

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

A Lost Opportunity: Mystagogy in the RCIA

THE VATICAN II CONSTITUTION on the Liturgy ordered the reintroduction of the catechumenate and the preparation of a rite for the baptism of adults.¹ The *Order for the Christian initiation of adults (RCIA)* resulted from these. The *Ordo* prescribes four stages in initiation: kerygma (first announcing of the Good News), catechumenate, celebration of the sacraments of initiation and mystagogy. The first three were already common in mission lands 'ad gentes'. Mystagogy was a new element; it was to come after the sacramental celebration, during Easter time. Virtually unknown since the seventh century, mystagogy is the pastoral art of leading a beginner into an experience of the Mystery of Christ.

The *Order for the Christian initiation of adults*² is a fruit of Vatican II liturgical renewal which has caught the imagination of religious educators. First published in 1972, with an expanded edition two years later, the *Ordo* was soon translated into national languages and published with local commentaries and adaptations. The applause which greeted its appearance was justified. It was the first time since the patristic centuries that, for most of the Church, the baptism of adults had its own rite not based on that for children.

The centuries from Trent to Vatican II form a dismal period in the history of liturgy. Rites were looked on as sacred and unchangeable in themselves, their origins and symbolism having been forgotten. Liturgy was a formal exercise whose efficacy was bound up more with exact performance than with comprehension on the part of either celebrant or congregation. The age was also a dogmatic one. Preparation for baptism, as for the other sacraments, called chiefly for the learning of verbal formulas articulating the current understanding of the truths of faith. Catechesis, at the level of popular religious education, paralleled the hegemony of dogmatic theology at magisterial level – the learning of doctrine was all important.

Since the sixties, a new generation, children of the electronic age, want to feel religion in their lives and in the world around them and have little time for abstract formulas. In a world changing with bewildering speed, they seek an experience in which they can see God in their lives. To be real Christians they need the conversion experience which they did not have when they were baptized as infants. Only after a powerful, lived conversion experience can theological reflection help equip them to face a modern culture unknown in their parents' youth. No more can faith be received complete from their parents or through the surrounding community; it is a commitment which must be taken on personally. Not surprisingly, most of the younger generation reject the

formalistic liturgy to which they are invited, giving rise to a quantum leap in the problem of non-practising, lukewarm, 'sociological', indifferent, and uninterested Catholics. Pastoral structures geared for maintenance rather than mission, and offering the style of religious education of a previous age, are unable to cope with young people baptized in infancy and inserted into a stream of humanity which does anything but flow towards the church door. A catechesis aimed at transmitting the unchanging and unquestioning faith of parents has proved inadequate. The teaching of a confusing multitude of 'truths' presupposed a society which transmitted an overall view of Christian life. It was adequate in a time of little change but now lacks an emotionally charged centre inspiring the type of significant religious experience which can occasion conversion.

Those concerned have made rescue attempts; the names of the lifeboats they have launched express various understandings of the challenge: post-baptismal catechumenate, re-initiation, neo-catechumenate, new evangelization, re-evangelization. Groups and movements, with similar aims but less revealing names, have also been founded: *cursillos*, charismatic movement, basic ecclesial communities, marriage encounter, parish renewal. Some of these provide a religious experience, but none has explicitly adopted mystagogy. In the case of the charismatic movement this is especially surprising, since genuine religious experience is traceable to the action of the Spirit.

For helping the unpractising baptized develop a living faith, the language and emphasis of mystagogy are more appropriate than any version of the catechumenate. We are in a pastoral age: making transparent the ways to life and the sources of vital energy is more relevant than calls to doctrinal obedience. The Mystery is not outside and above life, but is its hidden face, waiting to be discovered through appropriate experience.

Mystagogy was borrowed, in the fourth century, from the ancient traditional ('pagan') religions of Greece and Rome. The persecutions were over and huge numbers flocked to join the locus of imperial favour. A structured process for initiating newcomers was needed. Christian pastors learned from the old religions which had such a process, borrowing the language of the mystery cults (which were now on the wane and unlikely to contaminate Christian practice). Patristic mystagogy is known to us mostly through homilies, called 'mystagogic', of Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose and Chrysostom. These homilies were preached to the candidates during Lent or to the newly baptized during Easter Week to help them appreciate the depths of the Mystery celebrated sacramentally on Easter Night. The rites and scripture readings were the usual material for these mystagogic reflections. These homilies of outstanding bishops were some of the creative moments in a theology which was close to experience, prayerful and accessible to ordinary Christians.

