

# Mystagogy, religious education and lived catholic faith

A. J. M. Elshof<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** This article discusses the mystagogical attention within contemporary religious education, by describing the developed conceptualization of mystagogy. In the first part, the article relates the characteristics of pre-Christian, Christian and contemporary post-Christian/post-secular mystagogy to their respective historical contexts. Furthermore, it clarifies how contemporary mystagogical religious education both faces and opposes present-day tendencies, such as the neglect of church life within religious education and the instrumental use of religion and religious expressions. The second part of the article clarifies how meetings with catholic communities not only contribute to a less instrumental perspective of religion but also evoke the students' receptiveness to fragility, refractory and otherness in their own lives and in the lives of others. The article concludes with some thoughts about the way encounters with lived catholic faith might be of interest to religious education in school, while this education is not aimed at religious initiation.

**Keywords** Religious education · Faith communities · Lived religion · Mystagogy · Karl Rahner · Patristics

## 1 Introduction

Since 2000, several teachers and scholars in the European religious educational field have developed a focus on mystagogy. The main advocates of this development, the Catholic Professors of religious pedagogy Mirjam Schambeck (Freiburg) and Bert Roebben (Dortmund), believe that religious education should not only have informative, reflective and communicative goals, but should also aim to be mystagogical: students should acquire religious experiences, stimulating their sensibility for the mystery. Their shared perspective involves different approaches: Schambeck (2006, pp. 411–415, 2010, pp. 408–412)

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✉ A. J. M. Elshof  
a.j.m.elshof@uvt.nl

<sup>1</sup> Tilburg School of Catholic Theology - Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

wants to complement informative and hermeneutical learning with mystagogical elements, and Roebben (2013, pp. 111–126, 2015, pp. 33–54) argues for a mystagogic communicative model.

Both scholars find support for their claims in the world of the youth. Schambeck (2006, pp. 1–7, 2010, pp. 400–401) detects a post-Christian culture in which religion and faith are so marginalized that young people do not even ask whether there is a God or not. Roebben (2013, pp. 77–82, 168–169, 2015, pp. 28–29) adds a post-secular consciousness to this post-Christian one: a consciousness of the diversity and fragmentation of religions and worldviews and the predominance of control thinking. Young people in particular are relatively defenseless against the related ideals of self-redemption (which deems people to be able to and required to save themselves) and malleability of human life (of love, health, relationships, happiness, etc.). They lack the language with which they can determine their own (resilient) position. Both scholars believe that for a growing number of youngsters, religious education at school is the first structured moment of becoming acquainted with religions and worldviews. This requires a religious education that is not only informative, reflective and communicative, but also mystagogical. Students should be able to gain experiences with religion, not aiming at their initiation into church life, but at their personal and social development (Schambeck 2010, pp. 413–414; Roebben 2015, pp. 28–30, 64–65).

What do Schambeck and Roebben mean by mystagogy? Does their mystagogical concept have anything to do with previous views and practices? Actually, the term mystagogy has had different meanings in the course of time. The first part of this article describes the changed conceptualization of mystagogy. The characteristics of mystagogy in the pre-Christian period of the Church Fathers are compared to the main features of Karl Rahner's mystagogy, which answered the questions of church and theology within a mainly Christian culture. Schambeck and Roebben however, develop a mystagogy in the midst of an educational world, and from a culture that they consider post-Christian and post-secular. Their mystagogy is intertwined with their context as well. The small role faith communities play within their mystagogy, expresses the decreased relevance of the church in social and educational life. Furthermore, their mystagogy faces and opposes an instrumental use of religion, which does not contribute to people's ability to be receptive and to deal with the fragility and the refractory of life.

The second, empirically based part of the article clarifies how students' encounters with two catholic communities contribute to mystagogical learning processes that enable these youngsters to deal with situations that call for a receptiveness towards fragility, refractory and otherness. This part concludes with some thoughts about the way encounters with lived catholic faith might be of interest to religious education in school, while this education is not aimed at religious initiation.

