

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

**The First Sunday of Lent
February 13 and 14, 2016**

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

Tomorrow/Today is Valentine's Day, or, more precisely, Saint Valentine's Day. The fact that the Valentine after whom this day is named was a saint is the reason why his feast day is a very appropriate time for this celebration of the Rite of Election and Continuing Call to Conversion. Yes, some of you are becoming Catholic because of the loving influence of your spouse or fiancé, but romance is not the reason why the example of Saint Valentine is a model for you to emulate. The fact that the color red is associated with Saint Valentine's Day provides a hint as to that reason: red is the color of martyrs, because they shed their blood in witness to their faith in Jesus Christ, and their willingness to die out of love for their Savior

who died for our sins on the cross is the motivation that spurs all of us on in our faith.

There are several versions of the story of Saint Valentine. Ironically, on this day when our secular culture celebrates Valentine's Day as a day of romantic love, the prevailing consensus is that this day is named after a celibate priest! The Roman martyrology records the February 14th death of a Roman priest named Valentine who died in the year 269. According to a book called *Valentine's Day* by Fern G. Brown, February 14 was called "Valentine's Day" after Saint Valentine, a Christian priest who lived in Rome in the third century after Christ.

At that time, Christians in the Roman Empire were persecuted and forbidden to follow the "new religion" of Christianity. The priest Valentine was executed on February 14 for preaching Christianity. He apparently was buried on the Flaminian Way, a Roman highway extending north from Rome to Rimini built in 220 B.C., and a basilica was built in his honor less than a century after his death. He was later proclaimed a saint.

Another story tells of a priest named Valentine who loved children and gave them flowers from his garden. He was put in prison by the emperor because he refused to pray to the Roman gods. The children

missed their friend and threw him bouquets of flowers with love notes attached through the prison bars. Valentine spent a year in prison with only the most basic necessities. The jailer's blind daughter brought him messages and food and tried to make Valentine's life easier. The emperor was impressed with the priest's gentleness and dignity. The emperor offered to set Valentine free if he would give up Christianity and begin to worship Roman gods. Valentine refused. He was ordered to be put to death. During the priest's last days, he prayed that the jailer's daughter would regain her sight – and she did! Then Valentine was beheaded.

Perhaps you never heard these stories of Saint Valentine before, but if you are truly to live the life of a dedicated Catholic Christian, it is essential that you understand the life of martyrs like Saint Valentine and be willing to follow their example, even unto death.

Before we dismiss such thoughts as belonging to an era of the Roman Empire that has long since passed many centuries ago, we are reminded that this Monday, February 15, will be the first anniversary of the courage and religious fortitude of 21 Coptic Christians who were executed one year ago by Islamic State terrorists in Libya. These Coptic Christian hostages

were executed for no other reason than their faith in Jesus Christ. A report of this gruesome execution relates that:

The 21 men executed that day were itinerant tradesman working on a construction job. All were native Egyptians but one, a young African man whose identity is uncertain—reports of his name vary, and he was described as coming from Chad or Ghana. But the power of his example is unshakable. The executioners demanded that each hostage identify his religious allegiance. Given the opportunity to deny their faith, under threat of death, the Egyptians declared their faith in Jesus. Steadfast in their belief even in the face of evil, each was beheaded.

Their compatriot was not a Christian when captured, apparently, but when challenged by the terrorists to declare his faith, he reportedly replied: “Their God is my God.” In that moment, before his death, he became a Christian. The ISIS murderers seek to demoralize Christians with acts like the slaughter on a Libyan beach. Instead they stir our wonder at the courage and devotion inspired by God’s love.¹

Unfortunately, we do not hear too much about this genocide, this deliberate extermination of Christians by the Islamic State, from our secular media or our politicians. Instead we hear the constant drone of political

campaigns and politicians seeking to be elected. So it is important for us to note that there is a significant 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!

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).

While God is the One whose action of choosing you is the primary focus today, it is important to understand clearly what your actions mean here. Accepting God's call for you to enter the Catholic Church is not a cause for self-righteousness or for seeking admiration or praise for what you are doing. It is not we who are doing God any big favor by choosing to become Catholic, but God who has done us the biggest favor possible or imaginable by calling us into His loving embrace.

Nor is our accepting baptism or full communion in the Catholic Church merely a label or an accomplishment that we can check off our bucket list, but a true conversion that means we will live a Christian way of life for the rest of our lives. In short, to be a Christian means to recognize our sinfulness, to repent our sinful way of life, and to place ourselves completely dependent on the grace of God to save us and raise us up to live in His love.

Saint Irenaeus, Bishop and Martyr, summed it up succinctly in these words:

In the beginning God created Adam, not because he needed man, but because he wanted to have someone on whom to bestow his blessings. . . . The same is true of service to God: it

adds nothing to God, nor does God need the service of man. Rather, he gives life and immortality and eternal glory to those who follow and serve him. He confers a benefit on his servants in return for their service and on his followers in return for their loyalty, but he receives no benefit from them. He is rich, perfect and in need of nothing. The reason why God requires service from man is this: because he is good and merciful he desires to confer benefits on those who persevere in his service. In proportion to God's need of nothing is man's need for communion with God.²

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.³

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, which I have read, 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.

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. 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, our readings from the Old Testament and the Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark and Luke during the first three and a half weeks of Lent will speak of beginning anew; of fasting

prayer and almsgiving; of conversion, of mutual forgiveness, of hardness of heart; of love of enemies; and the call to holiness. The readings of the second half of Lent, beginning on the Monday of the fourth week of Lent, are taken from the Gospel of Saint John and lead us to the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, of whom Saint John says that all who believe in Him will have eternal life. Christ is the healer and life-giver, the One who gives life through His confrontation with death and gathers into one the scattered children of God. This dynamic from the ethical to the Christological is quite intentional, because as we come to see the high ethical ideals and moral demands of discipleship, we come to realize our total dependence on God's grace and our profound need of salvation.⁴

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.

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 Bishop Demetrios of Mokissos, "ISIS Is Guilty of Anti-Christian Genocide," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, February 13, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-is-guilty-of-anti-christian-genocide-1455236036>.

² St. Irenaeus, from the *Treatise Against Heresies*, Lb. 4, 13-14, 1: SC 100, 534-540; reprinted in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, Office of Readings for Saturday after Ash Wednesday.

³ 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.

⁴ Cf. Mark Searle, "The Spirit of Lent," in *Assembly*, volume 8:3 (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Center for Liturgy).