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### Roots and Branches: Mystagogy for Religious Education

#### Abstract

This paper argues that incorporating a praxis of mystagogy within religious education is crucial for the church and our world today. It enables us to “sniff out grace” and be all the more likely to discern the mystery that inheres to daily life. A praxis of mystagogy incorporated into religious education helps to fashion people into mystics—a life-long process of becoming alert to God’s hidden presence by honoring the fundamental mode by which we know anything about God: intentional reflection on the encounter with God’s self-revelation and effective love through human experience.

*And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.<sup>1</sup>*  
— Gerard Manley Hopkins

What is always in front of us tends to disappear. Like fish unaware of the water around them, human beings swim in an infinite ocean of grace and mystery. Indeed, “the signs and fruits of grace are not always (or usually!) extraordinary mystical events. Often they are not even explicitly religious.”<sup>2</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins voices this mystery above: “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things...” The abundant, inexhaustible ever-fresh giving of God’s self holds all creation— all of us— *in being*. The human person, in the world, is the recipient of God’s deepest communication within creation, that is God’s very self.

The fundamental insight here is the recognition that grace is not a remainder— outside, over, and extra— to creation and nature. God’s self-disclosure and effective love is not an irruption into a world where God is absent. Rather, God’s presence pervades and surrounds and is the very ground of all existence. This is what Catholics refer to as the ‘sacramental principle’—the belief that all things in the cosmos are capable of mediating God’s presence. How might religious education enable Christians to “sniff out grace” and become more likely to discern the mystery that inheres to daily life?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from *God’s Grandeur*, Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems*. London: Humphrey Milford, 1918.

<sup>2</sup> Sachs, John R. *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Fuellenbach, John. “The Church in the Context of the Kingdom of God,” Daniel Kendall, Gerald O’Collins, and Stephen T. Davis. *The Convergence of Theology: A Festschrift Honoring Gerald O’Collins, S.J.* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 237.

I propose that incorporating a praxis of *mystagogy* within religious education is a crucial recovery for the church and our world today. Arising from the ancient church, mystagogy is an essential interpretive frame of reference for discerning mystery. The word mystagogy means “interpretation of, or initiation in, the mysteries.” Emphasizing a mystagogical approach nurtures a sacramental imagination. It enables us to discern the mystery of grace that inheres to daily life. It honors the fundamental mode by which we know anything about God: encounter with God’s self-revelation and love through human experience.

Education, at its roots, is a critical exchange of ideas and beliefs, truths and values in a community of practice<sup>4</sup> that is oriented toward participants understanding and self-reflection of their position in the world. The best education engages active learners to apprehend, appropriate, and amend the community and the world (inform, form, and transform).<sup>5</sup> Groome writes, “Consider the worthiest purpose of education as that learners might become fully alive human beings who help to create a society that serves the common good.”<sup>6</sup> Contemporary religious education must be capacious enough to allow for the experience of the mystery of a God who seeks us out and draws us close, then, reflects critically on its implications for our lives and our world, and how best to respond.

Despite this positive affirmation of religious education’s role, current trends in teaching theology in the United States are inherited from earlier classical approaches that have for a century been influenced by an increasingly secularized academy. Farley writes, “the churches hid from themselves the uncomfortable fact that they promote an education that does not educate.”<sup>7</sup> This methodology trains and perpetuates an academic proficiency that seems more at home in universities rather than engendering a faith that unites what is taught, grappled with, integrated, and lived. Harris in her evocative work, *Teaching and Religious Imagination* writes, “I am convinced our society desperately needs a philosophy of teaching that explores the dimension of depth in teaching, a philosophy that begins not with technique but with the majesty and mystery involved in teaching.”<sup>8</sup>

Mystagogy was foundational to the formation of those initiated into the faith of a burgeoning ancient church, and remains an important ingredient to shaping a meaningful and honest search for the credibility of faith in our milieu. This essay will explore the *roots* of mystagogy within our tradition and how a model of Recollect, Recognize, and Relate emerges as a constitutive pattern of mystagogy. What *branches* arise from mystagogy’s reinterpretation in today’s context?

