

# **The Emmaus Journey: Mystagogy for God's People**

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Two people are walking together on the Road to Emmaus. Their heads are down and their hearts are crushed. Along the way they meet a stranger who seems to be unaware of all that has happened. So these two proceed to tell him. They explain to him that they had pinned their hopes on Jesus, thinking that he was the one to deliver them from their captivity, but with the cruel death of Jesus, their hopes were dashed and their spirits destroyed.

Then the stranger – the one to whom they pour out their hearts – begin to explain Scripture to them. He connects the sufferings of Christ to the story – their story. Beginning with Moses and continuing through the prophets, he interprets Scripture and it is about himself. For unbeknown to them, the stranger is the Crucified One now risen.

Then he joins them at table for a meal. He blesses bread, breaks the bread, and shares it with them. Suddenly their eyes are open. They recognize the Risen One. At once he vanishes from their sight. Awestruck, they begin to reflect on their experience. They ask, “Were not our hearts burning within us?” Then they go and tell others about their experience. They tell others how they encountered the Risen One who opened their minds to understand the Scripture and opened their eyes to see his presence in the breaking of the bread.

At first he was a stranger. Once he explains scripture and makes his risen presence known in the meal, he is encountered in a new and profound way. He changes their lives through the ritual action of Story and Sacrament; Word and Meal.

That encounter leads them to reflect: “Were not our hearts burning within us?”

What happens after they reflect upon their experience? They return to Jerusalem without fear to tell the good news and to share their experience with this story from Luke, chapter 24 was used to instruct catechumens in the early church. The story was shared, though, not while they were catechumens, but was shared only after their baptism. The Emmaus story helped the newly initiated explore their new experience of encountering the Risen Christ in the new community gathered around Word and Sacrament.

Besides providing a way of instructing the newly baptized on the meaning of the Eucharist, the Road to Emmaus story functions as a kind of paradigm for a method of

teaching or catechesis in the Catechumenate by using the ancient process known as Mystagogy.

What is Mystagogy? It means the “Study of the Mysteries.”

This teaching is reserved primarily for the fifty days of Easter and its purpose is to

- explore the sacraments,
- connect the experience of the sacraments to one’s personal experience, the experience of the faith community and the teaching of the church
- shape and identify ministry in daily life.

Another way of saying it is that in the Easter season the task is to *integrate conversion*. Having been baptized at the Easter Vigil, the newly initiated, or those who have reaffirmed the baptismal covenant, explore the new life into which they have entered or to which they have rededicated themselves.

One author likens the fifty days of Easter to an orientation tour of the new country in which one now lives after being baptized. It is a time to connect the maps and guidebooks previously studied with the new reality of Christian living.

So, during the Easter season, we help the newly baptized or those who have reaffirmed baptism to ask:

- What does it mean to live out my baptism?
- What does it mean to live a Eucharistic life? or, What did I get myself into?

The method of catechesis or teaching that I propose for this period of mystagogy and one that is being touted by many is the pattern we see in the Emmaus story:

The travelers on the Emmaus road encounter Christ in word and meal. They look back and reflect on their experience: “Did not our hearts burn within us?” This experience becomes integrated into the way they live. This impels them to new ministry and mission.

So, for those in the Christian community, especially those newly baptized or confirmed at the Easter Vigil, we can provide a time and a space for them look back upon the experience of the Easter Vigil or their experience of any liturgical celebration for that matter and reflect upon that experience – the experience of encountering the Risen One in the Christian community celebrating Word and Meal. And this kind of reflection upon experience, then, leads to an informed and enlightened way of living out one’s baptismal calling.

So, mystagogy aims at connecting the maps and the guidebooks with the new reality in which the newly baptized find themselves. It is a way to connect liturgy to life, Eucharist to ethics, the ritual encounter with Christ to the daily encounter with Christ.

This method is commonly called “Ritual Catechesis.”

Such a process, unfolding ideally over the fifty days of Easter, gives those in the process opportunity to

- focus on the essential actions of the liturgy,
- reflect upon their experience in these ritual actions,
- explore one's personal experience as well as the experience of the entire faith community,
- help persons reflect,
- connect their experience to the Scripture and church teaching.

Finally, ask, "Now what will I do?" or "How will what I have experienced shape the way I live out my faith in daily life?"

To say it plainly, this kind of mystagogy or ritual catechesis asks these questions of the newly initiated or recently confirmed:

- What did you experience?
- What does it mean?
- What are you going to do about it?

Let's try something of this method by looking at the first question. Think back to the opening liturgy last evening here at the NAAC Conference, the Evening Prayer service. You will recall that we gathered in the beautiful chapel adorned with icons. We gathered in prayer using the ancient form of Vespers and sang using music that is both new and old. We began thanking God for the light that shines in the midst of darkness. We prayed the psalms. We heard the Scripture read from Philippians 2 and then this same scripture was proclaimed through liturgical dance. We responded in intercession, and before we left having been blessed, we shared the peace of Christ with each other.

