The Mystagogy Segment of the RCIA
at St. Simon Parish, Indianapolis, Indiana

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1. Introduction

The idea for this project is a result of my involvement with the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) at St. Simon parish in Indianapolis, Indiana. For many years, St. Simon has had a vibrant RCIA program which has provided the catechetical instruction and spiritual preparation which are essential to prepare candidates and catechumens to receive the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. Every year, a group of adults would complete the program and be received into the Church on Holy Saturday. As implemented at St. Simon, the whole initiation process has been very successful.

However, like many parishes today, at St. Simon the RCIA did not really extend much after the Easter Vigil. There was one meeting the following week at which experiences during the Vigil were shared. This session then concluded with a presentation of the purpose and activities of the various parish ministries. The newly baptized or confirmed Catholics were encouraged to consider participating in one or more of them and thus assume an active role in the parish community. At the next session a week later, a pitch-in dinner took place. The pitch-in was a time of celebration and sending forth. At this point, the RCIA ended.

Such a short period of instruction after the Easter Vigil does not realize the full vision which was intended by the Second Vatican Council when it called for a revision to the rites of initiation for adults. In its final form as approved by the Church hierarchy, the RCIA includes a period of catechesis and reflection, called the Mystagogy, which continues during the Easter season until Pentecost. The Mystagogy was designed to be a time of further instruction in the essentials of the Catholic faith with special attention to the mystical experience of the sacred which is communicated through the sacraments.

My parish recently made the decision to reinstate or renew the full extent of the RCIA process. The RCIA leadership was therefore presented with the challenge of developing a Mystagogy segment almost from scratch. For the 2008-09 year, the RCIA team decided to use a series of lessons on the Eucharist
which are contained in *Eucharist: Source and Summit of Life and Mission of the Church*. The plan was to cover one lesson from this text each week. After the lesson, during the closing portion of the session, I led a reflection on some aspect of the Christian mystery.

Although the decision to base the mystagogical catechesis on the Eucharist was a sound one, I believe that the instructional materials could be improved so that they are tailored more specifically to the needs of St. Simon. Therefore, the focus of my project will be to review the effectiveness of our first attempt to reinstate the Mystagogy at St. Simon and to develop materials for use during the next year. To accomplish that goal, this paper will first examine the basic structure of the RCIA and the purpose of the Mystagogy within that process. This will be followed by a closer look at the specific factors which characterize the RCIA at St. Simon. Through a review of some magisterial materials as well as the work of various authors, I will attempt to provide a theological basis for instruction during the Mystagogy based on the Eucharist. From this theological basis I will then provide the outline of four lessons for use during St. Simon’s Mystagogy segment. A final theological reflection will attempt to draw together all the important ideas developed in the paper and asses their application in my own spiritual journey.
2. A Summary of the RCIA

Before considering the specific content of the Mystagogical segment, it is useful to establish its context by reviewing the general purpose and outline of the entire RCIA.

The RCIA is the process by which adults are brought into full communion with the Catholic Church. The rite is intended to be applicable to individuals from a wide range of backgrounds – some may be unbaptized, some may be baptized in another Christian tradition, and some may be baptized Catholics seeking Confirmation and full union with the Church. Some participants in the RCIA may be spiritual seekers who wish to know more about the Catholic faith in order to make an informed decision regarding conversion. Other participants are considering the decision to become Catholic for such reasons as an upcoming wedding to a Catholic or the baptism and confirmation of children. Whatever the reasons which bring the participants to the RCIA, the process is designed to provide both the catechetical instruction and the spiritual guidance which can support them during their faith journey of discovery and conversion.

Although local episcopal guidance may allow for variation, the RCIA is intended to last about a year, from Lent the first year until Holy Saturday the next year. As administered at St. Simon (and in most parishes in the United states), the RCIA usually commences in late August and until this year all the candidates and catechumens received the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. However, in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, the Adult Initiation Committee has published a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) which outlines how the RCIA requirements are to be applied in local parishes. The RCIA leadership at St. Simon only became aware of the FAQ in November 2009 and they reviewed the document at that time. In the light of the FAQ, certain changes were made to the RCIA at St. Simon; the most important change was that beginning with the current 2009-2010 liturgical year, some candidates who were already baptized and had received sufficient catechesis in another tradition can now be received
into full communion with the church on an individual basis when they are ready, without waiting until the Easter Vigil.

Regardless of such local variations in administration, the form of the RCIA which is used in the United States today became effective in 1988 and consists of four segments – Pre-Catechumenate, Catechumenate, Enlightenment, and Mystagogy. The content of the four segments is as follows:

Pre-Catechumenate – This initial period is a time of inquiry and discernment. The catechesis during this segment is of a general spiritual nature and is intended to support the process of seeking and conversion, rather than to present the specific teachings of the Catholic faith. The Pre-Catechumenate concludes with the Rite of Acceptance in which the candidates who wish to continue their spiritual journey are accepted into the community of the local parish, although they are not yet full members of the Church.

Catechumenate – This segment is an extended period of instruction in the specific content of the Catholic faith. All the major beliefs of Catholicism are presented. Important Church dogmas and the seven sacraments of the Church receive special attention. But the Catechumenate is about more than just catechesis; candidates are also introduced into the spiritual traditions and devotional practices of the Church. By enriching their faith journey, the Catechumenate is a time in which the candidates are encouraged to develop their own spirituality in the light of their new experiences with Catholicism.

This period is therefore an opportunity for the candidates to explore the teachings and the practice of Catholic faith while they gain the knowledge necessary to make an informed decision regarding the final step of entering into full union with the Catholic Church. For candidates who choose to continue the initiation process, the Catechumenate ends at the beginning of Lent with the Rite of Election during which the names of the candidates are entered into the Book of the Elect.
Enlightenment – This final period of preparation for the receipt of the sacraments of initiation corresponds with the time of Lent. Catechetical and spiritual instruction continues with a deeper emphasis on repentance and purification. On three successive Sundays, the candidates are presented to the entire community of the faithful at Mass in a rite called the Scrutinies as a part of this final process of preparation. Shortly before the Easter Vigil, the candidates are presented a copy of the Nicene Creed.

During the Enlightenment, the candidates make the final decision to become Catholic. This segment ends at the Easter Vigil, when the candidates receive the sacraments of initiation and become full members of the Catholic Church.

Mystagogy – After the Easter Vigil, the RCIA is intended to continue with this final segment. The instruction during this period develops the new Catholic’s experience of the sacred both in the sacraments and in other aspects of Catholic life. Another objective is to help candidates achieve a sense of community among the parish faithful. According to paragraph 252 of the RCIA, the content of Mystagogy includes meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the Eucharist, and the performance of works of charity. During this time, the new Catholics enrich their understanding of the Paschal Mystery and relate it to their own spiritual practices and to their new calling to perform works of service as members of the Mystical Body of Christ. The Mystagogy concludes at Pentecost.

As outlined here, the RCIA is the product of the process of liturgical renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council. In documents such as *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Council expressed its desire to create a greater sense of participation by lay people in the Church’s liturgy. Today, through the RCIA, adults who seek to join the Church can participate more fully and meaningfully in the process of initiation. The RCIA is intended to provide a true experience of the sacred as much as it is designed to provide doctrinal instruction.
In the revision of its liturgical practice, the Church has drawn on the liturgical renewal movement of the twentieth century. As part of that movement, theologians and scholars researched the initiation practices of the early church. The result of this research was the discovery that the praxis in regard to the sacraments of initiation had changed significantly from the first centuries of the Church until the period immediately before Vatican II.

The RCIA is intended to restore those aspects of the initiation praxis of the first centuries of Church history which can have a meaning and relevance for contemporary people. In *Doors to the Sacred*, Joseph Martos describes how the revised RCIA incorporates many practices and customs that were used in initiation rites during the first centuries of the Church’s existence. Many of the steps which are part of the RCIA process, such as the Rite of Acceptance, the Rite of Election, the three Scrutinies, the presentation of the Creed and the Mystagogy have historical precedents which were rich in meaning in the early Church.

Paragraph 8 of the RCIA document indicates that the entire initiation process should have a Paschal character. This expressed intent of the hierarchy to ground the RCIA in the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord, along with the recent recovery of the meaning of the initiation rites used by the first Christians, provides a rich theological basis for the Mystagogy segment (and the entire RCIA). The theological discourses and reflections in later sections of this paper will explore further how the Paschal Mystery, especially that mystery as represented for us today in the Eucharist, can be used to enrich the content of the Mystagogy.
3. The Meaning of the Mystagogy

The text of the RCIA devotes only two pages, eight paragraphs, to the Mystagogy segment. Nevertheless, one can find there a rich source of theological content which provides important indications for the meaning of this final segment of the RCIA and what the Church hierarchy intends to take place during it.

One theme which stands out is the emphasis on the Paschal Mystery. Although the entire RCIA is to be focused on the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, the Mystagogy should be a special time of spiritual growth in which the neophytes reflect on and deepen their understanding of Christ's redemptive work and its application to their lives. Reflection on the Gospel can assist them in their entry into these sacred mysteries. The Mystagogy sessions should therefore include readings from the Gospels and appropriate catechetical instruction on the Catholic Church's teachings regarding the Paschal Mystery.

In discussing the Paschal Mystery, the RCIA refers several times to personal experience. Closely connected with this experience is the idea of mystery. For Catholics, sacred mysteries are experienced in an especially meaningful way in the sacraments, as well as in personal prayer and devotion. The Mystagogy should be designed to encourage the neophytes to enter into these sacred dimensions of reality.

In this regard, there should a special emphasis on the reality of the sacramental dimension of creation, since each sacrament provides a personal encounter with Christ. In their totality, the sacred realities which are accessible through faith and the sacraments are unique to Catholicism. It is essential for their newly gained identity as Catholic Christians that neophytes should have an appreciation for the sacramental outlook which is at the heart of Catholic Christianity. The Eucharist stands out as of particular importance here since, in the well known phrase from Vatican II, the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Catholic faith.
Similarly, the neophytes should also be introduced into prayer and devotional practices. In this way, the Mystagogy will enrich their spiritual experience and support their spiritual progress as pilgrims on the journey of faith. In this regard, it is useful to take advantage of another unique aspect of Catholicism - its rich, two thousand year tradition of prayer and spiritual reflection. The Mystagogy can be a time in which new Catholics are encouraged to explore and draw from this tradition so that they might find the practices of spirituality and prayer which are most meaningful for their personal experience of sacredness and sacramentality.