### The Etymological Roots of Mystagogy

Mystagogy has been long known as a catechesis from the ancient church to help *neophytes* (newly baptized) come to a deeper understanding of their sacramental experiences throughout the Easter season. Over centuries, mystagogy fell away from broad use until it was

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<sup>4</sup> See Lave, Jean., and Wenger, Etienne. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Learning in Doing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> See Groome, Thomas H. *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (1st ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Groome, Thomas H. *Educating for Life : A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent*. (Allen, TX.: T. More, 1998), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Farley, Edward. “The Tragic Dilemma of Church Education,” as quoted in Kieran Scott (2016) *Alternating Currents: Sacramental and Prophetic Imagining and Church Education*, Religious Education, 111:4, 447

<sup>8</sup> Harris, Maria. *Teaching and Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 24.

reclaimed as part of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults with Vatican II. Many today consider mystagogy largely a homiletic tool with an emphasis on biblical typology and narrative method that takes priority over doctrinal or systematic methods. But what are the origins of mystagogy in the formation of Christians?

The term mystagogy originates in the secret cultic and “mystery religions” of the ancient Greco-Roman world.<sup>9</sup> Mystagogy was employed to signify the deeper meaning of participating in the life and “rites” of the community.<sup>10</sup> Plato coopted the term to express “the asceticism of philosophical knowledge, leading to contemplation of the real, of beauty, the way to the divine.”<sup>11</sup> Mystagogy’s appropriation into Christian formation along with its rise to prominence in the patristic period is most closely associated with Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia.

As noted, mystagogy comes from the Greek *mystes*, “one who has been initiated”, and *agogos*, “to lead”. Vincie suggests, “Although controverted, it is possible to trace the word “mystagogy” to the Greek verb *mueō*, which means to close the lips or to keep silent.”<sup>12</sup> This leads to the realization that the root of the Greek word for “mystery” (*mysterion*), and “mystic” (*mystikos*) is what gives rise to the Latin word, *mutus*- to be speechless. Thus “mystery” comes from a place of speechlessness.

David Regan theorizes that the etymology “of the word ‘mystery’ implies those present ought to close their mouths about what they had heard or experience; this is one of the factors making for scarcity of information about the cults.”<sup>13</sup> Because of this, mystagogy has been a mystery of its own within the tradition which lead Regan to claim that “No comprehensive work exists on the topic of mystagogy as a whole... Nowhere have I come across any attempt to treat of all brands of mystagogy as a coherent whole and to apply the results to contemporary pastoral needs.”<sup>14</sup>

Scholarship in the area of mystagogy seems to be on the rise, and Pope Francis has included the term in homilies. However, Enrico Mazza, stands singly as the comprehensive work on mystagogy. He defines mystagogy as closely united to our contemporary understanding. For Mazza, mystagogy is an authentic liturgical theology by virtue of its liturgical and patristic origins, and refers especially to the ritual sacraments of initiation and “the deeper spiritual meaning of the liturgical rites.”<sup>15</sup> However, this is only one aspect of mystagogy’s importance and relevance. From its roots in ancient human history, mystagogy was the way elders, or *mystagogues*, led candidates into the hidden mysteries, practices, and culture of a community.

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<sup>9</sup> See Regan, David. *Experience the Mystery: Pastoral Possibilities for Christian Mystagogy* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Regan suggests that mystagogue and mystagogy were used in a much more “extended sense” than we are accustomed to, such as, to introduce friends to the “sacred precincts of the Greek family” or initiation “into the business of tax-farming”. *Experience the Mystery*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Regan, David. *Experience the Mystery*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Vincie, Catherine. “Mystagogical Preaching” in *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching: Developed under the Auspices of the Catholic Academy of Liturgy*. Edward Foley, General Editor, and ProQuest. (Pueblo Book, Liturgical Press, 2016). Accessed February 14, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central. Created from bostoncollege-ebooks on 2019-02-12 18:07:46.

<sup>13</sup> Regan, David. *Experience the Mystery*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Regan, *Experience the Mystery*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Mazza, Enrico. *Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age* (New York: Pueblo Pub., 1989), 1.

Religious education can be thought of in the same way. I propose that mystagogy, in this way, is the process of intentionally *recollecting* the experience of the sacramental moments of everyday, mediated through sacred symbols and the sacramentality of life in the world; coming thus to *recognize* the deep echo (types, analogies) of those experiences with the salvation story of Christian faith; and then *relating* this growth in our daily living as disciples of Jesus to others. Mystagogues, then, are people who themselves engage, and invite others to engage this praxis, empowering people to see the deep resonance between their own story and God's saving story in Jesus.

