

Mystagogy and history

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Mystagogy is a liturgy-based effort to bring people more into the mystery that is Christ. The word is in the glossary at the back of the catechism. It is commonly related to preaching in the weeks after Easter. No matter how poetic the preacher, the current social context shapes what we hear. Or it makes it difficult to listen at all. The pandemic has upped the stakes because of what listeners are experiencing. And there are those who feel they cannot assemble for Mass and prayer just yet. In a sense, we are hearing impaired. We grieve such losses.

I receive suggestions about how ‘the Church’ or ‘the bishop’ should fix the chaos. There is an urgency in many voices that reminds me of Mark 4:38, with a squall threatening Jesus and the apostles while crossing the lake in a boat. “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (NIV) Would that my voice calm fears as effectively as the Christ’s.

As I mentioned, our historical moment shapes our perception of Scripture, preaching, and the sacraments. But what is our moment? This year? The past century? There is a temptation to forget that there have been many storms. My grandparents and great grandparents fled the storms of war and persecution in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Your family and my family have endured a lot of uncertainty since 1939. I am sure they cried out many times, “Lord, save us, we are perishing!?” (Mt. 8:25, NABRE)

My primary role as bishop is not storm analysis but returning people’s attention to Christ in our boat. When we look everywhere but within the craft that carries us, we can only become insecure. It should not disappoint us that every conversation has roots in our faith in God’s loving kindness. That loving kindness or mercy towards all is our touchstone. It is our origin, and our final destination. Where we fail to make this central, we can end up anywhere in discussions about equal human dignity, immigration, race and ethnicity, violence, firearms, and the whole range of sexuality or gender topics. Not to mention face masks.

Frustration also arises when we think that current tensions are somehow the results of recent social shifts. Too many people attribute total responsibility to today’s organizations, legislators or leaders. But we are on a much longer arc of time. I recently thumbed through John Tracy Ellis’s book “The Catholic Priest in the United States” that he edited for the U.S. Bishops Conference. He notes how priests’ identities have been dented by an ongoing social revolution that is more than a century old. No priest should have “compunction,” he writes, about not being able to keep up. (The book does not let bishops and clergy totally off the hook.) Please note that Ellis’s book was published in 1971, fifty years ago!

So how do we faithfully proceed from 1971 or 2021? When we can’t solve everything, where do we begin? Hope demands frequent restarts.

We just celebrated Divine Mercy Sunday on April 12. In a wonderful way, the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy (Catechism, par. 2447) bring us back to God when we direct ourselves to the service of others. How’s that for a start?

There will be those who say this list of works is too simple, too unintellectual, incapable of healing our Church and society. I can direct them to read about the cure of Naaman the Syrian by the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 5). Naaman balked at the idea that bathing in the Jordan River would cure his leprosy. It was barely a rivulet. The Syrian bragged of large rivers at home. But bathing in a minor stream indeed cured him, and he came to know God.

Mystagogy should help us to go deeper into the mystery, the sign that is Christ. It should help us to know that the biggest reconciliations might begin in small, out of the way streams. When we commit to small gestures like the Works of Mercy, we will gain insight into the blessings of truth, peace and justice for which we pray. Large issues will not go away. But insisting on solving the big issues first can't become an excuse to leave mercy for later.