## 2 Mystagogy in development

### 2.1 Patristic mystagogy: pre-christian times

Originally, mystagogy descends from a compound Greek word which means initiation into the Mystery. Within the mystery cults in the first centuries, this Mystery involved especially philosophical truths and divine mysteries into which people were initiated (Rouwhorst 2016, pp. 20–36). Early Christianity distanced itself from this cultic philosophically

oriented approach, since the Mystery of Christianity is in fact God's mysterious offer of love and salvation. According to the Church Fathers this Mystery should not be hidden from the uninitiated (as was practiced in mystery cults) but rather should be made known. Because of their rejection of the cultic philosophical mystery approach, the Church Fathers have hardly applied the term mystagogy to the Christian initiation processes of the first three centuries (Rouwhorst 2016, pp. 20–36).

This changed in the fourth century when the church, by the massive influx into Christianity, wanted to welcome the newcomers without diluting the faith. From that period two groups of faith apprentices could be distinguished: the catechumens who postponed baptism (sometimes their whole life), and those who wanted to be baptized. These last ones followed an intensive catechesis, were introduced into a Christian life praxis and into a faith community, whereupon they were baptized at Easter. After being baptized, they received additional catechesis. This post-baptism catechesis came to be called mystagogical catechesis. This catechesis further clarified what had been experienced in baptism and included two aspects: the newly baptized were able to better grasp and internalize what had been experienced in baptism (cognitively) and were also motivated to continue to live a religious dedicated life (volitional), embedded in the faith community (De Jong-Van Campen 2009, pp. 53–54). From the fourth century onwards, the term mystagogy is also used for the praxis of teaching and guidance, in which the baptized are further initiated into the meaning of one's life in light of God's plan of salvation (Schambeck 2006, pp. 18–77, 2010, p. 402). Although the mystagogy of these Church Fathers demonstrates terminological similarities to the cultic philosophical mystagogy (Rouwhorst 2016, pp. 20–36) it remains in line with the Christian reference of the previous centuries: the faithful are initiated into the Mystery of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Van Loon 2016, pp. 41–45). In short, patristic mystagogy is inaccessible and clearly distinctive from the non-Christian environment, aimed at further initiation into Church faith and life.

## 2.2 Karl Rahner: mystagogy in christian times

The background of the mystagogical revival in the twentieth century is not a pre-Christian culture with a growing interest in this faith, but a Christian society that has been closely interwoven with Christian faith for ages, and in which the self-evidence of this intertwining is decreasing. In order to bridge the increasing estrangement between faith and life, theologians like Karl Rahner promote mystagogy since it advocates an anthropological theological perspective with human life as a starting point. Instead of talking about an intellectualized God that is too far-removed from human life in order to be perceived as relevant, beneficial and saving, the human experience should form the starting point from which church and theology search for God's mysterious commitment (Rahner 1976). This experiential starting point is consistent with the patristic mystagogy (Schambeck 2010, p. 402). Unlike the Church Fathers, who focused their mystagogical praxis on the baptized, Rahner's mystagogy connects to the presumed innate openness of every human being for God's mystery (Rahner 1976; De Jong-Van Campen 2009, p. 59). According to him, the search for and receptiveness to God's mystery and transcendence of the unbaptised should be considered as well.

A second difference concerns the view on the finding places of God's mysterious commitment. The Church Fathers consider the ecclesial and sacramental life as such. Rahner however, believes that God can be experienced in daily life as well (Rahner 1976; De Jong-Van Campen 2009, p. 65; Schambeck 2010, pp. 404–406). For him, religion is not

about the transmission of religious knowledge but about interpreting human lives in a religious way, so that people become able to recognize God's commitment and mystery within their existential questions and life experiences (Rahner 1976; De Jong-Van Campen 2009, p. 65; Schambeck 2010, pp. 404–406).