### *Mystagogy's Roots in Christianity*

In the years following the first century, mystagogy was slowly appropriated from the pagan mystery religions and cults by a flourishing Christianity. These religions were opposed and critiqued by the Christian writers of antiquity to show how "debauched" and "inferior" they were, as well as being "diabolic counterfeits of Christian liturgy."<sup>16</sup> Eventually, the nascent Christian empire was to ban them entirely.

In the Patristic Era (primarily in the 4th century), and with the "official toleration"<sup>17</sup> of Christianity by Emperor Constantine and its subsequent establishment as the "official imperial religion (by edict of Theodosius in 380),"<sup>18</sup> the burgeoning of the Catechumenate, and by extension, mystagogy rose to prominence. The early Church Fathers—Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), John Chrysostom (d. 407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), and others, employed mystagogy as a homiletic and catechetical aspect of the catechumenate for new candidates. While Theodore and John Chrysostom preferred their mystagogical preaching before the rites of initiation as a preparation, more often mystagogy developed as a reflection on what had been *experienced*. For the majority of mystagogues, these were mysteries best understood from *inside* and having undergone the initiation.

The primary thrust of mystagogy—following the rites of initiation—was to uncover meaning by relating the experience of mysteries within the ritual and sacraments with types (*tupos*) found in the Hebrew scriptures—the figures, the occasions, and even statements that anticipated the Christian experience. For example, the passage of the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea toward freedom became a "type" for passing through the waters of baptism to a new freedom from sin and death in Christ.

This typological interpretation and reflection on the scriptures was paired with the symbols and rituals of the sacramental experience undergone in initiation. Vincie explains that in typological reflection,

Christian Scriptures could be read backward, giving further insight into the events of salvation history witnessed in the Hebrew Scriptures. Typology was an effort to keep the various phases of salvation history in relationship to one another. It could be either commemorative or prophetic. The movement could be from past salvific events to present realities or from present realities to future eschatological fullness.<sup>19</sup>

However, not all reflection was typological. Mystagogues also employed allegory—a way of interpreting the hidden potential meaning and symbolism in narrative text to illustrate an

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<sup>16</sup> Regan, David. *Experience the Mystery*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Harmless, William. *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 51.

<sup>18</sup> Regan, David. *Experience the Mystery*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Vincie, "Mystagogical Preaching", 2.

abstract idea. For example, in *De Paradiso*, Ambrose provides a commentary comparing Paradise (Gen. 2:8-3:18) to the soul.<sup>20</sup>

Along with braiding the facets of ritual and scriptural interpretation, there was a moral feature as well. The newly initiated were not just to become new members of a society or cult. The Christian understanding of baptism implied a fundamental reorientation of their lives—an elemental shift of self in the world. They were become “a new creation,” and this new identity was to be reflected in how they lived their lives as faithful disciples of Jesus.

From the work of Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) in *Mystagogia*<sup>21</sup> (circa 658), we have a model of mystagogy articulated in a register that seems most appropriate for religious education recovery today. Maximus was writing at a time when Christianity was firmly established as a state religion and lacked the vigor and urgency of the persecuted church of the earlier age. “Many were leaving in disillusionment and his purpose in writing seems to have been to recall them to their earlier faith.”<sup>22</sup> Maximus’ primary insight was to propose mystagogy as a way to “gain knowledge (*gnosis*) of the Mystery through contemplating it with the spiritual senses... This spiritual sensing can only be accomplished through seeking the Mystery where it is to be found: in creation; in Scripture; in the liturgy, as mediated by symbols.”<sup>23</sup>

With the rise of infant baptism as a nearly universal practice by the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, the adult catechumenate grew fallow. The mystagogical approach of reflecting on the experienced mysteries of Christian initiation began to disappear in wider church practice, and was kept alive only in monastic communities.<sup>24</sup> The early Scholastic period with its emphasis on rigorous dialectical reasoning and resolution of contradictions, assured the passing of mystagogy into historical artefact.

