

PERMANENT MYSTAGOGY: THE URGENCY OF ADULT CATECHESIS FOR THE RECEPTION OF COMMUNION

By R. Jared Staudt

According to the *General Directory for Catechesis*, “adult catechesis must be given priority.”¹ In fact, the GDC links adult catechesis to the baptismal catechumenate: [Adult catechesis] “involves ‘a post-baptismal catechesis, in the form of a catechumenate...presenting again some elements from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* with the purpose of allowing a person to grasp and live the immense, extraordinary richness and responsibility received at Baptism.”² Therefore, adult catechesis is not simply a refresher course in content but is permeated by the idea that the life of Baptism (and each of the sacraments) must be lived in maturity. And this requires ongoing formation and support, a “permanent mystagogy.”³ Therefore, Pope Benedict XVI, in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, calls for a “mystagogical approach to catechesis, which would lead the faithful to understand more deeply the mysteries being celebrated.”⁴

Initiation is ultimately ordered to being one with our Lord in an intimate and eternal communion. Such intimacy requires that we approach Jesus’s Body with love, free from serious sin, and with a reverent disposition. However, many seem to take the reception of Communion lightly in the Church today. Reception of the Eucharist, for many, has become routine, uniform, and even presumed as a right, regardless of canonical standing or state of soul. We know from St. Paul that improper reception of Communion works against its true purpose and rather than deepening our participation in the life of God, it can actually alienate us from him:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself (1 Cor. 11:27-30, RSV).

We know from the infrequency of confessions today in many parishes that few Catholics approach the Eucharist with the necessary aid of the sacrament of Penance. This fact alone makes it clear that we are living in a time of Eucharistic crisis.

In defending current practice, some would point to the work of Pope Pius X in promoting frequent

Communion. Indeed, many Fathers of the Church, noting the words of the Lord’s Prayer and the practice of the early Church, exhorted their flocks to daily Communion. The practice of frequent Communion should not, however, be confused with approaching the sacrament routinely or haphazardly. In fact, in the decree authorized by Pope Pius X, *Sacra Tridentina*, encouraging frequent Communion, the Holy Office notes that the Eucharist should be approached with a “right and devout intention (*recta piaque mente*).”⁵ Thankfully, the document explains the characteristics of this intention. “A right intention consists in this: that he who approaches the Holy Table should do so, not out of routine, or vain glory, or human respect, but that he wish to please God, to be more closely united with Him by charity, and to have recourse to this divine remedy for his weakness and defects.”⁶ The decree also makes clear that there is no *obligation* to receive Communion frequently, as is made clear in the Church’s precept that it must be received at least once a year.

Sacra Tridentina provides one more crucial point on this topic: that the grace of the Eucharist requires a proper disposition in order for it to bear full fruit in the soul. “Since, however, the sacraments of the New Law, though they produce their effect *ex opere operato*, nevertheless, produce a great effect in proportion as the dispositions of the recipient are better, therefore, one should take care that Holy Communion be preceded by careful preparation, and followed by an appropriate thanksgiving, according to each one’s strength, circumstances and duties.”⁷ In order to avoid a merely routine reception of Communion that is hindered in its effects, both preparation and thanksgiving are vital. Pope Benedict XVI explicitly affirms this need for a proper disposition: “Active participation in the eucharistic liturgy can hardly be expected if one approaches it superficially, without an examination of his or her life. This inner disposition can be fostered, for example, by recollection and silence for at least a few moments before the beginning of the liturgy, by fasting and, when necessary, by sacramental confession.”⁸ Liturgical participation requires the right interior disposition in order to fruitfully enter into the realities of the Mass and the Eucharist.

We need to ask ourselves, does possessing the right disposition seem to be common today? Simply from the lack of silence in many churches, it is apparent that the times before and after Mass are not being dedicated to serious prayer. Further, an adequate catechesis for fostering the proper disposition for Communion is frequently missing. The results are seemingly disastrous. Sherry Weddell insightfully observes that “in recent decades, there has been little or no serious discussion at the parish level about how an individual *receiving* the sacraments can prepare his or her heart, soul, and life to do so *fruitfully*.”⁹ Given this fact, she concludes: “I think we may safely question whether many Catholic adults possess the inner disposition of discipleship necessary for the sacraments...to have the intended effect and bear the intended fruit.”¹⁰

More faith-filled and reverent reception of Communion cannot realistically be expected until Catholics are better prepared. In fact, many of those who attend Mass could actually be understood to be *quasi-catechumens*. Pope John Paul II says as much when he writes:

[Our pastoral ministry] is also directed to those who in childhood received a catechesis suited to their age but who later drifted away from all religious practice and as adults find themselves with religious knowledge of a rather childish kind. It is likewise directed to those who feel the effects of a catechesis received early in life but badly imparted or badly assimilated. It is directed to those who, although they were born in a Christian country or in sociologically Christian surroundings, have never been educated in their faith and, as adults are really catechumens.¹¹

We must approach those who find themselves in this situation with patience and understanding, offering them the means to grow in understanding and love for God.

