

# How Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it.

## *Mystagogia* *Part I:* *Why the Church* *Needs Mystagogia*



Office of  
Evangelization and Worship

The Easter Vigil marks the celebration of the sacraments of initiation for those journeying in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Through this final step, the elect are admitted into the people of God and enter into the community of the Church. The entire RCIA, its pastoral notes, prayers and actions, signal incorporation and beginning; in practice however, the celebration of the sacraments seem to signal the end for new members. These endings show themselves in a variety of ways: new members recently initiated cease being a visible presence; new members terminate their participation in the life of the parish; new members stray from the sacramental life of the Church. In addition, parish RCIA coordinators are reluctant to enter this post-baptismal period because they are unsure of what a post-sacramental catechesis looks like or simply because they have expended all their energy journeying to the celebration of Easter and find themselves too exhausted to go beyond the Easter event.

In the Church's restoration of the ancient catechumenate, it is the post-sacramental period of mystagogia that is usually short lived and/or often eliminated. Mystagogia, traditionally and historically a period of great catechesis in the Church, has become the "weakest aspect of the RCIA. The text of the RCIA concerning the final period of mystagogia is brief. The section provides the spirit and nature of this period of formation but offers little assistance regarding the shape of mystagogia. What needs to be remembered is that the catechumenal process provides the model of faith formation and development. The initiation process not only provides the basis for Christian living but also indicates how to continue to embrace the Christian way of life. In planning mystagogia what has to be considered, explored, and maintained is what supports and nurtures the prebaptismal journey. These rhythms must continue in the lives of the newly initiated.

### *The Community Gathering on Sunday*

The entire process of initiation takes place "within the community of the faithful and this community support continues to be of "great significance" as the fifty days of mystagogia gets underway and continues on. Even with the prebaptismal dismissals from the assembly, the gathering with the believing community on Sunday is the key formative experience in the initiation journey. Mystagogia has as its setting and source the Sunday eucharist. This period names the Sunday gathering as the moment through which all the baptized are continually led ever more deeply into the mystery of God revealed in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The Sunday eucharist is vital to the life of the Church and the spiritual formation of the people of God. During this formal period of mystagogia, the neophytes should be gathered together for eucharist on Sunday *donning* the white garment of the believer. The presider should acknowledge their presence during the appropriate introductions and during the homily. The general intercessions should take into account their presence and their needs. The newly initiates should continue to be seated in a place of prominence.

Mystagogia is a communal experience, a time for the community and neophytes to grow together. The believing community continues to influence the neophytes and the neophytes continue to influence the community. The assembly needs to encounter adult people *in the baptismal garment*, people seated up front, hungry for the word of God, and hungry for the eucharist. The formal gathering of neophytes for Sunday Eucharist for the fifty days of Easter is crucial if the Church is to reclaim the period of mystagogia in its initiation process.



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## Mystagogical Catechesis

In addition, the paschal 50 days is the season to gather the neophytes for mystagogical catechesis. Mystagogy is catechesis of the baptized, which has a “distinctive spirit and power.” For the neophyte the Easter season is the Emmaus walk, sharing scripture, remembering all that has happened, discussing, reflecting, leading to a recognition at the breaking of the bread and an empowerment for witness and mission.

### Sharing Scripture

During the catechumenal experience, the celebrations of the word of God in both ritual and catechetical settings “are foremost.” Hearing the word of God proclaimed well, arouses faith and moves the heart to conversion. Proclamation, evangelization, and conversion are always a part of the dynamism of faith in every stage of life. For the neophytes and for all gathered Christians, the experience of the Church assembled to listen to the proclaimed word of God “increases and sustains them.” The Church needs the liturgy of the word celebrated well and mystagogy depends on it.

### Remembering, Reflecting, Discussing

The RCIA reminds us that this post-baptismal time is a period of catechesis that is mystagogical, that is of a paschal nature, gradual and dependent on the experience of the rite. A catechesis dependent on the rite denotes a dynamic not immediate to the actual sacramental experience that is “What is unseen is much greater than what is seen.” Simply feeling good about a sacramental moment is not enough. Sacraments not only celebrate the presence of the risen Lord they cause that presence. Indeed Christians themselves become sacraments of the divine presence to one another and the world. Thus the rite can speak of the Christian experience as something that increases as it is lived.

Mystagogical reflection is anamnestic; it probes the memory of the body of Christ and makes present the event and the graces necessary to increase our participation in it. Mystagogical catechesis is the invitation into deeper meaning, a sacramental adventure. It is a reminder that sacraments are not graduations but inductions into a communion. The difficulty of mystagogical reflection comes in poor celebrations of the rites of the catechumenate especially the sacraments of initiation themselves since the distinctive spirit and power of the post-baptismal catechesis or mystagogy is derived from the new, personal experience of the sacraments, especially the Sunday Eucharist. Because the sustaining rites of the ongoing post-baptismal state of life are the Sunday Masses and mystagogical catechesis is dependent on the experience of the rite, Sunday must be celebrated well. The symbols, gestures, actions and words of the liturgy have to be unleashed. Sunday must be worth remembering.

### Deeper Participation in Sunday

By virtue of their baptism full, conscious and active participation in the Sunday Eucharist is the right and duty of the neophyte and the aim that should be considered before all else. This period of mystagogy with the formal gathering of the neophytes, their families and godparents not only provide for reflection on the new experience of sacramental life but also foster deeper participation in the community of faith gathered on Sunday. In text and praxis, the RCIA holds Sunday as the “primary and indispensable source” of the true Christian spirit but it is in the *doing* of mystagogy that Sunday is particularly proclaimed as “the day that is at the very heart of the Christian life.”<sup>161</sup> For the newly initiated, the formal gatherings of the Easter Sundays are the beginning of the ongoing rhythm of the Christian life. Without Sunday there is no mystagogy and without Sunday there is no Christian life. Therefore pastors, RCIA coordinators, and team members must be *zealous* in this regard for baptism is the way the Eucharist begins for the newly initiated and Sunday Eucharist is the way that baptism is sustained in their lives.

### Witness and Mission

The RCIA is a process of gradual conversion to Christ that leads to an involvement his missionary spirit. The newly initiated have *been clothed in Christ* and now share in his mission. An empowerment for witness and mission is a gift of initiation. Those in our initiation process should be introduced to the community’s works as an ongoing dimension of the RCIA but it is especially during mystagogy that the neophytes are invited to grow in their grasp of the Paschal Mystery by doing works of charity. Mystagogical catechesis arouses a living faith that is expressed in action. To know and be part of the works of the local community and the Church leads to a deepening of knowledge and greater experience of the communal nature and spirit of the Church. This should never take the shape of a requirement for the reception of the sacraments but rather the neophytes should be led to understand that the fullness of the Holy Saturday “redditio” (giving back) of the faith is charitable works. *Faith without works is lifeless.*

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