

**Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

**The First Sunday of Lent
February 21 and 22, 2015**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated religious, catechists, godparents and sponsors, dear catechumens and candidates, family and friends, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

If someone asked you where you were going today and you said that you were going to the Cathedral in Springfield for the Rite of Election, you might have gotten a puzzled look and a response exclaiming, “But Election Day is next Tuesday, and even if it were today, why are they holding the election at the cathedral?”

The answer is that indeed there is an election taking place at the Cathedral today, not a political election, but an election of faith. The word “election” comes from the Latin word, *eligo*, which means, “I choose,” the past participle of which is *electus*, which means, “one having been chosen.”

The Latin etymology is important to help us understand what is taking place here theologically. Each of you catechumens and candidates

may be thinking, "I have come here today because I am choosing to become Catholic. Well, that is true to the extent that you are engaging your free will to accept the invitation to join the Catholic Church, but the invitation itself was first initiated by God choosing you to follow Him. In that sense, God is the one doing the electing or choosing. You are accepting what God has chosen for you, not what you have chosen for God! This is expressed clearly in the reading from the Bible passage that we have just heard from the Gospel of St. John, chapter 15, verse 16, where Jesus tells His disciples, "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you."

Jesus also goes on to warn those He has chosen that the world will hate them because He has chosen them out of the world (John 15:19). Just as Jesus was persecuted, we should expect to be persecuted, too (John 15:20). We should not expect that such persecutions only took place long ago or in places far away.

Earlier this week, commenting on the beheading of twenty-one Coptic Christians in Egypt by terrorists of the Islamic State, Pope Francis said, "Their only words were: 'Jesus, help me!' They were killed simply because they were Christians. The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a witness that cries out to be heard. It makes no difference

whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants,” the pope said, according to a Vatican transcript. “They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ.”¹

Heaven forbid that such violence should ever confront any of us personally, but these executions of Christians simply because they were Christians should cause us to ask whether we have the depth of faith and resolve to be willing to die for our faith in Jesus Christ. St. James reminds us, in his letter that we heard in the first reading today, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off promptly and forgets what he looked like” (James 1:22-24).

We are here today because, in one way or another, each of us has experienced a stirring in our hearts that has led us to “know the mystery of the divine purpose,” at least in part (Ephesians 1:9). We have come to know that the Lord desires to “bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth,” you and I included (Ephesians 1:10).

Today we have gathered to celebrate an ancient ritual of Holy Mother Church in which those seeking the Sacrament of Baptism “give in their names.” We have also gathered today to call those who have already received the grace of Baptism to a life of deeper fidelity to Christ and to an ongoing conversion to prepare to be received into the full communion of the Church which the Lord established on the rock of Peter.

I turn first to you, my dear catechumens, to you who seek baptism. To understand the meaning of this ancient rite, it is helpful to quote from the written account of a woman in the fourth-century who left her home in what is known today as southern France or northern Spain – on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Writing home to her community, she describes this ancient rite as it was then celebrated in Jerusalem. She says:

Then the candidates are brought in one by one, the men with their “fathers,” the women with their “mothers.” Then the bishop one by one asks their neighbors: “Is he a good-living man? Does he respect his parents? Is he a drunkard or untrustworthy?” He asks them like this about every vice, at least the more serious ones. If the bishop finds that the candidate is free from all these faults about which he

has questioned the witnesses, he writes down the candidate's name with his own hand.²

Today, you will give your names to me in petition to receive the Easter Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. Your "fathers" and "mothers," that is, your godparents, have already sent me written testimony about the conduct of your lives and in a few moments they - and those responsible for your formation - will testify publicly before the Church to your readiness to be incorporated into the life of Christ Jesus.

By signing my name to yours, I will ratify that God has indeed chosen you "in Christ before the world was made to be holy and faultless before God in love" (Ephesians 1:4). Once I have signed my name, you will no longer be called catechumens but the Elect, those who have been elected to the Easter Sacraments after a final period of enlightenment and purification consisting particularly in the three great scrutinies and their accompanying exorcisms.

The Lord himself has called you to this moment and at the great Vigil of Easter will graft you onto his vine. For your part, you must strive each day of your lives to keep his commandments so as to remain in his love.

By remaining in his love, the joy that begins to well up in you today will be brought to completion on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To you, dear candidates for the completion of your Christian initiation, I now turn. You have already been washed in the waters of Baptism and now you seek to be brought into the full communion of the Church. Having already been grafted into Christ, you seek now to remain in his love in a deeper way that your lives may bear great fruit for the Lord and that your joy, too, may be complete.

The whole Church rejoices at your presence here today, dear catechumens and candidates. There are many who would like us to believe that the Church is diminishing, that faith in the western world is weakening, that Christianity will soon have vanished. Your presence among us and your desire to enter into the full communion of the Church demonstrates quite the opposite. Through you, we see in a clear fashion that activity of the Holy Spirit present in the world, stirring the hearts of men, women, and children to turn to the One who has not only given them life but who also gave his life for them.

In these coming forty days of Lent, the faithful will accompany you in the works of increased prayer, fasting, and alms-giving that complete

faith (c.f. James 2:22). Your desire for a deeper conformity of your life to the teachings of the Lord spurs each of us to the same desire. May we all enter deeply into the Passion of our Lord so as to celebrate with abundant joy the great glory of His Resurrection and of your full reception into the Church.

Finally, dear catechists, godparents and sponsors, I turn to you. You have shared your faith with those who will be, as it were, your spiritual children. I thank you for your credible witness to the truth. You have come to understand that “it is possible to realize something new within ourselves and around us, simply because God is faithful, continues to be full of goodness and mercy, and is always ready to forgive.”³

I urge you to continue to stand with your catechumens – who will soon be numbered among the Elect – and with your candidates. In the days, months, and years to come, they will look to you for sources of both strength and comfort as they strive to stand daily with and for the Lord.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2015/02/16/pope-francis-denounces-isis-beheadings-their-blood-confesses-christ/>.

² Egeria, *Peregrinatio*, 45. In Edward Yarnold, S.J., *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 8-9.

³ Pope Francis, Homily for Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2014.