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The mystagogy challenge

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NCR Today

From the very first time I watched Lasse Hallström's 2000 film "Chocolat" I knew I had seen a fantasy film that captured the Rites of Christian Initiation for Adults from beginning to end. It is a quirky little film, based on the 1999 novel by Joanne Harris.

The community is in sin of all kinds, the young priest taking the place of the sick pastor, struggles to lead the unruly flock by example and presence and unadorned but direct preaching. Into the town comes a woman and her daughter with their secret past. The woman stirs things up, just by her presence; she exposes lifelong Catholics in hypocrisy when she opens a chocolate shop during Lent. It is a threat to all that the community stands for and an attack on Lent and the Faith! Through the persecution dumped on her from every side, she offers comfort, she listens, and irritates people to change and be who they say they are. The mayor attacks her chocolate shop on Holy Saturday night and as he decapitates a pagan goddess a sliver of chocolate flies onto his lips. He is grasped by the confection and stuffs himself into exhausted oblivion. When the priest walks by the box-like window in the morning, the mayor seems to wake from a tomb. Self-righteousness takes a lot of energy. And then the woman, Vianne, whose name means "life" or "alive", offers him a seltzer to quiet his stomach, and then is gone.

The people come out of church after Mass ready to be community, embrace everyone, and celebrate the mystery they have just experienced.

To me, the final scenes of the film symbolize the time of mystagogy, that precious, celebratory time after people are received into the community of believers for the first time through baptism at the Easter Vigil, or who enter into full communion.

Mystagogy

The final period of the order of Christian initiation of adults which is from Easter to Pentecost. The National Statutes for implementation in the USA also recommend and extend mystagogy for one year.

For as many years as I have been participating in catechetical and faith formation conferences and gatherings, mystagogy remains the most mysteriously understated aspect of our efforts.

At one meeting a few years ago, two RCIA instructors, gave a presentation on mystagogy; they noted that many people would leave after Easter. But the absence of practical application made me ask: "But how do parishes 'do' mystagogy?" One of the presenters replied, "Well, that's up to the parishes. We are speaking in general terms."

I am a proponent of creating opportunities for small groups to gather and watch mainstream feature films through the lens of the Scriptures. Yes, popular culture is interesting and using popular culture is relevant, but more interesting is what happens in the small groups and a leader to facilitate the conversation. When people can express what the film and scripture story means to their faith journey, a sense of belonging is created.

In religious life, growing into this "sense of belonging" is a significant step for a religious. There seems to be a parallel in the community life of the parish. Because we religious are a community, and some are very small communities within the whole of the province or congregation, we help sustain one another after first and then final profession, through the highs and lows, and in between times. Certainly each one has to take responsibility for their lives, but the Trinity is present in the dynamism of a loving communio. Community is a place, and state of, grace.

I recall our sisters from one of our Asian provinces saying that so many people come into the church at Easter but so very many stop practicing soon after. Why? Because they have been accompanied by believers through on an intense journey and then they are left on their own.

I found this article online by Sister Miriam Malone, SNJM, who offers "Six Steps to Effective Mystagogy." Rightly, she says that plans for mystagogy have to be in place from the beginning in order to be lived after baptism.

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A goal without a plan, after all, is just a wish.

When my mother was going through a difficult time and was sending us to Mass rather than going herself (she had eight children of varying ages), neighbors who lived across the street would offer to drive us. In those days, this couple had been excommunicated because one of them had been divorced and remarried. But they went to Mass anyway. This couple's example and "being there" sustained my mother through difficult times.

Mystagogy is a beautiful word that warms the heart. It sounds so "other worldly" but it is very this worldly. It is also labor-intensive community building and this is why it is all the more precious. Everyone in the parish can be part of mystagogy but we need to know more about it, and that reaching out to a new Catholic is a good thing to do, not unlike being a good neighbor.

Let the celebration begin.

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