Within Rahner's mystagogy, three layers can be distinguished (Waaïjman 2000, pp. 580–585; Wollbold 1994, pp. 23–46): the mystery of human existence, the mystery of God's grace and the mystery of the Church. The first layer concerns the human search for a meaningful God. Experiencing oneself and experiencing God are interwoven. Mystagogy is being mediated biographically and focuses on self-realization (Wollbold 1994, pp. 23–46; Van Den Berk 1999; Waaïjman 2000, pp. 582–583; De Jong-Van Campen 2009, pp. 61, 112–114). This first mystagogical layer merges into the second layer: that of initiation into the mystery of God's gracious self-communication in Christ (Rahner 1976; Wollbold 1994, p. 39; Waaïjman 2000, pp. 583–584; De Jong-Van Campen 2009, pp. 114–115). To the awareness of the first layer, of people's search for a meaningful God, the second layer adds the consciousness that this human search for God responds to God's previous reaching out to humankind (De Jong-Van Campen 2009, pp. 114–115). The mystical-dialogical encounter with God (Waaïjman 2000, p. 584) calls for a changed perspective on God, oneself, others and life in the world. The third layer concerns a changed praxis. This layer is indicated by various terms: initiation into the Church (Wollbold 1994, pp. 23–46), in the personal calling within the community (Waaïjman 2000, pp. 584–585), or initiation into the mystery of the Church (De Jong-Van Campen 2009, pp. 300–306). Regardless of these different titles, this layer concerns the consciousness that the changed perspective requires a changed praxis: a personal mission and even a calling to live life in a religious manner and in solidarity with others. That calling can be brought about by the Church as a local religious community but also by participating in the mission of the Church: in contributing to the realization of God's kingdom in the world (Rahner 1976; Waaïjman 2000, p. 585; De Jong-Van Campen 2009, pp. 304–306; De Jong 2010, pp. 55–58).

A main point within the changed concept of mystagogy concerns the church. In pre-Christian patristic mystagogy, the personal religious development was embedded in and oriented towards Church life and faith. Rahner's mystagogy expresses a similar awareness: in his still mainly Christian context he attempts to bridge the growing gap between personal life experiences and church life. Within contemporary mystagogy the church's life and faith do not play a crucial role anymore: initiation into the faith community is not self-evident. This implies that the second layer is not always followed by the third. (De Jong-Van Campen 2009, p. 114). Moreover, the transition from the first to the second layer does not follow as a matter of course. The disintegration of the coherence between the layers results in the risk that contemporary mystagogy neglects her critical characteristic. Instead of criticizing social tendencies such as an orientation towards self-redemption and the malleability of human life, contemporary mystagogy might contribute to them. Crucial is the transition from the first layer onto the second. At stake is the awareness that one's personal experiences and perspectives develop in relationship with others/The Other (De Jong-Van Campen 2009, pp. 66, 309).

A final difference between contemporary mystagogy and the mystagogy of the Church Fathers and Rahner concerns the fact that gaining religious experiences nowadays is also considered part of the mystagogical learning process. Contemporary mystagogy is comprised of (a) providing a Christian perspective view on life, (b) gaining religious experiences in the so-called mystagogical arrangements, and (c) interpreting those experiences (De Jong-Van Campen 2009, pp. 85–94; De Jong 2010, pp. 48–53). Contemporary

mystagogy can, other than the patristic and unlike Rahner, not fall back on previously acquired religious experiences nor on a previously presented Christian framework of interpretation. Recent mystagogy is easily accessible for people who have not been religiously socialized and who gain their first experiences with religious practices and interpretations.

### 2.3 Schambeck and Roebben: mystagogy in post-christian and post-secular times

The mystagogy of Schambeck and Roebben focuses on existential questions and experiences of students, whose educational context is post-Christian and post-secular. Roebben and Schambeck emphasize that the divine mystery can be searched for and experienced both in the lives of students and in the religious domain. In their view, the mystery in the life of students can be revealed by encountering religious expressions such as rituals, Bible stories or buildings. Due to the confrontation with the students' questions and experiences, these expressions themselves might become meaningful in new ways. Although Schambeck and Roebben do not mention the three phases in mystagogy (conveying a religious view of life, gaining religious experiences and the subsequent interpretation of those experiences) these phases can be recognized.

In their mystagogy, the distinction between the three mystagogical layers (the mystery of existence, of grace and of the Church) play a role. To them, the first and the second layers are important.