The RCIA text also gives emphasis to the community of which the neophytes are now a part. For Catholics, faith and salvation are not realities that belong only to the individual believer; they find their fullest and truest expression in the community of believers which is the Mystical Body of Christ. Part of the spiritual growth of the neophytes should be the recognition that they belong to something bigger than themselves and that there is a communal dimension to their faith and salvation. In this way, neophytes can be taught to partake in fellowship with other Catholics and they can learn that the Church is an essential source of spiritual support and direction if they are to continue on their spiritual journey. For this reason, the RCIA text encourages participation by the community in the Mystagogy; the primary way in which this takes places is in the liturgy, especially the Masses of the neophytes. Here again, the Eucharistic dimension comes into play.

However, participation in a new community must extend beyond fellowship with other members of the Catholic faithful and participation in the liturgy and sacraments. To fully live out the call of the Gospel, the life of any Catholic must reach outwards in service to others. This is the response to the Gospel which the Mystagogy segment should encourage and support. To make this happen, the RCIA text suggests that neophytes reflect on the demands of the Gospel message and how they can respond to that
calling in their daily life and activities. The Mystagogy should therefore help neophytes to take part in a Church ministry which is suited to their spiritual gifts and life experience.

In addition to these reflections on the meaning of the Mystagogy which are drawn from the text of the rite itself, I can add a few additional considerations based on my personal experience of dealing with RCIA candidates for several years.

I have frequently observed that the neophytes need support for their decision to join the Church. Although this concern applies at all stages of the RCIA process, it is especially applicable during the Mystagogy so that neophytes do not fail to persevere and live out their new faith simply because they do not understand or appreciate it. The RCIA, and the Mystagogy in particular, should therefore answer the question “Why be Catholic?” and thereby reinforce the sense of Catholic identity which gives meaning to the decision to unite with the Church.

Therefore, it is important that neophytes understand what makes Catholicism unique among the many forms of Christianity. Of course, as already indicated above, the answer to that question encompasses specific doctrinal teachings of the Church which distinguish it from other Christian faith traditions. Of special importance here is the sacramental principle which animates the Catholic faith. Yet, in my experience, there is an even deeper dimension to the answer - neophytes should understand why being Catholic matters, or in other words why Catholics believe that their faith is the fullest expression of God’s revelation in Christ.

This means that the reinforcement of Catholic identity requires that the RCIA team members not only explain Catholic teachings and practices but also sometimes even defend them. Unfortunately, many people who consider joining the Church are programmed, through no fault of their own, with misinformation about Catholicism. Some individuals are even hostile to those aspects of Catholicism which make it unique, such as the Eucharist or the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These attitudes may
still be present in some form even during the Mystagogy. As a result, there is a place and even a need for an apologetical approach by RCIA team members. As will be explored later in this paper, in doing so the RCIA team must maintain an appropriate pastoral and ecumenical atmosphere.

From all of these theological and practical considerations, it is evident that the Mystagogy can be a time of rich spiritual meaning and growth for new members of the Catholic Church. For practical purposes, these reflections on the meaning on the Mystagogy can be expressed in the following summary of the key objectives for the neophytes during the final segment of the RCIA:

2. Experience of the mysteries of the Catholic faith, especially the Paschal Mystery.
3. Appreciation for the sacramental understanding of the Church.
4. Understanding of the Eucharist as the central reality of the Catholic faith.
5. Participation in the fellowship of the Church community.
6. Participation in a ministry or service role in the parish.

After considering the specific characteristics of the RCIA at St. Simon's parish, the rest of this paper will explore some of the theological basis for these objectives and then suggest how the catechetical content of the Mystagogy sessions might be designed in order to achieve them.
4. Historical Background for the RCIA at St. Simon Parish

As background for my project, I can provide some history regarding the RCIA in my home parish of St. Simon the Apostle in Indianapolis. The idea for my project is a result of several discussions which I have had with Deacon Tom, a deacon who is the leader of the RCIA. My discussions with him concerned the content of the RCIA program and the changes which have recently been made to the program.

The 2008-09 RCIA year was the first time that Deacon Tom led the RCIA program. For several years previously, Deacon Tom and I had assisted another person, who had been the leader of the program for many years. This person is a grade school teacher by profession and he usually conducted the RCIA sessions in a lecture format. In addition, he led most of the sessions himself; the other RCIA team members, such as Deacon Tom and I, had a limited teaching role. Each of us might lead at most a couple of sessions during the entire course of the RCIA. During the rest of the time, the RCIA team members simply joined the class and listened to the lectures along with the candidates. For the most part, the candidates did not receive handouts or other materials. There was often minimal participation by the candidates during the sessions.

Although this approach provided a great deal of useful information during the course of the RCIA lessons, Deacon Tom felt that the format of the program could be improved. In many sessions, the candidates were overwhelmed with historical and theological detail. The RCIA candidates spent too much time listening and taking notes and not enough time talking and interacting with the each other. In particular, they did not get to know one another very well, so they did not bond as a group. As a result, the sessions did not really become a safe place in which the candidates felt comfortable asking questions and sharing experiences of their personal spiritual journeys.

Therefore, when Deacon Tom took over the leadership of the RCIA program in 2008, he was resolved to change the format of the sessions. He wanted more small group discussions and more
participation by the candidates. In addition, it was Deacon Tom’s intention that all the RCIA team members be involved in teaching and ministering during every session.

For this purpose, he obtained a set of RCIA lessons called “Come and See”. Each lesson provides a set of questions and other instructions for a small group discussion approach to the RCIA syllabus. Further, each lesson is linked to one or more issues of the Catholic Update. The lessons and the Updates were distributed in a loose leaf binder to the candidates at the beginning of the program, so the candidates could read the lesson material and the Update articles in preparation for each session.

There were too many lessons in the “Come and See” program for use by our parish in a single year, so I prepared a syllabus of lessons to be used each week. The syllabus continued for two weeks after the Easter Vigil, which is the time our RCIA program has traditionally ended.

As we approached the end of the first year of the RCIA under his leadership, Deacon Tom shared several concerns with me regarding the RCIA program. First of all, he wanted to evaluate the success of the new format and consider ways to improve its implementation in future years. Secondly, and most importantly, Father Bill, the parish priest, had asked that the RCIA program be extended until Pentecost. This meant that we needed to develop another four or five lessons for use during the Mystagogy portion of the RCIA this year.

Deacon Tom asked me to help him plan the Mystagogy sessions. His desire was that they be centered on the Eucharist. Because the team had no time to prepare any materials specifically oriented towards the Mystagogy, we had to find some published resource which we could adapt for our purposes. After some discussion, we concluded that the Come and See materials would not meet our needs. Therefore, after further research on his part, Deacon Tom decided that we would use a set of lessons on the Eucharist which are contained the booklet Eucharist: Source and Summit of Life and Mission of the Church.
In order to prepare for the Mystagogy and to evaluate the effectiveness of new format which was used during our first year of the RCIA program with *Come and See* materials, I suggested that the RCIA team meet for a theological reflection. I also decided it would be best to include some of the RCIA candidates in the theological reflection in order to obtain their impressions of the RCIA process. The results of that theological reflection are summarized in Appendix II.

Based on the theological reflection and Deacon Tom’s intentions, we finalized the structure which would be followed during the Mystagogy. The plan was to base part of each session on one of the lessons from the *Eucharist* booklet. Each lesson would take about an hour to complete and would be concerned with some aspect of the Eucharist in Catholic life and spirituality. For the rest of each session, I would provide appropriate material which would occupy another thirty minutes or so. Based on the practical considerations which I described in Chapter 3 of this paper, I decided to lead a series of reflections on short questions which were related to specific aspects of the Catholic faith. After some thought, I chose a set of topics for the reflections which would supplement the teaching on the Eucharist in the first part of the session. The topics which I chose were:

1. Why be Catholic?
2. What makes Catholicism unique?
3. What forms of spirituality are meaningful to you?
4. What does the Gospel call Catholics to do?

In the event, the Mystagogy sessions went well. Regrettably, attendance was light - only four or so of the neophytes attended regularly. However, on a positive note, the group bonded effectively and it was actually difficult for the group to break up after the formal sessions were completed. Despite the small
numbers, the RCIA team was encouraged by the bonding and sharing which took place among the group members. Clearly the newly implemented format had worked - the material booklet lessons were effective and interesting, and there was good participation by the neophytes in the reflections which I led. The sessions had been a time of meaningful spiritual growth and fellowship, both for the neophytes and for the RCIA team.

A short time after Pentecost, when the sessions had been completed, the team members met for a second theological reflection to evaluate our first attempt at an extended RCIA at St. Simon with a full Mystagogy period. The results of that theological reflection are summarized in Appendix III.

My project is intended to meet a specific concern which was raised during that reflection – we felt we should place more emphasis on spirituality and applying new knowledge to daily Catholic life. The lessons which I have developed attempt to address that concern.
5. The Specific Characteristics of the RCIA at St. Simon

To provide some additional context for understanding the Mystagogy at St. Simon, I will now provide some additional information regarding the specifics of our RCIA program and the candidates and catechumens who participate in it.

At St. Simon parish, the RCIA program begins in late August or early September and lasts a few weeks past the Easter Vigil. The meetings take place once a week on Wednesday nights at 7:00 and last one and a half to two hours. The size of the group initially is about twenty to thirty members, but usually only 60-70% those persons complete the program and receive the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil.

The membership of this group is diverse. Regarding age, the program is intended for adults, but still a wide range of ages is represented. The group includes young persons in their early twenties all the way up to persons in their sixties and seventies. Every age bracket in between is represented. Because many members of the RCIA program intend to become Catholic because they plan to marry a Catholic, a good portion of the RCIA candidates are persons in their twenties and thirties.

