

“*Mystagogy of the Eucharist* is an excellent resource that weaves together practice and theory. The reflective process which is offered to parish ministers and teachers enables both the catechist and the community to more fully understand the biblical process of mystagogy and its meaning for one’s life.”

— Catherine Dooley, OP, emerita,
Catholic University of America
Washington, DC

“Anyone who has been involved in the study and practice of liturgical catechesis over the past twenty five years has benefitted from the work of Gilbert Ostdiek. *Mystagogy of the Eucharist* offers a brilliant synthesis: an engaging framework for mystagogical reflection and its flexible application to each segment of the eucharistic liturgy. What do we do? What does it mean? Whether you are reading this as a liturgist, catechist, or first time participant in mystagogical reflection upon the experience of Eucharist, you cannot help but be drawn into mystery. In responding to the church’s call for new evangelization, I highly recommend this text for anyone facilitating parish faith development or religious formation.”

— Mary Ann Clarahan, RSM
Professor of Liturgy and Sacraments
Pontificio Collegio Beda, Rome

“Many people have come to associate mystagogy with the rites of Initiation, it being in the narrow sense the period between Easter and Pentecost. But mystagogy is more than a period of time; it is a way of knowing from ritual experience. Gil Ostdiek applies this principle as he reflects upon the Eucharist drawing upon the liturgical symbols, prayer texts, and ritual actions of the Mass. He provides a wonderful pastoral resource for liturgical ministers and those responsible for liturgical formation. Anyone reading this book will come to savor the liturgy to a greater extent knowing the Eucharist from within.”

— Michael S. Driscoll, Professor of Liturgical Studies
and Sacred Music at the University of Notre Dame

“The paschal mystery is the key to understanding our lives as Christians. In Fr. Gilbert Ostdiek’s *Mystagogy of the Eucharist*, pastors and catechists have an invaluable resource to deepen their community’s celebration, understanding, and participation in the Eucharist, which is our communal and individual entry into the paschal mystery.”

— Rev. Joseph E. Weiss, SJ, Pastor
Saint Thomas More Catholic Community
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Mystagogy of the Eucharist

A Resource for Faith Formation

Gilbert Ostdiek, OFM



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Preface

This little book is the product of many people. The contents have been field tested over a number of years with many participants in workshops and sessions of mystagogical reflection on the Eucharist, including parishioners, clergy, and graduate theology students. To them I owe grateful thanks for their responses and suggestions. I also wish to thank my faculty colleagues at Catholic Theological Union who have been a constant source of inspiration and support in so many ways. I especially owe a debt of gratitude to all the staff at Liturgical Press, who have been most solicitous, patient, and helpful in bringing this volume to publication. Finally, I wish to express my deepest thanks to my family and friends, my Franciscan confreres and students, all of whom have taught me so much about how liturgy speaks to us and what it means for our lives. Above all, to our gracious and loving God, be all thanks, honor, and glory.

Gilbert Ostdiek, OFM
Professor of Liturgy
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Abbreviations

- RB *The Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).
- CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (John Paul II, 1992)
- DOL *Documents on the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982)
- GDC *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997)
- GILM *General Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass* (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, ICEL translation, 1998)
- GIRM *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (ICEL translation, 2010)
- LG *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican II, November 21, 1964)
- LGWO *Liturgical Gestures Words Objects*, ed. Eleanor Bernstein (Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy, 1995)
- MR *Missale Romanum: The Roman Missal*, 3rd edition (ICEL Translation, 2010)
- OM The Order of Mass, in *Missale Romanum*, 3rd edition (ICEL Translation, 2010)
- SC *Sacrosanctum Concilium: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Vatican II, December 4, 1963)

Introduction

Why this book?

Why did they change the Mass? Does that change what the Mass itself means? These questions were often asked when the revised *Roman Missal* was implemented in Roman Catholic communities at the beginning of Advent 2011. To be sure, there were many well-designed programs of preparation. Much of the material for that preparation focused, however, on what changes were being made in the new translations and why,¹ or on the theology of the revised texts.² Others gave the historical and theological background for each part of the revised Mass.³ Questions people asked gave voice to a thirst for something beyond instructions or academic theology. People still feel a persistent hunger to know what the Eucharist means for their daily living, to connect liturgy and life. That is the hunger this book seeks to address.

