin to move in recovering the art of mystagogy for the contemporary churches.

### *Patristic Period*

The most highly developed form of mystagogy dates to the fourth and fifth centuries. In this early period of the church mystagogy is equated with Easter, with the "mysteries" celebrated in the rites of initiation at the great vigil: baptism, chrismation, and eucharist. The mystagogical homilies or lectures were delivered primarily during Easter week by the bishop or on occasion by a deacon appointed by the bishop.

These mystagogical addresses attempted to reveal in depth what the neophytes experienced in the actual celebration of the mysteries. The bath of regeneration brought enlightenment so that now the neophytes could see more clearly what they could not grasp before.

Cyril of Jerusalem put it this way:

For some time now, true and beloved children of the Church, I have desired to discourse to you on these spiritual and celestial mysteries. But I well knew that visual testimony is more trustworthy than mere hearsay, and therefore awaited this chance of finding you more amenable to my words, so that out of

your personal experience I could lead you into the brighter and more fragrant meadow of Paradise on earth.<sup>1</sup>

We have to presume in all of this that the vigil and the rites of initiation were substantial enough to be remembered, and that the vigil was a true vigil, a night watch, and not just a little longer Saturday evening Mass. We must picture water, lots of water; chrism filling the whole church with its perfume; candidates shivering naked in the darkness, hungry and tired from fasting and praying, and frightened about being plunged beneath the water; a eucharistic table with bread that looks like bread; and wine, perhaps the fruit of local labor. Note the joy and excitement of the vigil as Gregory of Nyssa (+394) describes his experience:

What have we seen? A light like a cloud of fire of the candles burning during the night. All night our ears have resounded with psalms, hymns, and spiritual chants; it was like a river of joy running through our ears to our soul and filling us with blessed hopes. And our heart, delighted by what we heard and saw, was marked with ineffable joy, conducting us by means of the visible spectacle to the invisible. Those blessings which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man are shown to us in replica by the blessings of this day of rest; they are a guarantee for us of the ineffable blessing we hope for.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Cyril of Jerusalem, *"Mystagogic Catechesis," Sermon I: The Prebaptismal Rites*. In Edward Yarnald, S. J., *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation* (Slough, England: St. Paul Publ. 1971) 68.

2. Gregory of Nyssa, *Sermon III: On the Sacred Feast of the Pasch and on the Resurrection*. In Andre Hamman, O. F. M., *The Paschal Mystery, Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts* (Staten Island, N. J.: Alba House, 1969) 96.

Already we have the first test to our own attempts at mystagogy. Is our liturgy worth remembering the week after? Were the sights and sounds strong enough to preach about later?

What is consistent in these early writings is the constant reference to the liturgy and the beautiful poetry used to communicate the depth of meaning behind all the signs and symbols, words and gestures, of the vigil. There is a beautiful interweaving of biblical events and personages related now to the baptismal event. The writings of the Fathers, especially during this Golden Period, are filled with rich imagery, metaphor, and allegory.

Again from Cyril of Jerusalem:

Then you were conducted by the hand to the holy pool of sacred baptism, just as Christ was conveyed from the cross to the sepulchre close at hand. Each person was asked if he believed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You made the confession that brings salvation, and submerged yourselves three times in the water and emerged: by this symbolic gesture you were secretly re-enacting the burial of Christ three days in the tomb. For just as our Savior spent three days and nights in the hollow bosom of the earth, so you upon first emerging were representing Christ's first day in the earth, and by your immersion his first night. For at night one can no longer see but during the day one has light; so you saw nothing when immersed as if it were night, but you emerged as if to the light of day. In one and the same action you died and were born; the water of salvation became both tomb and mother for you. What Solomon said of others is opposite to you. On that occasion he said: 'There is a time to be born, and a time to die', but the opposite is true in your case--there is a time to die and a time to be born. A single

moment achieves both ends, and your begetting was simultaneous with your death.<sup>3</sup>

The strong emphasis in the east on the cross and the tomb is understandable because of the proximity to the holy places themselves. Thus it was not only the liturgical expression of the cross and tomb that the eastern Fathers could point to but also the revered holy places associated with the Lord's passion, death, and resurrection. The pilgrim Egeria has left a wonderful diary of all she witnessed on her pilgrimage to these holy places.

