

## Mystagogues: ancient, modern and K-12

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### In the Beginning:

My interest in mystagogy, the teaching of mysteries, begins with my deep and abiding interest in the spiritual formation of public school teachers. Mystagogy, even before I knew the term, was a personal quest rooted in my personal experience with the transformative power of teaching. It was a signature moment in my life when in the midst of pedagogical angst I learned to trust the still small voice of my inner teacher. And mystagogy has become a professional mission as I believe that it is only when teachers learn to access their inner spirit, wisdom, and calling to teach that they stand a chance of surviving and thriving in the soul-stunting environment of many K-12 schools. As a teacher educator who prepares teachers for the public schools I believe that we don't pay too little attention to the spiritual formation of teachers. Teacher education is narrowly focused on the technical and procedural elements of teaching (pedagogy) while deep questions of the inner life (mystagogy) are left either unexamined or unwelcome.

Perhaps the best known counter example to the marginalization of the soul in education is the work of Parker Palmer, particularly his book *Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (2007). Palmer writes: "the teacher within is not the voice of conscience but of identity and integrity. It speaks not of what ought to be but of what is real for us, of what is true. It says things like, "This is what fits you and this is what doesn't"; "This is who you are and this is who you are not"; "This is what gives you life and this is what kills your spirit—or makes you wish you were dead" (p. 30-31). In many ways Palmer is an educator who

knows his way around the deep mysteries of education, the stuff of calling, passion, commitment to inner-gifts, the stuff that is often left off of syllabi in teacher education courses. Palmer is for me a good candidate for the role of a modern-day mystagogue.

The ancient practice of mystagogy offers a new way to broaden the role of teacher educator to include the education of apprentice teachers into the mysteries of teaching instead of the life-stunting consequences of pedagogy as technique. But before going too far down that path I will first define the term mystagogy, provide examples of practices and practitioners from the ancient church, particularly Maximus the Confessor (580-662) and Clement of Alexandria (150-215), and suggest ways that mystagogy is still present in the modern church. Only after accomplishing these tasks will I return to the world of K-12 education to offer some thoughts on ways that the ancient practice of mystagogy can inform the method for teacher education.

#### Defining Mystagogy:

When writing about the process of mystagogy in the ancient church, Andrew McGowan (2014) uses the following descriptors: “teaching and otherwise preparing” (p. 170), “critical educational process” (p. 170), “mystagogy—Christian education” (p. 171), and “pedagogical strategy” (p. 174). As an educator who is interested in the heart of teaching and a member of congregation where I often lead adult education around the theme of spiritual formation I was interested in learning more about mystagogy and its potential application to my life as a spiritually-minded educator. In a technical sense, mystagogy is the stage of Christian faith formation that begins after Baptism. The main purpose of mystagogy is to teach a person how to navigate the conflicted space that often surrounds scripture and the task of living the life of a Christian with integrity and fidelity. This is not as easy as it seems because it entails mastering

“the real mystery of learning to live the paradox of creatureness and Godliness” (Anatolios, 2015, p. 16). The psychic and spiritual challenges associated with fully engaging this paradox requires a discipline that draws from the Gnostic and ascetic traditions of Christianity where the divine mystery, the human creaturely nature, and the spirit inhabit the same space.

Thus, mystagogy, according to Jeffery Morrow (2015) “is a movement from the natural sensory signs to the deeper supernatural realities signified by these external clues. ... mystagogy is sacramental: it facilitates and enables our deeper experience of the rich Christian sacramental life whereby we are divinized” (p. 2). The lived challenge of the mystagogue is to find concrete language, rituals, and texts that invite another person into a deeper relationship with the ineffable qualities of God for the purpose of transformation of a person’s being. And to accomplish this in such a way that the teaching is understandable while preserving the unknowable mystery of the creator. The ultimate goal of “mystagogy is fundamentally an assertion of the eschatological ultimacy of personal identity in the experience of deification, as we encounter the reality of the divine mystery, our own subjectivity—an irreversible gift of God’s agapic love, with all its unique characteristics—will be ratified and affirmed as eternally enduring” (Cattoi, 2015, p. 18).