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Let's gather in groups of four persons each. Talk among yourselves, asking "What did you experience?" Share what you personally experienced and do this by examining the whole experience: the senses, the intellect, the emotions, and spirit. What did you see, hear, taste, touch, smell, sense? What thoughts, ideas, or memories came to mind? What emotions did you feel? What blessing did you experience? How was God a part of this experience?

[Fifteen or so minutes is spent in small group time using the aforementioned method. Once the group reassembles, they share some of their conversation with the whole group.]

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In this exercise we explored our experience. The next step is to ask "What does it mean?" In this step, it is important to remember the following: Each individual's experience is

honored. Everyone in the group is given opportunity to speak of their experience. Conversation ensues.

The “Mystagogue” (teacher or catechist) facilitates the conversation and connects the experience being shared with Scripture and the larger tradition of the church.

[At this point in the presentation, I ask “How might you do that?”]

It is important that the teacher be well prepared and well versed in bible, liturgy, and sacraments to engage the group in this kind of conversation.

This past year, the week after Easter, our catechumenate group met for its first session of mystagogy. In leading the session, I wanted to “unpack” the experience of the Easter Vigil. Leaving that one session for the unpacking was something of a mistake. In retrospect I should have had all the sessions devoted to that kind of ritual catechesis. For in that one session we only skimmed the surface.

We began our conversation, not with the Vigil, but with the entire Triduum (Three Days). So, we began reflecting upon the foot washing of Maundy Thursday. Folks spoke about the experience in a variety of ways ranging from powerful to awkward. This, then, led to a rereading of John, Chapter 13 and a lengthy discussion on servanthood. What does it mean to live as a servant? An appropriate topic for mystagogy.

When we finally got around to talking about the Easter Vigil there was so much to talk about. We spent a good deal of time focusing on the service of readings and the various ways in which members of the faith community acted out these stories, especially the children. This led to a conversation on how we are literally inserted into the story. We talked about how the ancient Hebrew narrative is our narrative and then linking the Noah story to the covenant God makes with us in Baptism and linking the story of the Red Sea to our crossing over into a new life in baptism and so forth.

In another recent experience, Lutherans and Episcopalians in Oregon sponsored a training event for the Catechumenate. Dan Benedict was the speaker. At this year's conference we celebrated an abbreviated form of the Easter Vigil, and we asked the small groups there to dramatize the scripture readings: Creation, Noah and the Flood, Exodus and Dry Bones.

In the Exodus reading, the women were the Israelites and the men were the Egyptians. The Red Sea was the table on which was placed the baptismal pool. Moses proceeded to stretch his hand over the sea and Israel went on “dry ground” to the other side. And the “Horse and rider” of course, fell into the sea. Well, the next day – in the fashion of ritual catechesis – a woman at the conference reflected on her experience and she said that she saw in a fresh way how salvation sometimes – maybe always – involves a loss of life or sacrifice. So, in opening up the scripture in a new way with this kind of playfulness and creativity, the story opened up new venues of meaning.

Here's a more dramatic example shared by Dennis Christz in his book, *Creating an Effective Mystagogy*:

A woman named Susan shared her story:

*I had a hard time sleeping last Friday night, it had been a long day. But in the morning, Holy Saturday morning, I woke up filled with all kinds of strange feelings. For some reason, I knew that what had happened to Jesus was about to happen to me. By the time the day was over, I would be dead. There were so many people to talk to . . . if this was to be the last day of my life . . . . I talked to my children and told them I loved them and asked if they could forgive me for the times I had let them down . . . . I called my parents, my brothers and sisters and thanked them for all the ways in which they had supported and loved me over the years. They must have thought I was crazy, calling them for no apparent reason and offering them my love and asking for their forgiveness. But, I was dying and I knew I'd be dead before the day was over.*

*And then we gathered in church to pray and to prepare ourselves for the Easter Vigil; it was like making my own funeral arrangements. You were all so excited about what was about to happen, and so was I. But I knew that I was about to die and that made my excitement and anxiety just little different. And then, during the Easter Vigil, when you poured water on my head, then I died . . . I died.*

When she finished her story, many in the group were in tears. After a period of silence, the catechist shared the Scripture from Romans 6 about being baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. And though that same scripture reading was heard at the Easter Vigil, in the context of this group meeting and shared experience on the ritual, the reading came to life in a brand new way. Connections were made. The tradition was shared. The starting point for those connections and sharing was Susan's experience.

So, experience is connected to scripture, tradition, the faith community and finally, the third question is asked: "What are you going to do about it?"

