

Liturgical Catechesis
Unlocking the Sacramental Imagination

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Introduction

In our time there is deep concern for the continuing reality of decreased attendance at Sunday Mass. Surveys depict multiple reasons for this decline. However, it is likely that far too many people experience Mass as irrelevant to lived experience. The catechetical ministry of the Church has a unique opportunity to show adults and children that liturgy, particularly the celebration of the Eucharist, has everything to do with the struggles, fears, hopes, and dreams of the human person.

The contemporary world is flooded with individualism, consumerism, radical doubt, economic instability, and ecological disaster. The celebration of the Eucharist, on the other hand, affirms the creative, positive traits of contemporary living, provides hope, and most importantly, is God's active, loving presence among us. The weekly gathering of the Body of Christ in prayer is more than meets the eye. It is a profound symbol of relationship rooted in the sacraments of initiation. The gathering of the baptized illustrates the meaning of faith. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Faith is a personal act – the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals himself. But faith is not an isolated act. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone. You have not given yourself faith and you have not given yourself life. The believer has received faith from others and should hand it on to others" (CCC 166).

Due to the revelatory nature of the Eucharist, liturgical catechesis is indispensable in our time. Liturgical catechesis cultivates the religious imagination with its exploration

of language, symbol, story, prayer, song, and gesture. Mass, therefore, intuitively nurtures, shapes, forms, and provides meaning for life. The Sunday liturgical experience expressed through feasts and seasons unlocks the sacramental imagination and indiscriminately shows us how to live, and in turn how to die. Liturgical catechesis is not a new phenomenon. It is the rediscovery of an affective catechetical method that calls for our attention as we look toward the future.

This essay first looks to the historical connection between liturgy and catechesis. It then explores the meaning of catechesis and liturgy with the intention of mending any fragmentation that exists in current practice. The essay concludes by emphasizing *mystagogy* as a life-long process of reflection.

Historical Partners: Liturgy and Catechesis

The General Directory for Catechesis states that liturgy educates to active participation, contemplation, and silence. It must be regarded as an ‘eminent kind of catechesis.’¹ Therefore, efforts must be made to repair any fragmentation between liturgy and catechesis. Acknowledging the important connection enhances the experience of the catechetical journey, and at the same time calls for deeper participation in the Eucharist.

Historically, liturgy and catechesis were intimately connected. Although theoretically linked today, in practice, they remain divided. In the early centuries of the Christian Church, catechesis and liturgy were two sides of the same coin.² Catechesis was originally associated with the catechumenate, a process consisting of several stages of preparation for baptism. Telling the story occurred through proclamation and celebration.

¹ USCCB, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1997), 71.

² Charles Gusmer, *Wholesome Liturgy* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1983), 32.

Gerald Sloyan writes: “This public instruction delivered to adults and children indiscriminately on the occasion of the celebration of the eucharistic liturgy is the oldest form of catechetical presentation.”³ Regarding the early catechumenate, Sloyan also notes that homilies “woven into the fabric of liturgy” were for centuries, the chief form of catechesis for those on the journey toward initiation and beyond.⁴

This early historical context indicates: catechesis was directed toward the nurture of conversion and rebirth in faith for a way of being in the world.⁵ However, by 1200 C.E., infant baptism was the norm and the three-year catechumenate process was reduced to a six-week period prior to Easter.⁶ With this shift, the profound relationship between liturgy and catechesis began to diminish. The separation became visibly apparent after the Reformation. Regarding this historical period, Anne Marie Mongoven writes, “During this time there were few relational definitions of catechesis and liturgy . . . There were also social and cultural reasons for the separation. Liturgy was the provenance of the priest. Catechesis, on the other hand, which was synonymous with children and CCD, was the work of women . . . Catechists were generally mothers who were not as well educated.”⁷

However, the liturgical-catechetical relationship was reclaimed and gained momentum through the catechetical and liturgical movements of the twentieth century.

³ Gerald Sloyan, “Religious Education: From Early Christianity to Medieval Times,” in *Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics Vol. 1*, ed. Michael Warren, 110-39. Winona: Saint Mary’s Press, 1983, 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵ Joseph E. Weiss, “Liturgy and Catechesis,” in *Liturgical Ministry* 7: 57-66.

⁶ Michael D. Whalen, *Method in Liturgical Catechesis: A Systematic and Critical Analysis of the Relationship Between Liturgy and Catechesis in the Writings of Dom Virgil Michael* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1996), 46.

⁷ Anne Marie Mongoven, “Forum: Catechesis and Liturgy.” *Worship* 61(3): 248-59.

