

“This important book reminds us again and again that the liturgy is primarily not about what we do for God but what God does for us in a unique way through the liturgy. Throughout Boselli penetrates to the spiritual heart of the liturgy. A much-needed book at a time when debates about liturgy are all too often about externals, not the inner depth of what liturgy is and does. The author’s invitation that we truly ‘listen’ to God speaking to us through word and sacrament—as simple as that sounds—is a much-needed lesson not only about liturgy but about the Christian life.”

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and Theology*

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Facilitator, International Commission on  
English in the Liturgy

“Today perhaps more than ever we need to deepen our spiritual understanding of the church’s liturgy. Boselli provides us with a genuine mystagogy, leading to a profound appreciation of the depths of the liturgy and rooted solidly in the Scriptures and the early Christian writers. His work brings out the nature of the liturgy as primarily a gift from God, God’s work among us, calling us to listen to his word and respond. It will be of enormous value to ministers, scholars, and the worshipping faithful alike.”

—John F. Baldwin, SJ  
Professor of Historical and Liturgical Theology  
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

# **The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy**

*School of Prayer, Source of Life*

Goffredo Boselli

Translated by Barry Hudock

Foreword by Paul De Clerck



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# Foreword

You have in your hands an important book. It sheds light on the current situation of the liturgy, fifty years after the Second Vatican Council and initial efforts at applying the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. This distance in time allows the author to take account of the long experience of the liturgical reform, including a deeper understanding of the very meaning of the liturgy itself. In fact, it is in regard to the latter topic that this book makes its most significant contributions. In a certain sense, the introduction summarizes well everything the book has to say:

[T]he future of Christianity in the West depends largely on the church's capacity to allow its liturgy to become the source of the spiritual life of all believers. For this reason, the liturgy represents an important challenge for the church today. I am increasingly convinced that the decisive question that demands an answer from us is not so much how believers experience the liturgy but whether believers live from the liturgy they celebrate.

So that Christians can live from the liturgy, Goffredo Boselli offers us a method: mystagogy. Just as *lectio divina* allows us to penetrate the depths of the meaning of the Scriptures and to live that meaning more authentically, mystagogy introduces us to the mystery. "What *lectio divina* is for Scripture, mystagogy is for the liturgy." Unlike

those who conceive understanding the liturgy as intellectually subduing and making its contents our own, here we read that “in celebrating the mystery, we are initiated into the mystery.” “[The] close connection between Scripture and liturgy is the essence of the fathers’ spiritual intuition, and it is made concrete through mystagogy.”

The author presents his thinking over a series of chapters, offering a mystagogy of several key moments of the eucharistic liturgy and exploring topics such as the role of the liturgy in the life of the church, liturgy and love for the poor, and the way the liturgy transmits the faith. The author, though a monk, is not satisfied to confine his thoughts to matters of spirituality. He is attentive at all times to the liturgical-theological foundation of his thinking, taking, for example, the ritual of the breaking of the bread as a starting point for identifying the social consequences of the celebration. He is able constantly to extract from the rites their quintessence, in the sure conviction that the meaning of the liturgy must determine liturgical praxis, and for this reason the first and fundamental school of the liturgy is the liturgy itself. Each of these chapters are marked profoundly by a living awareness that the liturgy provides its own explanation of itself, naturally, and that it bears great theological importance for Christians of today and tomorrow. Throughout the presentation of his arguments, the author demonstrates his thorough immersion in a solid biblical and patristic, theological and liturgical culture.

In his final chapter, on the relationship between the liturgy and the transmission of the faith, a certain disquiet emerges. I perceive in those pages a tension, if not even an opposition between an authentically spiritual liturgy and the convivial character with which many today wish to imbue the celebration. Is there necessarily opposition



between these two goals? Is there not a way to reconcile them, giving a distinctive a rhythm to the celebration?

Throughout this work, Goffredo Boselli demonstrates himself to be a man grounded in mystery. He has integrated the profound meaning of the liturgy, living it personally and communicating it in a style that is both intelligent and accessible. We might say that this book marks the beginning of a second stage of the postconciliar liturgical reform: following the publication of the new rites and their initial reception, it is time for a theological deepening; this is very necessary today and it is coming about. It is a step forward in our understanding of the liturgy!

Paul De Clerck  
Professor  
Institut supérieur de liturgie  
Institut catholique de Paris

# Translator's Note

I have made strong efforts to provide patristic translations from the appropriate English sources. Where the available translations are dated, I have occasionally made some minor revisions to eliminate obvious English archaisms. In some cases, where published patristic translations were not available to me, I translated passages directly from Br. Boselli's Italian text. I have noted the instances where this has occurred.