Since St. Simon is located near one of the wealthier areas of Indianapolis, most RCIA candidates are middle class or even upper middle class. Nevertheless, some members do come from a working class background, although the membership usually does not include poor or disadvantaged persons. However, persons with special challenges sometimes participate in the program; for instance, one member is a gentleman who, though he is blind, pays close attention to the material presented and often contributes valuable insights. Ethnically, the membership is overwhelming white. A few Asian, Hispanic or black persons may take part from time to time, but this is rare. Regarding education, the group again represents a range of backgrounds. Many are college graduates. Some even have advanced education or graduate degrees in various professions. For instance, the group has included lawyers, actuaries and health care
workers. Other candidates have less education, but in my experience, no RCIA member has lacked at least a high-school level education.

The greatest diversity is found in the religious background of the RCIA candidates. Some of them are seeking to convert to Catholicism from a Protestant affiliation. These persons often have been part of one of the mainline denominations, usually some kind of Lutheran, Presbyterian or Methodist tradition. Other denominations are sometimes represented, and typically a few members will have experience with a Baptist, Evangelical, fundamentalist or non-denominational church. Other persons belong to a Jewish or Eastern Orthodox tradition or they are baptized Catholics who wish to be confirmed. Finally, it is often the case that a few members have had no religious education and have never been baptized or otherwise initiated into any faith tradition.

With this variety of religious traditions, the members have differing levels of knowledge of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. Those members coming from a Christian tradition usually understand a few basics about the faith, but have never received extensive religious instruction. Occasionally a member has had adult-level instruction in the faith and the Scriptures, but such individuals are atypical. What is often true is that the candidates enter the program with little direct knowledge of Catholicism. Often they have many misunderstandings and misconceptions about the Church and its teachings. Even the baptized Catholics have usually received little catechetical training. For some members, the RCIA sessions will be the first religious instruction in which they have ever participated.

Every RCIA candidate has a reason for participating in the program. Psychologically, this is a key issue. In this respect, the RCIA membership generally falls into one of two general categories. The candidates either are just going through the motions as they attend the RCIA sessions, or they are genuinely interested in the material which is presented. Those who are becoming Catholic in order to marry a Catholic are often lukewarm towards faith matters and religious discussion; these persons simply
endure the RCIA process. But the opposite reaction is also possible – the person may genuinely want to understand the Catholic faith of their future spouse, or they may wish to be prepared for a commitment to the raising of children as Catholics. Some candidates are genuine seekers who are interested in learning more about Catholicism; these persons will ask questions and take extensive notes during the sessions. In some cases confirmed Catholics attend the sessions in order to improve their knowledge of the Catholic faith.

The themes and struggles which are evident in the membership of the RCIA process are defined to a great extent by the interaction of two factors previously mentioned – the religious background of the candidate, and the reasons for his/her participation in the program. For many people, the RCIA program will be their first in-depth exposure to Catholicism. In this case, the unique beliefs and practices of Catholicism can lead to conflict with prior religious experience. For example, the centrality of the Eucharist in Catholic life can seem foreign to someone who was raised in a non-sacramental tradition. The role and functions of the priest can be significantly different from those of a minister in a Protestant tradition. The use of statues and sacramentals may appear to be old fashioned or even superstitious.

These examples from everyday Catholic praxis can be points of confusion and even resistance for a person who is encountering them for the first time. This can lead to differing psychological reactions. Some persons will get confused but be afraid to ask questions. Some will be fascinated and want to understand more. Others may even become angry if they feel that their prior faith tradition is being criticized.

In its four part structure, the RCIA is well-designed to deal with individuals at different stages in the spiritual journey. The pastoral leaders in the RCIA must be able to meet the consequent pastoral challenges. RCIA ministers are most effective when they exhibit a compassionate and flexible instructional approach which respects the diversity of religious backgrounds and varying levels of
religious education among the RCIA candidates. A proper understanding of the stages of faith formation and the importance of spiritual crises should make an RCIA minister step back and humbly recognize that God is leading us all on a pilgrimage which is intended to bring us to full unity with the divine in eternal life. The particular role of the RCIA team members is to support faithfully that divine work in the lives of the RCIA candidates as they advance with them on the spiritual path that leads to God.
6. **Affirming the Decision to Become Catholic**

Having established the background and context of the RCIA at St. Simon, I would now like to examine some of the issues and considerations regarding the Mystagogy which were raised in the prior chapters of this paper. The first such issue I would like to explore is what I have called the need to affirm the decision to become Catholic. After all, this is what the RCIA is all about – bringing people into full fellowship with the Catholic Church.

For me, the important pastoral consideration in this regard is that potential converts to Catholicism may need validation and support of their decision to become Catholic. They may have family members and friends who are not Catholics and who may not agree with a decision to become Catholic. As a result, outside of the RCIA sessions, these friends and family members may challenge the candidates with difficult questions or even present misinformation (usually unknowingly) about the Catholic faith. This can cause uncertainty and doubt for the RCIA member, and he/she will look to the RCIA instructors and his/her sponsors for answers to questions and for spiritual support. The Mystagogy segment is a time when this uncertainty can be addressed.

For other candidates, marriage may not be the reason for their participation in the RCIA program; instead, they are experiencing a significant stage in their faith journey which has led them to consider joining the Catholic Church. As the text by Erickson emphasizes, the factors which have led to such a stage in the candidate’s spiritual journey can vary. The person may be experiencing a normal process of growth and development, even if that change is occurring at an unusual age. Perhaps a life crisis of some kind has propelled them forward on their spiritual journey or even brought them for the first time to a serious contemplation of their relationship with God. In any case, an important psychological factor is the desire for understanding and truth. These seekers are looking for encouragement and direction in their
faith journey and they wish to be fed with religious instruction and spiritual guidance which will help them to advance on that journey.

A related issue is the level of faith development of the RCIA candidates. Although the work of Erikson, Whitehead, Brussatti and Fowler has already been alluded to, it is at this point that their conclusions can really help in understanding the individual spiritual journeys of the RCIA candidates. These authors delineate and describe the various stages of human growth and development from birth through childhood and on into adulthood. Further, as the article by Louis Brussatti points out, that pattern of development can also be applied to spiritual growth and faith formation. For example, Erik Erikson speaks of early childhood stages in terms of trust, autonomy and initiative. A child first learns to rely on its parents for all its needs. At the next stage, the child becomes mobile and moves out into the world and begins to explore and experience new things. Later on, the child develops initiative and purpose which is expressed through play and the development of imagination.

Louis Brussatti outlines the parallel between the stages of human growth and the stages of the life of grace. He uses Erikson’s full eight stage model which includes additional later periods of adolescent growth and adult maturity. However, due to the typical level of faith formation of the RCIA candidates, for my purpose it is useful to focus on the first three stages. Brussatti notes that Erikson associates the development of a particular virtue with each stage; in the case of the first three stages these are hope, will power and purpose, respectively.

Most RCIA candidates are at a stage of faith formation in which these virtues, in a theological sense, are still in the process of formation. A spiritual person first must learn to trust in God, just as a child learns to trust its parents. In the case of a person considering entrance into the Catholic Church, this also means learning to trust in the goodness and truth of the Church’s liturgical rituals and its teachings. The pre-Catechumenate stage of the RCIA is a period of discernment in which that basic trust is fostered and
the candidates are given hope and support as they are encouraged to continue on the spiritual journey to full union with the Catholic Church. At the next stage, a child develops autonomy and begins to explore. The parallels in the RCIA are the Catechumenate and Enlightenment stages in which the candidate begins to discover the richness and beauty of the Church's liturgical practices and teachings. In these stages candidates develop the desire and will to become Catholic and ultimately make the decision to enter the Church. Finally, just as a child develops initiative and begins to play on its own and develop purpose, so in the final Mystagogy stage of the RCIA the now fully initiated members of the Church explore ways to move beyond themselves and participate in the ministry of the community.

The work of Richard Osmer and James Fowler describes the process of faith development in children in four stages which are similar to Erikson's model. Their conclusions provide further insights into the stages of faith formation which characterize the RCIA candidates. Primal faith is a perception of the presence of the parents as a source of love and care. This parallels the notion of trust. The next stage is intuitive-projective faith in which a child forms its own images through perception, feeling and imagination. This reflects the first stages of autonomy. A mythic-literal stage comes next in which the child first encounters other people's ideas about the faith, usually through stories. This stage corresponds to the process of discovery and exploration associated with autonomy and is often experienced through instruction by storytelling. The final stage is synthetic-conventional faith in which an adolescent learns to think hypothetically and begins to evaluate the beliefs which have been taught by the parents in terms of his/her own experience as he/she seeks to find an identity and place in the world.

The process of growth from a primal faith to synthetic-conventional faith can be used to describe the RCIA. The four stages of the initiation process are analogous to the four stages Osmer and Fowler outline for children and adolescents. The RCIA is designed to lead a candidate from the earliest stages of faith awareness through the steps of discovery and storytelling which lead to a greater familiarity with the
Catholic faith. The candidate then evaluates his/her spiritual journey and ultimately makes a decision whether to enter the Catholic Church and find a purposeful role in the Church’s life and work.

Osmer and Fowler also describe developmental crises which can have a significant impact on human development. Crises can be a normal part of growth, or they can be imposed by a specific life event or situation. They may also be the result of the deficiencies and unjust structures of society. These crises have a corresponding impact on faith development; they can speed or slow progress in a person’s faith journey depending on his/her reaction to them. An RCIA leader must be able to recognize and distinguish such crises and respond to their impact on the faith development of the RCIA candidates.

A final insight comes from the Whiteheads. They see conversion in terms of metanoia, a complete change in one’s spiritual direction and way of thinking about the world. This is the sort of spiritual change an RCIA candidate may experience, either fully or partially. The result may be a type of crisis mentioned above which leads from one stage of faith formation to the next. The Whiteheads understand such change in terms of a New Testament interpretation of krisis. This interpretation has three parts – it is a judgment, it is an act of God, and it is delivered at the end of life.