Early catechetical leaders, for example, Josef Jungmann (1889-1975) and Virgil Michel (1890-1938), best known for their liturgical contributions, greatly influenced catechetical renewal. Noteworthy is the *Our Life in Christ* series, edited by Michel (1939). It made a concerted effort to highlight liturgical feasts and seasons in curriculum materials for students. Other allies, Mary Perkins Ryan, Gerard Sloyan, Mary Charles Bryce, were as much a part of the liturgical movement as they were the catechetical movement. *Orates Fratres*, currently *Worship*, concentrated on catechesis as well as liturgy.⁸

Since the Second Vatican Council, beginning with the *General Catechetical Directory* (USCCB 1971), *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory* (USCCB 1978), continuing with the *General Directory for Catechesis* (USCCB 1997) and the *National Directory for Catechesis* (USCCB 2005), the relationship between catechesis and liturgy has been reclaimed and strengthened. The relationship between liturgy and catechesis is most clearly seen in the restored *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA). The RCIA states:

The catechumenate is an extended period during which the candidates are given suitable pastoral formation and guidance, aimed at training them in the Christian life. . . . A suitable catechesis is provided . . . planned to be gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the word.⁹

The recent catechetical documents, the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) and the *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005), claim that the RCIA ought to be the model for all catechesis. Such a claim promotes the partnership of liturgy with catechesis. Liturgists are often reluctant relating liturgy and any form of education. However, such reluctance

⁸ Berard Marthaler, "The Modern Catechetical Movement in Roman Catholicism: Issues and Personalities," in *Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics Vol. 1*, 275-89.

⁹ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 75.

can be alleviated when the meaning of catechesis and liturgy is explored in their richest and deepest sense.

Catechesis: Teaching to be Religious

Catechesis comes from the Greek, *katechein*, to resound or to echo. In the early church, catechesis was a process of instruction given by word of mouth. It was an act of teaching in the way of Christ.¹⁰ Restored with the Second Vatican Council, catechesis presented a new framework for education in faith. Catechesis is intended to be ongoing, flexible, and supportive of Christian life for the whole community. The art of catechesis promotes inter-generational relationships, supports households of faith, is focused on adults, and most importantly, is linked to liturgy.¹¹

Catherine Dooley defines catechesis as “a lifelong process of conversion for the individual and a continual and concerted effort for the Christian community, . . . the tasks of catechesis are: to share and foster community, to proclaim the message of faith, to motivate to serve, and to lead to worship and prayer.”¹²

Catechesis, as a form of religious education, is concerned with the tasks of promoting knowledge of the faith, liturgical education, moral formation, teaching to pray, education for community life, and missionary education.¹³ It includes knowing the Roman Catholic tradition and its set of practices. However, its goal is to know Christ.

¹⁰ Weiss, “Liturgy and Catechesis” 57.

¹¹ Bill Huebsch, *Whole Community Catechesis in Plain English* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), 3-12.

¹² Catherine Dooley, “Catechesis, Catechetics,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchok and Mary Collins, 161-66 (Willmington: Michael Glazier Inc, 1987), 161.

¹³ USCCB. *General Directory for Catechesis*, 74.

Catechesis, therefore, is education as formation and nurture into a particular way of being in the world. It is apprenticeship in the Christian life. Teaching to be religious in a Roman Catholic way is an ongoing, gradual process of sharing faith that begins with the Sunday Eucharistic assembly, is rooted in baptism, involves the whole community, and interconnects with everyday lived experience. Bill Huebsch writes: “Catechesis or growing in one’s faith is constitutive, we would say, of Christian life. One simply cannot say that he or she is Christian unless he or she is also in a process of sharing faith. Sharing one’s faith *is* catechesis. And sharing faith, or catechesis, is what makes a Christian a Christian.”¹⁴

Education through liturgy is part of the process of catechesis. Catechesis links us to the past without being nostalgic, and, at the same time, maintains continuity with the past, but is deeply rooted in tradition. The renewal of catechesis, in our time, offers a profound sense of traditioning for Roman Catholics.

Appropriately understood, catechesis flows from the Eucharist, the principal activity of a parish community. Religious rituals are the primary means of shaping and reshaping a person in faith. Religious development unfolds a pilgrimage through feasts and seasons of the liturgical year. Together, catechesis and liturgy create a journey for re-appropriating deeper meaning in life and in death.

Reclaiming the connection of liturgy and catechesis can enable us to deepen our sense of who we are as a people, of word, sacrament, and service. The relationship of Eucharist with catechesis unfolds for us the profound truth of what it means to be religious. Therefore, catechesis that flows from the Eucharist reveals meaning for the

¹⁴ Bill Huebsch, *Whole Community Catechesis in Plain English*, 20-21.

ongoing process of conversion. It moves the human spirit from initiation, toward celebration and witness.