# Introduction

*“We . . . worship in the Spirit of God.”*

—Philippians 3:3

One often gets the impression today that the liturgy is perceived more as a problem to be solved than as a source of life. And yet the future of Christianity in the West depends largely on the church’s capacity to allow its liturgy to become the source of spiritual life of all believers. For this reason, the liturgy represents an important challenge for the church today. I am increasingly convinced that the decisive question that demands an answer from us is not so much how believers experience the liturgy but whether believers *live from* the liturgy they celebrate. How believers experience the liturgy, in fact, depends on how they live from the liturgy. To live from the liturgy one celebrates means to live from what one experiences there: mercy invoked, the word of God heard, thanks given, Eucharist received as communion. If believers live from the liturgy, they will experience it differently, because it bears within it the spiritual energies that are essential for their growth in the spiritual life. The liturgy, in fact, is the specific way the church lives from Christ and through Christ and enables believers to live from Christ and through Christ. The liturgical words and gestures are ordered to this: “[T]o me, living is Christ” (Phil 1:21).

It is not at all obvious that the liturgy might be a spiritual experience, because one can celebrate liturgy throughout one's life without ever drawing one's life from it. And this is true of all believers without distinction: laity, clergy, or monastics. More than a century after the start of the liturgical movement and half a century after the start of the postconciliar liturgical reform, we must ask the difficult question of whether the liturgy has or has not become the source of the spiritual life of believers.

The great Christian tradition has always considered the liturgy to be the fertile womb of the church from which Christians are born. The liturgy is parturient. It gives life. For this reason the liturgy does not choose its own purpose but receives it from the holy reality that it celebrates and which it serves exclusively: the mystery of God in Christ, which we confess in the Creed to be "[f]or us men and for our salvation."<sup>1</sup> Like the mystery that it celebrates, the liturgy, too, is for us and for our salvation. For this reason, the purpose of the liturgy is the sanctification of people; it is through holiness of life that one gives glory to God. Therefore, the decisive criterion on which one can judge the quality of the liturgy can be nothing other than the quality of the spiritual lives of those who celebrate it. It is necessary, then, to put before all other liturgical concerns the goal that Christians find in the liturgy the nourishment of their lives of faith, that they never celebrate the liturgy without living from it.

We must recognize that while believers have been taught, in recent decades, how to draw nourishment for their spiritual lives from the Scriptures, they have not been taught to draw it in a similar way from the liturgy. Half a century after

1. *The Roman Missal, Third Edition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 527.

the important choice of the council to draw the word of God closer to the heart of the church, we have seen remarkable growth in awareness of the Bible by Christians, thanks in part to the rediscovery of *lectio divina*, brought about by monastics and pastors who have carefully broken and shared the bread of the Word. We have seen the spontaneous growth of a great number of Bible study groups where the laity meet weekly to read and meditate together on the Sunday readings or on entire books of Scripture. Many observers suggest that in the history of the church there has never been such a great awareness of the Bible by the people of God as there is today. Can we say the same of the liturgy?

Despite the profound renewal brought about by the conciliar liturgical reform and the undeniable benefits that have come with the reestablishment of the connection of the liturgy to believers and believers to the liturgy, it is still not possible to say that the liturgy is the nourishment of the spiritual life of believers in the same way that can be said today of the Scriptures. In reality, what happened in regard to the Bible has not happened in regard to the liturgy. By introducing believers to *lectio divina*, we have taught them a method for knowing and understanding the Bible, an interpretive key so that every single Christian can personally approach the word of God contained in the Scriptures. We placed in the hands of believers not only the Bible but also a tool that has enabled them to draw from the Scriptures the necessary food for their lives of faith. Although there is still a long way to go, the reconnection of believers to the Scriptures is today a reality that would have been unthinkable only fifty years ago. When the conditions were provided that made it possible for believers to understand, because they were taught a suitable and effective method for approaching a task as complex and demanding as hearing the word of God contained in the Scriptures, it became possible.

In the same way, the church could provide the conditions that enable believers to live from the liturgy by teaching them a method for understanding the liturgy they celebrate. It is urgent to teach a sort of *lectio* of the liturgy that helps Christians understand the meaning of the liturgical texts and gestures in order to interiorize the mystery they celebrate. This would mean, for example, approaching the mystery of the Eucharist by understanding the meaning of the eucharistic prayer. To interiorize the dynamic and the content of the anaphora would mean nourishing one's life of faith with the church's eucharistic faith in its highest and fullest expression. As long as believers draw their understanding of the Eucharist from other places, they will be unable fully to live from the mystery of the Eucharist as it is celebrated by the church. It may well be an authentic eucharistic faith, but it will also be an incomplete one. An illuminating example in this regard was offered by the bishops of France in 1978, when they published a small catechism called *Il est grande le mystère de la foi*, which presented all of the essential points of Christian faith by taking as its starting point Eucharistic Prayer IV. In the introduction to their catechism, the bishops wrote:

The church believes as it prays. Every eucharistic celebration is a profession of faith. The rule of prayer is the rule of faith. For this reason, we French bishops, wishing to present to Catholics in our dioceses the essential aspects of the mystery of faith, offer not a new document but a text already known to many: the eucharistic prayer. . . . We believe all that the church of Christ believes, all that is expressed in the eucharistic prayer.<sup>2</sup>

2. The Bishops of France, *Il est grande le mystère de la foi. Prière et foi de l'Église catholique* (Paris: Éditions du Centurion, 1978), 3.