They advocate mystagogical learning processes (arrangements), in which students gain experiences with religious expressions such as Bible stories, religious rituals, symbols, ethics, aesthetics and buildings (Schambeck 2006, pp. 387–388, 2010, pp. 408–412; Roebben 2013, pp. 167–184; 2015, pp. 114–135). Students can discover that these expressions reflect the way other people, based on their existential questions and experiences, have sought after God and experienced God's mystery. In these religious expressions, previous God-searching is solidified (Schambeck 2006, pp. 358–359; Roebben 2013, p. 180). By gaining experiences with these expressions, students can become aware of the inner part of religion (vital questions of life and meaningful answers). Furthermore, they can experience the unsuspected, mysterious parts of their own lives, discuss them (Schambeck 2010, pp. 408–413; Roebben 2015, pp. 113–135), and consider the importance of a religious perspective on their own lives. Here, the first layer is at stake: the initiation into the mysteries of existence, with a focus on the biographical line and personal development. Two signals point at the significance of the second layer within their view on mystagogy. Firstly, their emphasis on respect for the distinctiveness of the two worlds: both the student's world and the religious world. The relative autonomy of these worlds should be considered. Only then, both voices can be heard, in a critical correlative relationship. Actually, it is the encounter with the surprising, inconvenient and refractory elements of religious expressions, that enables students to become aware of the surprising, inconvenient and refractory elements they experience in their own lives. Thus, the strangeness of religions evokes their capacity to experience their lives in a different way: as mysterious and with openness to transcendence (Schambeck 2010, pp. 401, 406, 414; Roebben 2015, pp. 117–118). Their emphasis on respecting the distinctiveness illustrates their concern that the first phase (the search for a meaningful God) evolves onto the second (the changed perspective due to the experience of love and relation). Both Roebben and Schambeck feel that the phase of personal formation (the constructive side of identity) must be complemented by a phase of change of perspective on one's own life (the receptive side of identity). Secondly, this becomes evident from their great attention to perceiving

identity as something that can be ‘discerned’ and ‘received’ as well. They point out that identity arises from a relationship to the other/Other (Schambeck 2006, pp. 375–388; Roebben 2015, pp. 72–76). They oppose an instrumental treatment of religion: they do not aim at religious tourism in religious education but rather at a pilgrimage (Roebben 2013, 2015, pp. 33–54): students do not only take note of the pleasant and recognizable aspects of religion but also of its critical power and its refractory nature. They argue that students can discover a transcendent perspective which enables them to shed a new light on their lives (Schambeck 2006, pp. 308–371, 2010, pp. 403–408; Roebben 2013, pp. 167–184, 2015, pp. 72–76), which corrects current interpretive frameworks (of manageability and self-reliance). They consider religious education a place that can open up a world of experience of students, not only for new opinions (vision), but also for a new way of being (praxis) (Schambeck 2010, pp. 406, 414; Roebben 2015, p. 114). In the transformation process that they wish to promote, the first and the second phase play an important role.

They reject the initiation of pupils in religious faith and mission of the third phase. To them, the patristic mystagogical emphasis on Church life seems rather meaningless.

## 2.4 Questions to Schambeck and Roebben

Schambeck’s and Roebben’s mystagogy raises questions. The first question stems from the religious pluralism of today’s educational context. Therefore, the Mystery cannot be presumed as coinciding with the way God is experienced and thought of in the Catholic-Christian tradition. In education it cannot be presupposed that youngsters come to the recognition that the same secret is active and present in their lives as is spoken of in Scripture and Tradition (Wissink 2006, p. 63). Such a presumption recognizes the right of all students to learn about Christianity but denies the right of students that have other convictions to explore their own religion (GDC 1997, p. 74 mentions both rights).