To explore what the Eucharist can mean for daily living, *Mystagogy of the Eucharist: A Resource for Faith Formation*, takes an approach that differs from many of the available resources. It offers a mystagogy of the Eucharist, that is, a reflective walk-through. It asks two simple questions about the Eucharist: What do we do? And what does that mean? Toward that end, the book takes the ritual actions of the Eucharist as its starting

¹ E.g., Paul Turner, *Understanding the Revised Mass Texts*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2010).

² Barry Hudock, *The Eucharistic Prayer: A User's Guide* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), focuses specifically on the Eucharistic Prayer. For a publication focused on the homiletic and catechetical potential of the revised texts, see Anscar J. Chupungco, *The Prayers of the New Missal: A Homiletic and Catechetical Companion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

³ E.g., Paul Turner, *At the Supper of the Lamb: A Pastoral and Theological Commentary on the Mass* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011).

point. It then draws on liturgical symbols, prayer texts, and reflective commentary to explore what meaning those ritual actions can have for Christian living.

This book is offered primarily as a pastoral resource for those who are responsible for the formation of worshippers and their liturgical ministers. Chief among those who bear this responsibility are directors of liturgy, those who prepare liturgical ministers, RCIA directors and catechists, and especially directors of religious education and of adult faith formation. It might also be of use in campus ministry and retreat settings. Though this book has been written from a Roman Catholic context and perspective, others are also invited to borrow freely and adapt whatever may be of use in their own contexts. The ultimate goal is that *Mystagogy of the Eucharist* will help all who participate in the celebration of the Eucharist to name and reflect on the deeper meaning it has for daily living.

The plan of the book is simple. The first chapter in Part I will sketch some reminders about liturgy and mystagogy. Chapter 2 will offer a biblical model of mystagogy and describe some practical procedures and resources that can be used for it. Subsequent chapters in Part II will reflect on individual segments of the eucharistic rite: gathering, proclaiming and listening to the Word, presenting the gifts of bread and wine, offering thanks and oneself, breaking and sharing bread, being sent, and saying Amen.

Part I

Frameworks

1

Some Reminders

About liturgy

What is liturgy about? The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy issued by Vatican II is very clear about it.¹ The paschal mystery lies at the heart of the liturgy. Christ “achieved his task of redeeming humanity and giving perfect glory to God, principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension” (SC 5). The Constitution goes on to say: “In the liturgy by means of signs perceptible to the senses, human sanctification is signified and brought about in ways proper to each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members” (SC 7).

Let’s focus for a moment on the phrase “signs perceptible to the senses.” What are those signs? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains it this way.

A sacramental celebration is woven from signs and symbols. In keeping with the divine pedagogy of salvation, their meaning is rooted in the work of creation and in human culture, specified by the events of the Old Covenant and fully revealed in the person and work of Christ. (CCC 1145)

¹ Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), ICEL translation, in *Documents on the Liturgy 1963–1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts*, nos. 1–131 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982). Translations of the Constitution are taken from this source and cited in text hereafter as SC. Also online at www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

. . .

The liturgical celebration involves signs and symbols relating to creation (candles, water, fire), human life (washing, anointing, breaking bread) and the history of salvation (the rites of the Passover). Integrated into the world of faith and taken up by the power of the Holy Spirit, these cosmic elements, human rituals, and gestures of remembrance of God become bearers of the saving and sanctifying action of Christ. (CCC 1189)

Liturgical signs and symbols, then, are built up of many layers:

- created realities that were meant to tell us something of their Creator;
- human and religious rituals that make use of these perceptible realities in social gestures that enable people to communicate with one another and with their gods;
- rituals of Jewish life that take up those human and religious rituals and transform them into gestures of remembrance of the covenant; and
- rituals from the life of Jesus and his early followers that further transform those Jewish rituals into gestures of remembrance of the covenant Jesus announced in word and deed and sealed with his death and resurrection.²

