Sacraments and Beginnings

In the entryways, on the bulletin cover, you may have noticed the logo ‘We Believe. We Belong.’ for a few months now. Coming into church this morning, you were greeted with We Believe. We Belong. We Learn. That will be our focus as we begin another school year, and as faith formation programs start up this Fall. but it truly is more than just a theme. It is essential to our creed. It is who we are.

Every Sunday we profess what we believe: We Believe in a loving God, who created us, who sent his Son to save us, and who sends the Holy Spirit who draws us into the divine life. Worshipping God, becoming disciples of His Son, guided by the Spirit, we are drawn out of a self-centered, selfish and solitary life into a life that finds joy and meaning in loving relationships, communion with God, and with others. We Belong to the human family, children of God, and brothers and sisters. We Belong to the Catholic Church, founded upon Christ and born on Pentecost. Gathered together by the Holy Spirit, We Belong to a parish family, formed of many families drawn together, praying together, serving together, and constantly learning together. We Believe. We Belong. We Learn.

Learning is a life-long enterprise. We begin the day we were placed in our mother’s arms, the day we were born. We learn about smiles – how to win them, and how to return them. We learn to make sounds, then to form words, and with God’s grace, we continually learn how to form words into prayer. We learn to stand, then to walk, and with God’s grace, we learn ever new ways to serve. We learn to read, we are introduced to God’s Word, and in the Bible we begin to discover the wisdom and guidance God gives us for a full, free and holy life. With God’s grace, we keep right on learning until we learn how to say good-bye, to let go of this life, to journey through death into eternal life.

As we focus more intently on learning this Fall, I want to re-iterate a couple of things I wrote in the bulletin this past month. For one, with faith formation launching another semester, it seems wise to repeat the changes in sacramental preparation, namely the move of 1st Penance from around 4th grade, to 2nd grade or so, before 1st Eucharist. But lest that move be misunderstood, I believe it will be helpful to revisit a word I brought up three weeks ago. Mystagogia.

The word refers to reflecting on, unpacking, learning about the sacraments and the mysteries of our faith after experiencing them. You know that old expression “You had to be there”? Well, we have to experience the grace of a sacrament before we can truly appreciate and fully learn its meaning and power. Put another way, every sacrament is more a beginning than an ending. Celebrating a sacrament for the 1st time is more like the first day of school than like a graduation.

It is obvious with Baptism. That is our first plunge into the life of Christ, the first time we are washed, bathed in mercy and love and reborn as a child of God and member of the church family. Then we spend the rest of our life learning how to live our baptism, live the Christ life.
We learn the depths of mercy, we learn the stories of our church, how others who lived the life, traditions, teachings.

1st Penance is another beginning. We learn the procedure to follow when we need to be reconciled to God and to others. We learn that forgiveness is at the heart of who God is. We learn how we can experience God in asking for and receiving the sacrament of reconciliation.

But this is important: we learn the procedure, and ask for forgiveness for little sins, so that we will know where to go and what to do when we truly need the deep grace of repentance and reconciliation. Second graders rarely make choices that truly rupture their relationship with God or with the church. So it isn’t that their mortal sins need to be forgiven before 1st Eucharist.

Think about it though. Isn’t learning of a merciful, forgiving God a great preparation for the other great sacrament of forgiveness, the Eucharist? Experiencing 1st, 2nd, 3rd Penance, encountering God’s mercy, reflecting on it each time, we learn more and more about the power this sacrament holds, for times we will truly need it.

Can any 2nd grader truly understand the fullness of the gift of the Eucharist before receiving 1st Communion? Of course not! But prepare to receive Eucharist, begin receiving, celebrating Mass, pray after communion, count on the gift, commune with the Lord, and we enter the realm of mystagogia – learning the true depth of a mystery through the experiencing it, and encountering the Lord.

Does any Confirmation candidate know all the ins and outs of the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives before Confirmation? Of course not. Memorize a list of gifts, maybe. But truly understand those gifts, value and use them, that comes with Confirmation, not before.

For those who are living the sacrament of Marriage: did you understand all there is to know about the married life on your wedding day? Did you fully grasp how important God’s grace is to living the sacrament, or how your relationship could be a place to concretely experience God’s love, all prior to exchanging vows? I can tell you, despite years of preparation to receive the sacrament of Orders, the day I was ordained was a beginning. I am still learning about priesthood, as I live that sacrament. I checked with Fr. Ray and Msgr. – they are still learning too!

Even anointing. It is the beginning of a journey of healing. It is a sacramental way to bring God into our illness, whether the journey will lead to recovery, relief, peace, or to freedom from suffering in this life and peace in the life to come.

I hope this gives a little clarity as to how the sacraments take root in our lives, especially after we experience them. A little clarity about why it is worth learning a new word like mystagogia, if it can help us grasp this process of learning the mysteries through experiencing and then reflecting on them.

One of the gifts of the 2nd Vatican Council was the restoration of the Catechumenate; the RCIA, or Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. It was rediscovering how that process of conversion can work that led to a new look at mystagogical learning. We have been encouraged to see the RCIA as a model of all sacramental preparation, and that is one of the reasons various changes have taken place in sacramental preparation over the last 40 or 50 years. You see, it is
not just individuals who must continually reflect on the mysteries of the faith, and keep learning. We belong to a learning church. God’s revelation that we are drawn into the life of the Trinity through the sacraments: that is unchanging. How we best introduce children or others into the mysteries, how to celebrate them well in various cultures, different times and places: that is a different story. In the Middle Ages, stained glass windows provided a visual way of teaching mysteries of the faith. Now we have inspirational apps. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church continually searches out, learns anew the best ways to communicate, to teach the truths of the faith in every time and place.

Now if you are missing the usual homily on the scriptures, as always, the scripture page in the bulletin provides some helpful, condensed reflection. Spurred to keep learning, as long as you have the bulletin in your hand, check out the various learning opportunities this Fall. You may want to pick up the flier an adult faith formation opportunities as well.

A last word about learning. The real goal is to not just learn ideas in our head, but to get to know the Lord in our heart. Scripture studies, other opportunities this Fall are not geared toward a degree and graduation, but to a deeper life in Christ, and sanctification. We Believe. We Belong. We Learn.