



Mary and Bob often find themselves sharing common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry. When approaching ministerial concerns from different angles, *He Said - She Said* is a venue to share differing perspectives.

## Unpacking

*Mary's Perspective:*

As this blog is published, we have just observed the holiest time of the year. Those who celebrated initiation at the Great Vigil, now called Neophytes (literally, one who is brand new at something), enter into the fourth stage of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. For the next several weeks, the Neophytes will explore not only what they experienced, but what it means to live life fully aware of the profound and joyous mystery that Jesus is Lord. This phase of formation is called *Mystagogy*. Originating from the Greek language, *mystagogy* means "learning about the mysteries". It is an initiation into God's self-revelation. It is a process of growing in faith through continued prayer, learning, and practicing with other believers. I would propose that the concept of *mystagogy* – or unpacking the mysteries – applies to more than simply those who received Sacraments at Easter.

A few weeks into Lent, I participated in a workshop on *Mystagogy* with some 40 other people. Many of them had a hand in the RCIA process at their parish. When asked about the challenges of the period of *Mystagogy*, there was resounding agreement that keeping the Neophytes engaged (or even showing up) was a major concern. While not surprising, that really got me to thinking. Consider the image of growing a cucumber. We plant a seed in one of those little starter containers, give the plant water and sunlight, transplant it to the earth at the appropriate time, continue to tend to it, and eventually (hopefully) harvest our veggies.

We in the Church plant a lot of seeds. Whether it's faith formation classes, or celebrating worthy liturgy, or evenings of confession, there is no shortage of opportunities for folks to cross the threshold of the parish. When we continue to consistently provide quality nourishment – engaging teaching, beautiful music, insightful preaching, compassionate healing – faith begins to take root. This is evidenced by an increase in folks attending Mass, joining ministries, volunteering to help in the food bank, and perhaps even more subtle things like kinder behavior toward each other or deepening prayer lives.

Here's the thing. We don't know what the cucumber plant needs unless we pay attention. Whether our perspective is from the leadership side or attendee side of the parish, we won't know what we need to nourish those seeds of faith if we don't take some time to reflect. *Mystagogy* isn't just for the RCIA – it's for all of us! As a disciple of Christ, how will I know what I should do to continue growing if I don't take



time to discern where the Spirit is leading? As a church minister, how do I know what parts of parish life need some tending if I don't take time for reflection?

We just concluded a Lenten Retreat. Literally, we committed six weeks to some behavior or commitment that was intended to make us more aware of the presence of Christ in our lives. How did that work out? Have you emerged transformed from the experience? Did you perhaps change a behavior or habit? Have you taken time to unpack what unfolded?

Not sure how to get started? Allow me to share an example. During Lent, I committed to a number of things. First, I read a book about discipleship that had 40 chapters. Conveniently, there are roughly 40 days of Lent, so I read a chapter each night. I also started each day listening to My Daily Prayers, offered by the Diocese of Cleveland. Finally, I committed to visiting different churches, to get a better sense of the styles of worship near me. I have taken some time to reflect on each of those endeavors. The book? It definitely gave me some good ideas, and things that I feel like I need to explore more deeply over the course of the next year. The daily prayer? Has become such an ingrained habit that I actually miss it if I get delayed in listening. The church hopping? That's probably been one of the most fruitful endeavors.

At one of the churches I visited, as I was walking out of Mass, the pastor greeted me with a warm smile and a giant bear hug. He didn't know me; he was simply welcoming one in his midst. When I was driving home afterwards, I couldn't help but smile. I don't know about you, but my experience is that one of the "after-effects" of the Covid pandemic has been a general weirdness when it comes to the sign of peace at Mass. Some people give a papal wave, others nod, still others are taken aback if you extend your hand and actually *<gasp!>* touch them! To have a human being unabashedly embrace me affirmed my humanity, my oneness with him as a child of God, and my overall worthiness of affection. I didn't feel like a potential source of germs or disease; I simply felt loved. I know that sounds dramatic, but I was genuinely surprised at what a difference that small gesture made in my experience of the rest of the day. Contemplating that on the drive home was a form of mystagogy, as it prompted me to consider how the Lord is working in that parish, in my life, and how I can use that experience to direct my behaviors so that I can perhaps impact others in a positive way. That sort of thought and reflection takes deliberate intent and time. That's what I mean by unpacking the experience.

So here's your challenge: We have just experienced Lent, Triduum, and Easter. That's a lot to unpack! Take some time, intentionally and purposefully, to reflect. Where did you sense the Lord present? How were you transformed by your Lenten retreat? At what points, perhaps during Mass of the Lord's Supper or Easter morning itself, did you have an Emmaus-type of experience, with your heart burning just knowing Jesus was with you? How is he directing you? What did that all mean? We are a Resurrection people. What does that mean at the grocery store, or the office, or the gym? How are you different for



having made this Lenten journey and celebrating the holiest days? You don't journey alone. How were your friends and family impacted by these celebrations? How will you work together to make a positive impact on those in your sphere of influence? Embrace the process of unpacking!

*Bob's Perspective:*

Another way of approaching Mystagogy is to translate its meaning as "so what." Many times, when we pause to evaluate our Lenten retreat, or any other important life event or experience, the tendency of most people would be to evaluate their experience based on their perception of how well things went. That, in itself, is not a bad place to begin. For example, if I gave up chocolate for Lent (Mary's probably screaming), was I successful, moderately successful, or unsuccessful? That would be fine for an immediate evaluation. But in the true spirit of mystagogy, the next question that needs to be considered (no matter the aforementioned answer), is "so what?"

- So, what if I was successful? What did that exercise build or bring out in me? How do I move forward in my life so as to build upon that success?
- So, what if I was moderately successful? What worked, and what didn't work? What were the factors that led to partial success, and what were the factors that led to a partial lack of success? How can I build on what worked and what can I extract from that which didn't work?
- So, what if I was unsuccessful? Did the attempt have a reasonable chance for success from its inception – yes or no, and what can I do about that? What were the factors that attributed to the lack of success? What more (or what less) would have improved the chances for a successful outcome? Rather than giving up, what steps can I take to give it another whirl? If the Wright brothers hadn't tried it again, right now we'd all be walking to California!

So what? In the Cycle B Gospel for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, we hear our Lord talking about a grain of wheat needing to fall to the ground and die in order to produce new life. That wonderful parable is exactly what the season of Lent is all about. If the attempt was successful (or moderately successful) what in yourself had to die in order to bear fruit? Now that it's accomplished (or well on its way), what's the next step? How truly successful was the venture if the "new fruit" is now simply left on the vine to wither and perish?



Conversely, if the attempt was unsuccessful, well...there you have it! What fruit within is now given way to flourish because "the attempt fell to the ground and died?" What visions or aspirations can be extrapolated from seeming unsuccess to blossom into new growth or a new way of being?

Happy Mystagogy-ing!