Consider the often impoverished style of catechesis we may be accustomed to delivering on the meaning of baptism or its definition. Then consider the catechesis of Gregory of Nazianzus (+390) preaching at Constantinople in 381 on illumination or baptism:

Illumination is the splendor of souls, the conversion of the life, the question put to the Godward conscience. It is the aid to our weakness, the renunciation of the flesh, the following of the Spirit, the fellowship of the Word, the improvement of the creature, the overwhelming of Sin, the participation of light, the dissolution of darkness. It is the chariot to God, the dying with Christ, the perfecting of the mind, the bulwark of faith, the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the change of life, the removal of slavery, the loosing of chains, the remodeling of the whole man. Why should I go into further detail? Illumination is the greatest and most magnificent of the Gifts of God. For just as we speak of the Holy of Holies, and the Song of Songs as more comprehensive and more excellent than others, so is this called illumination, as being

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3. Cyril of Jerusalem, "Mystagogic Catechesis," *Sermon II: The Baptismal Rite (The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation)* 76.

more holy than any other illumination which we possess.<sup>4</sup>

### *Early Mystagogical Literature*

The early Fathers did not preach so eloquently simply to provide a body of Christian poetry. There was a pastoral purpose and message behind all their discourses. They wanted the neophytes to delve deeply into the mysteries from different angles. I find it helpful to study their writings in three basic categories, all of which dove-tail with one another. There are first of all the sermons and writings which are directed toward forming the neophytes in a liturgical spirituality. This was not meant to be simply an explanation of the liturgy but more of a desire to help the neophyte adopt a sacramental vision of life. The mystagogical catechesis would not only lead them to a deeper appreciation of the liturgical rites but would also help them begin to see all of life, the times and seasons and their very own way of living, from a sacramental perspective.

A second category of mystagogical literature was intended to be doctrinal, to pass on the fundamentals of the faith. Frequent topics included creation, the Trinity, the incarnation, redemption, and the divinization of the creature. Some of the doctrinal input was already beginning to develop out of a desire for orthodoxy in light of the emerging theological controversies of the day.

A final category to consider is the pastoral material, characterized by its frequent admonitions for a sinless moral life. This includes instructions on the implications of baptism for a holy life.

Let me offer you a sampling of each category.

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4. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on Holy Baptism*, (In Andre Hamman, O. F. M., *Baptism, Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*) Staten Island, N. J.: Alba House, 1967) 89.

In the first, characterized by a desire to foster a sacramental vision of life, we turn to Basil the Great (+379), who firmly proposes the uniqueness of Easter itself for initiation.

Therefore any time is suitable for obtaining salvation through baptism, be it day or night, or at a precise hour or the briefest moment. But assuredly that time should be considered most appropriate which is closest in spirit to it. What could be more akin to baptism than the day of the Pasch? For that day commemorates the Resurrection, and baptism makes the resurrection possible for us. Let us receive the grace of the resurrection on the day of the Resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

A lesser known writer in the early Church, Asterius, (+410), Bishop of Amasea in Pontus, spoke eloquently about the holiness and grace-giving night which saw Christ rise from the dead.

- Night brighter than day;
- Night brighter than the sun;
- Night whiter than snow;
- Night more brilliant than torches;
- Night more delightful than paradise;
- Night which knows not darkness;
- Night which has banished sleep;
- Night which has taught us to join vigil with angels;
- Night terror of demons;
- Night most desirable in the year;
- Night of torchbearing of the bridegroom in the Church;
- Night mother of the newly baptized;
- Night when the devil slept and was stripped;

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5. Basil the Great, *Protrepitic on Holy Baptism #1* In Andre Hamman, O. F. M., *Baptism, Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts* (New York: Alba House, 1967) 76.