The over-intellectual and abstract theology of later centuries – which lasted until Vatican II – was just beginning to show its head. For the poetry of the Gospels and Psalms would be substituted philosophically based arguments to rebut the attacks of intellectual adversaries. The borrowed intellectual weapons

would become the Church's exclusive armoury for too long and would exclude religious experience from Christian formation. The unity of the Christian Mystery would be broken down into a multitude of 'mysteries', each of which would come with equal demand on the faith of Christians.

Mystagogy was exiled for twelve hundred years when theology left mysticism and Christian experience behind. In our day, now that experience, rather than obedience, is the keynote of the culture, mystagogy should find once more a hearty welcome. Why does it not? The experience into which the mystagogue led the candidate was not just any experience, but experience of the central Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. The Paschal Mystery is the historical centre of Christian faith, clearly identified by Vatican II. Insistence on a unifying centre is recognized as fundamental in religious education today. Mystagogy aims at the centre and always sees other aspects of the Mystery as leading towards that. Why is it that, in spite of the fact that it was reintroduced by the *Ordo* and includes key aspects of the best contemporary religious education, mystagogy still remains, for all practical purposes, in exile? It suffices to examine the manuals of catechetics to see that catechists, enthusiastic about the *RCIA*, remain indifferent to mystagogy. The word itself has not become accepted into the vocabulary of educated Catholics; most clerics and religious, if they ever hear it, have no idea what it means. The expression is not more difficult, nor more Greek than 'eucharist', 'kerygma' (which has returned to use in recent decades), 'ecclesiology', 'theology' or 'pedagogy'.

The main reason for the overlooking of mystagogy, even when it has been officially restored, is the way in which it has been presented – as a part of catechetics. This is not entirely the fault of the original text of the 1972 *Ordo*, which rarely mentions catechesis and tries to give full value to the total experience of initiation and not just to an intellectual 'learning of catechism'. The *RCIA* speaks of catechesis in relation to the catechumenate. When treating of the pre-catechumenate, it speaks of 'evangelization',³ and when treating of the time after the sacramental celebration of initiation, the *Ordo*, in its Latin original, speaks simply of 'mystagogy' – never of 'mystagogical catechesis'. The untimely abortion of the newly introduced mystagogy is due to the way in which this element of Vatican II renewal was received. Existing categories suggested filing the *Ordo* under catechetics because this was the department for dealing with 'preparation for the sacraments'.⁴ Enthusiasm over the catechumenate and efforts to implement it left little time for examining the new element of mystagogy. Also, the *Ordo* timidly makes mystagogy one chronological stage in the initiation rather than a vital factor throughout.

Two examples may help to show how mystagogy has been subsumed under the doubtful umbrella of catechetics. English language translators of the Latin text of the *Ordo initiationis Christianae adultorum*, when they came to the vital paragraph (37) introducing mystagogy, translated the word as 'post-baptismal catechesis or mystagogy'.⁵ Whatever might be said in defence of this paraphrase in 1975, when mystagogy was first being reintroduced and the word was relatively unknown, it is inexcusable in revised editions more than a decade later.

The second example comes from critical editions of the patristic, 'mystagogical' homilies. Yielding to the same temptation to file something less known under a more familiar heading, editors gave these homilies the titles 'Catechetical homilies', or 'Mystagogical catecheses'. The translators and editors of the Syriac manuscript of Theodore of Mopsuestia admit that *they* chose the title 'Catechetical homilies', which is not original, because it fitted the diversity of the matter and allowed them to group together 'Explanations' on the Credo, the Sacraments and the Church; and to fit the style of presentation adopted by the author.⁶ They did not see that they were dealing with a theological category quite different from catechesis. In more popular editions, distinguished patristic scholars speak of 'Mystagogic catecheses' in the case of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia.⁷ Other scholars see that there is a problem about classifying these homilies, especially since the title of the mystagogic homilies of Cyril of Jerusalem does not seem to be original, and at the end of the first of his five mystagogies he himself speaks simply of continuing 'the mystagogies'. Others again opt clearly for calling these discourses 'Mystagogies' or 'Mystagogical instructions', without any reference to catechesis.⁸