#### Mystagogy and the Ancient Church:

Colossians 3:1-5 is a good place to begin a discussion about the role of mystagogy in the ancient church. In Paul’s letter he writes: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory”. For Paul, Jesus is the head of the Church and becomes the spiritual model for the divine

life. Maximus the Confessor (580-662) extends Paul's description of living the Christian life. He viewed the church as a physical and metaphysical pedagogical tool for teaching members of the congregation how to transform their human qualities into their divine nature. Maximus begins his argument by claiming that since God created everything that exists in the world then by logical extension, God resides at the center and energizes everything that exists. However, it is also true that human beings are composed of two natures; human nature and divine nature, which are always in dynamic tension. The ultimate mission of each person is "...to integrate the different aspects of their inner lives, as well as their souls and bodies, into a higher, harmonious unity" (Cattoi, 2015, p. 4) called the hypostatic union as modeled by the life and death of Jesus.

It is the unending process of mystagogy through which the creaturely and experiential nature of humanity is pulled up and united with our divine nature, the divinity of the created whole of the universe, and God. Cattoi summarizes Maximus's theological and anthropological stance in this way, "...our experiential knowledge of God is in profound continuity with our experiential knowledge of the natural world, and thereby anchors all mystical experience explicitly and firmly with the created order" (p. 9). Humanness is not something to be avoided and cast aside but rather the ground out which our divinity flourishes. But this process can only occur through spiritual practice and discipline in the form of mystagogy under the strict tutelage of a mystagogue who is well trained in the art of calling out the human soul.

For Maximus, the Church as the physical representation of the process of hypostatic union (the merging of human and divine qualities with the created whole) facilitates transformation through its "pedagogical and liturgical action" (p. 9). Physically, the nave of the church represents the sensual and experiential qualities of humanness and thus is the place inhabited by the congregation during worship. In a metaphorical and symbolic form of

mystagogy the priest and the sacramental elements enter the back of the church pass through the nave and ultimately reside in the chancel or sanctuary, which surrounds the altar. To reinforce the pedagogical message that achieving the higher and more spiritual nature of the priesthood requires work and discipline, the chancel is separated from the nave by stairs, railings, and other impediments.

It is clear from the architecture of most churches that "...the two parts of the building serve different purposes, between them there is an underlying unity, since the nave and the sanctuary derive their meaning from the celebration of the liturgy for which they are built" (p. 10). But more is needed for spiritual transformation than a well-designed worship space to teach the faithful how to elevate and unify their creaturely nature with their divine nature. The physical church becomes a sort of spiritual stage upon which the divine acts of the liturgy and the sacraments are played out before the open hearts and minds of the congregation.

With respect to mystagogy and education into the mysteries of faith, perhaps the most powerful and well known marker of changed identity is Baptism. The first stage of Christian commitment to the hypostatic union with the divine is the catechumenate where the basic building blocks of Christian identity are laid down. The second stage of spiritual formation is termed mystagogy and its signature stance is the task of learning, experiencing and participating in the impenetrable secrets of the faith community. It is only through Baptism a "radical change in your life" (McGowan, p. 18) that a person moves from catechumenate to mystagogy. And historically, it was only after Baptism that "...you would be told the meaning of much that you had undergone, explaining in more detail the significance of the various actions. You would wear your white robe in the gatherings of the church... celebrating your new birth" (p. 25).

Practically the mystagogues responsibility was to teach the Baptized about the unexplainable ways that the spirit works in conjunction with the human heart to facilitate a complete transformation of the person. The early-church mystagogue and theologian Clement of Alexandria states that “many things are spoken in enigmas, many in parables. However, it does not behoove me to teach about these things further, says the Instructor. But we need a Teacher for the interpretation of those sacred words, to whom we must direct our steps. And now, in truth, it is time for me to cease from my pedagogy, and for you to listen to the Teacher” (Bucur, 2009, p. 320). And by “Teacher”, Clement meant Jesus, the ultimate mystagogue who taught with parables, stories, and metaphors.