O Night in which the inheritor brought the beneficiaries into their inheritance;  
An inheritance without end.<sup>6</sup>

In his *Sermon to the Neophytes*, John Chrysostom (+407) eloquently suggests to the newly baptized that they themselves have become stars shining in the daytime, implying from this the sacramental role the neophytes will play in the world. While so many passages in the Fathers point to signs and symbols in the liturgy, Chrysostom here points to the neophytes themselves.

Blessed be God! Behold, there are stars here on earth too, and they shine forth more brilliantly than those of heaven! There are stars on earth because of Him who came from heaven and was seen on earth. Not only are these stars on earth, but--a second marvel--they are stars in the full light of day. And the daytime stars shine more brilliantly than those which shine at night. For the night stars hide themselves away before the rising sun, but when the Sun of Justice shines, these stars of day gleam forth still more brightly. Did you ever see stars which shine in the light of the sun? Yes, the night stars disappear with the end of time; these daytime stars shine forth more brightly with the coming of the consummation.

The doctrinal element in the mystagogical sermons of the Fathers runs through all of their work, of course, but a few examples of their direct approach to passing on the doctrinal tradition may be helpful.

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6. Asterius, *Joseph and Jesus: Homily 19 on Psalm 5* (*The Paschal Mystery, Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*) 108.

7. John Chrysostom, *Sermon to the Neophytes, #1* (*Baptism, Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*) 165.

St. Ambrose, in his *Sermons on the Sacraments*, offers an early development of a eucharistic catechesis. Remember, this mystagogic catechesis is being delivered only after the neophytes have experienced the actual sharing of the eucharistic table. The strong doctrinal teaching of this sermon thus has as its primary purpose uncovering what one experienced in the liturgy.

Notice each detail. The day before he suffered, it says, he took bread in his holy hand. Before it is consecrated, it is bread; but when the words of Christ have been uttered over it, it is the body of Christ. Listen to what he says then: "Take and eat of this, all of you, for this is my body." And the chalice, before the words of Christ, is full of wine and water. But when the words of Christ have done their work, it becomes the blood of Christ which redeemed the people. So you can see the ways in which the word of Christ is powerful enough to change all things. Besides, the Lord Jesus himself is our witness that we receive his body and blood. Should we doubt his authority and testimony?

Let us return to my argument. That manna rained down from heaven for the Jews was a mighty and awe-inspiring work. But think; which is greater, manna from heaven or the body of Christ? Surely the body of Christ, who is the maker of heaven. Besides, those who ate the manna are dead. But those who eat this body have their sins forgiven and will never die.

So the answer "Amen" you give is no idle word. For you are confessing in spirit that you receive the body of Christ. So, too, when you come up for communion, the Bishop says to you: "The body of Christ." And you say "Amen," that is, "It is true." What your lips confess let your heart hold fast.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Ambrose of Milan, *Sermons on the Sacraments*, IV 23-25. (*The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*) 137-138.

Theodore of Mopsuestia in his Third Baptismal Homily offers an instruction on the Trinity based on the three-fold immersion of baptism. It is hard to imagine, of course, that this profound teaching could be easily grasped by the neophytes, but it certainly gives evidence of teaching some profound theological truths.

Three times you immerse yourself, each time performing the same action, once in the name of the Father, once in the name of the Son, and once in the name of the Holy Spirit. Since each Person is named, you understand that each enjoys equal perfection and each is able to dispense the graces of baptism. You go down into the font once, but you bend beneath the water three times in accordance with the Bishop's words, and you come up out of the font once. This teaches you that there is only one baptism, and that the grace dispensed by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one and the same. They are inseparable one from the other, for they have one nature. So although each Person can confer the grace, as is shown by your immersion at each of the names, we do not consider baptism to be complete until the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have all been invoked. Since their substance is one and their divinity is one, it follows that it is by a single will and a single operation that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit regularly act upon their creatures. So we too can hope for new birth, second creation, and in short all the graces of baptism only upon the invocation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy

Spirit--an invocation which we believe to be the cause of all our blessings.<sup>9</sup>

One wonders how much of the doctrine communicated to the neophytes was really meant for their ears; others besides the neophytes would gather for these instructions as well. As theological differences began to develop, these mystagogical catecheses became a forum for the notable bishop orators to teach their viewpoint. One can also begin to sense in these theological/doctrinal discourses the initial stages of a developing distinction between theological schools.

