



Mystagogy

A Note of Explanation:

Typically when we write these blogs, we discuss a topic together, and then one takes the lead in writing, and the other responds. For this blog, we had talked about a topic and then life got busy. We each found a small chunk of time on a random Saturday to write, only to discover afterwards that the other had written in EXACTLY THE SAME CHUNK OF TIME! While we attempted to weed out redundancy in this published version, in true *He Said-She Said* fashion, we noodled separately, wrote similar thoughts from different perspectives, and basically came to the same conclusion!

Here's the Cliff Notes version: Mystagogy = good. Utilize it!

Want further explanation? Read on...

Bob's Perspective:

Mystagogy (mis-tuh-GO-jee) comes from the Greek word, *mystagōgos*, that is the act of leading or being led through a mystery. In Church terms, mystagogy is the process by which our Neophytes (those who received Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil, and are thus fully initiated into the Catholic Church) take time to reflect on or unpack their experiences of this event. This process of unpacking helps them to find for themselves the deeper truths that will continue to form them and aid them in taking ownership of their faith beyond an academic or emotional understanding.

I'll come back to this shortly.

Next concept:

God creates each of us with a purpose or mission (many times more than one) and free will. This free will allows us to accept or decline our purpose or mission in life. Most people will agree that it's much easier to decide whether to accept a mission when we know what's being asked. However, for the most part, the proposed mission or purpose isn't very clear or apparent – and the mission or purpose can change or evolve as time goes onward. One of the best ways to discern our purpose is through a process of mystagogy – unpacking and coming to understand what has been.

Think about when someone moves into a new home. The act of unpacking their belongings helps them to settle in and take ownership of their new living quarters. As long as they're living out of boxes and suitcases, they're not settled in – they're living in a transient state. When we take time to unpack our life experiences and examine their contexts and relationships, we in turn take ownership of our lives. Once



we take ownership, we can begin to see a map taking shape. This allows us to understand where we've been and aids us in conjecturing where the path is leading us.

Back to mystagogy:

I personally find mystagogy to be a very useful tool. As I look over the course of my life, I can see a definite direction – although as things were unfolding, the direction wasn't always recognizable. My life has dramatically changed over the last eight years in three significant ways:

1. Three very close people in my life have gone home to God – reshaping the way I live my day-to-day life.
2. I retired from full time parish ministry, although I've been very active in my home parish [thanks to Mary] and as a substitute musician around the diocese.
3. A very close friend of six years and I recently decided to go our separate ways in life.

At the very same time, several opportunities have basically fallen into my lap out of seemingly nowhere. For example, one such opportunity: As many know, I was a student and teacher of martial arts for a good number of years. However, I haven't taught martial arts since the beginning of the Covid fiasco (classes were cancelled and opportunities dried up.) Although I've thought about it on occasion, I didn't have any concrete plans for starting up again. Then an old dear friend (whom I haven't heard from in years) called me out of the blue to ask if I'd like to teach Personal Self-Defense at Lakeland Community College. At first, I was unsure of what to do. It's been close to four years since I've taught. I need to create a syllabus, resources, and written tests for a semester course – lots to be done! Using the process of mystagogy, I examined my experiences over the years and how they interconnected. In a short time, it became clear that this is a path I should follow, and so my class will start in the fall. Who would have thought? Now the class itself may not be a calling from God, but the connections or relationships that this experience will yield could very well be part of the plan. And so I say, "Sure, why not?"

This isn't the first time I've used mystagogy, and I'm sure it won't be the last time either! Like any skill, mystagogy takes practice. Maybe it's not something to be done every day...or maybe it is. In today's world, it seems that so many people are living with imbalance and uncertainty in their lives – they have no idea where they're going, they jump from one thing to the other – kind of like a fish biting at the first shiny thing it sees – and they're not very happy (like the fish getting hooked). While it may not always be the case, I think that much of this comes from lives steeped in soundbites, impatience, and instant gratification. When we feel uncertain or imbalanced, slowing down and engaging in mystagogy can help to unpack and take ownership, see the map more clearly defined, and aid us in accepting our purpose or mission.



