



The United States Association of

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd®

Catechist Notes for April 2021

Mystagogy

The Bible and Liturgy are like a vine intertwining forming a unity. Their woven vines can draw us progressively deeper in an experience of knowing God. One of the ways we see these intertwining vines engage us in knowing God is through Mystagogy.

At the International Catechists Retreat in Assisi, Italy, 1997, I was sitting in a breakout session with about 10-15 other catechists with Sofia Cavalletti. She was talking about a word “Mystagogy” I had never heard before which intrigued me. I was rather new to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd then having only been a catechist for about seven years. The word itself held mystery. Mystagogy. Really, just to sit close to Sofia and hear her speak was enough for me, even if I didn’t understand fully the topic of the session. Mystagogy, it felt as if I was going to discover something new from something old, something long forgotten but now remembered. And in some ways, this is true about Mystagogy. Then in 2007, I went to the International Council Meeting as one of the representatives from the U.S. and heard Sofia speak more fully about Mystagogy and the children. It was an aspect of the work that I had not heard emphasized as much especially regarding the older children’s atrium experience.

There is a brief passage in *The Religious Potential of the Child, 6-12 years* (pages 68-69) in which Sofia describes Mystagogy. Sofia writes about in light of the Mystery of Faith.

Mystagogy begins by focusing on a moment of liturgy. It then seeks its biblical roots/sources, and then in pondering the corresponding biblical texts, returns to the moment of the liturgy allowing for a fresh look at that moment of the liturgy.

The early church had a profound respect for the power of the liturgy because they understood the power of sign. This is the source of the practice of Mystagogy. In the time of the early church signs were like a window to a world of meaning beyond themselves. There was, therefore, an understanding that if members of the church were able to fully experience the signs, the signs would actually open up for them all that they were supposed to “know.” There is a famous axiom from this early period of church history – ‘lex orandi; lex credenda’ – what we pray, we believe. Knowledge and belief for early Christians came about through the experience of the Church’s liturgy.

Maria Montessori also spoke about the liturgy saying that it was the pedagogical method of the Catholic Church. The success of the “learning” depended on liturgy being “done well” – that the symbols were fully engaged.

In addition, such engagement with the signs and symbols also depended upon moments of reflection following one's experience of the liturgical signs so inviting thoughtful reflection of the members there would follow the experience with questions such as "What did you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, feel?" What did this moment remind you of? What could this mean? These were ways to encourage this reflection.

This process of reflection on the liturgical experience was called in Greek, "mystagogia" or in English "Mystagogy." It literally means "initiation into the mysteries." The use of the word "mystery or mysteries" was common when referring to the sacraments in the early Church.

Sofia referred to it as the "method for approaching the Mystery." In fact, in *The Religious Potential of the Child, 6-12 years* (page 47) she says this about approaching the Mystery:

"Indeed, in describing our work with the children I believe it is best not to speak in strict terms of "the parable method" or "the method of signs" or "the typological method" but rather of "the method for approaching the Mystery" in its various manifestations. The Mystery is unfathomable, and there are many ways one draws near to it. It can be hidden in parables; it can be progressively manifested in the events of history; it can be celebrated in the liturgy. Yet, the method for attempting to penetrate the Mystery is always the same. It is that method that begins with concrete, perceivable elements that then point us to and help us live a reality that transcends those very elements. It is that method which opens up the whole of reality for us and enables us to see with new eyes its multiple levels of meaning. God uses this method in all his interactions with humankind, beginning with the creation of the world and reaching its highest expression in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one about whom it could be said, in relation to his human body, "He is the son of the carpenter." Yet, at the same time and with the same truth it could be said of him, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Accordingly, concerning the bread, it can be said, "it looks like bread, but it is God." Accordingly, concerning the bread, it can be said, "it looks like bread, but it is really Christ the Lord."

Although we could say that we "do Mystagogy" with all the sacraments as we pause and reflect on what we have experienced after a sacrament, this term was originally used in relationship to the sacrament of Baptism. Even still today, it is most frequently used in that context.

In the early Church, persons who wanted to become Christians spent years preparing for initiation into the Church by studying scripture and learning what the Church expected of its members in terms of a way of life, but they were not told ahead of their Baptism what to expect of the initiation ritual itself.

The experience of Baptism – the stripping off of the old garments and clothing into a white garment, the immersion in water, the darkness that was penetrated by the light, the lathering with oil, the standing at the table to be part of a meal – all of this would have been a surprise for the catechumen. They would have had a powerful experience, but they wouldn't know all that it meant.

In the weeks that followed the experience of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist which was during the Easter Season, they would continue to return to the Eucharist with their fellow Christians and listen to homilies by the priest that would help them to unpack what they had experienced. The priest would ask them what they felt, saw, smelled, heard and then he would make connections between their experience and the wider history of the People of God in scripture.