### Rooted in a Pattern

The mystagogues of the early church had to fashion a theology and pattern of formation for *neophytes* as a pastoral and catechetical response.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the ancient church recognized that lived experience is replete with meaning—experience does not always lead to more questions. It may also provide answers, and disclose the sacral and mysterious dimension of our existence. Precisely because it affirmed people toward a lived and living faith, mystagogy in the Patristic Age honored experience by being affective, based in the sensible, and made use of evocative and lyrical language.

Thus, a pattern to the mystagogical approach emerges that I describe as *recollect*, *recognize*, and *relate*. The first aspect of the pattern, *recollect*, has to do with two features of memory in the Christian life: the corporate memory of the church (typological) and the individual affective memory of each member (experiential). William Harmless suggests the mystagogy of the fourth-century “typically wove together three common elements: (1) gestures

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<sup>20</sup> Savage, John J. *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 42)* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1961).

<sup>21</sup> See *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. Berthold, George C. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), 183-214.

<sup>22</sup> Regan, David. *Experience the Mystery*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Regan, David. *Experience the Mystery*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Mazza claims, “In the patristic age, there was no standard way of doing theology, if for no other reason that theology sprang not so much from a felt need of developing a treatise as from the Church’s vital needs, which called for a homily or more thorough instruction (catechesis)... It seems then that it was pastoral need that forced bishops to become theologians and thus Fathers of the Church.” *Mystagogy*, 7.

and words drawn from the liturgies of the vigil, (2) scriptural themes and images, (3) analogies drawn from nature or the local culture.”<sup>26</sup> The memory of the *neophytes* and gathered community were activated by drawing upon the archetypal moments of salvation history, human experience, and what each member had encountered in the rites of initiation.

Experientially, recollection helped the community identify and renew itself in connection with those who had gone before them as friends of God. Recollection gave access to salvation history, that in turn became personal history. Moreover, for Theodore of Mopsuestia, the act of recollection provided a means of encounter with Christ and the soteriological blessings that come from his resurrection. As Theodore claims,

Because of this [the death of Christ] they [the faithful] must gaze with *recollection* and awe on what is occurring, and also because at this movement, by reason of the awesome “liturgy” that is being accomplished... it is fitting that our Lord the Christ should arise, proclaiming to all a participation in the ineffable blessings. This is why in the oblation we *recall* the death of our Lord: because it proclaims the resurrection and the ineffable blessings.<sup>27</sup>

Typologically, the way to make meaning of present experience of the mystery of initiation was to draw the experience into the light of God’s self-revelation in human history. Augustine of Hippo was a master of utilizing typological referents to animate the imagination of the *competentes* even prior to their baptism, preparing them for what was to come. Harmless writes, “[Augustine] encouraged them: ‘Be joyful going to baptism; enter without fear on the road to the Red Sea.’ He tried to allay fears about certain future ‘enemies,’ those minor sins one committed daily. These would be destroyed the same way Israel destroyed the Amalekites: by standing, as Moses had stood, with arms raised in prayer.”<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Patristic Era mystagogues recalled biblical typology for the rich imagery and disclosive power of God acting in the history of God’s people before and after baptism. Jesus as the “new Adam” stood contrapuntally to the Adam of the Fall. Moses led the Israelites out of slavery, through the waters of the Red Sea into a new covenantal life with God and so on. “Like Cyril, Ambrose read the baptismal washing typologically, as a harkening back to and a recapitulation of a long sequence of Old Testament events: the Spirit hovering over the waters at creation; the flood at the time of Noah... Moses sweetening the desert spring; the cure of Naaman the Syrian.”<sup>29</sup> *Recollect* locates the petitioners, or *neophytes*, within the arc of God’s self-disclosure in history, helps them assume it as their own, brings it forward to orient them toward their new life. From the entirety of this experience they can come now to *recognize* new meaning.

The Church Fathers’ approach enabled newly initiated Christians to *recognize* and understand the implications of their commitment and new status within the community and as adopted daughters and sons of God in Christ. We turn again to Augustine. In his famous Sermon 272, Augustine draws on and elucidates the meaning of Church described in the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians:

“You, though are the body of Christ and its members.” (1 Cor. 12:27)  
So if it’s you that are the body of Christ and its members, it’s the  
mystery, meaning you, that has been placed on the Lord’s table; what

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<sup>26</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Mazza, *Mystagogy*, 67. Emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 308.

