

# Catholic

## UPDATE

© 2019 LIGUORI  
PUBLICATIONS,  
A REDEMPTORIST  
MINISTRY.

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE  
LIGUORI, MO  
63057-9999

800-325-9521  
LIGUORI.ORG

PHOTOCOPYING  
PROHIBITED.

C1905A

MAY 2019

## Mystagogy

### DEEPENING THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION

**Liguori Publications • © 2019 All rights reserved.**  
**Liguori.org • 800-325-9521**

*The drama of contemporary culture is the lack of interiority, the absence of contemplation. Without interiority, culture has no content; it is like a body that has not yet found its soul. What can humanity do without interiority? Unfortunately, we know the answer very well. When the contemplative spirit is missing, life is not protected and all that is human is denigrated. Without interiority, modern man puts his own integrity at risk.*

—ST. JOHN PAUL II, 2003

# Mystagogy is one of the greatest treasures of the Church, one we've neglected far too long and one that would benefit everyone—even long-standing and cradle Catholics.

**A**n admirer of Carmelite spirituality and a student of St. John of the Cross, St. John Paul II could see that “interiority,” or contemplative dimension, had been in decline or missing for a long time in the world and within Catholic parishes and communities. Furthermore, he could see that this decline or lack in our civilization was the cause of many contemporary problems.

For this reason, the practice of mystagogy was revived in the wake of the Second Vatican Council as a way to reforge the link between theology, mysticism, and Christian experience and open the contemplative dimension to modern Catholics. But has it worked? Saint John Paul II clearly didn't think so, and the extent to which our young people are dropping away from the practice of their faith since the 1960s seems to suggest he was right. Mystagogy is one of the greatest treasures of the Church, one we've neglected far too long, and one that would benefit everyone—even long-standing and cradle Catholics.

## Understanding Mystagogy

First, what is mystagogy? This Greek word means “leading or guiding into mystery.” The mystery in question here is the fundamental one at the heart of Catholic Christianity—the Incarnation and its extension into our lives through the seven sacraments. The sacraments are mysteries because they are works of the Holy Spirit, communicating divine grace, working invisibly on us through visible symbols. The supreme examples of this are the three sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist.

In the early Church, sacramental initiation or induction of new Christians took place behind closed doors, in secrecy. (In Greek, *mystery* refers to the closed mouth of the one who keeps a secret.) The reason for this secrecy may have been to protect Christian communities from persecution or to prevent the sacraments from being mocked and misunderstood by outsiders who lacked the eyes of faith. In any case, the initiations themselves and the mystagogical teaching associated with them were taken extremely seriously. Church Fathers have left us long treatises on mystagogy.

## Deepening the Christian Experience

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) promulgated by the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1987—one fruit of the liturgical renewal prompted by Vatican II—spoke of four stages or steps for initiation into the sacraments and the full liturgical life of the Church and four associated periods of maturation.

The first stage or step is the period of inquiry that leads to a person's becoming a formal candidate for instruction in the faith. The second is the period of catechesis or formal instruction, which may last several years. The third is an intense time of “purification and enlightenment” which occurs during Lent and often leads to baptism and reception into the Church during the Easter liturgy. The fourth, says the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, “goes through the whole Easter season and is devoted to the post-baptismal catechesis or mystagogy. It is a time for deepening the Christian experience, for gaining spiritual fruit, and for entering more closely into the life and unity of the community of the faithful” (RCIA 7d).



Early Christians were persecuted and often mocked for their practice.