Before concluding, I would like to offer a few suggestions. Of course, the first step must be to offer a substantive and compelling catechesis on the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. If Catholics do not believe in the reality of the Eucharist, fruitful reception of Communion is clearly impossible. Such an initiative must be linked, of course, to more general and necessary efforts of evangelization and catechesis. Second, we need to find ways to impart the necessity of proper preparation before Communion and thanksgiving following it. Third, parishes can revive such practices as Sunday Vespers with Benediction, Eucharistic processions, and, most of all, the practice of Eucharistic adoration. When Catholics see a more flourishing general devotion to the Eucharist, they will more likely prepare themselves well for Communion. Fourth, we can work to create a more prayerful and silent environment before and after Mass, more conducive to preparation, thanksgiving, and devotion to the Eucharist. Finally, pastors can firmly and gently challenge Catholics

to go to confession before receiving Communion (when needed) and more generally reinforce the principle that one must be prepared to receive Communion.

The Church has been clear that we need to prioritize adult catechesis, that it should be inspired by the baptismal catechumenate, and that we should form the initiated but uncatechized through the New Evangelization. These important endeavors foster intimate communion with our Lord. This communion brings about a transformation of one’s entire life, as the Eucharist is meant to impact how we live out the Christian mission in the world.¹² Thus, there must be an emphasis on the ongoing mystagogical catechesis requested by Pope Benedict: “A convincing indication of the effectiveness of eucharistic catechesis is surely an increased sense of the mystery of God present among us. This can be expressed in concrete outward signs of reverence for the Eucharist which the process of mystagogy should inculcate in the faithful.”¹³ When Catholics approach the Eucharist with the right dispositions—charity, faith, piety—that stem from deliberate preparation and thanksgiving, there will be a deeper living of the Christian life by all within the Church.

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Notes

1. Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, art. 258.
2. *Ibid.*, quoting *Christifidelis Laici*, art. 61.
3. This term appears in the Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin, XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishop 7-28 October 2012. *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, Proposition 38. The paragraph reads as a whole: “Therefore we propose that the traditional process of Christian initiation, that has often become simply a proximate preparation for the sacraments, be everywhere considered in a catechumenal perspective, giving more relevance to permanent mystagogy, and thus becoming true initiation to Christian life through the sacraments. (cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, 91.)”
4. Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, art. 64.
5. Sacred Congregation, *Sacra Tridentina* (20 December 1905), par. 12 (1). (This decree from the Sacred Congregation and authorized by Pope Pius X is out of print, but may be found in its entirety at: <http://www.cwtn.com/library/CURIA/CDWFREQ.HTM> courtesy of ETWN.)
6. *Ibid.*, par. 13 (2).
7. *Ibid.*, par. 15 (4).
8. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, art. 55. He also mentions the importance of thanksgiving: “Furthermore, the precious time of thanksgiving after communion should not be neglected: besides the singing of an appropriate hymn, it can also be most helpful to remain recollected in silence” (art. 50).
9. Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), 98-9.
10. *Ibid.*, 120.
11. Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, art. 44.
12. See Pope Benedict XVI’s *Sacramentum Caritatis*: “Finally, a mystagogical catechesis must be concerned with bringing out the *significance of the rites for the Christian life* in all its dimensions – work and responsibility, thoughts and emotions, activity and repose. Part of the mystagogical process is to demonstrate how the mysteries celebrated in the rite are linked to the missionary responsibility of the faithful. The mature fruit of mystagogy is an awareness that one’s life is being progressively transformed by the holy mysteries being celebrated. The aim of all Christian education, moreover, is to train the believer in an adult faith that can make him a ‘new creation’, capable of bearing witness in his surroundings to the Christian hope that inspires him” (art. 64).
13. *Ibid.*, art. 65.