This notion of spiritual growth as krisis can describe the uncertainty and difficulties an RCIA candidate may experience in the process of becoming a Catholic. In this case, the krisis is not the end of life, but the end of a stage of development, the end of a certain way of looking at the world and its replacement with a new outlook. That is the real meaning of metanoia, which in its Greek root means to change one’s way of interacting with the world. The resulting changes in the person’s spiritual maturity and awareness of the faith can be seen as a divine activity in which God breaks into the life of a person. The Whiteheads even use the biblical story of the Exodus as a way to understand such a crisis in religious terms. These insights are a reminder that God is at work in the lives and in the spiritual path of the RCIA
candidates. God is the one leading them forward; the role of a pastoral minister is to facilitate the work God has already begun.

From the insights of the above-mentioned authors, one can find useful guidance for work with RCIA candidates and for the realization of the objectives of the Mystagogy. First of all, an RCIA leader needs to be aware of the various stages of human growth and recognize that the transition from one stage to the next is a normal part of human development. The spiritual journey may always follow a similar pattern, but the timing and pace at which individuals move along that path cannot be reduced to a schedule which is normative for everyone. On the contrary, every person proceeds along a unique spiritual pilgrimage.

Even during the Mystagogy, the neophytes will be at very different stages of their faith journey. Depending on the life circumstances or crises which may have led them to join the Catholic Church, they will have different needs as they begin their life as Catholics. The Mystagogy, by emphasizing the mystery and uniqueness of Catholicism, especially as those realities are expressed in the Eucharist, can reinforce the decision to become a Catholic and provide the spiritual support and catechetical guidance which neophytes will need in order to continue in their new religious identity.

In order to support the neophytes as they pass through these stages of growth, particularly the process of entering the Church, RCIA leaders need to be aware of the key theological issues which can be sources of difficulty. Neophytes may be grappling with teachings and practices which cause them to reevaluate their notions of God, the Scriptures and the life of faith. This process of spiritual assimilation is an important part of the pilgrimage in the RCIA process. At the same time, the neophytes, whether consciously or not, want to know why being Catholic matters and the Mystagogy can be an opportunity for them to reflect on the meaning of being Catholic and a time to explore why Catholics believe the fullness of God’s revelation and truth can be found in the Catholic faith.
Finally, different life crises have an important effect on the spiritual journey of the neophytes and their ability to respond to religious investigation and instruction. An RCIA minister must deal with their needs and inquiries in a pastoral context which recognizes their current stage of spiritual growth and the effect of those life crises. The Mystagogy stage can be a time in which neophytes can reflect on those crises by exploring their new faith with a greater sense of mystery and sacramental understanding. In this way, they will receive the support they need which can effectively affirm their choice to enter into union with the Church.
7. The Role of a Gentle Apologetics

Apologetics can be a controversial and unwelcome concept in today’s ecumenical and pluralistic climate. Many people will not accept absolute truth claims such as are traditionally associated with some aspects of Church teaching. Understandably, as a result of the renewal of ecumenism which was initiated by Vatican II, the desire of pastoral ministers to work for cooperation and understanding with members of other faith traditions can lead to reluctance to make any assertion which might imply that the Catholic faith is correct where other traditions are wrong.

These pastoral concerns in relation to apologetics are especially applicable during the Mystagogy. As was mentioned in previous chapters, since the RCIA candidates and catechumens come from such a variety of faith traditions, it is unavoidable that certain aspects of Church teaching will still cause difficulty even after the initiation rites at the Easter Vigil are completed. This is certainly my experience at St. Simon.

The Mystagogy can be a time in which such questions about the faith can be explored in a supportive and open setting. The pastoral challenge here is to maintain a safe environment which encourages new Catholics who are serious about their faith to seek a deeper understanding of Church teaching and to continue to grow in their spiritual pilgrimage. Sometimes this will mean dealing with difficult issues, especially in regard to certain Church dogmas. The RCIA team should not duck any tough, difficult or even hostile questions regarding Catholicism. Instead, they should adopt a positive approach, what I call “gentle apologetics”.

Gentle apologetics deals with questions in a loving and respectful way. Viewed negatively, apologetics can be associated with triumphalism and the winning of an argument. That is not the kind of apologetics which is appropriate during the Mystagogy. Positively, apologetics can be an opportunity to explain what the church teaches and why the Church believes that teaching to be true. Apologetics can
"get under the hood" and delve into the reasons, and even something of the historical processes of theological investigation and reflection, which have contributed to the definitions of the Church dogmas and other teachings which we have today.

Apologetics can therefore answer the "why" questions which neophytes so often ask. In response, the goal for the RCIA leadership is to clarify what the Church really teaches and to demonstrate the reasons why Catholics believe those teachings to be true. In this regard, RCIA instructors can draw on the rich two-thousand year tradition of the Church in order to show that Catholic doctrines and practices have roots that go back to the earliest stages of Christian history. The Church has been blessed with many holy and intelligent persons who have contributed to the formation of Church teachings such as are found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This theological, spiritual, and even mystical tradition can be presented in a way which emphasizes the mysteries of the faith, mysteries which each generation experiences in a unique way. By drawing on the experiences of those who have preceded us in the faith, the Mystagogy can enrich the experience of neophytes today as they approach those same mysteries on their own terms and then respond to them in their own way.

Used constructively, apologetics can help the Mystagogy be a time in which new Catholics are given an opportunity to move deeper into the great living Tradition of Catholicism. Done properly, this kind of apologetics reflects a pastoral approach which is free from polemics yet is willing to stand up for Church teachings with charity and compassion. When RCIA leaders adopt such a pastoral approach, apologetics can become a healthy part of the process of affirming Catholic identity and leading the neophytes into a more meaningful experience of the sacred mysteries.

Another way to think about apologetics is in terms of empathetic listening. The RCIA team can learn to hear the real questions that are being asked. In order to be effective, this kind of listening enters into the perspective of the person who is asking the question. The empathetic listener takes into account
the stage of spiritual growth which the questioner has reached, as well as any life experiences or crises which may have an influence on the questioner’s thinking on the particular issue at hand. Good apologetics connects with and responds to questioners in an empathetic way, so that they do not only hear and understand an answer to a question, but they also can apply new knowledge and understanding to their spiritual journey.

A couple of examples might help illustrate these points. A commonly asked question in the RCIA is why Catholics believe the Pope is infallible. When dealing with the issue of papal infallibility, I have often found that the real basis for questions is not a challenge to the Pope’s authority, but rather the impression that Catholics believe that the Pope never does anything wrong. The issue may even become not infallibility, but impeccability - the questioner believes that the Church teaches that the Pope does not sin.

A pastoral response will do more than simply clarify the limited scope of infallibility as it is defined as applying to only matters of faith and morals when the Pope acts *ex cathedra* as the successor of Saint Peter. It is of course useful to describe the meanings of terms like infallibility and *ex cathedra*. But the real pastoral objective is deeper than this. The RCIA instructor can then go on to describe how the presence of an infallible Pope, and along with him an infallible teaching authority in the Church, is actually a great blessing from God, because it means that Catholics have a source of teaching on which they can rely. Catholics do not have to rely on private interpretation, as is often the case in many Protestant traditions. To the extent that the Church provides teaching and guidance on matters of belief and moral conduct, faithful Catholics can be free from confusion or uncertainty. That freedom is a great benefit for spiritual progress in the journey of faith.

Another example is the Blessed Virgin Mary. Typical questions regarding Our Lady are “Why do Catholics worship Mary”, or “Why do Catholics pray to Mary?” Usually, when one listens to these
questions empathetically, one will find that that the real concern is that Christians are forbidden from engaging in idolatry. Prayers to Mary and statues of her may seem to do just that. At the same time, these Catholic practices are perceived to be a distraction from Christ’s glory and a denial of His role as the one mediator between God and human beings.

The theological answer to these questions which the neophytes should first hear is that of course Catholics do not worship Mary; they venerate her as an honored member of the Church. Likewise, Catholics do not pray to Mary; they pray through her by asking for her intercession. But beyond the basic theological response, again there is another pastoral dimension which an RCIA minister can use to direct the neophytes into new and greater dimensions of the Paschal Mystery and the order of grace.

This pastoral dimension arises not so much from the Catholic veneration of Mary, but from the reasons why Catholics so honor her. The greater spiritual reality here, which is the real basis for Marian devotion, is the unique privilege of the divine maternity. The real import of that privilege is often underappreciated by non-Catholics. God did not pick His mother at random; she was chosen to be, and still is today, a special channel of grace. In addition, such undervaluation of Mary as the Mother of God can often indicate a similar lack of appreciation for the wonder of the miracle of the Incarnation. When the Incarnation is better understood, then the Catholic veneration of Mary can be seen as an appropriate part of the life of grace and mystery which the Mystagogy is intended to open up to its participants.

By emphasizing these aspects of the Church’s Marian teachings, Mary’s role as major participant in the Gospel drama can be presented by the RCIA leadership as another dimension of the Paschal Mystery. Mary devotion becomes something which does not detract from Christ’s glory or from His mediation, but rather amplifies both of them by opening another channel of grace though which Catholics can enter into and experience the mysteries of their faith. Moreover, a practical application can be drawn from Marian devotion, since Mary can be held up as a model disciple whose obedience to her vocation and trust in God
are an example for any persons who choose to follow Christ today and progress on their spiritual journey to God.

By encouraging reflection on the miracle of the Incarnation and the mystery of Mary’s place in the order of grace, the RCIA leadership can use questions about Mary as an opportunity for the neophytes to engage in meditation on the Gospel, to broaden their experience of the mysteries of the Catholic faith and to respond to their own calling from God. After all, those are the three primary objectives outlined in the text of the RCIA in regard to the Mystagogy.

These examples are just two out of many which could be cited. They show how a “gentle apologetics” can be a constructive part of the Mystagogy. With a sound pastoral touch, RCIA ministers can use questions and challenges to the Catholic faith in positive ways which reinforce the meaning and goals of the Mystagogy.
8. The Centrality of the Eucharist in Catholic Life and Spirituality and its Meaning for the Mystagogy

As indicated in the RCIA document, the Mystagogy should explore the Paschal Mystery and offer neophytes opportunities for a more mature and meaningful experience of the sacramental mysteries of the Catholic faith. Since it is through the Eucharist that Catholics are united with Calvary and with the fruits of our redemption, it is appropriate for this paper to consider the meaning of the Eucharist and how that meaning can be related to the objectives of the Mystagogy. In this way, a theological basis can be established for a Mystagogy curriculum with a Eucharistic emphasis.