The Special Session of the Synod of Bishops, celebrated in 1985 to mark twenty years since the ending of Vatican II, covered again, from its own perspective, some of the ground traversed so memorably by the Council. Speaking of the liturgy, the bishops recommend that 'Catechetics should become once more, as it was at the beginning of the Church, a way which leads towards living the liturgy (mystagogical catechesis)'.⁹ The recall of mystagogy was positive, the same cannot be said of its classification as catechesis.

Mystagogy is not rightly a final stage in a process of initiation still overwhelmingly catechetical – in the all too customary sense of a learning of truths. If it were, the whole *Ordo* (*RCLIA*) would have been in vain. Mystagogy offers the twentieth-century Church a whole new approach to Christian initiation, an approach marked by the primacy of religious experience rather than of religious knowledge, while not excluding this latter. It is this fundamentally new factor which has been almost completely missed by religious educators. It was not missed by Karl Rahner in the sixties, when he proposed a mystagogy for lay men and women living in the darkness of a secularized world: 'The devout Christian of the future will either be a "mystic", one who has "experienced" something, or he will cease to be anything at all'.¹⁰ Rahner wanted a modern mystagogy – a mysticism for beginners – based, not on the liturgical rites of initiation, but on the Exercises of Ignatius, with their discernment of spirits.¹¹ Coming before the 1972 *Ordo*, Rahner's project did not catch on and in his later writings he seems to forget about it. The language and theology of mystagogy have also been revived, especially in Italy, by theologians of mysticism. These see the Fathers of the Desert as the pioneers of a form of mystagogy which consists in leading beginners into mystical experience; even though the Desert Fathers did not use the language of mystagogy. For these theologians of spirituality, the mystagogue is one whom we would call a

spiritual director. I cite these two cases of revival of mystagogy to show that the version in the *RCIA* is not the only possible modern application of the ancient practice. Now that a real 'initiation' into adult life is proving necessary for young people in the First World,¹² just as it had always been seen as necessary for the young of traditional societies, a pastoral practice devoted to a real initiation – rather than to a ritual 'initiation' performed on infants – has much to recommend it. Preparation for and celebration of Confirmation would be an obvious time for specifically Christian aspects of this pedagogy for adult living.

Mystagogy consists in the leading of a beginner into experience of the Mystery. In its origins in the mystery cults, the entire initiation was considered to be mystagogic. In its Christian patristic centuries, though what we know best are the homilies whose texts survive, mystagogy was bound up with initiation as a whole. In an important article on 'The Christian understanding of initiation', Pierre-Marie Gy points out that in the writings of Chrysostom the language of mystagogy is used of the rite of initiation itself and not of any words spoken before or after the rite; thus the homilies, which survive, do not, in Chrysostom's view, exhaust the possibilities of mystagogy.¹³

Even though it formally presents mystagogy as a last element in initiation, the 1972 *Ordo* can be seen as countenancing a view of mystagogy which does not limit it to this final stage (often treated as optional), but sees it as pervading the whole process of initiation. In dealing with the first of the four stages, the period of pre-catechumenate, which is that of evangelization, the *Ordo* says: 'From evangelization, completed with the help of God, come the faith and initial conversion that cause a person to feel called away from sin and drawn into the mystery of God's love' (37). The language of 'feeling' and reference to being 'drawn into the mystery of God's love', belong to mystagogy, which is in effect present even in this first stage of the initiation process. Evangelization, then, should be mystagogic. At the second stage, that of the catechumenate proper, the *Ordo* again uses the language of mystagogy: 'This catechesis leads the catechumens not only to an appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts but also to a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate' (75.1). This includes elements of the definition of mystagogy – to lead the candidate into an experience of the Mystery of Christ. What a pity that the *Ordo*, which accepts, in fact, the need for both religious experience and for focusing on the central Mystery of Christ at all stages of the initiation, limits mention of mystagogy to a final chronological stage.