Schambeck’s and Roebben’s approach to this plurality expresses similarities and differences. Schambeck advocates mystagogical moments and not a mystagogical model; in her view the freedom of religion and conscience of pupils is at issue (2010, p. 414). Her mystagogy is mono-religious: she only refers to expression (writings, rituals, locations, etc.) originating from (Catholic) Christianity. Her interpretation of God’s Mystery refers to God as Father and Son (Schambeck 2006, pp. 109–212, 2010, pp. 400–415). The role of the Holy Spirit remains remarkably neglected in comparison with the patristic teachings. Roebben’s approach is quite similar, both in terms of religious expressions that mainly originate from Catholic-Christianity, as well as in the above-mentioned Catholic Christian interpretation of God’s Mystery. However, he combines these mono-religious references with a plea for religious education which is fundamentally broader, and brings students into contact with religious expressions from diverse traditions. This is consistent with his post-secular multi-religious perspective and his perspective on the social role of education (Roebben 2015, pp. 10–31, 70–76). He considers mystagogy a guide into the mystery of existence (narrative identity) by bringing about a sensitivity to the transcendent nature of that mystery: the soul (Roebben 2015, p. 49). This raises a question about his perspective on the various religious truth claims. His work shows that the orthodoxy (the debate about and the search for the best interpretation of religious doctrine) does not have priority. He prefers the orthopraxis: a pragmatic (as opposed to dogmatic) approach that allows students to reflect on what people (and they themselves) do with religion and what religion does to people (and to themselves) (Roebben 2015, p. 56), from the perspective that religious truth unfolds within the inter-subjective and inter-religious encounter (Roebben 2015, p. 80). The normativity of Scripture (and Tradition) is not in the past but in the future (Roebben 2015, p. 120). His attitude

towards the different religious truth claims is primarily directed at pedagogy: his mystagogy contributes to students' capacity to recognize, acknowledge and endure religious diversity and otherness (Roebben 2013, pp. 154–165, 2015, pp. 56–76).

Schambeck's and Roebben's approaches require a further theological reflection on the possibilities and limitations of a Christian mystagogy in the religious diverse world of education. Such a reflection might begin with the characteristic features of their approaches. They both: (a) recognize and respect religious differences, (b) approve of the developing and revealing nature of the true and good, and (c) support the preference for orthopraxis. Such a reflection may benefit from pneumatology: theological reflection on the activity of the Holy Spirit in God's mystery. To Catholics, the Holy Spirit is not only efficacious in Church life but in people's worldly lives as well. The Spirit is present in situations in which people are yearning for peace and justice, in which they anticipate the Mystery that this world holds, in which they move towards each other without leveling the differences: the Spirit creates unity while preserving diversity (Wissink 1989, p. 97). The workings of the Holy Spirit thus fit well with the distinctions of the mystagogy in the religious educational praxis.

The second question arises from the reduced role of the Church within the post-Christian contemporary mystagogy. In Schambeck and Roebben's mystagogy the church plays a minor role: religious education, including mystagogical religious education, is not aimed at the students' religious initiation. From this, it is understandable that when they bring up the issue of religious impulses for learning (e.g. ethics, aesthetics, rituals or writings), neither of them mention the option of specific meetings with lived catholic faith and religious communities. Nevertheless, the marginalized position of Christianity leads to a cautious openness to church life, as long as this life is diaconal (Schambeck 2010, p. 414) or kenotic (Roebben 2015, pp. 106–110) in nature: subservient to the development of pupils without wanting to incorporate them.

Actually, the absence of meetings with concrete forms of lived faith in religious education is questionable. Will students not learn to observe religion from an archaic and outdated perspective? Will religion not be reduced to ethics? Shouldn't students be taught that religion is not a dead language, but a living one, which is still spoken in many ways today? Don't they have to gain experience with concrete believers and their perspectives? And, more importantly: is it possible that encounters with catholic communities might contribute to the transition Schambeck and Roebben both plea for: from the first onto the second mystagogical layer? Might contact with lived catholic faith add to students' capacity to become aware of the meaning of other perspectives for their own worldview? Could that support their receptiveness and openness for transcendence?

These questions concern the meaning the third mystagogical layer (about church life) might have for learning processes that contribute to the transition from the first layer onto the second. The second part of this article discusses this question by presenting empirical research that addresses the significance of encounters with faith communities for students' learning processes.