The Second Vatican council refers to the Eucharist as the “source and summit” of the faith. These beautiful words provide important insights into the mystery of this sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Lord. The Eucharist is a source since it is in substance the God who is the source of life and all other things. As the summit of the faith, the Eucharist is a sign of the goal of the Christian life — union with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. These are key points which can animate catechesis during the Mystagogy.

One way to do that is explore the Eucharist as anamnesis. This Greek term is often translated as remembrance, but it really contains elements of past, present and future. The Eucharist does more than remember the passion of Our Lord; it makes it present again so that we can unite with it. We stand at Calvary under the cross; we experience the suffering and rejection of our Lord. At the same time, we are present at the Resurrection; we are joined with the power and triumph of the Kingdom of God. As a result, in us and through us, this Kingdom of God, present today in mystery, grows in accordance with the eternal plan of God to reconcile the world to Himself. By celebrating God's presence and the triumph of His Kingdom, in the Eucharist we also look to the future when Christ will return and consummate that Kingdom.
Through these memorial aspects of the Eucharistic celebration, we experience grace in a personal way. But God’s presence in that grace is linked with transformation. This is the basis of the ethical meaning and power of the Eucharist—the body and blood, soul and divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ changes what it encounters. In His earthly ministry, Jesus changed the world by inaugurating the Kingdom of God, which is the presence of God at work in the world. But the Incarnation does not end when Christ ascends to His heavenly glory. This presence of God remains today in the bread and wine and works to transform fallen humanity and creation.

These ideas of grace, God’s presence and transformation are a central part of the experience of the Eucharist. The Mystagogy can explore these sacramental realities, which occur through the personal experience of the sacred which unites us with the Paschal Mystery. Good catechesis will point out that the idea of mystery means that we do not understand the Eucharist; we acknowledge it as a profound mystery of faith. It does not matter if we do not understand the theological nuances of transubstantiation, or if we do not comprehend how it is possible for God to be present in the bread and wine on the altar among the gathering of His people. In the Eucharist, we are not called to ask questions, but to listen. If we are willing, if we listen to the God who speaks to us in this sacrament, we experience something sacred and divine and we receive a power which transforms us and empowers us so that we can live out our callings as Christ’s disciples.

This transformation means that what is enacted in the Eucharistic celebration does not remain in the sanctuary of the Church or upon the altar. The Eucharist is meant to bless and change the whole world. Here the Eucharist can be an encouragement during the Mystagogy for neophytes to apply their faith in the performance of good works and acts of service and love for others. After the liturgical rite is completed, Catholics are to go into the world and carry with them the power and mission which they have received in Holy Communion. *Ita, missa est*—we are sent to be witnesses for Christ and agents of
goodness and compassion. We are to help advance the Kingdom of God in the circumstances and station to which God has called us.

The Mystagogy lessons can draw on this commission which the Eucharist presents to every Catholic. When Christians join with God in the Eucharist, they affirm that they too are part of this Kingdom of God, and that they are agents of the transformation which God is working on a fallen world. The Kingdom of God confronts sin and evil and overcomes them — in Jesus’ ministry sinners are forgiven and reconciled with God, the sick and lame are healed, and demons are cast out. Through its members, the Body of Christ participates in this dynamic work of transformation. Therefore, an authentic response by a Christian to the grace of the Eucharist is to work for the establishment of justice, the protection of human rights, and the elimination of conflict and hatred. Such a response cares for the sick, visits the lonely and embraces the marginalized. Christians denounce evil and confront sin because that is what the Kingdom of God does.

Another result of the transforming power of the Eucharist provides an additional dimension for reflection on experience of the sacred during the Mystagogy. The Eucharist brings us reconciliation. In the Incarnation, the infinite God and finite creation were joined in the God-man Jesus Christ. The Passion and the Resurrection of Christ, which is the historical dimension of the Paschal Mystery, extend this unity so that all of humanity, and all of creation, can be reconciled with the Creator. Sin no longer need separate humans from God. Likewise, the effects of sin on individual persons, on their relationship with each other and on creation itself have been overcome and defeated. Since God has reconciled all things in Christ, all Catholics who are joined with Christ in the unity of the Eucharist are therefore a means of spreading God’s reconciliation into the fallen world. This transformation of sin, alienation, and injustice into the harmony and peace, the shalom, of the reign of God in His Kingdom, is why God
calls Christians to follow Him. Here again we see the application to the call to service which is an objective of the Mystagogy.

But the idea of union extends to the whole Church. This dimension of the Eucharist can be applied during the Mystagogy to reinforce another objective — to develop the neophytes’ sense of their belonging to and participating in the parish community. In our individualistic society, we are reminded by the Eucharist that through the Incarnation God has joined Himself not just with each individual believer, but with the whole of the Mystical Body of Christ. When we partake of the bread and wine, we are joined with all the other persons who belong to the Mystical Body of Christ. Since Christians are unified with God and each other in the Eucharist, they are to be a witness of that unity to the world. If the Church is to live out the love which Jesus commanded His disciples to have for one another, it must be an example of unity in love to a world which knows so much separation and conflict. Proper instruction during the Mystagogy will reinforce for the neophytes the reality that the Eucharist unites them with all Catholics and gives them a place in the parish community.

Reflection on other aspects of the Eucharistic mystery can further enhance the sense of participation in the community for the neophytes. By the use of things that are common, things that are present everywhere, the Eucharist also speaks to us of inclusiveness. The gathering to celebrate the Eucharist is an expression of the equality of all human beings in Christ. As the apostle Paul tells us in Galatians 5, there is no longer any distinction — male or female, Jew or Greek, master or slave. Christ died and rose for all of humanity, and humanity assembles as equals as they remember the Passion of Our Lord. This equality means that everyone is included in the Eucharistic celebration.

Similarly, when the community of faith gathers around the altar to celebrate this sacrament, they are assembled as the Church, the *ekklesia*. This Greek word literally means the assembly of those who are “called out”. The Church is comprised of those persons who have been called out from all of
humanity to be the People of God, the Mystical Body of Christ. Therefore an important aspect of the celebration of the Eucharist is participation; believers are not simply spectators at the performance of a religious rite. Vatican II placed great emphasis on this idea of participation in the liturgy. Participation is the opposite of oppression and marginalization. As we have seen, the Eucharist is many things, but it is above all a meal, an act of communion by the members of the Body of Christ. This body is a witness and model to the rest of the world of participation, of a just society in which everyone can fulfill their proper place free from any discrimination which excludes and free from any oppression which does violence to basic human rights and dignity.

The Mystagogy can explore still more dimensions of the Eucharist in order to help neophytes understand their calling as new Catholics and disciples of Christ. Of the many wonders of God's love which have been revealed to us in our daily lives and throughout the course of human history, perhaps the greatest is the humility which is expressed in the Eucharist. The Lord and Creator of the universe, the Uncreated and Eternal, empties Himself completely, to the point of becoming a human being and dying a terrible death on the cross. The great hymn in Philippians 2 speaks of this emptying, this kenosis, in which Christ set aside his heavenly glory to take on the form of a bondservant. Today, the Incarnation is perpetuated as Christ is secretly and mysteriously present in the humble form of bread and wine. The Lord becomes the servant; the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Mystagogical instruction can draw from this example of Christ's kenosis. Those who would be disciples of Christ are called to imitate this humility and servanthood of Our Lord. Christ warned his first disciples that they must not lord over one another, as the Gentiles were wont to do. A disciple must set aside all tendencies towards domination and exploitation, and instead become the servant of all. The humble service which is embodied in the Eucharist spends itself on behalf of others.
The word “Eucharist” comes from a Greek word meaning thanksgiving. When we remember Our Lord’s life, death and resurrection, when we make His passion present again and unite with it, we give thanks for His sacrifice, a gift of self-emptying love. This attitude of thanksgiving should be a characteristic of the Christian Life. “In all things give thanks” St. Paul exhorts us in I Thessalonians 5:18. This attitude of thanksgiving, full of the love and grace of Christ, is the witness Christians can provide to the present world, which is lost in the hopelessness and despair of secularization and the commodity culture. Christians give thanks because the Eucharist tells them that there is more to life than the pursuit of possessions, wealth, power or prestige. These things are ultimately empty, because the God of Love is a love that empties itself in the Eucharist and gives itself fully to others. Likewise, Christians are called to give of themselves for others in an attitude of thanksgiving for what God has done to bring them salvation and reconciliation.

The service of a simple Christian life of love tells the world that it need not despair; that there is more to life than material things; that the God who is our Creator has reconciled us to Him and offers us true life through His Son. The Eucharist tells a world lost in self-centered pursuits and the desire to dominate and destroy that the world and human history will not go on forever as they have in the past. Humanity can have hope and overcome its despair because God intervenes in history to bring about salvation. This intervention happened once in the Incarnation, and it will happen again when Christ returns to consummate all things and turn them over to the Father. Therefore humanity has great cause for thanksgiving and rejoicing.

These reflections on the Eucharist are intended to show in some small way the richness of this sacrament and of the Paschal Mystery. The RCIA team and the neophytes can find here a rich field for exploration during the Mystagogy. Of course, these thoughts are only the first steps, since the depths of the Eucharistic mystery can never be fully experienced. Nevertheless, there is enough theological and
practical material here for use in a lesson plan for the Mystagogy. The four lessons presented later in this paper are an attempt to utilize these reflections and do so in a way that corresponds to the objectives of the Mystagogy.
9. Catholic Identity and Spirituality in relation to the Catechetical Content of the Mystagogy

In light of the previous reflections on the meaning and content of the Mystagogy segment, the practical question now arises regarding the actual catechetical content of each session. In this regard, it is helpful to review the objectives of the Mystagogy as they are stated in the text of the RCIA itself—participation in the Paschal Mystery, the meaning of the Eucharist, a sense of community. In Chapter 3 of this paper I stated those objectives in the form of six specifics points which the Mystagogy is designed to address.

