Mystagogy for Everyone

Initiation is not graduation. Graduation implies an end; initiation clearly refers to a beginning. It is true of all sacraments, that they are not an end, but the beginning of a new way of being. This is most clearly seen, however, in the Sacraments of Initiation -- Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist -- as they are celebrated at the Easter Vigil.

Lent, Holy Week and Easter Sunday are soon over; but the season of Easter is celebrated for 50 full days, ending with the feast of Pentecost. These fifty days comprise another phase in the ongoing formation of the “neophytes,” those “newly-born” in faith, who receive the Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil. The formal name of this period is mystagogy.

Those baptized and received at Easter embark on a distinctively new way of life. As neophytes in our faith, they need support, example, explanation, incorporation -- and the “savoring of the mysteries” that is mystagogy. In fact, one could say that mystagogy is life-long, as all of us are called to continual growth.

There is a record of mystagogical catechesis as early as 380 AD in the work of St. Cyril of Jerusalem. The daily teachings were meant to last just one week; they were designed to “break open” the rites of the Easter Vigil and to encourage the neophytes to live the reality of what they had experienced in these rites. Opening up the symbols of the rites was aimed at

- Eliciting a sense of wonder at what God has done in the person
- Calling forth a sense of responsibility to live out the gifts received

St. Ambrose, who was elected Bishop of Milan in 373 while he was still a catechumen, followed a similar pattern in his post-Easter catecheses. He believed that the experience of the sacraments leads to faith, and only then comes understanding. Like St. Cyril, he had a two-pronged approach:

- Open up the experience of the sacraments
- Share the meaning

Some 1500 years later, the Second Vatican Council returned to and restored these ancient rites which had become obscured over the centuries. Our contemporary understanding of mystagogy has grown out of the Vatican II documents and post-conciliar documents such as the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. While time for formal instruction is important,

- Experience is restored as a valuable source of learning
- Conversion and faith consist of much more than intellectual knowledge
- The entire season from Easter to Pentecost is now the time of mystagogy
- The entire community of the faithful plays a role in faith-formation

Beyond the fifty days from Easter to Pentecost, all of us -- not just the neophytes -- are called to the ongoing mystagogy of life-long growth and formation in our faith.

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Ideas for Various Ages

- Research: What is a symbol? How is it different from a sign? Give (or make) examples.
- For each of the seven sacraments, make a list of, or draw/paint, all the symbols. Check the book of the Rites of the Catholic Church if you are not sure of all of them; also see the recent "Timely Topics" on the symbols of Easter. (For older students and adults, reflect on how these express the "mysteries" of the sacraments.)
- Reflect on the statement: Every sacrament is the beginning of a new way of life. How is this true for each of the seven sacraments?
- Discuss: What does it mean to say that Mystagogy is life-long, for everyone?