### 3 Empirical research

#### 3.1 Method

This section describes two specific meetings of students with Catholic faith communities that took place during two weekends in the winter of 2014. The weekends were part of a

period of several years of inter-religious/worldview teaching in two training courses for primary school teachers: the Openbare Pabo in Deventer (Netherlands) and the Karel de Grote Hogeschool in Antwerp (Belgium). Dutch and Belgian students participated in these weekends, in order to obtain their teacher's certificate to teach religious education in Catholic primary schools. During these weekends, the informative, reflexive and communicative goals of the training programs were complemented by mystagogical goals: the students acquired experiences with two forms of Catholic faith. The first weekend took place in the convent of the Trappistine sisters near Arnhem. During the second weekend, they met people of St. Egidio, in Antwerp.

By observant participation during these weekends, the researcher attempted to gain an understanding of the experiences, visions and attitudes of young people regarding the Catholic faith.<sup>1</sup> Participant observation is a qualitative research method that is appropriate here, because it comprises various ways of information gathering such as observation, interviews, informal conversations and document collection (Maso and Smaling 1998, p. 87). The research method lends itself well to investigate the meaning a particular group ascribes to certain processes, behaviors, interactions, perceptions, attitudes, feelings, experiences, or social relationships (Maso and Smaling 1998, p. 49). In consultation with the supervising college teachers, the investigator informed the students about her role as a researcher. This openness has not only been motivated by ethical motives; it could also lead to more relevant research data. Students may demonstrate a greater willingness to share relevant information with the researcher, since people usually consider it flattering when researchers study their environment intensively (Maso and Smaling 1998, p. 100) and because of their affinity with scientific research. Therefore the presence of the investigator would probably not obstruct the learning process of the students (Baarda et al. 1997, pp. 106–111). It would more likely deepen this process, partly because the researcher actively participated in all components of the program, in a role that showed overlap with that of the accompanying college teachers.

The researcher used a variety of data. First of all, personal data that students, lecturers and the investigator sent to each other prior to the weekends: information about age, hobbies, religious backgrounds and affinities, etc. The second type of data comprised the researcher's notes concerning the students' attitudes, behavior, mood and manners. These notes were discussed after each shift with the college teachers and afterwards they were supplemented. The third type of data consisted of the evaluation forms of the weekends filled out by the students. The fourth type of data comprised the Dutch students' final evaluation of the religious curriculum offered by the college, including their evaluation of the two weekends. Collectively, these documents provided an adequate insight into the significance of encounters with catholic people and communities (Wester 1995, pp. 107–111).

### 3.2 Findings

During the weekend the students spent in the convent of the Trappists sisters, they followed an intensive program including meetings about life's questions, attending religious services and dialogues with the sisters. The whole program took place in an atmosphere of reflection, silence and seclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> This is part of a broader research that concerns the connectedness of youngsters with catholic faith. The researcher explained this to the students. Moreover, she asked and received their permission to participate and to write about the findings.



The second meeting was with the St. Egidio Community: the Catholic lay movement dedicated to socially marginalized people. It took place during a weekend in Antwerp. Again, the students encountered a specific way of life and a specific spirituality. And again, they were able to gain experiences with that particular way of life: by visiting the elderly, tutoring street children, cooking meals for the homeless and attending a religious service. Here too, the dialogues played an important role.

The data of the two weekends reveal six significant issues: (a) silence and seclusion, (b) the sisters, (c) monastery celebrations, (d) personal symbols, (e) the homeless, and (f) personal engagement with marginalized people.

To most students it is exceptional to experience silence and solitude without (social) media. A monastery in which this is being cherished was therefore a new and instructive experience: it led to inner peace or, conversely, it revealed inner turmoil. Moreover, it resulted in a more careful use of words and more awareness of their own life's questions; something they are not very conscious of in their daily life. This outcome underscores previous research findings that young people's attitudes are relatively little reflective and their value orientations are mainly pragmatic (Hijmans 1997): crises in life are dealt with by working harder or studying more (Kregting and Sanders 2003).