Finally, the pastoral or moral admonitions to the neophytes are found in all of the Fathers in some form. In *Sermon 259* Augustine (+430) appeals for the neophytes to practice mercy through forgiveness and almsgiving.

This day is a symbol of perpetual joy for us, for the life which this day signifies will not pass away as this day is going to pass away. And so, my brethren, I urge and entreat you to direct your entire reason for being Christians and for carrying his name on your forehead and in your heart solely to that life which we are destined to enjoy with the angels, where there is perpetual peace, everlasting happiness, un failing blessedness, with no anxiety, no sadness, and no death.

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9. Theodore of Mopsuetia, *Baptismal Homily III, #20* (*The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*) 202. The Christological orthodoxy of Theodore of Mopsuestia of the Antiochen school, was much debated. Indeed, some would say he set the stage for the Nestorian controversy. There remains in his writings, however, some very helpful material, for example his emphasis on the resurrection in connection with the eucharistic supper and redemption, and his perception of the eschatological role of the sacraments, are reflected in some modern approaches in the liturgical and catechetical movements.

In the meantime, until we come to that rest, let us work well in this time when we are laboring and are in darkness as long as we do not see what we hope for and as long as we are making our way through the desert until we arrive at that heavenly Jerusalem as at the land of promise overflowing with milk and honey.

Now, therefore, since temptations do not cease, let us work well. Let medicine be always at hand, as though kept near to be applied to our daily wounds. Moreover, there is a healing power in good works of mercy.

For, if you wish to obtain the mercy of God, be merciful.<sup>10</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa is straightforward in his moral appeal. There is no question that for this pastor of the Church there was to be some recognizable change evident in the neophyte. Gregory preaches:

Before baptism, the person was wanton, covetous, grasping at the goods of others, a reviler, a liar, a slanderer, and all that is kindred with these things, and consequent from them. Let the person now become orderly, sober, content with his own possessions, and imparting from them to those in poverty, truthful, courteous, affable--in a word, following every laudable course of conduct.<sup>11</sup>

There is a much stronger moral imperative in the pre-baptismal lectures since a visible change in one's moral behavior would have to have been proven prior to Baptism. It was presumed that once you were baptized you were

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10. Augustine, *Sermon 259 (Baptism, Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts)* 216.

11. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ: A Sermon for the Feast of the Lights, (Baptism, Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts)* 135.

already converted and thus should not need any further exhortation to live an honorable and virtuous life.

### *Contemporary Mystagogy*

Having surveyed some of the patristic mystagogical literature let us make some connections to our present practice. What do we learn about mystagogy from these early Christian sources?

Caution: do not overly romantacize these early sources and think we can simply reproduce them for today's neophytes. The preaching of the Fathers, like all good preaching, is conditioned by the context, both time and place and composition of the community. Not all preaching of the Fathers should be emulated. They worked out of their biases and prejudices. John Chrysostom, for example, had a difficult time hiding his anti-semitic feelings. There are nevertheless a few conclusions to be drawn which may lead us to a contemporary practice of mystagogy.

1. Mystagogy relies on the experience of the sacred mysteries powerfully celebrated in the rites of the Church and its sacred calendar. A true mystagogical catechesis cannot be readily given without making reference to what one has personally experienced; to do otherwise would be to render the catechesis abstract. Even the more highly sophisticated doctrinal catecheses always relate to the ritual or formational experience of the neophyte.