The adage *lex orandi, lex credendi* is valid not only for the church as a whole but as a principle of every single Christian's life of faith. If the church believes as it prays, so every Christian is called to believe as he or she prays with the church.

For believers to live from the liturgy, they must have a method that allows them to draw directly from the source of the church's prayer. Like the holy Scripture, the liturgy must be understood, meditated upon, and interiorized until it becomes a part of personal prayer. I am referring not merely to intellectual understanding but to a spiritual and existential understanding that certainly includes an intellectual aspect. The question posed by the apostle Philip in the Acts of the Apostles to the Ethiopian official whom he finds reading the prophet Isaiah—"Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30)—should also be asked regarding the liturgy: "Do you understand what you are celebrating?" The response of the Christian people is the same as that offered by the Ethiopian: "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31). To guide into the mystery is, in Greek, *mystagoghêin*. Mystagogy is a method and a tool that the ancient church offers us to help the faithful live what they celebrate. What *lectio divina* is for Scripture, mystagogy is for the liturgy. The great fruits borne in recent years by the practice of *lectio divina* among the Christian faithful teach us that there is no place for resignation or cynicism in these efforts. The ongoing success of *lectio divina* has demonstrated that it is possible to teach Christians to drink from the pure source of their faith. This has been happening now for several decades with regard to Scripture, while with the liturgy it is largely yet to be realized.

This book is a little contribution that seeks to move us in this direction. It is a collection of texts that I have written in recent years for various occasions and circumstances. Essentially a collection, it does not have the linear

and uniform structure that one might expect of a monograph. Put in musical terms, we might say that it does not have the ordered and established unity of a symphony but the irregular pace of a rhapsody in which different themes freely intermingle. But the golden thread that runs through it and in a certain way gives it form is the need for a spiritual reading of the liturgy.

Part 1 is about mystagogy, its meaning and its use. I propose a mystagogical reading of several parts of the eucharistic liturgy—the penitential act, the Liturgy of the Word, and the presentation of the gifts—showing that the liturgy takes not only its meaning but also its structure and its dynamic from Scripture. Part 2 considers the role of the liturgy in the life of the church, and through various themes—assembly, presbyter, missal, prayer—I seek to show that the way the church prays establishes not only what the church believes but what the church *is*, to the point that the liturgy challenges our way of being church. Part 3 explores the Eucharist as the source of social ethics and the role of the liturgy in the transmission of the faith. Here I seek to show the relevance of the liturgy to the church's *hodie*—the circumstances and situations of today—which is always at the same time the *hodie* of society and of the world.

Bose  
April 21, 2011  
Holy Thursday



Part One  
*Mystagogy*



# Chapter One

## Introduction to Mystagogy

*[H]e who is still blind and dumb, not having understanding . . . like the uninitiated at the mysteries, or the unmusical at dances . . . must stand outside of the divine choir.*

—Clement of Alexandria<sup>1</sup>

### *The Liturgy Initiates Us into the Mystery*

Mystagogy is bound up with the reality of the mystery of God. It is ordered to that mystery of which the liturgy is an epiphany.<sup>2</sup> To speak of mystagogy immediately calls to mind the catecheses and homilies with which some of the most important fathers of the church—including Cyril (or John) of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia—introduced their catechumens and neophytes to the meaning of baptism, Eucharist, and more

1. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, 5.4, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. William Wilson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 449.

2. This chapter was originally published as “La mistagogia per entrare nel mistero,” in Enzo Bianchi and Goffredo Boselli, *La liturgia, epifania del mistero* (Bose: Qiqajon, 2002).

#### 4 *Mystagogy*

generally, the major elements of Christian liturgy. But there is more to mystagogy than the mystagogical catecheses of the fathers. It is, in fact, a vast, many-faceted, and extremely complex reality that cannot be limited solely to liturgical initiation.

The scholar René Bornert effectively summarized all the complexity of mystagogy in two principle definitions. Mystagogy “is in the first place the accomplishment of a sacred action and in particular the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, baptism, and Eucharist.”<sup>3</sup> To say that mystagogy is first of all a liturgical action means the liturgy is, in itself, mystagogy. It is by its nature an epiphany of the mystery of God; in celebrating the mystery, we are initiated into the mystery. For the fathers of the church, then, the celebration of the mysteries is already initiation into the mysteries. Through liturgy, the mystery is revealed, communicated, made known. This is to say that liturgy is a theological act, an action of God, and for this reason, it accomplishes what it signifies. As is well known, Benedict, in his Rule, never uses the word *liturgy* to refer to this reality but always the expression *opus Dei*, the work of God. To describe the liturgy as *opus Dei* is to attribute to God’s action in the liturgy the same qualities that Scripture recognizes as belonging to the word of God, a word that is, in itself, act, a word that accomplishes what it signifies. Through the prophet Isaiah, God describes the nature of the word that comes from his mouth:

it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55:11)

3. René Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la Divine liturgie du VII<sup>e</sup> au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Institut français d’études byzantines, 1966), 29.