Judith Kovacs (2001) makes the claim that the pedagogical techniques of mystagogy were drawn from the Gnostic tradition of Christianity and in keeping with its source in mysticism the teachings “...were not a matter of intellect alone; it also addresses the heart and soul of the student and seeks to form his character” (p. 11). According to Kovacs, mystagogues patterned their pedagogy after the perfect teacher, Jesus, the Logos of creation. And in keeping with the teaching style of Jesus an effective mystagogue was responsive to the varying learning styles of students, organized the curriculum of spiritual formation so as to draw students into a higher relationship with the divine, and focused on the care of the soul which included both intellect and the wholeness of the person.

One trait of the mystagogue that seems to run counter to the ethic of care described in the previous three qualities of teaching is that of “concealment” (p. 17). But when practiced with integrity, concealment fits the primary role of teaching about the mysteries of the faith in that the artful hiding of truth with parable, symbols and allegory matches the hidden meaning of scripture, the sacraments, worship, and the invisible workings of God’s “divine pedagogy” (p.

23). Judith Kovacs argues that Clement of Alexandria is a good candidate for the perfect human pedagogue teaching alongside the conceptual and practical modeling of the Logos of Creation: “As we have seen, Clement regards himself as an active participant in the divine work of creation and redemption. He follows the Logos in addressing a wide variety of students and in adapting his teaching to the capabilities and the readiness of each one. Like the divine teacher, he designs an orderly progression through the sacred curriculum, and he takes great care in guiding the souls of his pupils. In order to protect his less mature students, he mimics the concealment practiced by the Logos. In his literary activity, as in his oral teaching, Clement is acutely aware of the high challenge of his vocation as teacher, as he seeks to be a faithful servant—and an intimate friend—of the divine” (p. 23).

#### Mystagogy and the Modern Church:

The theologian Richard Gaillardetz (1996) makes a broad claim that modern-Christians can encounter, in their day to day wonderings amidst the detritus of our consumer culture, a mystagogue present in the voice of every poet or singer we encounter. The poets, according to Gaillardetz, “...as much as the theologians have captured this attentiveness to grace” and by attentiveness he means “...a stance of watchful engagement with our world in trusting expectation that the graciousness of life will manifest itself through this engagement” (p. 9). So like Maximus the Confessor and Clement of Alexandria, Gaillardetz grounds the spiritual formation work of the poets in the experiential and sensual world of our humanness.

There is another aspect of poetry that mirrors the nested set of pedagogical skills Maximus and Clement associate with mystagogy, the poets speak in metaphor and allegory that is often hard to see through and decipher in its fullness. Parker Palmer (2011), a mystagogue of

education in his own right, notes that Emily Dickinson affirms the mystagogical paradox of concealment as revelation when she famously writes: “Tell the truth but tell it slant”. By which she means most people will resist embracing truth if it is delivered straight ahead as hard facts, but they will be pulled into deeper relationship with self and infinite forms of knowing by soft knowledge that squeezes into the human psyche through side or back doors of consciousness. Dickinson, like the mystagogues of old, realizes that too much truth too quickly can be damaging to the human soul: “The truth must dazzle gradually or every man be blind”. It is best for ancient and modern mystagogues to move slowly and indirectly around the soul. The poets and singer/song writers embody many of the ancient qualities and pedagogical strategies of the ancient mystagogue including techniques and intentions that are often opaque and rarely obvious to the listener.

An example of mystagogy in modern times that is a little closer to the grounded experience of most Christians, yet still holds true to a more elevated and mystical understanding of the pull toward unification with the divine can be found within the pages of *Laudato Si’: on care for our common home*, by Pope Francis (2015). The Pope begins his mystical and transformational teaching in Genesis where he interprets the text to mean that God, humans, and nature are intimately connected; we are one big whole of God’s created order: “As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all being” (p. 143). In this picture of wholeness, humans have a particular responsibility for caring for the earth and all its creatures, human and non-human.

In *Laudato Si’* the Pope grounds his teaching text with an evaluation of the limitations and spiritually blind impulses of the consumer culture. His cultural critique of modernity is a claim that modern Christians are too narrowly focused on the material world; our experiential



and sensual humanness articulated by Maximus the Confessor. And like Maximus, the Pope points toward our God-infused human quality that no ideology of social, political or religious oppression can ultimately suppress: “No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts” (p. 135).