These homilies would sound something like this, “Do you remember the water you were immersed in? Why water? Because at the beginning of time the Spirit moved over the water! Because when the Israelites were in slavery, they won their freedom by crossing through water. Because Naaman the leper was healed in the water. ...” In essence, the priest would connect their experience to the whole history of salvation to the people of faith who had come before them.

The most famous period of “mystagogical preaching” in the Church lasted from the third to the fifth centuries. It is associated with saints like Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and John Chrysostom.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem begins his catechesis with a beautiful statement: “I have longed for this moment greatly. I have waited with great expectancy to be able to speak about these things but before I could not.” We need to be clear here that the reason he could not speak before was that it was necessary to experience first. So we can say that in order to do true Mystagogy, it is necessary that we experience the celebration first.

With the decline of adult baptism and the corresponding rise in infant baptism in the Middle Ages, the period of Mystagogy, together with the catechumenate process, fell into disuse. It was reintroduced in 1972, with the promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). For the Church today, the period remains one of great importance both pastorally and pedagogically. It requires the active participation not only of the newly baptized and the pastor, but of the whole congregation, for it incorporates the newly baptized into the community of the faithful and places instruction in the meaning of the Sacraments in the context of their frequent reception. In this way the newly baptized can deepen and enrich their own experience of the Sacraments by a clear exposition of the Sacraments' inner meaning for their own lives and that of the whole Church and a showing forth of that meaning in the actual community life of the Church.

Mystagogy with children

Sofia realized with the children that they were capable of doing Mystagogy following an experience of the Eucharist. They already had a sense, in being with Sofia, that they were before something very great at Mass, and she saw that they had the capacity to remain, be amazed with a gift of wonder before the Mystery.

She once spoke about it saying that we have all encountered moments with the children that were moments of grace. Sometimes these moments followed intense celebrations or presentations that engaged everyone. She said these are the moments that demonstrated very clearly to them that the children wanted to prolong the experience. They wanted to remain. In these moments the children didn't show any desire to move on to another activity as if they could never get enough of the experience they were living. It is not that they wanted to know more about it, instead they seemed, she said, to want to savor what they are living. “Might these be the moments for Mystagogy with the children?”

We need to keep in mind that the aim of Mystagogy is to penetrate the meaning of the rite that one has participated in. St. Cyril of Jerusalem said, “Mystagogy means to guide one to the mystery. It is, therefore, the moment that follows the experience of the celebration.”

How did the children experience Mystagogy in the Rome atrium? Every 2-3 months or at least 4 times a year, a priest working with Sofia and Gianna would come to the atrium to celebrate Mass. Almost always children in all three levels of the atria would participate. The youngest children would only participate in the liturgy of the Eucharist.

The Level II and III children help prepare for the Mass. Following the Mass which occurred in a room off from the Level III atrium, the Level II and III children would gather together with Sofia, Francesca and others to share their comments. Sometimes they might begin by saying, "This time there was a beautiful moment when we exchanged the sign of peace" (if the catechist noticed that this was a particularly rich moment of the exchange of peace). A child might share that he enjoyed a song they had all sung together. Another child might say something like, "I loved it best when we entered and we were finding our seats." When they are preparing the Mass, the catechists might ask the priest to accentuate something so that after the Mass, they could all return to that moment and comment on it.

It might also be that a catechist would say, "what a gift that you chose this particular reading. It came to me as a prayer of gratitude." It is important to connect the readings to the Eucharist. Some of this was done during the celebration of the Mass, at the moment of the homily, but the priest doesn't always make this connection. Afterwards they would help the children to do this.

Mystagogy as experienced in the Rome atrium following the Mass was spontaneous and real. It was not rigid and tied to specific presentation moments. Sofia has often said that for the older children it is an opportunity to remain and to savor.

Sofia shared that one time following a celebration of the Mass, it was past 6:30 and mothers were in a hurry to get their children because they had left their cars in no parking zones. There were two cousins, 7 and 8 years old, who suddenly started dancing. Sofia asked, "What are you doing, dancing?" They replied, "No, we are not dancing, but we are so happy, and we don't know why." She said, "Celebrations are particularly precious moments, but she added, can those moments that follow celebrations also be precious?"

Sofia and Gianna felt that they had found the link with Mystagogy when they observed children in the prepared atrium environment where children can be truly who they are after a particularly intense moment when the children love to linger over what they had just experienced. It is a practice that is in direct opposition to the hurry of our society.

This was an important link to what the Fathers of the early church had experienced with the newly baptized by inviting them to revisit 'what they have seen and what they have done.' In this same way Sofia and Gianna found that children are fully capable of doing Mystagogy.

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