Bornert offers a second meaning of mystagogy: it is “the oral or written explanation of the mystery that is hidden in the Scripture and celebrated in the liturgy.”<sup>4</sup> Mystagogy takes account of both the mystery contained in the Scriptures and the mystery contained in the liturgy. The object is one: the mystery of God. The modalities of expression of the mystery are two: Scripture and liturgy. And the method of explanation for both is the same: mystagogy. The great spiritual intuition that the fathers expressed in their mystagogical catecheses was to apply the same method they used to interpret Scripture to their interpretation of the liturgy. Using the same method of interpretation, the same hermeneutic for two distinct realities, means recognizing in these two realities a profound and essential unity, while never denying their distinction, their difference, and the preeminence of the Scriptures over the liturgy. Indeed, the Scriptures are the norm of the liturgy. This close connection between Scriptures and liturgy is the essence of the fathers’ spiritual intuition, and it is made concrete through mystagogy. It is also the reason for mystagogy’s profound relevance for the church of our own day.

### ***Jesus Christ, Mystagogue***

To begin by understanding mystagogy as an eminently christological action means above all to affirm that only the mystery can fully reveal the mystery: mystery reveals itself. This is an essential truth of the Judeo-Christian faith experience: humanity knows God’s name because God has freely revealed it. The revelation of the mystery of God is an act that God carries out.

4. Ibid.

In Jewish apocalyptic literature—in which the Christian understanding of mystery is deeply rooted—the mystery (*mystérion* in the Greek Bible) is the secret, divine plan that God alone can reveal to his servants the prophets, as Amos proclaimed:

Surely the Lord God does nothing,  
without revealing his secret  
to his servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7)

To the prophet Daniel “the mystery was revealed . . . in a vision of the night” (Dan 2:19), and when the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, orders him to explain the mystery contained in his dream, Daniel responds, “No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries” (Dan 2:27-28). To reveal the mystery is the work of God alone.

Like the prophet Daniel, the apostle Paul sees himself as one who comes “proclaiming the mystery of God” (1 Cor 2:1). He asserts that “the mystery was made known to me by revelation” (Eph 3:3). And for Paul, the mystery is God’s plan “to gather up all things in [Christ]” (Eph 1:10), and so that mystery is, in sum, Christ himself, revealed fully in his death on the cross. Christ is, for Paul, not only the revealer of the mystery but is himself the mystery of God. In the synoptics, too, in the only place the word *mystery* occurs, we find the idea that God alone is the revealer of the mystery. It is Jesus himself who, in the context of explaining to his disciples the parables of the Kingdom, says, “[K]nowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted” (Matt 13:11 NABRE; cf. Mark 4:10; Luke 8:10). Therefore, the one who entrusts to his disciples “the mystery of the kingdom” is Jesus, “the prophet mighty in deed and word” (Luke 24:19).

Despite this profound understanding of Christ as revealer of the mystery of God, the term *mystagogy* appears nowhere in Paul or anywhere else in the New Testament to designate initiation into the mystery, nor is the title of *mystagogue* attributed to Jesus. This can be explained by the fact that in the Jewish tradition it was the *rabbi* whose role it was to introduce his disciples to the knowledge of God, above all through commentary on the Scriptures.

But in the third and fourth centuries, in places rich in Greek culture like Alexandria and the churches of Asia Minor, Christian authors like Origen and fathers of the church Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and others take a decisive step. The fathers did not assume the Greek concept of mystery, since for the Greeks mystery was a reality that had to remain hidden and of which one could not speak. The Greek understanding of mystery, then, is exactly the opposite of the Judeo-Christian one, for which the mystery is the revelation of the secret of God and God's will. The fathers of the church limit themselves to recognizing in the Greek term *mystagoghía* its sense of initiation into the cultic mysteries by the mystagogue, a term adequate for describing much of Jesus' teaching of the disciples and the crowds, as well as the preaching of the Gospel by the apostles. The preaching of Paul is described as mystagogy by, among others, Gregory of Nyssa: "Paul . . . initiates the people of Ephesus in the mysteries (*mystagogheî*) and imbues them through his instructions with the power of knowing what is that 'depth and height and breadth and length' [of the knowledge of God]."<sup>5</sup> At

5. Gregory of Nyssa, Catechetical Discourse 32, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Select Writings and Letters*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 500.