The pastoral challenge for the RCIA minister is to select appropriate material from the Catechism and other Church documents which will meet these objectives. Based on the length and schedule of the Mystagogy at St. Simon, there will be time for four sessions. Four lessons is hardly enough time to address Catholic teaching regarding the Paschal Mystery or the sacraments in their fullness, so the focus must be on material which will be most meaningful for the neophytes. Here the RCIA minister is reminded that the neophytes are at different levels of spiritual development, as was discussed in Chapter 5. Because the Mystagogy objectives are directed towards experience, mystery and participation, the practical result is that material which best enhances a personal sense of divine presence is most effective for use during the Mystagogy, rather than material which simply deals with doctrinal issues.

A final pastoral consideration is that at St. Simon these lessons will most likely be used to supplement the other teaching material in a text such as the “Eucharist” booklet. The first half of the session would present a portion of that booklet, and the second half would be a time of reflection and discussion based on the material in the lessons in this paper. Nevertheless, the lessons presented here are designed so that they can be used on their own; they contain enough material that an RCIA leader could use each lesson as the basis for a full session.
One way to organize the catechetical material is to emphasize the aspects of Catholicism which distinguish it from other faith traditions and to relate those aspects to the goals of the Mystagogy. Specific Church teachings can be selected which correlate with each objective. In this regard, the pastoral and ecumenical approach which was described in the chapter on apologetics should be kept in mind. The idea is to use Church teaching to provide an opportunity for neophytes to broaden their experience of the Christian mysteries and to lay a foundation for their spiritual growth.

Each lesson could be organized in the following way. The lesson begins with the reading aloud of a brief paragraph which describes the topic of the lesson. This would be followed by reading of selections from Scripture which relate to the lesson’s topic. The RCIA leader will then present a few Church teachings which correlate with the lesson’s material. In each case, the lesson will emphasize both a certain amount of doctrinal content, but just as importantly, each lesson will explore how Catholics enter into the experience of these realities in their spiritual life. The content of the lesson would also be related to the mystery of the Eucharist. The lesson would then conclude with a group discussion based on certain prepared questions which are represented by an RCIA team member. However, this final discussion time is open to any questions which the neophytes might raise.

Here is one way in which the catechetical material can be organized around the objectives of the Mystagogy into four lessons:

Lesson I  The Meaning of the Gospel. This lesson is centered on the objectives of reflecting on the Gospel and entering into the Paschal Mystery. The lesson would present Church teaching regarding the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection. Those events are the historical means through which God, because of His love for us, has met the need of fallen and sinful humanity for reconciliation with God. Through faith in Christ, we can receive the forgiveness and redemption which the Paschal Mystery has made possible for us. We are reconciled to God and can experience spiritual renewal and a living
relationship with Him. The Eucharist is the means by which we can unite sacramentally with the Paschal
Mystery and therefore with God's forgiveness and love.

Lesson II — Experiencing God's Presence — The Sacraments The topic of this lesson is the meaning
of the sacraments as a door to the experience of grace and the divine presence. The lesson would review
Church teaching regarding the meaning of grace and the role of the sacraments in communicating grace
between God and human beings. Baptism, which the neophytes have now received, is the first step into
the life of grace through which Catholics experience God and His love and forgiveness. The Eucharist is
significant here as the source and summit of the faith and as a sustaining channel of grace. The mystery of
the Eucharist, by representing for us the body and blood of our crucified Lord on Calvary, unities us to the
Paschal Mystery and draws us into the mystery of redemption. The other sacraments each have a specific
role in communicating grace and God's presence to us.

Lesson III — Experiencing God's Presence — Personal Prayer and Devotion. This lesson will explore
how prayer and devotion can be the means to bring us into a closer relationship with God. As an
indication of the importance of prayer in Catholic life, the lesson can note how the final section of the
Catechism is concerned solely with prayer. Prayer brings us into closer union with God and prepares us to
lead a life which is directed towards God's will and service to others. Through prayer we participate in
the life of grace and experience the mysteries of the faith in a personal way. Specific Catholic devotional
practices can be discussed here, such as the rosary, Eucharistic adoration and the stations of the cross,
which all are means by which we can join with and participate in the Paschal Mystery.

Lesson IV — Participation in the Church Community. The final lesson presents participation in the
local Church community as a natural and necessary extension of personal faith and Catholic identity.
Baptism unites us with Christ, and if we are all united in his mystical Body, then we are united to each
other and depend on each other. The Eucharist is the primary sacrament which sustains our union in
Christ and it empowers us with the grace necessary to fulfill our vocation to reach out to people in need. Regular attendance at the liturgy is therefore essential to Catholic life. Similarly, the doctrine of the Communion of Saints can be used to illustrate the belief of Catholics that all members of the Church can, and should, share spiritual benefits with one another. Those who are united to Christ are also called to follow his example of service to others and thereby live out the command to love God and neighbor.

This is just one way that appropriate catechetical material might be organized. The lesson plan suggested here correlates with the six objectives presented earlier in Chapter 3. The specific choices of doctrinal and spiritual content are intended to realize the intention to emphasize the Eucharist and certain other teachings which are unique to Catholicism. In that regard, there is also a special focus on mystery and personal experience on the part of the neophytes so that Catholicism becomes a living faith and not just a set of beliefs and practices. As a further important practical application, the neophytes are given a context in which they place their calling to lead an active spiritual life which participates regularly in the liturgy and reaches out to others.

Appendix I contains a detailed outline of each lesson for use by the RCIA team members.
10. Conclusion and Final Theological Reflection

The process of preparing this paper has been a personal spiritual and theological journey. With that pilgrimage almost complete, I would like to conclude with some final thoughts about what the journey has meant to me.

Other sections of this paper have assessed the first year Mystagogy at St. Simon, its success or failure, and possible changes for the future, so there is no need to repeat those things here. Instead, I would like to briefly reflect on what I have learned as a result of my involvement with the Mystagogy and how my own spiritual journey has been enriched by that experience. In this reflection, I will follow Kinast’s method, in the sense that I will identify several important points which are part of the present context of the Mystagogy, but these points have a broader practical and theological application to other aspects of Catholic life.

One basic and essential point which should always be in the mind of an RCIA minister is that no one spiritual path is normative. In a previous chapter on Catholic identity, I mentioned the work of Erikson and others who have defined the stages of adult development which can be applied to the process of spiritual growth. Those stages provide an outline of the path which leads to maturity in adult and in spiritual life. But every person follows that path in a uniquely personal way. Every person who enters the RCIA process is at a different point their walk with God. This is especially true during the Mystagogy when new Catholics are finding their way forward in the new stage of spiritual progress which follows upon the receipt of the sacraments of initiation. The practical result is that the pastoral approach of an RCIA minister, and the content of the syllabus, must be flexible enough so that something meaningful and understandable is always offered during the Mystagogy sessions.

A related idea is that a minister really cannot know how God is working in someone’s life. If everyone’s spiritual path is unique and personal, then I cannot use my own responses and preferences as a
basis to judge how a person is reacting to or learning from a particular lesson which I might be presenting. As Kornfeld has pointed out, a minister must not read minds but give God room to work. A minister’s role is not to mold a person into a certain type of spirituality or to determine what path that person should follow. Rather, the minister should concentrate on the provision of a nurturing environment in which people can grow and flourish as they experience God in their own way. I have often been surprised to find out, sometimes weeks or months after leading a session, that persons have learned from and responded to my teaching efforts in ways which I did not at first recognize or even imagine to be possible.

These thoughts about the role of a minister have greater meaning within the context of the Mystagogy, which focuses on one of the unique aspects of the Catholic faith—the sacramental experience of God’s presence. In fact, the whole of the Catholic faith is permeated by this sacramental principle. My work with the RCIA, especially during the Mystagogy segment, has shown me how much that sacramental dimension can enrich and empower the lives of Catholics who earnestly desire to enter into and explore it.

For me, as a one-time lapsed Catholic who returned to the fold after an absence of some twenty eight years, the depth of value and meaning in the sacramental experience reminds me that the Catholic faith is worth the effort required to explain it and even defend it. The experience of Christ which is offered by the Church to the world through her sacraments is something which makes the decision of catechumens and candidates to join the Church such an occasion for joy and thanksgiving. For me, it is a personal thrill to help guide adults through the process of joining the Catholic Church and to see them enter the Church at the Easter Vigil and thereby become participants in the fullness of the sacramental life which distinguishes Catholicism from other faith traditions.

The focus on the Eucharist, which has been a prominent characteristic of the Mystagogy at St. Simon, has enriched my personal understanding and appreciation of this sacrament of Our Lord’s Body and Blood. My sense of the sacred and mysterious, and the depth of meaning in the Paschal Mystery, are
more real to me as a result of reflection on the meaning of the Eucharist and as a result of the sharing of personal experiences of the divine presence. The bonding which I observed during our Mystagogy sessions has made me more conscious of how the Eucharist is a source of life and strength which binds us all together into the Mystical Body of Christ. At the same time, the Eucharist binds us to the call of the Gospel, so I am more aware of the need to reach out to others and to do what I can to help the growth of the Kingdom until Christ returns.

Because it attracts persons from such a variety of backgrounds, the RCIA highlights the value of ecumenism. Catholics, in particular RCIA ministers, should be ardent about the depth of their Church’s teachings and beliefs, but at the same time they must be respectful of other faith traditions. Proper ecumenism recognizes the truth and value in those faith traditions and uses that content as the basis upon which to build an understanding and experience of the riches of the Catholic sacramental tradition.

In order for this to happen, a pastoral approach which uses the “gentle apologetics” described in an earlier chapter of this paper is essential. The Mystagogy, as a time which explores the experience of the sacred, should be characterized by a sense of openness and discovery which values the insights of anyone who is genuinely seeking the divine. This kind of freedom is necessary to create a safe space in which people feel able to ask questions and explore the mysteries of the faith. As has been mentioned earlier in this paper, even during the Mystagogy, questions of an apologetic nature often arise, and the challenge for me, or any RCIA minister, is to develop a pastoral approach which deals with such questions in a truly ecumenical way.