It is this mystagogic approach to Christian initiation as a whole that it seems urgent to recapture as of the greatest pastoral relevance today. Certainly it is the element of experience of the Christian Mystery as a whole, together with a departure from the mere learning of doctrines, which has made the *Ordo* popular with catechists. My argument here is that it would be pastorally helpful to distinguish the new element of leading beginners into an experience of the totality of the Mystery from aspects of catechesis which are less pastorally relevant today. This would mean recognizing the specific role of the ancient and traditional practice of mystagogy rather than absorbing it into a catechetics

which, like it or not, has difficulty in escaping from its intellectualist past and whose future is not more promising. Catechists dissatisfied with the limitations imposed by an overwhelmingly intellectualist tradition in their discipline might be happy to learn that they could be mystagogues.

The mystagogical approach to religious education originally grew up in the context of a real and progressive initiation of adults into the Christian Mystery and way of life. It is suited to the contemporary conviction that human growth is a slow and gradual process, including affective elements as well as intellectual. It also respects the fact that growth in faith does not always take place within the home: in a pluralist world, subject to swift and deep cultural change, parents are almost as much in need of conversion as are their children. Genuine religious experience, in the setting of the church community, is necessary for parents too, if they are not to lose heart in the face of new challenges to their faith. The Sunday liturgy is the obvious and traditional place where they have the right to expect such a living experience.

The liturgy is the Church's traditional *locus* of religious experience, but liturgy today must develop considerably if it is to provide such experience and begin to exercise once more its mystagogic function. Fire, light and water, each symbolizing either life or destruction, have always been mystagogic material. Our liturgical use of them today is often banal. The Alleluia sung in tongues; free-floating prayer; personal experience fed into the community: these elements of charismatic renewal must be incorporated once more into the liturgy, to which they once belonged, so that Sunday worship may recover its mystagogic potential for producing a living religious experience. A symbolism which speaks to contemporary men and women must take its place alongside older ritual elements, which in turn must be situated in their biblical and historical contexts – the role of the homily is important here. Clean water, pure air, green leaves, non-toxic food – for all God's children on this planet – must be celebrated with the bread and wine. The dynamism and concern of movements and groups – which struggle for ecological balance, Third-World liberation, racial religious and sexual equality; those who engage in protest marches for liberation, racial, religious and sexual equality, for the rights of minorities and of those discriminated against – must be incorporated into liturgy as integral to a contemporary understanding of the Christian Mystery. They are the places where the Spirit is seen at work and God heard speaking most readily today. If properly understood, in the light of a theology which is adequate to its contemporary task, work at each of these concerns can be mystagogic. These preoccupations of our times are ultimately linked to aspects of the total Mystery of Christ, crucified, risen and coming in his kingdom.

It is in these domains, especially, that the sort of mystagogy desired by Rahner might find its starting point today. In his time there were no structures putting his intuition into practice; his invitation found no pastoral echo. Today there are groups and organizations working at each of these areas of human life, and those which have a holistic view of their enterprise could easily read it in a mystagogic light as leading their members into an experience and living of the Mystery.¹⁴

Efforts to lead Catholics, grown indifferent, to a vital living of their faith might better be called *mystagogy* than any of the unsatisfactory names currently in use to label those efforts. In that case, 'mystagogy' might replace the expression 'catechumenate' as descriptive of the Christian formation of those baptized in infancy but not currently practising.

I hesitate to suggest the use of the expression 'mystagogy' for individual spiritual direction. The writers who have worked in this direction – almost exclusively in Italy – have mostly retained an off-putting and obsolete vocabulary. The idea that to lead the individual into mystical experience through contemplative prayer is the *ne plus ultra* of mystagogy, might pass – especially if the setting were monastic, as it was among the Fathers of the Desert – although it is not a patristic use of the expression; but the language is not encouraging. More important seems to be the development that sees mystical experience as attainable (not independently of prayer) in forms of spirituality integrated into the life and activity of a community for the salvation of aspects of our world. Animators and advisers to groups engaged in such pursuits could exercise a highly mystagogic function if they perceived the theologico-spiritual impact of what they were about, appreciating the depths of the Mystery whose surface they were daily touching. This is spiritual direction too, but in a community setting and, as such, is better called mystagogy. Mystagogy is linked to initiation into the Christian community – which is part of the Mystery of Christ. The leading into an experience of the Mystery should itself be a community activity if it is to be true mystagogy. Here the original liturgical format of Christian mystagogy should carry normative weight.