Antioch, John Chrysostom preaches, “Paul is to be seen in prison, even in chains, instructing and initiating [*mystagogoûnta*: offering mystagogy], even in a court of justice, in shipwreck, in a storm, and in a thousand dangers.”<sup>6</sup>

On Jesus as mystagogue, it is enough to mention two witnesses. Gregory of Nazianzus, who in *Christus patiens*—a work that is a true and proper tragedy in the style of the Greek tragedies—puts in the mouth of an anonymous person this cry addressed to Judas: “You are the initiated into the mystery (*mýstes*) and you dishonor your fellow disciples by handing over for money your mystagogue (*mystagogón*).”<sup>7</sup> For Gregory, then, Jesus is the mystagogue of his disciples, and the twelve then become the initiated who in turn initiate others to the mystery of God. In the same way, Cyril of Alexandria, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, says regarding the episode of Jesus teaching the crowd at Capernaum and the healing of the demoniac that immediately follows, “It was useful and necessary that Christ often followed his mystagogy with miracles.”<sup>8</sup> It is clear, then, that Cyril does not hesitate then to describe as mystagogy the teaching that Jesus offered to the crowds, making Jesus a mystagogue and his listeners initiates into the mystery.

6. John Chrysostom, *Homily I on the Statues*, 30, *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. W. R. W. Stephens (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889).

7. Gregorio de Nazianze, *La passion du Christ* 195–96, ed. A. Tuiler, SC 149 (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 145. [My translation from Bosselli’s Italian.—Trans.]

8. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*. [My translation from the Italian. Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, trans. R. Payne Smith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1859), 41, <http://www.elpenor.org/cyрил-alexandria/luke-commentary.asp?pg=41>, accessed January 18, 2014.—Trans.]



When the fathers speak of Jesus as a mystagogue and describe “all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning” (Acts 1:1) as initiation into the mystery of God, they are using extrabiblical categories to describe the extraordinary awareness that John expresses at the conclusion of his gospel: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18). He has “made him known” (*exeghêsato*): Jesus has offered an exegesis of God. We can therefore describe Jesus, with the Fourth Gospel, as *the exegete of God* and, with the Greek fathers, *the mystagogue of God*, meaning that nothing reveals the mystery of God more than the words and actions of Jesus.

According to the Easter stories of the evangelist Luke, the texts of Scripture are not enough to arouse the disciples’ faith in Jesus’ resurrection; it is, rather, the Risen One who, manifesting himself to the eleven, “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:45). The testimony of Easter faith expressed in the gospels tells us that neither the Scriptures nor repetition of the words and gestures of Jesus are sufficient to arouse the church’s confession of faith. The risen Christ himself must be the exegete of his mystery hidden in the Scriptures. It is he who opens the minds of the disciples to understand the Scriptures; it is not the Scriptures that open their minds to understand the mystery of Christ. In addition to the testimony of the gospels, and in profound fidelity to them, we have the testimony of the early church, which attests that neither the Scriptures nor the rites, texts, and liturgical gestures are sufficient in themselves to arouse the confession of paschal faith. The Risen One, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is the mystagogue who opens our minds to understand the liturgy. To affirm, in a perspective of faith, that mystagogy is an eminently christological action means therefore to be aware that the intelligence of the believer

alone is not enough to understand the mystery hidden in the liturgy. The revelation of the mystery of God is always an act of God, because only the mystery reveals the mystery. Just as every time that the church breaks the bread of the Word it is Christ himself who is the exegete of his mystery contained in the Scriptures, so when the church as mystagogue initiates Christians into the mystery contained in the liturgical action, it is Christ himself who opens their minds to understand the liturgy.

### ***The Link between the Scriptures and the Liturgy as Matrix of Mystagogy***

Having looked at mystagogy as a christological activity, we turn now to consider how the essential link between the Scriptures and the liturgy is the matrix, the womb in which mystagogy has its origins. We considered above the testimony of the Scriptures and the fathers of the church. I would here like to take as a point of departure the witness of the liturgy.

In the most solemn eucharistic celebrations, the Roman Rite calls for the ritual of placing the Book of the Gospels, the Evangelarium, on the altar. It is a gesture of great significance, but one that too often passes nearly unnoticed and is therefore rendered mute and misunderstood. At the beginning of the liturgy, the Evangelarium is carried solemnly, in a grand gesture of being held high before the entire assembly, until reaching the altar, the heart of the assembly. Its enthronement on the altar is truly an epiphany of the mystery, the mystery of the Word of God that, passing through the existence of the people of Israel, finds its realization in the *'avodà*, the cultic service offered to God. This cultic service, however, is not the point of arrival of the Word of God but rather the place of the "passage"

of God through the midst of his people; it is intended to permeate the entire existence of the children of Israel, so that their very lives might become the true worship of God.

For us Christians, the same Word that permeated the entire history of Israel, in the fullness of time, “became flesh” (John 1:14) in Jesus Christ. We confess that Jesus is the *‘eved Adonaj*, the servant of the Lord who offered his life as a true and total service of God, and for this reason we recognize in him the realization and the fulfillment of the *‘avodà*, the true cultic service of God, understood as an offering of oneself, of one’s entire life. In Christ, the word of God becomes not just a body but a body offered, a total gift of self. For this reason, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews puts in the mouth of Christ the prophecy of the psalmist:

Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,  
but a body you have prepared for me. (Heb 10:5; cf. Ps 40:6)

Behold, then, the epiphany of the mystery in the gesture of placing the Evangelarium upon the altar. The word of God has found its fulfillment in the true worship offered by Christ to God on the cross. It is the gift of self unto death, the body given and the blood poured out, of which the altar is the place of memorial, the place of thanksgiving. Truly profound is the spiritual understanding behind the church’s choice to put the enthronement of the Evangelarium on the altar at the very beginning of the eucharistic celebration. It becomes the interpretive key, the hermeneutic of all that is celebrated in the liturgy that has just begun. The gesture is in fact the most eloquent icon with which the liturgy manifests the intrinsic unity that exists between the Scripture and the mystery of the altar, the Eucharist.