It is the Church’s responsibility, argues the Pope, to educate the community of believers about the human, God, and earth relationship; without which humans are not likely to achieve their higher purpose of spiritual transformation and unification with the Divine. Drawing from the Gospel of Luke, the Pope points toward Jesus’s ecological and theological sensibilities when referring to birds: “not one of them is forgotten before God” (Lk 12:6). In language similar to Maximus the Confessor when describing the mystagogical relationships between our human creatureliness, our human divineness, and hypostatic union with God, the Pope as teacher offers this description of Gospel-focused ecological curriculum: “These include the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us... Then too, there is the recognition that God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore” (p. 143).

A prime place for “ecological education” within Catholicism is the period of Christian formation, prior to Baptism or confirmation, called the “catechesis”. The leaders of catechumenates have a rich set of texts, sacraments, and liturgies to draw from in their preparation of spiritually and ecologically-minded disciples. For instance, the Pope quotes Benedict XVI as stating: “The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast”. Benedict sounds like a wise teacher of old who speaks in metaphors and invites the listener into an extended meditation on the deeper meanings and

invisible understandings associated with living into this quote in a way that elevates humanness to unify with the Logos.

So far in my articulation of modern examples of mystagogy I started with the somewhat lofty realm of poetry and then moved to the ecologically-grounded, yet still ethereal, faith formation articulated by Pope Francis. I will conclude this section of the paper with a more intimate example of mystagogy rooted in the spiritual and educational life of a congregation. The church community I worship with has a practice of faith formation for adolescents called confirmation. This process of weekly gatherings, led by the pastor, centers on community building, introduction to the liturgical and sacramental practices of the church, reading of scripture, and personal faith formation. A core text in confirmation is *Words for the Journey: Letters to our teenagers about life and faith*, by Martin Copenhaver and Anthony Robinson (2011). As implied by the title, the book is a collection of letters from Copenhaver and Robinson to their teenage children, for Copenhaver he is writing to his son Todd while Robinson is penning his notes to his daughter Laura.

The text is a lovely collection of heart-felt and heart-delivered instructional messages to a son and a daughter. But what brings the book to life, in the sense of spiritual formation and an invitation for adolescents to enter the next phase of their relationship to God, Logos, and the great unity of all things, is the role of the mystagogue as teacher and translator. Copenhaver and Robinson clearly state that it is the church's responsibility to find experienced and knowledgeable adults to properly educate young people into the practices and rites of the Christian faith: "...teens still need reliable and trustworthy adults in their lives, so we hope to invite that possibility by having mentors. It is their job to get to know you, to help you get to know them, and to learn from their example and experience what it means to be a Christian in

today's world" (p. 60). Mentors in the confirmation process, it can be argued, are the mystagogues of the ancient church, teaching the mysteries of the faith in the basements and out of way places of faith communities, to adolescents with emerging Christian identities. They are uniquely positioned to facilitate the spiritual development of adolescents as they transform their concrete and procedural understanding of church into a rich, mystical and ineffable relationship with the divine presence in all things great and small.

Although *Words for the Journey* is not overtly a mystagogical text in the format of a sermon or exegesis by Maximus the Confessor, Clement of Alexandria, or Pope Francis, the letters do contain descriptions of the deeper mysteries of Christianity for adolescents attempting to navigate the spiritual challenges of the modern world. The chapter, *Letters about Church*, seems to offer the richest curriculum for a teacher looking to develop the ethereal linkage between text, self as human/divine, and God's eternal love toward which all humans are drawn. When describing the changing nature of the church community, Robinson writes: "There are other changes that are harder to spot—less visible, but no less real, changes in people's lives. For some, faith deepens and matures...some face unforeseen challenges... The church is a community of people who are trying to live and teach a particular way of life, a way of life shaped by Christian beliefs and practices" (p. 33-34). In this short letter, Robinson touches on several essential elements of the ancient practice of mystagogy: the ineffable, lived-experience, liturgy as a pedagogical tool, struggle as a catalyst for faith formation, and a community anchored in Christian practices.