<sup>29</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 122.

you receive is the mystery that means you. It is to what you are, that you reply “Amen,” and by so replying, you express your assent.<sup>30</sup>

“In other words,” writes Kubicki, “Augustine reasons that if his listeners want to understand the Eucharist as sacrament, they must begin by understanding themselves as the Body of Christ. The mystery that they receive is the mystery that sums up their own identity as Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

Another example of helping the newly baptized to *recognize* the hidden meaning within experience of the mystery is found in John Chrysostom’s *Baptismal Instructions*. Chrysostom painstakingly elucidates the meaning of baptism drawing on Galatians 3:27 for the *neophytes* new status in the world and their relationship to God:

In Chrysostom’s description of the rite following the water bath, it becomes clear that the spiritual garment the *neophyte* dons is Christ. “For straightway after they come up from the waters, they are led to the awesome table heavy laden with countless favors, where they taste of the Master’s body and blood, and become a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. Since they have put on [ἐνδεδυμένοι<sup>32</sup>] Christ Himself, wherever they go they are like angels on earth, rivaling the brilliance of the rays of the sun.”<sup>33</sup>

By drawing upon all features of the environment, culture, activity, and context that helped the newly initiated to *recognize*, and more deeply enter into, their community of practice.<sup>34</sup> This enabled them to appreciate the implications of who they had become as members of the Christian community, and so *relate* this change to their new life in the world.

*Relate* begins as a response to what they have lived through: the events, ritual, instruction, and apprehension of meaning that inhered to the synthesis of what was experienced in initiation into the Christian community. Having encountered and put on the Risen Christ through the Holy Spirit, the newly initiated are now implicated—there is an ethical obligation with their new life. Having spent time *recollecting* what God has done for humanity in a history of which they are now part, and *recognizing* the meaning of who they have now become, a response to how they must live is required that includes *relating* the Good News to others. The ethical implications of baptism follow: to “put on Christ” and become a “new creation” is to be marked and claimed and conformed to the One who embraces, restores, listens, forgives, heals and walks with those who suffer—the poor and insignificant ones. To have embraced the gospel is to acknowledge where reality in our world falls short, and correct that reality with great love.

This, of course, is the ideal. Harmless presents Chrysostom lamenting the lack of a demonstrable shift in identity among many of the newly baptized:

I see many after their baptism living more carelessly than the uninitiated, having nothing particular to distinguish them in their way of life. It is, you see for this cause, that neither in the market nor in the Church is it possible to know quickly who is a believer and who

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<sup>30</sup> *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Part III Sermons. Vol. 7: Sermons 230-272 B on the Liturgical Seasons, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, N.Y.: New City, 1993), 300.

<sup>31</sup> Kubicki, Judith Marie. “Recognizing the Presence of Christ in the Liturgical Assembly.” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 4 (2004): 823.

<sup>32</sup> My study of this Greek term reveals that it comes from a form of ἐνδύω (*enduo*) and shows that some form is used throughout the New Testament, particularly in Matthew. In this case it refers to its use in Galatians 3:27: Meaning “put on, array.” From *en-* in, and *duno-* sink into a garment.

<sup>33</sup> Roosien, Mark. “Putting on Christ: Metaphor and Martyrdom in John Chrysostom’s Baptismal Instructions.” *Studia Liturgica* 43, no. 1 (March 2013): 58.

<sup>34</sup> See Lave and Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Learning in Doing*.

an unbeliever; unless one be present at the time of the mystery...whereas they ought to be distinguished *not by their place, but by their way of life*.<sup>35</sup>

The demands of ethics and justice run throughout ancient mystagogical formation. Indeed, Harmless suggests catechesis is an art, and Augustine “insisted that the measure of artistry depended on God’s good grace and expressed itself in people who enfleshed the faith, embodied its charity, and enacted its justice.”<sup>36</sup> To put it differently, the *telos* of mystagogy is for the neophytes to embody the characteristics of the Gospel and God’s love for the poor after coming to recognize who God has been for them and apprehending its meaning.