The recognition by the fathers of the church of the essential link between the Scriptures and the Eucharist goes

as far back as Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote of taking flight “to the gospel as to the flesh of Jesus.”<sup>9</sup> For Origen, the words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper over the bread and wine also make reference to the word of Scripture. Origen writes:

It was not the visible bread that he held in his hands which God the Word called his body, but it was the Word in whose sacrament the bread was to be broken. Nor was it the visible drink that he identified as his blood, but it was the Word in whose sacrament the libation was to be poured out.<sup>10</sup>

Jerome adds:

[A]s the Lord’s flesh is true food and his blood is true drink, on an anagogical level, all the good we have in the present age is to feed on his flesh and drink his blood, not just at the sacrament but also in our reading of the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup>

These few examples are enough to make clear that the fathers of the church recognized a strong relationship between the Scriptures and the Eucharist. It is in this horizon of understanding—the Scriptures and the Eucharist as a single mystery, the sacramental body of Christ—that mystagogy has its origins.

9. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, 5.1, in William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 200.

10. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, in Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 14–28*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT Ib (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 248.

11. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 3.13, trans. Richard J. Goodrich and David J. D. Miller, *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 66 (New York: Newman Press, 2012), 60.

Until the fourth century, Christians were a persecuted minority, and in these conditions the liturgy was a simple and basic reality. The activity through which the church generated faith was the teaching of the mystery of Christ through commentary on the Scriptures. The spiritual exegesis of the Old and New Testaments was therefore the womb, the matrix in which the church confessed its faith. In the fourth century, the church confronted a new reality, which included the task of leading a great number of catechumens and neophytes to understand the mystery contained in the liturgy. Reading the most ancient mystagogues, it is clear that the fathers intuitively interpreted baptism and Eucharist, and then the liturgy as a whole, in the same way they interpreted the Scriptures, since the Scriptures and the liturgy contain the same mystery: Jesus Christ.

Origen wrote: "The words which have been written are mystical."<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere he said, "[T]he Scriptures were written by the Spirit of God, and have a meaning, not only the meaning that is apparent at first sight, but also another, which escapes the notice of most. For those (words) which are written are the forms of certain mysteries, and the images of divine things."<sup>13</sup> It is clear that the fathers were equally aware that all that the liturgy contains is also mystery and that the liturgical rites too are "the forms of certain mysteries, and the images of divine things." Thus they applied to the liturgy the same exegetical method they used to interpret the Scriptures, the typological method, which they had found used already by the New Testament authors.

12. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 10.2, trans. Ronald E. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 71 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 158.

13. Origen, *De Principiis* 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4 (New York: Scribners, 1925), 241.

And so Jean Danielou could write, “The application of this [typological] method to Scripture is called spiritual exegesis. When it is applied to the liturgy it is called mystagogy.”<sup>14</sup> Typology consisted in understanding the events and people (*týpoi*) of the Old Testament as anticipating and prefiguring the mystery of Christ.

Mystagogy, understood as “typology applied to the liturgy,” puts the liturgy in relation to the events of salvation history, as the Old Testament is put in relation to the New. The mystery that the liturgy hides and communicates—the liturgy’s “meaning that is not as clear,” to paraphrase Origen—is the entire mystery of salvation realized in Christ. However, the typological method applied by the fathers to the liturgy had multiple developments in different ecclesial contexts and schools of exegesis. Over time, mystagogy progressively revealed not only how the liturgy realizes the figures of the Old Testament but also how in every liturgical action there are gestures carried out by Jesus, how it also contains a moral teaching (or an existential value for the life of the believer), and how it prefigures an eschatological reality.

Cyril of Jerusalem, in his mystagogical catechesis on baptism, understands the baptismal anointing as the definitive realization of the anointings narrated in the Old Testament:

[T]his Chrism is prefigured in the Old Testament. When Moses, conferring on his brother the divine appointment, was ordering him high priest, he anointed him after he had bathed in water, and from that point he was called “Christ” (“anointed”), clearly after the figurative Chrism. . . . But what was done to [him] in figure was done to you, not in figure but in truth, because your salvation

14. Jean Danielou, “Le symbolism des rites baptismaux,” *Dieu-Vivant* 1 (1945): 17–43 at 17.

began from Him who was anointed by the Holy Spirit in truth.<sup>15</sup>

Through mystagogy the fathers also show that the liturgical action is, in reality, the action of Christ himself and that it is therefore never distinguishable from the action of the Father and the Spirit. Addressing neophytes in baptismal catechesis, John Chrysostom says:

[I]t is not only the priest who touches the head, but also the right hand of Christ, and this is shown by the very word of the one baptizing. He does not say: "I baptize so-and-so," but: "so-and-so is baptized," showing that he is only the minister of grace and merely offers his hand because he has been ordained to this end by the Spirit. The one fulfilling all things is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the undivided Trinity.<sup>16</sup>

These extracts of mystagogical texts demonstrate that mystagogy was a true and proper theology of the liturgical mystery, revealing the mystery of Christ and for this reason encompassing a Christian's entire existence. Just as in the Scriptures there is a spiritual meaning hidden within the *graphé*, the human work of writing, so in the liturgy there is a spiritual meaning hidden within the *érgon*, the human action, gesture, or rite. The rite is for the liturgy what letters are for the Scriptures. For this reason, the liturgy, like the Scriptures, calls for a spiritual understanding, a deeper

15. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 3, 6, in *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 64 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 173.

16. John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, 2.26, trans. Paul W. Harkins, *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 31 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963), 53.

penetration. The more one reads the mystagogical texts, the more it becomes clear that for the fathers, mystagogy was not a simple initiation into the liturgy but rather, starting from the liturgy, an understanding of the single mystery contained in the Scriptures and celebrated in the liturgy: the mystery of Christ. The fathers of the church shared a certainty that *cum Scriptura* and *sub Scriptura* the liturgy had its own way, unique and singular and therefore essential, of communicating the mystery of Christ. The communal prayer of Christians is called *leitourgía*; it is *érgon*, a doing, an acting. The knowledge offered by the liturgy, therefore, is not entirely intellectual and rational. It is an integral knowledge, an experience that invests all of a person's faculties. In the liturgy, one learns by listening, speaking, seeing, smelling, touching. The senses are the pathway to meaning.

### ***The Relevance of Mystagogy***

Mystagogy's relevance to the church today was reiterated forcefully and authoritatively by the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985, celebrated to mark twenty years since the close of the Second Vatican Council. In its final document, the synod fathers offered several suggestions for the renewal of the liturgy and declared: "Catecheses must once again become paths leading into liturgical life (mystagogical catecheses), as was the case in the Church's beginnings."<sup>17</sup> We should ask ourselves: how far have our churches gone today in the reception and actualization of this invitation? Are we able to say that mystagogical catechesis is penetrating and forming the vital fabric of the Christian community? It is difficult to give a single and

17. Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod, 2.B.b.2, available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/SYNFINAL.HTM>, accessed January 18, 2014.



definitive response to this question. There are many positive and encouraging signs that give hope, but there are also disheartening and troubling signs, too. We must all, at every level, hold on to the certainty not only of mystagogy's relevance but of its extreme necessity and urgency.

I will limit myself here to recalling two questions found in Scripture. These two questions reveal the permanent relevance of mystagogy, for they demonstrate that it is not an element added on to liturgy but an integral part of the liturgical experience. There is no liturgy without mystagogy. There is no authentic liturgical life without a knowledge of the mystery celebrated in the liturgy.

*"What does this rite of yours mean?"* (Exod 12:26, NABRE)

The Jewish liturgical tradition still lives today and still finds its authenticity confirmed through its obedience to the command found in the book of Exodus:

Thus, when you have entered the land which the LORD will give you as he promised, you must observe this rite. When your children ask you, "What does this rite of yours mean?" you will reply, "It is the Passover sacrifice for the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt; when he struck down the Egyptians, he delivered our houses." (Exod 12:25-27, NABRE)

"What does this rite of yours mean?" is the question addressed at the Jewish Passover by the youngest son to his father who presides. The question is an integral part of the rite itself. Recalling the meaning of the Passover rite, the father's answer protects the rite from the constant risk of standing outside of history. The story he tells prevents the rite from being understood as something magical. Nothing, in fact, is more contrary to the Judeo-Christian faith, a faith in God's actions in history, than the loss of its

historicity.<sup>18</sup> And this can happen easily when the liturgical rite is repeated with no knowledge of its meaning.

“What does this rite of yours mean?” is the same question that the ancient church received from its youngest children, the catechumens and neophytes, and the answer is the mystagogical catecheses of the fathers. The fathers demonstrate to Christians that the events of salvation narrated in the Old and New Testaments are present in every liturgical action. Indeed, within the liturgical rite is the most historic thing of all: the entire mystery of the earthly existence of a man, Jesus Christ, his death on the cross and his resurrection, his entire life. If the liturgical rite is not kept constantly united to the historical event from which it was born and of which it is a memorial, it becomes “mute,” “inexpressive.” It becomes an image that no longer puts us in contact with the living Lord who saved us within history. What is true of the Jewish liturgy is also true of Christian liturgy: when the meaning of the rite is forgotten, contact between the liturgy and salvation history is lost.