These liturgical signs and symbols make use of material realities, human actions, and words. As the Constitution indicates, “human sanctification is signified and brought about in ways proper to each of these signs” (SC 7). Classical theology spoke of the sacraments as working in both those ways, i.e., signifying and effecting salvation. The stress, however, fell more on their efficacy than on their communicative function. Current theology has recovered and highlights the communicative function. The sacramental signs themselves, prior to any theological reflection, say what they do and do what they say. They are like God’s creative word (*dabar* in Hebrew): “God said ‘let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:3). In the biblical way of thinking, words do things and deeds speak. The Constitution encourages us to attend to that power of the sacramental signs and symbols to say wordlessly what they bring about.

²Summarized from CCC 1146–52.

How do symbols communicate?³ From its Greek roots the word “symbol” (*sym* + *ballein*) means to bring together what was apart. By mutually engaging our bodies and all our senses, human symbols make communication possible between people. Symbols are not just objects; they are symbols because of our actions, what we do with them. Think of actions like exchanging and wearing wedding rings or displaying and saluting flags. They not only engage the body, they speak to the heart without the need of words. They give expression to what is within us and communicate that to others through sound, sight, smile, touch, gesture. And when others receive this communication through their bodily senses, the magic happens. Our inner selves are in touch with each other, to share something of our dreams, our loves, our lives, our very selves.

Liturgical symbols work in that same way. They bring together our embodied selves and the hidden God we worship, who is present to us under tangible signs and symbols. Liturgy begins with our bodies. Think of baptismal washing with water, of sharing food and drink, of anointing someone with oil, and so on. Liturgical symbols begin with bodily action, but they do not end there; they lead to the mystery hidden within. Spiritual cleansing, nourishment of soul, healing of spirit. And marvel of marvels, the words of our liturgy tell us again and again that it is not just we who perform these holy human actions; rather, our liturgical action embodies that of Christ: “The Gospel of the Lord.” “May the peace of Christ. . . .” Liturgical symbols are born for communication. They bespeak and bring to fruition all that unites us, especially the love of Christ and our love for one another. “People in love make signs of love.”⁴

Liturgical catechesis, then, needs to attend to what the ritual actions of the liturgy have to say, not just in words, but by their very performance. According to the *Catechism*, that embodied meaning builds on the use of created things in human and Jewish rituals, and it transforms what those rituals say and do. That layering and transformation of meaning in liturgical rites will be of great importance for mystagogy, for it is in the liturgical rituals themselves that mystagogy begins.

³ Some of the material in subsequent paragraphs is adapted from an earlier article, Gilbert Ostdiek, “Ongoing Mystagogy Begins in the Liturgy,” *Pastoral Music* 25, no. 6 (Aug/Sept 2001): 21–22.

⁴ Bishops Committee on the Liturgy, *Music in Catholic Worship* 4 (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972, revised ed.1983).

About mystagogy

When they hear the word “mystagogy,” most people now connect it with the period in the catechumenate that follows the sacraments of initiation. To appreciate fully what mystagogy is and understand its role, we need to step back and place it in a larger framework. The church sees catechesis, that includes mystagogy, as a form of ministry of the Word. That ministry, in turn, is a “fundamental element” in what the church calls evangelization.⁵ Another name for evangelization is the mission of the church. That mission is what Jesus entrusted to his disciples before his Ascension. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). Their mission is to be an extension of his own. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). The church’s mission is what God entrusted to Jesus. His shorthand name for his mission is the “reign of God.” He was sent to announce it and bring it about. In that reign, attitudes and values of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and invitation to all to sit at the table were foremost. For after all, the God who sent him “is love” (1 John 4:8).

The church’s mission to bring about God’s reign unfolds in four steps, church documents tell us (e.g., GDC 47–69). The first step is called *silent proclamation*. That is the living witness of Christ’s disciples who by their lives show others what life in God’s reign is to be like.⁶ Silent witness is absolutely critical for the evangelization work to follow. Without it the following steps would not have credibility or succeed.