Give me an “M”.... give me a “Y”

Mary’s Perspective:

As Bob described, for those who were newly initiated into the Catholic Church, the last stage of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults is the period of mystagogia – although the experience of mystagogy applies to all who are baptized. Mystagogy is the task of becoming *progressively aware of mystery*. It is less an exercise in study, and more a process of reflection. The intent is a formal opportunity for the newly initiated to “take it to the next level” – not just being able to academically recite the rules, but to embrace the relationship.

Mystagogy is not about providing easy answers to life, but rather teaches an approach to life. While it can certainly have a theological component, I believe the process of mystagogy can apply to anyone. Whether you call it discernment, or meditation, or evaluation, the process challenges us to reflect on an event or experience, and to consider how we might be transformed as a result of both the experience and the reflection. In Churchworld, our reflections invite the Holy Spirit to guide us to a deeper relationship with God and a progressively deeper awareness of mystery.

Although I have an analytical mind and tend to be task-oriented, the idea of reflecting on events or experiences that have caught my attention rings true. Bob and I have often written of the value of reflecting on the journey, so we have a better sense of direction. So, here’s where my reflections have taken me:

Think back to New Year’s Day. Did you make any resolutions? Were you determined to read more, or save money, or lose weight? January has come and gone. Have you made progress on those resolutions, or abandoned them completely? Perhaps during the Lenten season, you made some efforts at changing a behavior – whether it was refraining from foul language, or not drinking bourbon, or volunteering weekly at a soup kitchen, or giving up chocolate. On Easter Sunday morning, was your breakfast an entire chocolate bunny topped off with a fifth of bourbon? (And if so, may I please join you next year?)

Here's the mystagogia part... why did you make those resolutions, if it was only for a limited period of time? Did our Lenten practices lead to any substantive change in our lives? Have we become kinder, less foul people who look out for the underdog and also have cleaned up our dietary habits? Or was it a limited exercise in discipline, just to show we could last 40 days without chocolate? Not that there’s anything wrong with exercising



self-control for the sake of being disciplined, but I also don't think that's usually the intent of our resolutions. I'm often pretty guilty of fleeting resolutions and limited discipline, which don't really lead to substantive transformation. But that doesn't mean we give up!

I read a quote the other day: "As long as we can breathe, something can happen." Back to the fleeting resolutions and limited discipline, I sometimes catch myself thinking in terms of all or nothing. For example, if I was resolved this week to walk every night after dinner, and on Tuesday, I flopped on the couch instead of walking, my gut reaction is to allow that to derail me – and flop on the couch on Wednesday, as well. By the end of the week, my walking intentions are completely blown out of the water, and by next week I don't even remember resolving to walk each night. Whether it's failed New Year's resolutions or a completed Lenten season, this is where I need to remember that, as long as I'm breathing, I can make a difference!

So, I take a moment to reflect and seek a deeper awareness. Perhaps I look for patterns of my behavior, so I can understand, anticipate, and redirect. Maybe I reflect on the positive steps I have taken and see how I've grown. One of the biggest challenges for me, personally, is identifying goals and desires, so that I can articulate steps that will lead to achieving those goals. We've written previously about wandering and meandering. Mystagogy helps to give purpose to our wandering.

Did your Lenten practices (if you had any) make any difference to who you are today? How did your experience of Triduum impact your understanding of the mysteries of our faith? Whether you resolved to give something up, or to take on a new behavior, how have your resolutions spurred growth? Do you recognize not just your own path, but how you fit in the bigger picture?

Magdalene went to the tomb that Easter morning, only to find it empty. Wandering along, she was so stuck in what she expected, that she was unable to recognize the unexpected. The guys on the road to Emmaus, too, were unable to see what they didn't anticipate. Do we get so caught up in our own expectations and daily activities that we've become blind to the possibilities?

Perhaps my challenge for you this day is to employ a process of mystagogy: Pick one thing. Just one. Maybe you reflect on a conversation you had with a friend today. Maybe it's your experience of footwashing on Holy Thursday. Perhaps you want to reflect on a work



project, career path, or an encounter you had at the grocery store. Whatever experience or event that somehow caught your attention, break it open. Ponder what it means, and what doors might be opening as a result of it. Consider how you might grow from it, or if it is drawing you to a particular step in your journey. Invite the Spirit to open your mind so you're not stuck in limitation and expectation.

Now do something!