Initially, the students regarded the lives the sisters led as rather limited, due to their presumed chances of getting married, their intellectual and social skills, their involvement in the world and their openness to other religions. Their dialogues with several sisters, which confronted them with the limitations of their own perception, changed this, especially because of the sincere and personal explanation of the sisters about their calling (similar to a lifelong infatuation and including the relating choices), their seclusion (which does not imply a rejection but a prayerful solidarity with the world), their renouncement of property, their obedience to strict precepts (which enables reflection and solidarity) and their openness to other religions. This changed view on the sisters illustrates earlier research findings concerning the significance of the encounter with personal religious narratives (Elshof 2017). The students' experience of not being turned down by the sisters and the sisters' openness towards students' questions were crucial. Certain aspects of the sisters proved to be emulate-worthy: purposefulness, openness to others, their loyalty to their principles and their ability to voice their choices.

For most students, monastery church services were a new experience. Several students had previously attended a church service, for example during Christmas or special moments in family life. Their initial liturgical spectator-perspective gave way to a perspective of a participant. Several students attended more services than the minimum required by the program and they also took part actively by trying to sing the psalms, by taking part in the blessing with holy water at the end of the evening service and by receiving Eucharist Communion. Most students experienced the church services as welcoming and appealing. In that respect, it struck them that the intercessory prayers especially mentioned them. Their appreciation supports the outcome of research concerning the significance of Catholic rituals for a broader group: they provide a broad perspective of embedding and transcendence (Elshof 2015).

The symbols students brought along to depict their lives gave insight into the mystery of their personal lives. It was striking that the symbols primarily referred to existential experiences, which were usually kept secret: feelings of abandonment after divorce, mourning after death, isolation after moving, despair because of being bullied, stress during exams or surviving a traffic accident. The devotional pictures, tattoos, candles, books or jewelry symbolized the connection with a deceased grandmother or brother who keeps watching over you, the special saint who protects you or (the more immanent

varieties) the love of your partner, the trust of your mother, the belief in your own capacity or in the good in every human being. By talking about these personal symbols, the mysteries of the students' personal lives were revealed, more consciously experienced and shared with a wider group.

Through encounters with the Community of St. Egidio, the students became acquainted with the till then unknown world of the socially excluded. The meetings with homeless people, street children and lonely elderly opened their eyes to these lives and to social processes of marginalization. It also allowed them to become acquainted with a spirituality that prioritizes the personal dignity of these people in particular. The encounter with a homeless person who once was a primary school teacher, demonstrated how brittle and fragile life can be in a confronting way: this man could well have been their internship supervisor. These encounters confronted the students with the frailty of human existence.

In addition, the students' participation in the praxis of St. Egidio had a major impact. By teaching children, handing out coffee to the homeless or visiting the elderly, they did not only discover their involvement as meaningful for these people, they experienced that this involvement impacted their own lives as well. Besides obtaining a different view on the homeless and the world, their self-image also changed. They started to see themselves as someone who had something to give, someone who could be of value for a broader group than just family and friends. It expanded the common 'happy midi-narrative' (Savage et al. 2006).

According to the final evaluation (data type 4), the weekend in the monastery was a special experience, one that most students would not have wanted to miss. 24% rated the weekend as 'good', 42% rated it as very good and 35% rated it as excellent.<sup>2</sup> Their evaluations clarify that they did not only appreciate the pleasant side of the monastery weekend, but that the wondering, inconvenient and difficult aspects also helped them in their search for value in life. Similar results can be found in the particularly positive evaluation of the St. Egidio weekend: 12% rate this weekend as good, 35% considered it very good and 53% considered it excellent. If we look at the central themes that become visible when the data are put together, it is striking that these weekends were especially relevant because of the transformation processes that emerged.

The meetings have led to a different perspective on themselves and their lives. Aspects that were hidden came to light: not only personal existential questions and experiences, but also the more unexpected and mysterious sides of the lives of others, including those who are religiously and socially different. The encounter with people whose lives were characterized by dependency, receptivity, vulnerability and transcendence encouraged the students' reflection on the role these themes play in their own lives. The strangeness of other people's lives opened their eyes to the mystery of their own existence: it enabled the change of their own perceptions and ways of life.