I suspect the majority of catechesis today is given prior to the experience of the celebrated mysteries, as if doctrinal knowledge were the only prerequisite sign of readiness for sacramental participation. This leads us to ask "*what* is required for the reception of the sacraments of initiation?" (You are, I presume, familiar with debates on infants receiving communion.)

Our post-sacramental catechesis is, I believe, extremely minimal. And it does not necessarily draw out the connection between the depth of the mystery and our lives as much as it may be dry systematic theology. This applies not only to baptism and eucharist, but to other

key religious ritual experiences such as marriage or celebrating the passage of a deceased loved one.

2. The time-context of mystagogy is the Easter season. During this season the experience of the initiation sacraments is still fresh. At this time the prayers and scripture readings of the season prolong and support what began at the Paschal vigil. Even in churches with an extensive liturgical calendar Easter often means Easter Day and not an experience of fifty days culminating with Pentecost. Thus the spirit and dynamic of Easter which is the supporting stage for mystagogy is weak or lost. The piety of average Christians tends to be lopsided with a great deal of spiritual effort made during Lent but a return to the ordinary on Easter Monday. While the vigil is once again slowly reclaiming its pre-eminent position in the Church calendar, the fifty days of Easter still need more attention.

The RCIA (#237) assumes the Sunday Eucharist during the Easter season will be the principal setting for mystagogy. The relevance of the Easter lectionary as well as what we hope would be a sustained Easter focus in the preaching, the singing, the praying, and the environment is the reason for this assumption. The Easter season becomes the lens through which we will view all of life.

3. Third and most important, the dynamic of mystagogy, as is clearly demonstrated by the early Church Fathers, is not clever rhetoric but poetry, metaphor, allegory, story, image making, and song. To use a current cliché, mystagogy is a right brain activity. It is an activity requiring the use of our imagination and a reflective spirit. Mystagogy is better suited to dreamers, lovers, and star gazers than to analytical scientists and computer programmers.

In a predominately left brain society there are major obstacles to doing mystagogy or getting at the mysteries. Our mystagogy doesn't fit the thinking patterns of contemporary men and women, if indeed they are thinking,

reflecting, or contemplating at all. Neil Postman, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*,<sup>12</sup> makes the point that we have given in so unconditionally to an entertainment mode that we no longer think creatively. We are amusing ourselves to death. Mystagogy demands that we use our imagination and think creatively.

Teachers are frequently complaining that their students expect to be entertained in class. They report an amazing decline in their student's imagination and an ability to think creatively. Youth may be bright, but they are unable to use their imagination, to find meaning in art and symbol, and to articulate their ideas and feelings in words or other media. They are frequently unable to read signs and symbols and make personal connections to them. And you know what goes first when there's a budget cut in education: art and music. This is unfortunate because the arts could help develop that right side of the brain toward an appreciation of the symbolic life. Our traditionally male dominated leadership in the Christian churches may not be helping matters either, if it is true that the male personality tends to traditionally exhibit more of the left brain or analytical approach to life.

The point I would like to make is that as Christian pastors, parents, catechists, and liturgists we have to recognize the ways in which our culture and its entertainment mode of life are adversely affecting our ability to use our imagination. We must also be careful not to become victims of the same entertainment mode in planning liturgy. To make the matter clear, mystagogy does not despise reason in favor of the affective. Rather mystagogy requires a careful blend of the imagination and experience, together with critical reflection.

Hopefully you can see the consequences of this for contemporary mystagogy. Without imagination, without a reflective mind and heart, even worthy celebrations of the liturgy may be lost. The implication is consequently

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12. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985)



applicable not only to mystagogy, but also for the sake of better liturgy and more effective catechesis, namely, we must work at simulating the imagination as well as developing critical thinking. And we need to begin at a very early age.

4. If we want to restore mystagogy in our churches then we are also going to have to call forth mystagogues. I'm not sure our seminaries and theological schools have this in mind. I'm not sure we will soon see the likes of a John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, or Theodore of Mopseustia. Our preaching styles may need to be recycled and our sabbaticals may first need to allow for some mystagogy time for ourselves.