Liturgy: Catechesis in the Knowledge and Love of God

Liturgy, the work of God, consistently invites people to experience holy mystery through ritual, symbol, narrative, and practice. The ritual prayer of a community religiously educates with an end in view, namely, to know Christ, that is, to experience the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ in relation to the life, death, and resurrection of the world. The curriculum of liturgy, then, is a practice, and the practice (of a people) is profoundly formative and transformative.

Ritual prayer requires entrance into the realm of the imagination. In this regard Nathan Mitchell writes, “This suggests that ritual’s role – liturgy’s role – is not simply to remember but to re-educate. Ritual re-educates desire. Like music, painting, sculpture, poetry or other human arts, ritual invites us to *dare* emotions – to *risk* feelings – we would otherwise never dare or risk. Ritual’s role is to *awaken* us to new ways of knowing, naming and experiencing God.”¹⁵ Through ritual prayer one enters a space where we can begin to make sense out of raw, disturbing, jarring, frightful, joyful, peaceful, and pleasurable moments encountered by humans. Ritual prayer in community makes real that which seems obscure or hidden. It discloses meaning when we dare to leave the comfort zone of the rational and enter into the seemingly eclipsed, waiting arms of God’s embrace.

¹⁵ Nathan Mitchell, “What is the Renewal that Awaits Us?” in *The Renewal that Awaits Us*, ed. Eleanor Bernstein and Martin Connell, 18-31 (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997), 20.

“*Leiturgia*, the curriculum of prayer,” writes Maria Harris, “establishes patterns and rhythms in its ways of being together.”¹⁶ It fashions and refashions the people of God, showing how to appropriate meaning for life. In the same vein, Aidan Kavanagh writes: “My thesis is that although the liturgy does indeed ‘teach,’ it teaches as any other ritual does – experientially, nondiscursively, richly, ambiguously, elementally.”¹⁷ It teaches powerfully in much the same way as poetry, music, and art. It engages people in a language that unfolds meaning and memory. It communicates mystery and invites one into an encounter with God.

Rituals are important to all of life. Ritual activity gives expression to the multifaceted life experiences of all people. They mark the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of birth, death, love, anniversary, achievement, tragedy, waking up, going to sleep, eating, drinking, cooking, playing, entertaining, and praying. Mitchell points out ritual’s expressive, formative, traditional, symbolic, and repetitive characteristics. He writes, “Although individuals may engage in idiosyncratic ‘rituals’ of their own devising, the term is best reserved for actions that are public, social, and collective.”¹⁸ Mitchell’s point has merit. However, attention to personal ritual aids in understanding the public religious rituals that gather, form, and communicate a tradition from age to age.

Caution must be taken if coming to liturgy with a consumer mentality. Liturgy is not about what we get, it is about who we are. Through liturgy we remember who we

¹⁶ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 94.

¹⁷ Aidan Kavanagh, “Teaching Through Liturgy,” in *Notre Dame Journal of Education* 5: 35-49.

¹⁸ Nathan Mitchell, *Liturgy and the Social Sciences* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 25.

are - children of God. Liturgy facilitates a jog of our memory. We forget that we are born from God who loves us despite our efforts to distort truth and ignore the needs of others. Despite the fact that we are often more sinner than saint, God loves us more than a mother loves her child who embraces us unconditionally as her own. Liturgy recognizes this and invites us to let down our pretentiousness and all that divides, thus entering into the realm of the sacred which has everything to do with life.¹⁹

Leaving the consumer mentality aside, one needs to engage imagination and continually recapture childlikeness, and with eyes wide open, reclaim the sensibility, playfulness, innocence, directness, and vulnerability of a child. Children are natural at play, wonder, surprise, trust, and at the same time, have the profound ability to evoke greatness from simplicity.

Liturgy, experienced as ritual prayer in community, educates toward adulthood, understood as childlike. The true meaning of adulthood discovered through the metaphor of childhood points toward the mystery of what it means to be human in a social, sexual, political, and religious way. In this regard Gabriel Moran writes, “To become adult is to recapture some of the qualities of childhood.”²⁰ Education through liturgy moves both adults and children toward wisdom for self-actualization and God’s self-communication. Knowledge of God and self emerges as we let down our guard and enter into ritual prayer.

Childlikeness is essential for the practice of liturgy as it explores the world of paradox, mystery, poetry, and symbol. Thomas Shepard explores qualities of childhood that are important for understanding liturgy. He writes:

¹⁹ J.Glenn Murray, *Why We Go to Mass* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2001).

²⁰ Gabriel Moran, *Education Towards Adulthood* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 32.