This new perspective is largely due to the students' participation in a religious way of interpreting and living. It led to new experiences concerning silence, liturgy or encounters with homeless people. They met locations, rituals, ethics and narratives that were part of a religious way of living. This participatory aspect has an added value compared to the religious education in school and its informative, reflexive and communicative goals.

In addition, the dialogue about this lifestyle with members of the faith community also played an important role. The students did not only experience that certain practices or rituals are an integral part of a religious way of life; they also discussed the significance of

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<sup>2</sup> The sum of these numbers is 101. Nevertheless, the final evaluation (data type 4) mentions these percentages on page 17 of.

this way of life and they heard how these people dealt with all sorts of difficulties that come with this lifestyle, such as the choice to live in community, in silence or in solidarity with the poor. They could thus discover what being faithful means for these believers. As a result, they were better able to reflect on the questions, attitudes and choices that are dominant in their own lives, as well as to search for the possible meaning of a religious perspective for themselves.

Although the meetings were meaningful to all students, a small difference could be observed which originated from their various religious backgrounds and affinities. For the large group of students who were not familiar with religion at all, these encounters were a positive first experience of a religious lifestyle. For those who were vaguely familiar with (Catholic) Christianity these encounters deepened or corrected existing fragments of religiosity. For the individuals who identified themselves as Catholic, Protestant or Muslim these two aspects mentioned above were supplemented with a third: that of the search for religious differences and similarities.

### **3.3 Conclusion: mystagogy that encounters God's Mystery the Church refers to**

The significance of the encounter with lived catholic faith is not related to the transition from the second to the third mystagogical layer: initiation into church life and faith was neither aimed for nor achieved. In that regard, the patristic perception on mystagogy remained meaningless. The significance of such meetings have to do with the transition from the first onto the second layer: they encourage reflection on the mystery of one's own life and that of others, and contribute to a change of perspective, attitude and behavior. This is not only encouraged by the recognizable and appealing aspects of a religiosity, but also by the distinctive and refractory aspects. Actually, these transformations are due to the awareness of the distinctiveness of the two worlds: of the students' lives and of religions, which is in fact an awareness that plays a more prominent role in the patristic mystagogy. This is a first indication of the significance of this mystagogy for contemporary education. The second signal concerns the fact that the contemporary forms of lived catholic life that the students have met, do not presuppose a familiarity with the Christian religion from 'outsiders': in that respect they also resemble the patristic mystagogy. However, while the Church Fathers aimed at further participation, this intention is absent within the hospitality of the Trappists sisters and St. Egidio. Their hospitality is aimed to offer an insight in a way of life in which faith is a challenge as well as a source of inspiration and a horizon. It is a way of life with both attractive and difficult aspects that both challenge the students to reflect on their personal existential questions and life experiences, including the question and experience of God. It is precisely the accessibility and the hospitality of that offer that was appealing. Another difference with the Church Fathers concerns the attitude towards other religions. While the Patristics oppose other religions, the contemporary faith communities showed a certain openness to other religions. What attracted them additionally was that people's faith was embodied in a way of life which was distinctive but also open to accountability and dialogue, drawing from their own religious experience and tradition: this aspect plays an important role in patristic mystagogy as well.

The research findings confirm the guess that encounters with contemporary lived catholic faith contribute to religious education that intends to contribute to students' religious literacy. Encounters with religious communities encourage the students' openness towards other perspectives and challenge their capacity to relate these perspectives to their personal views and attitudes. As such, these meetings contribute to the transmission from

the first into the second mystagogical layer. The educational world offers no room for a mystagogy which is aimed at students' initiation into church faith and life; the third mystagogical layer. Nevertheless, the role of church life is potentially big, due to the growing religious illiteracy that challenges the religious educational world. The encounters with lived catholic church life that is open to dialogue about the significance of their spirituality for individuals and society, encourage students to reflect on existential questions playing a role in their own lives, and confront them with alternative perspectives and praxis. Such encounters do not only reveal the mystery within these lives; they also expose the Church as mysterious and sacramental: sign and instrument of communion with God and the unity of all people (Lumen Gentium 1). In other words: such encounters with young people answer the Church's call to embody the mystery of God's salvation and God's Kingdom, which are both already existing and still to come as well.

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