### Grafting New Roots

It was not until Vatican II and the promulgation of its first document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*) in 1963 that the Catechumenate and its practice of mystagogy was exhumed from ecclesial memory. “The catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps, is to be restored and to be taken into use ... which is intended as a period of suitable instruction, may be sanctified by sacred rites to be celebrated at successive intervals of time.”<sup>37</sup> These distinct steps were: (a) evangelization (or precatechumenate), (b) catechumenate (from Greek *katēchoúmenos*, “one taught orally”), (c) enlightenment (the final stage prior to baptism beginning in Lent), and (d) mystagogy (following initiation). This was accompanied by three interstitial rites: (1) acceptance into the order of catechumens, (2) election, (3) sacraments of initiation.

Following Vatican II, mystagogy became the stage after the full initiation of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist—a time that was for “...a period of deepening understanding and experience of the mystery”<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, mystagogy in this context brought together the elements of the process into a fullness of meaning that suffused the affective and intellectual capacity of the newly baptized. On the other, it was a commitment by the community to accompany new members for the initial days of their new life in faith. However, mystagogy should be a fundamental affirmation and recognition that conversion is a lifelong process, and not to be collapsed into any one specific moment or experience. Karl Rahner’s theology and support for a recovery of mystagogy, helps us to explore this more deeply.

Rahner never explicitly or systematically works out mystagogy, but one could argue that the whole of his thought is a mystagogical theology. Rahner himself acknowledges this in *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery*:

Even though there are many books about my theology, it is my opinion that this one is particularly notable because it deals with a concept (mystagogy) which on the one hand gives access to much of my theology and on the other has not been so fully developed by myself...<sup>39</sup>

Rahner’s approach to theology incorporates an experiential, anthropological hermeneutic to rightly order an inductive approach to the central common reality of all human existence. God has always chosen human persons to be the receivers of revelation and saving grace—the

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<sup>35</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 407.

<sup>37</sup> Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963) § 64, in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980).

<sup>38</sup> Bugnini, Annibale. *The Reform of the Liturgy, 1948-1975* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), 593.

<sup>39</sup> Rahner, Karl. “Introduction” in Bacik, James J. *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery: Mystagogy According to Karl Rahner* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), ix.

hearers of God's Word, the speakers of our creeds, the builders of God's Reign. Rahner remarks on the mysterious world we live in:

The secular world, as secular, has an inner mysterious depth, in all its earthly mysteries from birth to death, through which, by the grace of God, it is open to God and his infinitely incomprehensible love even when it is not, before receiving the explicit message of the gospel, aware of it... For whenever its demands and its reality are really met and endured in the whole breadth and depth of natural human existence and in totality of human life, then... the grace of Christ is already at work and this response and endurance are already something Christian, though they maybe explicitly only secular and natural.<sup>40</sup>

God chooses to reveal Godself in a human person and in the everyday by taking flesh in the world. The entire orientation of our lives, experiences, and world is suffused by the gratuitous offer of God's self to us, and all of creation is revealed to us in, and sanctified by, Christ. Mystagogy for Rahner, enables our capacity to apprehend this truth.

In the first place a mystagogy (if we may use the term) of the mysticism of ordinary life is necessary; it must be shown that he whom we call God is always present from the very outset and even already accepted, as infinite offer, as silent love, as absolute future, wherever a person is faithful to his conscience and breaks out of the prison walls of his selfishness.<sup>41</sup>

However, mystagogy remains obscure to many Catholics despite its recovery of Vatican II. I recognize two reasons for this. First, the word "mystagogy" sounds alien, tinged with the arcane and hints of the magical. In the flatness of our instrumental, technical rationality and data driven existence, this word (and the concept) can be met with distrust and skepticism. Second, the mystagogy period lacks the emphasis that the preparation and celebration of the sacraments have—they have no "public" appearance in the life of the church. In so far as there is no ritual or liturgical celebration of mystagogy, nor is it preached about, or spoken of, in the liturgical year, it remains hidden to the wider community. It leaves little wonder that mystagogy becomes a much-diminished aspect of the catechumenal progression and life of the church, and points to the need for a far more effective mystagogy.

### Rooted in Experience

Through faith, then, we enter into the mystery that all life, all being, all created things are "graced" because the Triune God gives God's self to them. God holds in being all things that are not God because God loves them. I propose (with Rahner) that the primary and essential characteristic of mystagogy is the epistemological category of experience – the source for encountering the mystery. The whole created order is set up to reveal Godself. Experiences of God, "which transcend the human, always require interpretation."<sup>42</sup>

Religious education is one way to engage that interpretation, which, for Catholic Christians, always happens within the context of community and tradition. Enter the religious educator as mystagogue. Religious education that engages people's lives and emotions is a mystagogy. Regardless of particular theological content, at the most foundational level, religious education has the potential to be a mystical act: its proper object is the Divine. Undeniably, the

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<sup>40</sup> Rahner, Karl. "The Parish Bookshop," *Christian in the Market Place* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), 97.