The necessity that Christians understand the meaning of their liturgical gestures is affirmed by Origen with a particularly effective image. In his fifth homily on Numbers, Origen explains the spiritual meaning of the Lord’s command to Moses and Aaron to ensure that the first group of Levites, the sons of Kohath, are not eliminated (cf. Num 4:18). The specific task of the Kohathites—to whom it was forbidden to enter the Holy of Holies and to see the holy things (that was permitted only to Moses, Aaron, and their sons)—was to carry the ark of the covenant wrapped in leather and with it all the objects of the tent of meeting wrapped in blue cloth. To the Kohathites, then, is given the unique task of carrying on their shoulders the holy things

18. Cf. P. De Benedetti, *La morte de Mosè e altri esempi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1971), 151–54.

wrapped in coverings. Origen sees in the children of Kohath the figure of those Christians who do not know the meaning of the liturgical gestures they perform:

Who can offer an explanation of the Eucharist, both its overall meaning and the rite that takes place; or of the administration of the baptism: the words, the gestures, the rites, the questions and responses? We bring all these things covered and veiled on our backs, as they were given and entrusted to the high priest and his sons. When we carry out these practices and similar things without knowing the meaning of what we do, we bear a burden on our backs and carry the divine mysteries hidden under cloth.<sup>19</sup>

For Origen, when the meaning of the rites are not known, the mystery remains hidden and becomes a weight that the Christian must bear.

“What does this rite of yours mean?” is the definitive and radical question on the true meaning of the liturgy. Mystagogy is the church’s response. It is an essential element of the church’s transmission of the true meaning of the liturgy, because it is above all a spiritual understanding of the liturgy that makes transmission of its authentic meaning possible.

*“Do you realize what I have done for you?”* (John 13:12, NABRE)

During the Last Supper, Jesus, in the Fourth Gospel, carries out the gesture of a slave who washes the feet of his master every time the master sits down at table. In the context that John gives it—the Last Supper, which is in the synoptics the place of the Eucharist—and with the sacred gravity with which Jesus performs it, this gesture becomes

19. Origen, *Homilies on Numbers* 5.1–4. [My translation from the Italian. –Trans.]

a priestly action that assumes the solemn traits of a liturgical rite. The task of a slave becomes the rite of the Lord. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus again reclines at table—John tells us—and asks his disciples, “Do you realize what I have done for you?” (John 13:12, NABRE). And then Jesus interprets himself. He becomes the exegete and the mystagogue of his own action: “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet” (John 13:14, NABRE). Just as the entire mystery of Christ, the entire meaning of his existence, is enclosed in the eucharistic gesture of the breaking of the bread and handing over of the cup, so also in the washing of the feet. To understand the meaning of these gestures is to understand Christ.

If, as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms, every liturgical action is an action of Christ,<sup>20</sup> then he still today addresses his question to the church: “Do you realize what I have done for you?” In this question we find the entire relevance of the church's mystagogy for the announcement of the Gospel today. Mystagogy is not one method among other possible methods, not a simple pastoral choice among many; it is the way we know what Christ does today for his church in the liturgy. Just as, for the disciples, understanding the meaning of Jesus washing their feet meant understanding the meaning of his entire life and death, so today, understanding what Christ does in the liturgical action means knowing the mystery of Christ in its entirety. With Christ and the liturgy, there is a circular interpretive movement: knowing Christ through the liturgy because Christ himself is the principle of knowledge and interpretation of the liturgy. Christ is the only and true mystagogue of his mystery. When the church performs mystagogy, it

20. Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7.

becomes a servant of Christ the mystagogue and makes the Christian an *epóptes*, an eyewitness<sup>21</sup> of the mystery of God. Clement of Alexandria writes:

For he who is still blind and dumb, not having understanding, or the undazzled and keen vision of the contemplative soul, which the Savior confers, like the uninitiated (*amýeteon*) at the mysteries, or the unmusical at dances, not being yet pure and worthy of the pure truth, but still discordant and disordered and material, must stand outside of the divine choir.<sup>22</sup>

Those who participate in the liturgy without knowing the mystery are like a dancer who dances without knowing the music or the rhythm.

Mystagogy, then, means understanding the mystery narrated by the Scriptures and celebrated in the liturgy. Just as the spiritual exegesis of the Scriptures offers understanding of Christ, so mystagogy, the spiritual exegesis of the liturgy, offers spiritual understanding of Christ. With mystagogy, we can truly apply to the liturgy the well-known principle of Jerome: *Ignoratio Scripturarum, ignoratio Christi est* (“Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”). In the same way, *Ignoratio liturgiae, ignoratio Christi est* (“Ignorance of the meaning of the liturgy is ignorance of Christ”).

21. Here we render *epóptes* as eyewitness, as we find it in 2 Peter 1:16. In a more precise sense, the term means “one who sees from above” or “one who contemplates.” Of particular interest is how for Plutarch, *epóptes* is one who is initiated into the highest level of the mystery (cf. Plutarch, “Alcibiades” in *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives* [New York: Penguin, 1960]).

22. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, 5.4.