Finally, the basic meaning of the Mystagogy – the experience of the Paschal Mystery, the meaning of the Eucharist, the vocation to service – is applicable to all Catholics. Since it treats of aspects of the faith which are central to the meaning of Catholic life, the Mystagogy prepares people to enter into an active and productive life within the Church community. The reflections which have been made
throughout this paper provide lessons which remain relevant long after Pentecost and the close of the Mystagogy segment. If becoming Catholic is a choice which finds it greatest fulfillment in a life which is completely committed to the faith, then the Mystagogy has achieved its purpose when it sets new Catholics on the path to making that kind of commitment. It is my hope that the material in this paper can in some small way support and nurture the spiritual journey of new Catholics. The writing of this paper has certainly given me a richer experience of Catholicism and challenged me to deepen my own commitment as a Catholic and as an RCIA minister.
Appendix I – Lesson Outlines for use during the Mystagogy

Lesson I The Meaning of the Gospel.

Introduction: Christ’s Passion, death and Resurrection are called the Paschal Mystery. These events are the historical means through which God, because of His love for us, has met the need of fallen and sinful humanity for reconciliation with God. Through faith in Christ and baptism, we can receive the forgiveness and redemption which the Paschal Mystery has made possible for us. We are reconciled to God and can experience spiritual renewal and a living relationship with Him. The Eucharist is the means by which we unite sacramentally with the Paschal Mystery. Through the Eucharist we experience again God’s forgiveness and love which were opened up for us on Calvary.

Scripture Passages for Reflection and Discussion

Mark 10:45 Jesus came to give His life for us
John 10:7-11 Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for his sheep
Acts 2:38-39 Baptism and repentance lead to the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit
I Corinthians 15:1-7 St. Paul summarizes the Gospel
Rom 5:6-10 Christ died for us

Thoughts and Questions for Discussion:

How do you summarize the meaning of the Gospel?

Baptism has given us a new spiritual life. By our baptism we are forgiven, we receive the Holy Spirit, and we enter into the life of the Church. What new things have you experienced in your spiritual life and relationship with God?

How has God’s forgiveness changed you? What will you do differently now that you have experienced new life in Christ through baptism?

In what ways do you experience God’s presence? What situations, objects or symbols are most meaningful for you?

The Eucharist is the source and the summit of Catholic life. It is at the heart of what it means to be Catholic. What meaning does the Eucharist have for you? How has that understanding changed as a result of your Baptism and/or Confirmation?
Lesson II — Experiencing God’s Presence — The Sacraments

Introduction - The sacraments are a door to the experience of grace and the divine presence. Grace sustains our spiritual life. The sacraments are the primary means for communicating grace between God and human beings. Baptism is the first step into the life of grace through which Catholics experience God’s love and forgiveness. The Eucharist is significant here as the source and summit of the faith and as a sustaining channel of grace. The Eucharist represents for us the body and blood of our crucified Lord on Calvary. It unites us to the Paschal Mystery and draws us into the mystery of redemption. The other sacraments each have a specific role in communicating grace and God’s presence to us.

Scripture Passages for Reflection and Discussion

John 1:16-18 Grace comes from God through Christ and reveals the divine to us
I Peter 3:18-22 Baptism saves us through the power of the Paschal Mystery
John 6:48-58 The Bread of Life – we must partake in the Eucharist
Ephesians 2:4-10 By grace we are saved and raised with Christ to new life

Thoughts and Questions for Discussion:

Catholics participate in a life which is powered and sustained by grace. In what ways do you experience grace in your daily life?

The sacraments are a way in which God uses His creation to bring His presence and eternal life to us. The sacramental life, based on the seven sacraments of the Church, is unique to Catholicism. Why are the sacraments a special opportunity to experience God’s presence and grace?

Why did Jesus place so much emphasis on the Eucharist in the passage from John 6?

The sacraments represent a level of existence which transcends ordinary human experience. Through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, we can enter into a dimension of life which is holy and sacred. Words cannot fully describe this experience of the sacred; we can only refer to it as a mystery. What place does mystery have in your spiritual life?

The Eucharist joins us to the Paschal Mystery. Through it we can be present at, and receive the benefits of Christ’s death on Calvary. What have you experienced in your spiritual life as a result of your participation in the Eucharist?
Lesson III — Experiencing God’s Presence — Personal Prayer and Devotion.

Introduction - Prayer and devotion bring us into a closer relationship with God. Prayer is an important way to participate in a life sustained by grace. It prepares us to lead a life which is directed towards God’s will and service to others. Through prayer we experience the mysteries of the faith in a personal way. As an indication of the importance of prayer in Catholic life, the final section of the Catechism is concerned solely with prayer.

Scripture Passages for Reflection and Discussion

Mark 1:35 — The example of Christ
John 17 Christ prays before his Passion
1 Thessalonians 5:17-19 -pray always; give thanks; do not quench the Holy Spirit
Philippians 4:6-7 Take everything to God in prayer

Thoughts and Questions for Discussion

Regular prayer sustains our spiritual life. How has your prayer life changed now that you have become a Catholic? In what ways do you experience God’s presence when you pray?

What can we learn about prayer from the example of Jesus in the Gospels?

Catholics have many prayers and devotions. One common devotion is the rosary. It is a prayer of intercession through Mary and is a meditation on events in the life of Christ. Do you know how to pray the rosary? Are you willing to consider praying the rosary on a regular basis, say once a week or even daily?

The Paschal Mystery is central to the Catholic faith. The Eucharist unites us with the Paschal Mystery in a personal way, but we can also benefit from reflection on the events surrounding the death of Jesus. One way to do so is by praying the Stations of the Cross. What do you experience when you reflect on the Passion of Christ? Have you ever prayed the Stations of the Cross?

In the Blessed Sacrament, Our Lord Jesus Christ is present to us body and blood, soul and divinity. Time spent in prayer and adoration before the Blessed Sacrament is a powerful source of spiritual strength and growth. Have you ever participated in Eucharistic adoration? What might you do while you spend time in the presence of Jesus?

What prayer books do you use? Do you have any favorite prayers or devotions?
Lesson IV – Participation in the Church Community.

Introduction - Participation in the local Church community is a natural result of personal faith and Catholic identity. Baptism unites us with Christ, and if we are all united in his Mystical Body (the Church), then we are united to each other and depend on each other. The Eucharist is the primary sacrament which sustains our union in Christ and it empowers us with the grace necessary to fulfill our vocation to reach out to people in need. Regular attendance at the liturgy is therefore essential to Catholic life. The Communion of Saints teaches us that all members of the Church can share spiritual benefits with one another. Those who are united to Christ are also called to follow his example of service to others and thereby live out the command to love God and neighbor.

Scripture Passages for Reflection and Discussion

Matthew 16:24-25 Take up your cross and follow me
James 1:22-25 Be doers, not just hearers of the word
James 2:14-17 Take care of those in need; faith without works is dead
John 13:34-35 The new commandment to love one another
I Corinthians 12:12-26 One Body, Many Parts

Thoughts and Questions for Discussion

One of the commandments of the Church is that Catholics attend Sunday Mass. Catholics should also receive the Eucharist as often as possible. Why is regular attendance at the liturgy and frequent receipt of the Eucharist important to Catholics?

The Communion of Saints unites us with all members of the Church, whether on earth, in purgatory, or in heaven. We benefit from fellowship with our fellow Catholics here on earth. Likewise, the saints in heaven can be our friends and intercessors. We can also pray for the souls in purgatory. How do you participate in the Communion of Saints in your daily life? Do you have a favorite saint to whom you are devoted?

Catholics believe that faith and good works go together. How does your faith influence the way you lead your daily life?

Over and over, Christ in the Gospels calls us to a life of service to others. He gave his disciples a new commandment that they love one another. As the source of our faith, the Eucharist directs us outwards to service for others. Authentic Catholic faith is expressed in service to other people. What are ways in which you can participate in Church ministries or perform acts of serve for your neighbors?
Appendix II - First Theological Reflection prior to the 2009 Mystagogy

As I reflected on Deacon Tom’s request for me to provide material for the Mystagogy, I felt that I would benefit from the thoughts of the other RCIA team members. I therefore decided to lead a theological reflection before an RCIA session few weeks before the Easter Vigil. Because Deacon Tom wanted to evaluate the success of the new RCIA program and identify future needs, I thought it would be best to involve also some of the RCIA candidates in the reflection along with the RCIA leadership.

I used the Kinast method. Because the RCIA candidates have little, if any, prior theological training, I lead the theological reflection as an application. My intent was to take what the candidates had learned and determined how the RCIA program had contributed to their spiritual growth. I also wanted determine what the appropriate content of the Mystagogy sessions might be.

The Kinast method enters into a theological experience by first gathering important information. A key step here is to identify the players, the place and the plot. Clearly, the place is the RCIA program and the players are the RCIA leadership and the candidates. The plot is the success of the new RCIA format and the manner in which it should develop, both in the extended Mystagogy sessions and in future years.

The method also looks at clues provided by images, objects gestures. The key image here is the anticipation of the candidates feel as they prepare to receive the sacraments of initiation. Their extensive participation in the program, and the growth they had clearly exhibited, indicated to me that the new format was working. The goal of receiving the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist is both a gesture and, through the symbolism of water, oil, bread and wine a set of sacred objects which summarize what the RCIA program is all about. I wanted to know how the candidates felt about their spiritual journey in the program and whether they felt prepared to receive these sacraments and enter into the fullness of life in the Catholic Church.
So I structured the reflection around several questions. First, I asked the candidates to think back to the time when the RCIA program began last August and reflect on how they had grown spiritually during the course of the program. Several of the candidates were willing to talk about this and indicated that they had a much greater appreciation for the Catholic Church and what it teaches. They felt that their faith had a greater meaning in their daily life. One the candidates sent me an e-mail a few days after the reflection which I believe summarizes the journey of many of the candidates. Here is an excerpt from that e-mail:

I want to start out by explaining where my spirituality was before I started RCIA. I had religion in my life as a child until the age of 14. I attended church regularly with my grandma and was confirmed as an Episcopalian. I got married when I was 20, to my wife Diane, in a Catholic church and promised to raise our children Catholic. While my kids were growing up, I attended Catholic mass pretty regularly, but never felt a part of the community because I wasn’t Catholic. After my children grew older, I attended mass 2 to 3 times a year.