Until we've experienced mystagogy, we may not know what we're really trying to pass on. Inherent in this task must be the development of a rich baptismal piety in our own lives. We have to be filled ourselves with the kind of exuberance and awe the early Fathers seemed to have whenever they spoke about baptism and Easter.

Without over-stating the obvious, the early church Fathers obviously took Baptism extremely seriously. It was their unreserved joy and spiritual vigor that drew me to reflect more deeply on the meaning of my own baptism, led me to a deeper conversion, and spurred me to pursue further study in the rites of Christian initiation. The value of returning to these early Christian classics is the opportunity they provide to catch the spirit and flavor for mystagogy--and then pray to God that we can catch enough of it to intern as mystagogues ourselves.

As we learn to do mystagogy and become mystagogues ourselves, we also need to be alert for contemporary samples of mystagogy. One example by Jann Fullenwieder, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, draws our attention to the baptismal waters. By recalling numerous biblical images Pastor Fullenwieder opens us up to the richness of this element where we encounter the mysteries.

For we are not here alone, standing before and in this astonishing pool of grace. Fed by the righteous stream struck in the side of Jesus, the paschal

vigil waters are the source of all waters. All crashing floods, small streams and drink begin here in Jesus' self-giving passion. We are awash, afloat and alive in Jesus in the paschal waters. All lives are conjoined here, all meanings commingled eternally.

Welling up here are all other waters of time, and in them, with the baptizands of vigil night, stand all other beloved of God. There, feet still wet from Eden's rivers, are wide-eyed Adam and Eve awash finally in true wisdom. There, crossing this river and home from exile, is Jacob-Israel. There is Hagar, eyes shining to see this spring of life in the midst of the desert of death, and with her Ishmael drinking in life. Miriam dances by these waters of saving victory. Moses, smuggled through these waters by God, lives and splashes drink from the rock. Noah, brandishing the chrism of joyful liberation broken from the tree of balm stands in the flood with Naaman the stubborn one, eternally healed and beautiful. There too is the beggar of Siloam, giving God praise with eternally new eyes. Peter walks on these waters, no longer flailing at grace. Elijah is wakened here, to find unfailling waters in abundance. There is the crowd of Cana guests, drinking in sweet waters. There too a woman weeps in joy, her spirit cleansed in the washing of Christ's feet. John the Baptist, humble in washing our Lord, stands immersed in Christ in these paschal streams. Mary the virgin, in whose waters Jesus grew, grows with us here full of grace. The whole host, known and unknown, peers into the darkness with us, searching waters that shine with the gladness of the risen one.<sup>13</sup>

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13. Jann E. F. Fullenwieder, "Newborn in Paschal Waters," *Liturgy* Vol. 7, #1, 55-59.

You will find other texts with a mystagogic character in *An Easter Sourcebook: The Fifty Days*,<sup>14</sup> a joint Lutheran/Catholic editorial effort, published by Liturgy Training Publications in Chicago.

5. Another lesson or conclusion from these early patristic sources would remind us that mystagogy was a communal experience. The neophytes being instructed by the homilies and lectures were joined by the veteran faithful who were a source of support and encouragement for the neophytes. The newly baptized were being assimilated into a time-tested and -worn community.

The value of the community's participation then and now would also seem to be the occasion for some realistic sharing of how the mysteries have been lived out in this people. Surely it would not have been the eloquence of the local bishop alone which unfolded the mysteries for the neophytes. Can we not assume there were personal tales and stories of elders and others which helped clarify what was heard together from the notable pastors?