The first of these qualities is imagination and creativity. . . . The second quality of childhood involves sensuality and sacramentality. Children first begin to assimilate the world through their senses, not through reason. . . . The third quality is playfulness and leisure. Children are naturally skilled at play. . . . They use their imaginations. . . . Adults, on the other hand, have lost that sense of playfulness and imagination. . . . A fourth quality of childhood is openness and innocence. Children have a directness for truth. They haven't yet learned to make value judgments; they risk being vulnerable to others. 'A little child shall lead them.' And if we are a little suspicious, a little hesitant about what God wants for us, look to children because they will bring us closer to God.²¹

Liturgy, then, invites us to meet mystery, through the eyes of the child within.

Through liturgy we encounter God in Word and sacrament. However, one can never forget that we also encounter God in the gathered assembly. No one is independent; we are bound to one another through baptism. In baptism, and re-presented through liturgy, we share in the life of Christ. To live this life is to live like little children, open to the God of surprises and the treasure within. Therefore, to meet mystery one must learn to be open to God's touch, especially experienced in and through the profound baptismal relationship of the gathered assembly of believers.

Participation in liturgy, as *children* of God, catechizes toward participation in a way of life. For the Christian, this way of life is the hope-filled pattern of death and resurrection. Symbolically and metaphorically, the mystery of Christ, dead and risen, is experienced when the movement toward adulthood is captured as a constant circling back to what came before. The emerging awareness of what it means to be adult embraces death as part of life rather than something that comes at the end of life. This is Paschal Mystery, the mystery that shows us how to live and how to die. Authentic participation in

²¹ Thomas Shepard, "What Does it Mean to be a Child," in *Children, Liturgy and Music*, ed. Virgil Funk, 71-86 (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1990),

liturgy, then, involves taking risks. It involves a letting go that can lead to endless possibility.

The curriculum of ritual prayer is a motivating activity for the worshipping community. It is the center of all catechesis. Moran affirms: “The parish’s center of teaching is its liturgical service in which the lives of the participants are to be inspired and directed. If the liturgy is formative, then its effects should spill over into social and political transformation within and beyond the parish.”²² Education through ritual employs symbols that speak to the religious imagination, evoking powerful images and thoughts that lead to more wholistic ways of seeing, feeling, and acting toward ourselves and others. This is education as deeply formative and developmental.

Conclusion: Mystagogy – Learning to Live Mystery

Eucharist is catechesis for the reign of God. It transcends toward the unknown. In essence, it leads toward maturity where individuals look beyond self and consider the concerns of others. It strives for right relationship with self and others, both human and nonhuman.

Images of community, feast, and celebration emerge out of Jesus’ lived experience, his preaching, and the conviction of generations that followed. The hope-filled patterns of living and dying, expressed in the Eucharist and pondered through catechesis express the ancient story made new when the community of believers gathers in watchful prayer and remembers the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

²² Gabriel Moran, *Religious Education as a Second Language* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1989), 146.

Liturgy, and in particularly Eucharist, celebrates and teaches a way of life, namely, a life-death cycle that occurs within all that is human and nonhuman. The cosmic cycle of life and death, celebrated through Eucharist calls us into a mode of liturgical thinking – *Mystagogy*. *Mystagogy* is best known for its relation to the last stage of the RCIA. However, *mystagogy* is the experience that leaves one awe-inspired. Through a spirit of *mystagogy* one learns to live Eucharistically.

In sum, restoring the historical partnership between liturgy and catechesis illustrates: catechesis and liturgy remember the past, appropriate the present and point us toward a future full of hope. Succinctly, catechesis and liturgy are about tradition. Through liturgy memories of suffering and redemption are made present, traditions are maintained, and hope is restored. In other words, liturgy reveals deep meaning for ordinary life. In partnership, liturgy and catechesis are the foundation for a life-long process of *mystagogy*. Through catechesis the mysteries are explored and pondered for patterns of living rooted in the Paschal Mystery, through the celebration of the Eucharist these mysteries are remembered and celebrated for the life of the world.

Taking the initiative of the *National Catechetical Directory* (2005) seriously calls for greater awareness and practice of liturgical catechesis. “Catechesis both precedes the Liturgy and springs from it. It prepares people for full, conscious, and active participation in the Liturgy by helping them understand its nature, rites, and symbols. It stems from the Liturgy insofar as it helps people to worship God and to reflect on their experience of the words, signs, rituals, and symbols expressed in their Liturgy; to discern the implications of their participation in the Liturgy, and to respond to its missionary summons to bear

witness and to offer sacrifice.”²³ Liturgical Catechesis unlocks a sacramental imagination in our time, and gains for us a deeper perspective toward a way of being in the world.

²³ USCCB, *National Catechetical Directory*, 110.

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