I decided to participate in the RCIA program last August. My daughter started my thought process because she was going to attend. Why it took me so long is a question I can’t really answer. I had little spirituality in my life, but I felt like it was time to change. I hadn’t prayed or felt like God was an integral part of my life for a long time.

The RCIA program has been a wonderful experience for me. It has had a very positive impact on my life. I pray often and I feel like I have become a better person. I am more patient, forgiving and I feel like I have started a new chapter in my life. I still have a lot of work to do, but RCIA has provided me with the guidance that I need to continue my journey.

The emphasis in this reflection is on personal spirituality. This candidate talks about the impact on his life of the RCIA and the growth he has experienced in his personal journey. What is interesting from my perspective is that he does not consider whether he understands church teaching better; instead, he talks about what kind of person he has become. He clearly desires further spiritual growth. All this indicates to me that the Mystagogy sessions can build on the experience of the RCIA to date and provide further opportunities for spiritual growth.

A second question I asked was “Do you understand what it means to be a Catholic? Why is being a Catholic different from being a member of some other faith tradition?” The response from the candidates in this case was more mixed. Some candidates indicated they had a better appreciation for Catholicism
and how it differed from other faith traditions. The RCIA program had cleared up misconceptions they had about Catholic teaching.

On the other hand, one person indicated that she was intimidated by the three Scrutinies in which the candidates take part at Mass during Lent. In addition, she was not sure she knew what to do once she was fully Catholic. She was not even sure she knew the right way to act while at Mass. The group agreed to support her in the fear which naturally comes before one takes an important step in life. Clearly, there is more work for the RCIA team to do in making the candidates comfortable with the decision to become Catholic.

At this point, several of the team members indicated that the sacramental life of the Church makes Catholicism unique. In this regard, the Eucharist, as the source and summit of the faith, is of central importance. Deacon Tom mentioned his plan to conduct a series of meditations on the Eucharist during the Mystagogy, and the leadership, as well as the candidates, agreed that that would be worthwhile.

As I reflected on the responses I received from the group, I discerned several important themes. First, I was more convinced that personal spiritual growth needs to be emphasized in the Mystagogy. The candidates have begun an important spiritual journey by participating in the RCIA. That journey does not end at the Easter Vigil. Rather, it continues once the candidates are full members of the Church. The RCIA exists to encourage and equip them to continue their spiritual journey. To do this, the Mystagogy can examine spiritual practices such as prayer, devotions and Scripture reading. But authentic Christian spirituality reaches out to others. The Mystagogy can assist that outreach by showing new Catholics the many ways in which they can use their own unique gifts and talents to participate in the varied ministries of the Church.

Another important theme is reinforcing the decision to become Catholic. Many RCIA candidates go through the RCIA simply so they can marry another Catholic. Other persons may want to become
Catholic but are not fully confident in the meaning of that decision. The Mystagogy can support such persons at a critical time in their spiritual journey by highlighting the uniqueness of the Catholic faith, especially the richness of its sacramental life. The Eucharist is the fullest expressions of that richness. Reflection on the meaning of the Eucharist can be used to bring to new Catholics awareness that at Mass they participate in something which is bigger than themselves. The Eucharist joins all Catholics together and strengthens them to go forth and serve the Lord in daily life.

The conclusions which I drew from the theological reflection are as follows:

1. The Mystagogy segment needs to emphasize personal spiritual growth. One’s spiritual journey has only begun once one has joined the Church. Ways to continue that journey can be presented, whether they are devotions, prayers, personal Scripture study or service to the Church community.

2. An appreciation by new Catholics of their Catholic identity is critical. Reflection on the meaning of the Eucharist can provide a context to communicate that identity. An understanding the meaning of being Catholic will highlight the relationship of Catholicism to other faith traditions and to the secular world. Once the relationship between the Eucharist and Catholic identity is understood, the secular world becomes our mission field.

Based on this theological reflection, I believe my project idea should be to develop appropriate lessons for the Mystagogy segment of the RCIA for use at St. Simon. Clearly, the group will support and value this project, since we will be implementing Father Bill’s desire to extend the Mystagogy until Pentecost. My work will have a Eucharistic context as the lessons expand and supplement the material
which is used concerning the Eucharist. The content of the lessons would develop the ideas mentioned in my conclusions noted above.

We will begin the Mystagogy in a few weeks. It is not possible to have a fully prepared set of lessons ready in that time. However, I can prepare some ideas for use this year and then expand them into fully prepared lessons based on my experience when I present them and based on further study and reading during the final courses of the MAPT program. A flexible approach is appropriate here, since this is the first time in recent years that my parish has had an extended Mystagogy segment. In the past, the Mystagogy had only consisted of one or two sessions which explained the different ministries in the parish. Expanding the RCIA program by several weeks will be an important step for the parish. Hopefully my project can help implement Father Bill’s vision and make the Mystagogy segment a meaningful time of spiritual growth for all the RCIA participants.
On June 17, 2009, several members of the RCIA team met to reflect on the recently completed RCIA. This year of the RCIA had a special significance since it was the first RCIA which had been conducted under the leadership of Deacon Tom and it was first time in many years that the RCIA at St. Simon had included a full Mystagogy segment which extended until Pentecost.

Deacon Tom led the reflection and all the present members of the RCIA team participated. I extended the discussion by asking some specific questions related to the Mystagogy. I specifically wanted to find out if our approach to the Mystagogy had answered the basic question “Why be Catholic” and whether the sessions had really helped the neophytes gain a more meaningful experience of the sacred and the unique aspects of the Catholic faith.

Using the outlines of the Kinast method, the reflection which took place can be viewed as an application of the team’s theological knowledge and pastoral understanding to the specific experience of the RCIA during the 2008-09 year. Using some of Kinast’s categories, the key players are the RCIA team and the catechumens and the plot is the question of how successful the RCIA process had been. Although the scope of the reflection was the entire RCIA process, beginning with the Pre-Catechumenate in August 2008 through the completion of the Mystagogy in May 2009, the present summary will only present the portions of the reflection which related to the Mystagogy, unless other material is useful to establish context.

With regard the new format, one of the goals had been to increase participation by the catechumens and to avoid the feeling of a classroom setting or lecture format. Through the use of the “Come and See” lessons, this goal was accomplished. Participation in the discussion groups was good, and the catechumens asked more questions than in prior years. As a result, the team felt that the related goal of
creating a safer environment in which the catechumens felt free to speak up, ask questions and confront potentially difficult issues has also been met.

The improvement in participation carried over into the Mystagogy sessions. The use of the “Eucharist” booklet provided some worthwhile instruction on the meaning of the Eucharist and other material which provoked some good discussion. The neophytes asked a lot of questions, not only concerning the Eucharist but also other dimension of the Catholic faith. Therefore, the sessions were able to explore other aspects of the faith which were particularly significant for the neophytes. In addition, the participation among the group during the Mystagogy developed a greater level of bonding than what has occurred during the other segments of the RCIA.

Again using Kinast’s categories, the key objects which emerge from this reflection are the instructional materials which were used. Both the “Come and See” and the “Eucharist” lessons were instrumental in achieving the goal of participation. They were also useful resources for catechetical purposes. In particular, the neophytes who attended the Mystagogy sessions had a good opportunity to deepen their knowledge in regard to the Eucharist and the Paschal Mystery. The lessons, together with the reflections I added in the final portion of the session, helped the neophytes to understand what is different about being Catholic. By thus reinforcing Catholic identity, the Mystagogy answered the question “Why be Catholic?”

However, one area in which the team believed the RCIA curriculum could be strengthened was in the area of spirituality. Some time had been devoted to personal prayer and the devotional practices of the Catholic faith at various times in the course of the RCIA. During the Mystagogy, some of the devotional material in the “Eucharist” booklet, as well as the reflections which I led on Catholic identity and spirituality had helped to encourage the neophytes to continue their spiritual growth and to maintain an active prayer life. But everyone agreed that more emphasis should be placed on spirituality
in order to enhance the sense of mystery and participation in the Paschal Mystery which are central to the Catholic faith and to the Eucharist in particular.

As was pointed out by Deacon Tom during the reflection, these thoughts regarding the relative success or failure of the changes to the RCIA format illustrate that the initiation process is about more than providing doctrinal instruction and bringing new members into the Church. Although those aspects of the RCIA are certainly important, what is much more significant from a long term, spiritual perspective is for the RCIA to encourage new Catholics to be active members of the Church who regularly participate in the liturgy and who have some meaningful role in Church ministries.

These goals are central to the RCIA process, especially during the Mystagogy with its emphasis on the Paschal Mystery, the Eucharist and active service in the Church community. The best way to make those goals a reality is to teach the neophytes those aspects of the faith which show them that being Catholic really matters and becoming a Catholic is more than just the joining another church or denomination. Catholics enter into the sacred in a special way through the sacraments. That is why being Catholic matters.

In conclusion, the first year under the new RCIA format had been a success. The most progress was made in improving participation during the actual RCIA sessions. The challenge for the RCIA team was now to take that sense of participation and to extend it into the life of the new Catholics outside the RCIA, both in their personal spiritual life and in their activities as members of the parish community. The team agreed to improve the RCIA syllabus with that objective in mind.

The conclusions which I reached as a result of this reflection are:

1. The discussion format works much better than a simple lecture format. Participation by neophytes is much greater and a greater sense of community is created.
2. Centering the Mystagogy on the Eucharist is an effective approach. The Eucharist is a unique aspect of Catholic identity and it is the primary source of our spiritual growth and unity as Catholics.

3. The syllabus for the Mystagogy should be extended to provide more stress on personal experience of the sacred and spiritual practices such as prayer and devotions.

4. The emphasis on the Eucharist and on Catholic devotional practices provides a context for the neophytes to relate to their new roles as members of the Catholic Church. The most important answer to the question "Why be Catholic?" is simple and profound – the Eucharist.


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