Like all good mystagogues of old, Robinson and Copenhaver express their understandings of the mysteries of faith through metaphor and paradox. For instance, when articulating the elements of worship to his son, Copenhaver relies on the metaphor of the womb

and birth to convey the understanding that the practice of worship is more than ritualized behavior, it contains within its functional DNA an invisible teaching about the ways that the embodied experience of worship is a reaffirmation of God's reemerging presence in all of life: "Going to worship is a little like going back to the womb, back to where we are dependent on something or someone else. We all need that at times in our lives, no matter how old or grown up we are. But we don't get to stay there. We get rebirthed, reborn, sent back into the world to stand on our own two feet and to be independent. That is the deep rhythm of the Christian life. Back and forth. In and out. Dependence and independence. Tending our roots, spreading our wings, we need both" (p. 39). Copenhaver's pedagogical intent is in line with Emily Dickinson's suggestion to "tell the truth but tell it slant". He is simultaneously educating his son about the concrete practice of Christian worship while layering in the less visible energizing dynamism of God and God's universal presence in all things from birth, to worship, to individual human experience of the lived world.

#### Benediction:

In the modern world to be educated often means that the person has accumulate or infused with large amounts of knowledge. Within the broader field of curriculum design and implementation this is often referred to as the jug and mug theory of education. The text is mediated through the teacher who becomes the jug pouring the digested wisdom of the text into the student as if pouring water into a mug. It is easy to see the efficiency associated with this metaphor for what could be harder than tipping a jug and filling a mug? And the limitations are also glaringly present. If the jug is only partially full the learner will receive only partial knowledge. Or in the words of Parker Palmer, if the soul and inner-life of the teacher is depleted

how can the soul or inner-life of the learner be filled? Perhaps more troubling, once the student's mug is full of knowledge anything new including information that might result in a radical change of understanding just spills out on desktop to be mopped up later by the janitor. For many students in K-12 schools and faith communities in church basements the mug/jug model of education is the dominant form of effective instruction and pedagogical technique.

Fortunately, there is another way to conceive of the relationship between teacher and student; a way of being together that the ancient church called mystagogy. In contrast to pedagogy which is fueled by techniques of direct instruction and power relationships of imposition from above. Mystagogy moves in the opposite or better yet a deeper direction as it seeks to invite learners into a paradoxical learning space fueled by instructional strategies that are indirect, mystical, and rich with metaphors. In this sense, mystagogy is closer to the root meaning behind the word education, which means to "draw out" than the more functional meanings associated with pedagogy. It is the goal of the mystagogue to draw out the inner wisdom of the learner, the Logos of the soul. And without giving all the truth away, which no one, except Jesus fully knows, the mystagogue conveys the hidden mysteries of Christianity in ways that invites both an inner and outer transformation of the person so as to more closely approximate their divine nature within a human form.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, my professional role is to prepare teachers for teaching in the K-12 schools, the art and craft of pedagogy. But I wonder what would happen or even what it would look like if the profession approached its work more through the image of mystagogue, someone more interested in the inner-life of teachers than their outer efficiency on test scores or delivery of standardized curriculum. I will close with the poem *Two Kinds of Intelligence* by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Rumi. He speaks to the question of

the power to “author” one’s professional life in way that reminds me of the work of the mystagogue whose primary task in both the ancient and modern church is to strive for hypostasis, the unity of all things by driving upward from the human heart.

*There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired, / as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts / from books and from what the teacher says, / collecting information from the traditional sciences / as well as from the new sciences. / With such intelligence you rise in the world. / You get ranked ahead or behind others / in regard to your competence in retaining / information. You stroll with this intelligence / in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more / marks on your preserving tablets. / There is another kind of tablet, one / already completed and preserved inside you. / A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness / in the center of the chest. This other intelligence / does not turn yellow or stagnate. It’s fluid, / and it doesn’t move from outside to inside / through conduits of plumbing-learning. / This second knowing is a fountainhead / from within you, moving out.*

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