<sup>41</sup> Rahner, Karl. "On the Theology of Worship", in *Theological Investigations*, volume 19, 149.

<sup>42</sup> Vorgrimler, Herbert. *Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 6.

object of our discourse, inquiry, and scholarship is a *Someone*, who wants and desires to be known and reaches out to us through the ordinary and everyday.

Experience is an indispensable companion to theology and religious education. In truth, all we know of God is a mediated encounter, experienced and revealed through the sensible world. The careful dialog and reflection on these encounters within tradition is the mystagogical task: to stand at the edge of what is knowable.<sup>43</sup>

Whenever we plunge into the depths of our life and existence— seeing it emerge at birth, grow, preserve itself, multiply, undergo consecration, healing from ruptures and the like— we do not simply touch the mystery of life. We also penetrate into that dimension of absolute Meaning we call God and its manifestation in the world we call Grace.<sup>44</sup>

A mystagogical praxis acknowledges and compliments how religious education participates in the sacramental economy, honors the epistemological category of experience, and addresses current inadequacies of religious education.

Precisely because it was to affirm people toward a lived and living faith, mystagogy in the Patristic Age was also affective, based in the sensible, and made use of evocative and lyrical language, ever disposing people toward following the way of Jesus. Harmless summarizes brilliantly the foundations of mystagogy arising from early Christianity:

Mystagogical thinking is not difficult; it is simply different... mystagogy is an oral art and differs from a scholarly text on sacramental theology. Mystagogy moves by a logic more associative than discursive, more poetic than philosophical. This logic is not its only salient feature. There is another: a preference for surplus, whether a surplus of cultural images or scriptural echoes or both. The mystagogue tends to let these images and echoes pile up so that the meanings cluster and set off vibrations among themselves; the scholar, by contrast, tends to sort them out into discrete bits of meaning.<sup>45</sup>

A mystagogical praxis presupposes God's *a priori* reaching out to humanity through the created order of which we are part:

God wishes to be present to the consciousness of human beings, to come to an understanding with them, to open up to them the meaning and goal of their lives. This happens in that God reveals Godself... one who is interested in human beings. Humans cannot be aware of this utterly different God, this spiritual reality living in a different dimension, except by some sensible mediation.<sup>46</sup>

Rahner, however, writing shortly after Vatican II, points to a crisis of relevancy confronting the Church and religious education. He depicts the predicament of inadequate theology to address the modern mind and a well-educated populace that helped precipitate the Council, and characterizes some of the backlash following it. Much of his description rings true today. As a corrective, Rahner suggests the need of a "mystical theology."<sup>47</sup> Prophetically,

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<sup>43</sup> Karl Rahner writes in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, "wherever a person allows himself to fall into the abyss of the mystery of his own existence with ultimate resolve and ultimate trust, he is accepting God."

<sup>44</sup> Boff, Leonardo. *Sacraments of Life, Life of the Sacraments: [story Theology]* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1987), 60-61.

<sup>45</sup> Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 367.

<sup>46</sup> Vorgimmler. *Sacramental Theology*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> My research has come across several independent references to Rahner's contribution to a book entitled *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie (Handbook of Pastoral Theology)* regarding mystagogy and its importance to the future of theology. However, I could find no English translations. This seems like an important work to be translated.