This final question asks: "What are you going to do differently because of what you have learned about yourself, the church, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and so on?" The question leads to a conversion that has concrete effects in people's lives resulting in new behaviors and relationships as Christians in community and in daily vocational living.

So, the mystagogue (catechist, teacher) might ask:

- What difference does this make in your life?
- What difference does the Easter Vigil make in your life?
- What does it mean to keep and live out the baptismal promises?
- What does it cost to live out the baptismal vows?
- How does your experience of the Eucharist shape the way you live?
- What questions do these experiences raise for you?

Again, in this method of ritual catechesis we begin with experience. We reverence and honor the person's experience because we believe that God is at work in persons' lives. The goal of mystagogy, as it the goal of catechumenal process overall, is deepening of faith, not learning religion. A deepening of faith and an engagement with the Christian tradition must honor the experience of people.

One important note about ritual catechesis: See how teaching on the sacraments follows experience. The newly initiated experience baptism and Eucharist FIRST and then reflect on its meaning for their lives. There is no detailed explanation of the sacraments prior to their initiation. That comes later.

Exploration of the liturgy, the rites, the celebrations, and the ritual follows experience.

Like many of the early church fathers, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan reserved instruction on the sacraments as well as the Lord's Prayer after initiation. Ambrose, speaking to the newly baptized, states:

“Now is the time to speak of the mysteries and to reflect systematically on the sacred ritual actions. We would not have considered it helpful to those not yet initiated, but rather a betrayal of them, if we had decided to give such a detailed explanation before baptism. Indeed it is better for the light of the mysteries themselves to have inundated you as a surprise than it would have been for us to have given an explanation beforehand.”

For Ambrose the rites themselves taught. There is an inherent pedagogy in the liturgy.

One learns more easily if one has seen nor experienced before being instructed. What follows, in the approach of Ambrose, is a retracing of what the newly initiated had experienced. He carefully goes through each action, prayer, gesture and relates it to the biblical story and the church's teaching. Like many of the early fathers, his mystagogy takes the form of preaching to the newly baptized.

This is one way to do ritual catechesis. Do it with the entire faith community in preaching. The nature of the lectionary during the fifty days of Easter is mystagogical through and through. And with regard to the catechumenal process itself, I believe that an element of mystagogy ought to take place throughout the process, not only during Easter. So, for example, sustained reflection on the Rites takes place after the Rite of Welcome, after the Rite of Enrollment, after the Lenten scrutinies and so on.

Most definitely, as we have said, a ritual catechesis characterizes the Easter season. Since the Easter Vigil is so full of symbols, perhaps it will take several gatherings during the fifty days to “unpack” the Easter Vigil. Maybe the form of catechesis during the entire Easter period will be devoted to reflection on the Vigil by journeying through each movement:

- The service of Light
- The service of Readings

- The service of Baptism/Reaffirmation
- The Eucharistic Meal

and follow the suggested pattern:

- What did you experience?
- What does it mean?
- What are you going to do about it?

By “unpacking” the experience of the Easter Vigil, we savor or explore that experience and let it inform us and enlighten us. At the great Vigil we return, as Aidan Kavanaugh suggests, to our most basic roots as human beings on a human journey: fire, water, food, light, story, movement, silence, prayer, music, song, oil, touch, bread, wine. As Kavanaugh also points out, the universe, in a sense is transformed. Resurrection is experienced anew through the ordinary stuff of creation. Through such ritual we are re-created, transformed, and redeemed. By “unpacking” the Vigil using the method of ritual catechesis we allow that experience of rebirth and transformation to shape the way we live – to shape Christian identity and baptismal vocation. In the method I propose, the rites, the liturgy and sacraments are explored, not explained. By beginning with experience, we treat the mysteries like mysteries. So, mystagogy becomes an evocation, not an explanation. We allow the symbols to speak.

In no way am I suggesting that experience be the only criterion. As suggested, the catechist/teacher/mystagogue carefully moves from the question “What did you experience?” to “What does it mean?” With that second question, we are able to do some solid teaching and exploration of the tradition. But, we don’t begin there. We begin with experience. As Ambrose said: “It is better for the light of the mysteries themselves to have inundated you as a surprise than it would have been for us to have given an explanation beforehand.”

One of the hopes through this method of mystagogy is that faith communities themselves might become places in which the real presence of Christ is recognized, cherished, savored, proclaimed, shared, talked about, struggled with, and sought after in every day life. Underneath all of this is the prayer that lives will continue to be changed and transformed. By wedding experience and meaning and connecting it to daily living, not only are the newly initiated changed, but all those around them, supporting them, encouraging them and praying for them are changed as well in a process that continues throughout all of life.

“Did not our hearts burn within us?”

“They recognized him in the breaking of the bread.”

Explore the experience. Connect it to the story of each person and the community as a whole and to the church's story and then, go and tell in word and deed, speech and action, of the life-changing presence of the Risen One.