

## **Mystagogy as Loving Interrogation**

**Workshop presentation by Clark Brown**

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### **DEFINITIONS**

**Mystagogy** can be defined in number of ways. Sometimes it is used to describe just the time following baptism. More specifically, it is the process in which initiates learn the mysteries. That is, the newly baptized unpack what it means to have received the sacraments and deepen their understanding of what has now been revealed to them through the waters of baptism and holy communion. Mystagogy is also frequently used more broadly to describe any of the reflective work that we do in the catechumenate process (and elsewhere) to deepen a person's understanding and relationship with God and themselves.

**Mystery** comes up frequently when Roman Catholic theologians discuss mystagogy, so it is helpful to provide a theological definition here also. Miriam Webster online defines mystery as "a religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand." The word comes from Middle English *mysterie*, from Latin *mysterium*, from Greek *mysterion*, from *mystēs* meaning initiate.

The Catholic Encyclopedia (online) says "Mysteries are revealed truths that surpass the powers of natural reason." The word comes Greek *mysterion*, from *myein*, "to shut", "to close". Also, as Michael Merriman's workshop description says, the church used to use the term mysteries instead of the word sacrament. Note also that the term mysteries is perhaps most commonly seen today in connection with saying the rosary.

In some religious traditions the mysteries were those things that were kept secret until a person was fully initiated, a fact which helps explain the various word etymology above ("initiate" and "the closed or hidden things"). Christianity had (and has) a similar approach, but not that there were secrets in some sort of "The Da Vinci Code" sense, but in the sense that one could not understand God but could only receive God, a person could not see the Kingdom unless she were part of that Kingdom.

Gabriel Marcel (20<sup>th</sup> C. French philosopher) defined mystery as something that cannot be understood by the outside observer, by empirical verification, or a purely objective approach. But understanding can come only by being involved in it ourselves and by our reflection on that involvement.

## GOAL

I suggested above that mystagogy as reflection helps people unpack what God has revealed and is revealing to them. As catechists (facilitators or guides), we want to help people comprehend deeply what God has done or shown, so that this learning is not easily lost, dismissed, or forgotten.

Recall the parable in the Gospel of Matthew about the seeds scattered on various soils. The sower scatters seed with reckless abandon so that they land on hard-packed ground, rocky ground, amidst weeds, and on good soil. One way to hear this parable is in connection with the role of mystagogy. God reveals to all, but is not even perceived on the hard-packed soil. Little can be done there. In the weedy soil, the revelation is received, but lost in the shuffle of life. Maybe the opportunity to reflect would have made a difference, making these people more like good soil. The same is true for the rocky ground. Perhaps the opportunity to reflect can make a difference in this circumstance also.

When we encourage people to deeply reflect, it gives them opportunity to integrate what God has revealed into their daily life and their growing practice of compassion, justice, and joyful living. It is important for people who are new to our Christian communities to have opportunities to reflect on what has happened to them and is still happening for them. Their new life is full of insights that will help them and *help our communities of faith*. We want to help them integrate these new experiences so that the new life can grow and mature.

In Christian theology, we speak of baptism as a death and new birth. The Lutheran reformers said that the old man is drowned in the waters of baptism and the new comes to life; unfortunately, the old Adam is a good swimmer. And so, we also speak of the need to daily remember our baptism, to continually drown that swimming old self! I suggest that this sort of reflection can be used as an tool for that ongoing remembrance of baptism as well.

In contemporary psychological terms, we might speak of the ego, and the incredible strength of the ego to save itself. No matter the greatness of the revelation from God, the ego will resist it because what God reveals is invariably seen as a threat to the ego. Thus, you may have had the most beautiful and inspiring Easter vigil that history has ever seen, and all of the newly baptized may have seen the heavens opened and a dove descending, but it may not make any difference to their daily life or faith. Why? The ego resists, and experiences fade with time. When we do mystagogical reflection, the goal is to help people put into words what a particular experience means for them, what difference it makes in their life, and what they will do in response to that new understanding. When we do this kind of reflection in a group, others can grow from the shared experiences/revelations of God.

## **A PROCESS FOR REFLECTION ON RITES, ACTS OF SERVICE, AND OTHER SITUATIONS**

### 1. Remember what we did. (Being specific)

How did we move?

What did we say?

Were there certain smells, sights, or sensations?

What songs did we sing?

**What's the concrete thing that happened?**

### 2. Get in touch with our feelings. (Being honest)

What touched you?

What moved you?

What had an impact?

**When you remember those things, how do you feel? What's the emotion?**

### 3. Think about what we are saying. (Being made whole)

What did that say to you about God?

What did that say to you about the Church?

What did that say to you about faith?

What did that say to you about yourself?

**What did I learn?**

## THE LEADER'S APPROACH

If you are leading a group through a process of reflection, it helps to keep in mind that there is that part of us that resists new insights, perhaps because they usually require change. It is not as though you want to be combative, but realize that most people will reflect using the most superficial responses first. That said, most people will reflect more deeply with a facilitator's guidance and will appreciate her/his help in doing so.

This is where the image of the facilitator as loving interrogator comes into the picture. Whether the group is large or small, you want to begin your questioning with one person and stay with them. Do not move on to others in the group and do not encourage other people to "help out" the person being questioned. Let that one person put into words what the experience meant for her/him by asking them to be specific, and then even more specific. Get to the core of what they were feeling. By your questions, help this person focus and explain. Keep in mind that the goal is allow this person to put into words a revelation of God to them. Use the process shown above, with the three layers of questions, so that people can leave the reflection time able to say what they learned about God and how it changed their life.

When I have led training events in our region, I have sometimes gotten in trouble for this approach. Why? The rest of the group is just watching, yet as observers they feel uncomfortable for the person who is "on the spot." To them, it seems like I am being pushy and unfair. Keep in mind, however, that all the people who I have questioned have told the group later that they did NOT feel that way. Still, beware that the facilitator needs to be very sensitive to where the boundaries are for their questions. Obviously, it helps if there is trust between the facilitator and the people in the group, something that is difficult to develop in a two day training event!

Another way that I describe this approach is to explain that the work is similar to what clergy are trained to do in pastoral care. When providing pastoral counseling, there is a place and time for sympathy and for normalizing certain feelings. But there is also a place for questions. This is probably where any normal person will feel most uncomfortable, and yet asking those questions can be the most compassionate thing a person can do. Questions like, "Are you concerned about your husband's drinking?" "Is it hard to be in church (after your wife's death)?" "Why do you want to have your child baptized if you don't come to church?"

I am guessing that it is often more difficult to ask the questions than to answer them. It is very intense work, requiring focus and energy. You must be prepared through prayer, and centered in God's love.

The facilitator wants to keep in mind where she/he is going (the series of questions above) while at the same time listening intently. Give yourself time to get comfortable with the basic questions before your group meeting so that what you actually ask is not what is printed on the page, but adapted to your setting.

An important strength about doing this reflective work in a group is that everyone can share in the revelation. As each person unpacks their experience of a particular rite, service event, or other shared activity, the whole is enriched and the Body of Christ becomes even more visible.