Rahner states, “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.”<sup>48</sup>

Recovering a robust reflection on human experience along mystagogical lines could be the key to addressing this crisis in religious education in today’s world. “Experience,” Regan writes, “marks our Judeo-Christian tradition indelibly: from the Exodus to the Christ event, it is founded on religious experience. We ignore that experience at our peril.”<sup>49</sup> Boff draws our attention to this dynamic so beautifully and poetically throughout his book *Sacraments of Life, Life of the Sacraments*:

The Hebrew people were masters at interpreting human history as a history of salvation or damnation. On the basis of some very important experience, they continually reread their whole past history. New syntheses arose, in which their present was found implicitly announced and slowly prepared way back in the past. It gradually emerged into the light and then broke clear in their present experience of faith. The past was a sacrament of the present.<sup>50</sup>

We should be cautious and vigilant, however, to ensure mystagogical praxis in religious education enables and includes the experience of persons without being or becoming, individualistic. This is what Boff alludes to in the quote above: The Hebrew *people* collectively reflected on their *communal* experience and history and tradition. Reflecting on experience within tradition and the community is essential. “We always receive the gospel from someone else, rather than through an inner experience directly from God. The gospel is not my own private revelation or relationship with God, but a gift given through the hands of others.”<sup>51</sup> How might we begin to utilize this praxis of mystagogy alongside our current approaches to religious education?

### *Branches of New Growth: Mystagogical Praxis*

The Patristic Era taught us that scripture, experience, and even creation itself may be read like a book of revelation.<sup>52</sup> We have further received a framework for moving through the rites with the restoration of the Order of the Catechumenate from Vatican II. While mystagogy is most closely affiliated with the catechetical process of deepening an understanding of the rites of initiation, this essay argues that our understanding of mystagogy may be applied more broadly. I assert its value in this broad sense as an important (if not critical) methodological partner to religious education. What might a framework look like that orients our vision to reveal God’s presence, fullness, and abundant grace teeming through all creation and in the ordinariness of our everyday lives?

As we have seen from the pattern of *recollect*, *recognize* and *relate*, mystagogy begins with a steeping in scripture and tradition within a community, then pairs it with active reflection on experience and mystery, ultimately leading to that which must be articulated and expressed in a life that gives witness. This pattern is an integral part of the mystagogical process and is

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<sup>48</sup> Rahner, Karl. *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*. Rahner, Karl, 1904-1984. *Schriften Zur Theologie*. English, 15. Emphasis mine.

<sup>49</sup> Regan, David. *Experience the Mystery*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> Boff, Leonardo. *Sacraments of Life, Life of the Sacraments*, 38-39.

<sup>51</sup> Sawicki, Marianne, “Tradition and Sacramental Education”, 45. Seymour, Jack L., and Miller, Donald Eugene. *Theological Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 45.

<sup>52</sup> See Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei*, Book XVI for the notion that God has set all of creation as a “great book” to be read in order to “discover” God.

primarily inductive in nature. “The inductive method begins from the concrete, sensible, visible world and the tangible experiences of the person... and moves towards insights, principles, and conclusions of faith.”<sup>53</sup> The recognition required in the mystagogical process is experiential knowing, through direct relationship, and through encounter. Incorporating mystery, reverencing emotion, validating experience, and upholding revelation are all necessary components to the enterprise of religious education in our world and church today.

### Conclusion

Contemporary religious education must be responsive to the challenges of the modern context: a frame that is influenced by secularity, excludes experience as a way of knowing, commoditizes and espouses a form of reason more geared toward production and consumption than humanization. However, there are signs that modernity—and even more so, late modernity—still pursues a fullness to break through this frame, to echo Charles Taylor.

Mystagogy emerges as a relevant and important contribution from the early church for religious education this modern context. An emphasis on a mystagogical approach nurtures a sacramental imagination. It honors the category of experience and places mystery at the heart of the life of faith. It militates against the instrumentalization of creation, materialism, and commodification so emblematic of our current circumstances. Indeed, experience and mystery are the only way we can come to know the meaning of our relationship with Absolute Mystery. Mystagogy is about growing into mystics—a life-long process of becoming alert to God’s hidden presence.

The religious educator is a mystagogue, one who participates and enables others to participate in the sacramental mystery and revelatory work of God through religious education. Proceeding with awe, caution, and reverence, religious educators are empowered to integrate the phenomenological and the mystical into their teaching. Mystagogy takes the category of experience seriously—as *prima theologia*—and empowers the experience of those without status, those on the margins, and those who are excluded to speak and be revelatory of mystery. Aided by the ancient notion of mystagogy, I suggest a praxis that includes the inductive movements of *recollection*, *recognition*, and *relation* to benefit the integration of mystery and experience at the heart of all religious knowledge and formation.

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<sup>53</sup> Kelly, Francis D. *The Mystery We Proclaim: Catechesis at the Third Millenium* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1993), 129.

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