The second step is *missionary activity*, that is, the *explicit proclamation* of the gospel. We normally associate this with “missionaries,” but we all have a part to play.⁷ At the conclusion of every celebration of the Eucharist, we are all sent forth on mission, to proclaim the gospel and glorify God by how we live.

⁵ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 50 (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998). Hereafter cited in text as GDC with paragraph number.

⁶ For a striking description of the evangelizing power of silent witness, see Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 21 (1975). Online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html.

⁷ Pope Francis has written: “In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. . . . Every baptized Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus; we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’, but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples.’” *Evangelii Gaudium* 120. Online at www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en.

The third step in the church's mission is the formation of local Christian communities. This takes place through *initiatory activity*. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is now a growing focus of that initiatory activity with adults.

Once a Christian community has been formed, the fourth step is *pastoral activity*, caring for ongoing formation in Christian living. There are elements of catechesis in each of these four steps of the church's mission. The form of mystagogy that is our focus fits into the fourth step, as part of the church's pastoral activity.

It was noted above that mystagogy falls within the larger framework of catechesis. That merits further consideration. Mystagogy is one form of liturgical catechesis, that itself is one among many other kinds of catechesis. Church documents speak of liturgical catechesis as "an eminent kind of catechesis" (GDC 71). Liturgical catechesis takes place in several phases:

- catechesis that prepares for celebration of the liturgy (RCIA and thereafter);
- catechesis that occurs within the celebration itself; and
- catechesis that follows after and flows from the celebration.

These three phases can be characterized as catechesis *for*, *through*, and *from* the liturgy.⁸

Phase two, catechesis *through* celebration of the liturgy, though it is not technically known as mystagogy, deserves further commentary. The *Catechism* (1074) calls the liturgy "the privileged place for catechizing the People of God." This means that the celebration of the liturgy, that is primarily worship of God, also nourishes faith (SC 33) and has an ongoing formative power as the liturgical year unfolds.⁹ The *Catechism* (1075) teaches that the goal of liturgical catechesis is "to initiate people into the mystery of Christ. . . ." Initiation into the mystery of Christ is at the heart of catechesis, just as it is in the liturgy. That initiation begins in the liturgy, in the sacraments of initiation, and it continues

⁸ Catherine Dooley adds a fourth phase, catechesis for mission, in "To Be What We Celebrate: Engaging the Practice of Liturgical Catechesis," *New Theology Review* 17, no. 4 (November 2004): 9–17.

⁹ Consilium, *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* 1 (Vatican, 1969). This document can be found among the front materials in the 2010 *Roman Missal*.

in all subsequent celebrations of Eucharist and the other sacraments; it continues as well in post-sacramental mystagogical formation.

The liturgy itself can thus be said to be the beginning of mystagogy. How does that happen? Several aspects of the celebration help make that possible. First, if those who plan and lead the celebration are “thoroughly imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy,” they become models and teachers for the faithful (SC 14). Second, if the celebration “corresponds as aptly as possible to the needs, the preparation, and the culture of the participants,”¹⁰ they will be able to enter into it more easily and make it their own. Third, the celebration will begin the process of opening up the symbols if they are both human and holy. That is, the symbols help people connect liturgy and life if they are shaped with loving care and bear the stamp of their maker’s hand (i.e., they are human) and yet are “able to bear the weight of mystery, awe, reverence, wonder” (i.e., they are holy).¹¹ The symbols need to show both the traces of their origin in human rituals and the memory and imprint of how their meaning has been transformed through the saving actions of God in salvation history. Such symbols are “truly worthy, becoming, and beautiful, signs and symbols of the supernatural world” (SC 122). Fourth, a mystagogical turn of phrase in the words left to the presider’s discretion, such as the homily, invitations, and brief introductions, can open up what the liturgy means for life. In ways such as these, the celebration itself can become an effective “first catechesis,” the beginning of the formal mystagogy to follow.

The third and last phase of liturgical catechesis that is part of the ongoing formation of the community includes the mystagogy that is our focus. That is the catechesis that follows after and flows *from* liturgical celebration.¹²

¹⁰ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 352 (ICEL translation, 2010), found among the front materials in the 2010 *Roman Missal*. Hereafter cited in text as GIRM with paragraph number.