#### *The Outlook for Contemporary Mystagogy*

With all these cautions, what is the forecast? Can we really expect to see mystagogy in our contemporary churches? Is it really valuable enough for us to continue to work on? Yes--mystagogy is possible. And yes, it is worth our efforts--and not only for neophytes. John Chrysostom once said,

Since we have benefited from so great a gift, let us show abundant zeal, and let us remember the contract we have made with Him. I speak both to you, the neophytes, and to you who have long since been initiated--even many years ago. For the instruction is the same for us all, since all of us have made

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14. *An Easter Sourcebook: The Fifty Days* ed. Gabe Huck, Gail Ramshaw, and Gordon Lathrop, (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988).

our agreement with Him, writing it not in ink but in the spirit, not with the pen but with our tongue.<sup>15</sup>

For most already initiated adults, the experience of baptism and first eucharist is too distant to recall, especially in churches practicing infant baptism. However, there is a value in calling to living memory the fact of one's baptism or as Chrysostom put it "remembering the contract." This remembering is not an attempt to recall the actual occasion of baptism and reconstruct the scene with all the participants, the minister, and the Christening party that followed. The memory we speak of here is not knowledge but faith-memory. Believers are invited to make a memorial--to believe in such a way as to ratify the presence of yesterday in today. And so to remember our baptism is to activate its power in us in the present.<sup>16</sup>

For the already initiated life needs to be an ongoing discovery or mystagogy of what it means to be adopted, divinized, and redeemed. If in baptism we have put on Christ, then the entirety of our lives needs to be spent imitating the Christ whose name we bear as Christians. John Chrysostom clearly extended the meaning of neophytes to include us all when he said, "Imitate him, you also, I implore you, and you will be called neophytes not only for two, three, ten, or twenty days, but you will still merit this name after ten, twenty, or thirty years, and in fact for all of your lives."

The challenge entrusted to pastors is to keep the baptismal memory alive so that we live all of life from a baptismal dimension. Every Easter season becomes again the stage for stirring up the memory of our baptism through a contemporary mystagogic catechesis. The baptism of new members, the renewal of baptismal vows, the paschal

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15. John Chrysostom, *Sermon to the Neophytes* (*Baptism, Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*) 170.

16. Romanus, Sixth Century in *An Easter Sourcebook: The Fifty Days* 102.

vigil, the Easter candle, the Easter eucharist, the hymns and psalms and lectionary for Eastertide all become the catalyst for an ongoing mystagogical catechesis. All of these freshly experienced sacramentals and rites keep the memory of our baptism before us.

The RCIA defines mystagogy by stating "This 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 . . . ." (RCIA #234) The only way we can begin to deepen our grasp of the paschal mystery is to remember our baptism, to enliven our memory of that radical bath of regeneration which took us to the depths of the paschal mystery.

If I were pressed to find another word or phrase for mystagogy I would probably choose "baptismal remembrance" or "prevention for spiritual amnesia." However, since I am not pressed, I prefer not to choose another word for mystagogy. The reason mystagogy sounds archaic is that it is not common practice, not because it is outdated vocabulary. If we too quickly substitute another word for mystagogy, I'm afraid its uniqueness may be lost in whatever religious terminology is currently fashionable, however bland or generic.

There are so many more texts I would love to share with you. But in the limited time we have had I hope you have caught a taste of mystagogy and maybe a hint of how we can begin to shape a mystagogy for the contemporary Church.

I would like to conclude with two short quotes. The first is attributed to Romanos in the sixth century. It is an admonition to remain faithful to the baptismal calling.

And so, now I call upon you, since I love you more,  
O Neophyte, dear to me, always be what you have been  
called, one newly baptized everywhere, pleasing on  
every occasion, beautiful always, not a bridegroom

today and unweid tomorrow, for this has married you  
to the Lord, our resurrection.<sup>17</sup>

The final quote is a sixth or seventh century prayer to  
commemorate our baptism. May it be our prayer today.

O God, whose providence leaves no fact of the past  
without its consequences nor any hope for the future  
without its object, grant lasting effect to the past  
event which we are commemorating, so that we may  
always firmly keep in our actions what we relive in  
our memory. Amen.

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17. Quoted in Henri Bourgeois, *On Becoming  
Christian*, 2nd ed. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications,  
1985) 27.