

Eurocat-Bureau 2019: About Mystagogy, part 1:

Basic Dimensions and Experience

1. Mystagogy as an introduction to the mystery of faith

Someone who wants to help others discover the mystery, meaning the unfathomable depth of faith and celebration of sacraments of the church must have experienced it himself or herself.

Mystagogy does not start after initiation, but already starts with accompanying a person and introducing him or her to faith, prayer and participating in religious services from the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechuminate onwards. Mystagogy does not treat a few special topics, but comprises the mystery itself, which is the church as the people of God and as the body of Christ.

We will treat some specific topics in the second part (about mystagogy, part 2).

One dimension in itself is the question: What is Christianity?

I do not know what you would answer spontaneously – my answer is as follows: From the sociological point of view, Christianity is a religion, but in reality it is a faith, meaning that man finds stronghold in a permanent personal relationship with God, given freely out of grace by God.

This is where mystagogy starts, in which the longing for this relationship is growing and deepening slowly and the dimension of depth is explored step by step, e.g. that only the Holy Spirit as the love of God enables us to say „God is love“, and gives these words meaning as a testimony of identity, as opposed to mere attributes or comparing statements or the promise of baptism: „You are the beloved child of God“. This path then leads to recognizing that through the Holy Spirit, which is bestowed upon man in Confirmation, we are deeply connected to the innermost nature of God.

Lately some members of my parish, aged 65 to 85 and having been baptized shortly after being born, confronted me with the question why God is suddenly present in three persons in the New Testament, but not in the Old Testament. At least: they dared to ask in public. This gives an opportunity to partly find out about the mystery that God presents us with, starting with the statement „God is true to himself and the Old Testament, too, implicitly views his nature in three persons when Gen chapter 1 talks about the Spirit of God hovering above the

water and the word being created by the Logos. The circle is completed by the Prologue to the Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning was the word".

According to my experience, mystagogy first of all means helping somebody discover biblical connections and therefore showing that with restraining God to poor words we should never think we know who God is. This leads me to a deeper understanding of the prohibition of images in the decalogue and medieval theology: whatever I can imagine is not God.

In that respect, referring to mystical texts can be helpful. Just one example: Meister Eckhart and his speaking picture of some Christians who look at God like they look at a cow who is loved because she gives milk at certain times; Eckhart calls them to rather approach divinity instead of thinking you know everything about God. For Eckhart being a Christian starts where God, looking at us, sees His son – not any son, but His only begotten Son“.

This, of course, does not mean you should throw theological literature at catechumens or newly baptized persons. For us, however, who tend to see ourselves as experts, it must be a basic prerequisite to immerse ourselves in the mystery of God, so that we can then pass on the depth of our faith in simple words and metaphors.

2. **In-depth understanding** on the basis of the initiation sacraments and an introduction to being a Christian in autonomous responsibility within a community, in short Koinonia and its three dimensions of the actions of the church (Leiturgia, Martyria, Diakonia - or liturgy, giving testimony and service of our neighbor) are most important. Equally important are participation, and finding one's own way and calling in the people of God as well as experiencing the community as support and responsibility at the same time.

3. **Pictures may be helpful** to discover depth if chosen well, e.g.:

- icon of resurrection
- Baptism of Jesus by Piero de la Francesca
- Jesus and the Samaritan woman by Duccio di Buoninsegna
- Tabor Icon by Feofan
- Christ Pantocrator
- Christ in the mandorla

The pictures also help explain figures of speech and clarify misunderstandings they cause.

For example, the Holy Spirit comes LIKE a dove – a picture of love and relation between God and man, the Holy Spirit is the love of God that connects us with God ...

Or: God is not parted in himself: wherever Jesus is, God is entirely there, even if we can only see the man.

4. Exploring the church interior:

- Significance of altar, ambo, tabernacle etc, and liturgical colours and garments are best explained in a church
- Architectural styles and what they try to express could be shown by making a tour through different churches and short prayers in different form.
- Elements of decoration that also proclaim faith and introduction into the depth of faith can be helped by paintings, Lenten cloths, Advent wreath, palm leaves etc.

5. Experiencing the celebration of a community

- Celebrating together: how the head and the community interact, singing and praying together, classical church music as a dimension of experiencing God: “This music is love.”
- Fraternity: room for children, men and women celebrate together, everybody is welcome
- Getting to know the liturgies of the Holy Week (washing of the feet, veneration of the cross...), and Easter vigil
- Experiencing the presence of God: Christ in the word, in the community, in the church official and in the Eucharistic species is best possible in an atmosphere of calm and abundance, which is often given as a reason for converting to Christianity.
- Experiencing joy and care: greeting of peace, and “after mass the people are different...”

6. Rites convey an experience of God, so they are an introduction to the mystery of faith in itself, which is to be interpreted and deepened in conversation.

7. Diaconia: taking part and giving in everyday life and in activities of the community: coffee after mass, flea market, social markets. Often you can hear: “Everybody gets help, everybody is welcome; I want to be like them!” The biblical background and motivation for Caritas in the church needs to be explained.

8. Difference between “old“ and “new“ Christians:

The main difference lies in experience. Newly baptized persons need time to arrive in the depressions of Christian everyday life. They cannot understand why some people complain about a lack of experience of God, difficulty in prayer, or lack of understanding of the Scriptures, because not only have they learned a lot, but they also have experienced the changing effects of the sacraments and felt being led by God in such a deep way that they cannot imagine Christianity lacking this experience.

Spiritual exercises in daily life or Bible circles where newly baptized persons can exchange their experience with other members of the community will rather result in frustration of the latter and exuberance of the newly baptized. Only after several years of Christian practice those newly baptized will need new immersion like others and can make use of exchanging God experience and texts from the Scriptures – and because of different points of departure such exchanges are especially fruitful.

9. When to talk about what?

Questions of catechumens or neophytes indicate the way God wants to lead them. They are very individual, so those who accompany the respective person must be open, attentive and experienced in spiritual accompaniment.

Some questions can be dealt with in small groups. However, if you do not only want to remain on a general and superficial level, but want in-depth mystagogy to happen that reaches a person in the depth of his or her personal experience, individual conversations are indispensable, focusing on a specific person who is called by God in order to talk about personal experience. Only then can a person give testimony of his or her personal experience of God’s loving care, and share what has been received as a present.

Friederike Dostal, Leiterin, April 2019