¹¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* nos. 146–148 (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2000).

¹² The term “mystagogy” usually refers to the fourth period of the RCIA. Liturgical catechesis continues after initiation as part of the pastoral activity of continuing formation of the community that is named variously in GDC as “continuous education,” “ongoing formation,” “permanent catechesis” (51, 71). Although this ongoing liturgical catechesis, called “an eminent kind of catechesis,” is described as both preparing for the sacraments

What is mystagogy? The origins of the word “mystagogy” help make that clear. In ancient Greek religious culture, mystagogy meant being guided into the mysteries (for example, the sacred religious rites of mythaic cults). The root words in Greek are *muein*, to close one’s eyes/mouth, in a feeling of awe at the experience of those secret rites, and *ago*, to lead or guide. The experienced guide is called a mystagogue. Mystagogy is a kind of apprenticeship, a learning by doing. That is a natural human process still in use today—we learn to drive or to cook by doing it under the tutoring of a skilled driver or cook who can guide us in doing it and explain it to us more and more fully as we progress. The “it” in our context is initiation into the dying and rising of Jesus.

How does mystagogy work? After noting that the aim of liturgical catechesis is “to initiate people into the mystery of Christ,” the *Catechism* adds “by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the ‘sacraments’ to the mysteries” (1075). This is a simple, yet apt description.¹³

There are three steps in the process of mystagogy. The starting point is the experience of the liturgical signs and symbols used in the celebration. They have already communicated to us, without words, what it is that the sacrament accomplishes; they do the meaning. The words that accompany the ritual action give us a first articulation of what that meaning and effect are. This articulation, however, is not yet the fully stated meaning that formal mystagogical reflection will draw out.¹⁴ Mystagogy thus proceeds from the visible to the invisible, from the liturgical signs to what they signify, from the sacraments to the mystery. That is the starting point for the formal mystagogy to come.

The next step, mystagogy proper, is the formal, structured process that helps people name and reflect on their liturgical experience. In keeping with the multilayered reality of symbols described earlier, that reflection can draw on the experience of the underlying human ritual,

and promoting a deeper understanding and experience of the liturgy (71), it implements what can be seen as an extension of the RCIA period of mystagogy. This book uses the term “mystagogy” in that extended sense.

¹³ For commentary, see Catherine Dooley, “From the Visible to the Invisible: Mystagogy in the Catechism of the Catholic Church,” *The Living Light* 31 (Spring 1995): 29–35.

¹⁴ In fact, as ritual studies teach us, the meaning of ritual goes beyond what words can ever say about it. Ritual is its own way of knowing. See Ted W. Jennings, “On Ritual Knowledge,” *Journal of Religion* 62 (1982): 111–127.

on what Scriptures and tradition tell us about the transformation of those rituals in Jewish life and especially in the life of Jesus and his early followers. It can draw on the words that accompany the ritual actions and on subsequent reflections within the Christian community to interpret the meaning of the rites. And above all, it invites people to connect those rituals to the paschal mystery of Christ.¹⁵

The final step in the mystagogical process is a mystagogy for mission, to guide people in inserting themselves into the Christ story and to ask what it means for Christian living. How are Christian lives to be shaped and formed into the pattern of Christ's living, dying, and rising, into a journey of dying to self and rising to a newness of life in him? Christians are sent from the Eucharist to live out that dying and rising in silent witness in the world,¹⁶ and when they return from that mission to celebrate the Eucharist again, the cycle of liturgy and life repeats itself.

¹⁵ The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* 244 describes the period of mystagogy this way: "This is a time for the community and the neophytes to grow in their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, and sharing in the Eucharist, and doing the works of charity." Note the parallel to RCIA 76, that calls for catechumens to be formed by teaching, community living, liturgical celebration, and leading lives of witness to the gospel. Again, it is learning by doing under wise explanatory guidance. GDC, 90–91 sets the baptismal catechumenate as the model for all the church's catechizing activity. The ongoing mystagogy we are concerned with should thus draw inspiration from the holistic mystagogy in the final period of the RCIA.

¹⁶ In a lovely phrase, Paul says that we are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10).