To lead this generation to discern and experience the Mystery of God operative in our time is a prime pastoral task. Mystagogy is an approach to religious formation and to pastoral activity which goes beyond anything which can rightly be called catechetical. Religious experience is too different from the learning of logical formulations to bracket the two under one name. It would be appropriate to call efforts to lead others into an *experience* of the divine by its rightful name of mystagogy. Precisely what pastoral practices will adopt this name has yet to be seen and cannot be determined in advance. In recent decades 'kerygma', as an approach to evangelization, has found its place once more in the pastoral vocabulary. 'Mystagogy' merits at least as much.

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NOTES

¹ *Sacrosanctum concilium*, nos 64, 66.

² Some liturgists prefer the Latin word *ordo* to the first word in the English translation: *Rite for the Christian initiation of adults (RCIA)*. The latter easily suggests ritualism.

³ *RCIA*, 9–13.

⁴ In many places the *RCIA* has had the beneficial effect of bringing catechetics and liturgy together at parish level.

⁵ *RCLIA* 7d, 37–40. Faced with the Latin: *Ultimum tempus, quod per totum tempus paschale perdurat, attribuitur 'mystagogiae', id est . . .*, ICEL (The International Committee on English in the Liturgy) translates thus: 'The final period extends through the whole Easter season and is devoted to the postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy . . .'.

⁶ R. Ronneau and R. Devreesse (eds), *Les homélies catéchétiques de Théodore de Mopsueste* (Città del Vaticano, 1949), Introduction, p. 9.

⁷ Both Hamman and Daniélou do this in A. Hamman (ed), *L'initiation Chrétienne, textes recueillis et présentés par A. Hamman, introduction de Jean Daniélou* (Paris: Grasset, 1963; republished, DDB, 1980). Dom Botte, in his *Sources Chrétiennes* edition of the pilgrimage record of *Éthérie* (47, 1), on p. 261 gives as title of the section, 'Les catéchèses mystagogiques'; Aetheria's own words about the bishop were: 'exponit omnia, quae aguntur in baptismo'.

⁸ E. Yarnold, *The awe inspiring rites of initiation* (Slough: St Paul, 1972), Preface, p. ix; H. M. Riley, *Christian initiation: a comparative study of the interpretations of the baptismal liturgy in the mystagogical writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Ambrose of Milan* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1974), Introduction; L. Bouyer, *Mysterion, du mystère à la mystique* (Paris: OEIL, 1986), p. 207.

⁹ *La Documentation Catholique* 1909 (January 1986), p. 39, translation mine.

¹⁰ K. Rahner, 'Christian living formerly and today', *Theological investigations*, vol. 7 (London: DLT, 1971), p. 15. The place in which Rahner deals with mystagogy most directly is 'Die Notwendigkeit einer neuer Mystagogie' in *Handbuch de Pastoraltheologie II/1* (Freiburg, 1966), pp. 269–271.

¹¹ K. P. Fischer, *Gotteserfahrung: mystagogie in der Theologie K. Rahners und in der Theologie der Befreiung* (Mainz: Matthias Grunewald, 1986), p. 29.

¹² Cf Robert Bly, *Iron John* (Toronto: Random House, 1992).

¹³ Paul-Marie Gy, 'La notion Chrétienne d'initiation', *LMD* 132, *L'initiation Chrétienne* (1977), p. 37.

¹⁴ Recent writings of Leonardo Boff stress the transparency of creation to the divine and the accessibility of the Mystery through life: 'Expérience religieuse et ecologie', *COELI* (*Centre oecuménique de liaisons internationales*), Bruxelles, no. 73 (December 1992), pp. 16–23; 'Religión, justicia societaria y reencantamiento de la creación', *Pasos*, San José, Costa Rica, no. 45 (January–February 1993), pp. 1–10.