

## The Mystagogy of the RCIA

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The catechumens and candidates for full communion of the Catholic Church have now finished their Lenten preparation and have received the sacraments, at Easter. They now embark on a seven week journey to Pentecost called the Period of Mystagogy. This word has its origins in the Greek language of the Church in the fourth century. It means the deepening in understanding of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection expressed in sacramental form. Another way to see this journey is to relate it to the disciples who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus when the Risen Lord appeared to them, and 'explained all that had happened.' We now invite our neophytes and newly-received to undertake this journey.

### The Journey from Initial Conversion to a Mystagogical Journey

From the very beginning the Ordo for RCIA uses the language of conversion. The conversion process in simple religious terms is an *apotaxis* (turning away from sin) and a *syntaxis* (turning to God). This can only take place from the promptings of the Holy Spirit working through human agents. The process of conversion has begun already by the time individual people present to a parish RCIA team in response to an invitation to come to inquiry sessions.

From the pre-catechumenate period the catechumens and candidates proceed through a continual hearing of the word of God until they receive the sacraments at the Vigil. The continuing conversion after the Vigil is what is meant here as the mystagogical journey because now the neophytes and newly-received deepen their spiritual life by the sacraments as well as by hearing the Word.

The conversion process in the mystagogy period is very different to that of the Purification & Enlightenment period in Lent. The conversion process in that period for the catechumens is through an experience of the Johannine Gospels of the scrutinies: the woman at the well; the man born blind; the raising of Lazarus. Here the neophytes experience the feelings of empathy for the woman, the blind man and Lazarus' sisters. They see Jesus addressing the core meaning of life and offering them faith and forgiveness and eternal life.

In the mystagogy period by comparison, the conversion is more subtle and more protracted. The *Ordo* speaks of, “a time for deepening the Christian experience, for spiritual growth, and for entering more fully into the life and unity of the community.” In this way there is a transition from a call to initial conversion (*apotaxis*) to a mystagogical journey (*syntaxis*). Both processes occur throughout our lives; however there is a change of focus from one conversational aspect to a deeper conversational aspect as catechumens and candidates progress to being neophytes and newly-received.

This movement of initial conversion to a mystagogical journey can be seen when the words and rites used in the Lenten period are compared with the words used in the mystagogical period as illustrated below.

Conversion is understood  
as entrance into the church

Conversion comes to be  
understood as a spiritual journey

Conversion is radically  
Christocentric



Conversion becomes part of a  
larger journey using the language  
of the Rite

Conversion is essentially  
an ecclesial event

Conversion becomes a  
comprehensive reality involving

Conversion is fundamentally  
a sacramental experience

transformation of the whole  
person

These words illustrate that there is a movement from ‘joining the church’ in its practices, tradition, and sacraments to living a spiritual life through the sacraments as envisaged by the Vatican II Fathers and the Patristic Fathers before them.

To further connect the movement from initial conversion to a mystagogical journey, the thoughts of the Patristic Fathers, are relevant. The Patristic Fathers had an understanding of a life-long spiritual journey from baptism into union with Christ through Eucharist.

### Welcome by the Church Congregation

The “entering into closer ties with the other faithful” is achieved by the neophytes and newly-received engaging in the works of charity, engaging in parish services, and in joining other parish groups. In some recent research questions were asked of the neophytes and newly-received.

To the question: “Did you think you learned, during your time in the mystagogy, how these Christian attitudes (to the works of mercy) could become relevant to you?” The answers were very supportive of this activity, with a continuum of responses from ‘not at all’ (5%), to: a ‘little’ (5%), ‘some’ (29%), ‘much’ (32%), and ‘very much’ (29%). Therefore the neophytes and newly-received obviously saw relevance of engagement in works of mercy as part of their Christian commitment.

To the question: “Did you feel welcome in the parish?” 67% of the responses indicated positive feelings of inclusiveness, but the responses to the question about further engagement in other parish groups indicated that there was little engagement in on-going parish groups. To the question: “Did you think of joining any other discussion group e.g. Lenten discussion group, Passionist family groups, Teams of Our Lady etc.?” the responses from 34% of neophytes and newly-received indicated such groups were not at all promoted and 17% well promoted; and the other 49% indicated something in between. The comments show how we as parish communities can learn to engage our neophytes and newly received. There were obvious reasons why some people cannot attend other groups and services, as the mother with school-aged children attests. However, there seemed to be evidence of a disappointment that more was not done to allow them “to experience a full and joyful welcome into the community and enter into closer ties with the other faithful.”

### Mystagogical Journey as Transition in Life’s Passages

The current literature of conversion experiences is couched within the life cycle transitions of human psychology and hence is best understood through our common humanity. The existential nature of faith development has been well accepted since the time of Rahner and Vatican II.

In a piece of research I conducted in 2008 with people who had come through the RCIA in a 20 year period, Nearly all the interviewees recounted times of difficulty, challenge, and crisis. These varied between suffering the loss of loved ones to being caught up in the abuse scandal in a Catholic school. In nearly all cases, there were emotional periods, even tears, during the interviews. In most cases the interviewees were able to express what faith means to them in times of crisis. During such times, some felt abandoned by faith and other recovered their faith. Most of the interviewees stated that the crises led to a stronger and deeper faith.

### Mystagogical Journey as Self-transcendence

This area of discussion of spiritual development through self-transcendence is written about extensively by Walter Conn in *The Desiring Self* and by Thomas Keating in *Invitation to Love*. A comprehensive view of conversion and developmental theories is presented in the psycho-spiritual literature as self-transcendence. There has been a theological evolution of self-transcendence as a synthesis of self-denial and self-realization into the awareness of God's presence and love. This is the journey of life into which mystagogy propels us, not as denial of previous levels of consciousness but as fulfilment of God's love in us. There was a discernable movement in my research from one stage of faith to another, not necessarily 'higher' but in a way that was more embracing of life's situations and more mature.

This surrender of the self in God, leading to a deeper level of faith is expressed by Keating as:

Human growth is not the denial or rejection of any level, but the integration of the lower into more evolved levels of consciousness. The Gospel calls for a full development of the human person and invites us to the further growth that God has in store for us: the intuitive and unitive levels of consciousness to which mature faith and love gradually raise us.

### Conclusion

Therefore the mystagogical journey in faith is not simply confined to the period up to Pentecost, but continues throughout a life-time. Our neophytes and newly-received embark on a journey towards God in which all of us are involved.