

Homily for the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion

Saturday, February 17, 2018

Sunday, February 18, 2018

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, deacons, consecrated religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good for us to be here today, for one of the most profoundly inspiring manifestations of the Holy Spirit – alive and at work in our Diocese – is unfolding before us during this Rite of Election and the Call to Continuing Conversion. As Bishop, I have the great privilege of welcoming you to this magnificent cathedral, the mother Church of our diocese, as well as presiding over this part of your journey that will not only bring you to the Easter Sacraments, but also, through God’s grace, to a full and active participation in the life of the Church.

This milestone event in your spiritual journey is a visible sign that men and women, young and old, from all walks of life, are continuing to respond to the Lord’s invitation as He says to you, “*Come, follow me.*”¹ Jesus invites you to come, see where He lives and share with Him in the life of the Spirit.

In this ancient ritual of Holy Mother Church that we celebrate today, you will be invited to step forward into the sanctuary. As you do so, remember that you have been moved in a profound way by the power of the Spirit and that you are making this journey, not just on your own, but because our Lord has stirred your heart and has led you to desire to *know the mystery of the divine purpose*,² at least in part, for 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*,³ including you and me.

Each of you has had a different experience of what brought you to this moment. Perhaps the Spirit worked through a witness: a family member, a spouse, friends, coworkers, or neighbors, someone who invited you, encouraged you, and who now prays with and for you as you make this journey.

In preparation of this Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion, your sponsors, Godparents, pastors, family members and friends have written letters of testimony to me attesting to how God is working in your life and has called you to be a Roman Catholic Christian. I would like to read some of their letters now, because they are powerful testimonies of faith by people who know you well. *(Read selected letters.)*

We are reminded by these testimonial letters that the example of witnessing to our faith in our everyday lives is what brings people to Jesus and in turn strengthens our own faith in the Lord. Today, as we continue with this most profound celebration of faith, may the Lord move us to bear witness to Him by living as His disciples, so that we might inherit the place that has been prepared for us in the Heavenly Kingdom.

So now, I turn first to you, my dear catechumens, to you who seek baptism. To understand the meaning of this ancient Rite of Election, 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, saying:

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.⁴

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.*⁵ 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.

There are several components to the Rite of Baptism that you will receive at the Easter Vigil. First, those to be baptized make a profession of their belief in the Catholic Faith. Second, they are called upon to renounce Satan, the prince of sin, and all his works and empty show. Third, they are baptized in Christ, and thus released from the bondage of the devil and entered into the divinity of sons and daughters of God. Fourth, a white garment is placed on each of them, and they are exhorted to keep it pure and undefiled until death. Fifth, a lighted candle is presented to signify the good works that they are to perform as long as they live, fulfilling the command that Our Lord speaks in the Gospel: “your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.”⁶

By being baptized, you will enter into the common priesthood of all the faithful. This may sound confusing if you are thinking only of the ordained ministerial priesthood. Everyone shares in the priesthood of Jesus Christ by virtue of baptism. Martin Luther mistakenly thought this excluded the ordained ministerial priesthood, and so he renounced his ordination.⁷ The common priesthood of all the faithful and the ministerial priesthood are related to each other, but they are essentially different:

While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace – a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit –, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a *means* by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Orders.⁸

What does it mean for the laity to share in the priesthood of all the baptized? Basically, a priest is one who gives sacrifice. An ordained ministerial priest offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, but all the baptized are called to offer their very lives as a sacrifice. Fifty-some years ago the Second Vatican Council taught;

Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and prepared so that even richer fruits of the Spirit maybe produced in them. For all their works, prayers, and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit - indeed even the hardships of life if patiently born - all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping

everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God, everywhere offering worship by the holiness of their lives.⁹

This notion of giving sacrifice to God – by offering to Him all that we are, all that we have, and everything that we do – is at the heart of the commitment that we made as a community of faith last year at our Fourth Diocesan Synod in declaring that the Christian faithful grow in love of God and neighbor by “dying to their selfish desires through acts of mortification and self-sacrifice. The whole Christian life aims at reaching this goal of everlasting happiness in eternal life by turning from sin and growing in virtue through God’s grace.”¹⁰ Thus, as faithful and generous stewards of God’s abundant gifts, those who are “committed to discipleship and stewardship as a way of life pledge to share their talents, give of their time and contribute proportionately from their financial resources for the good of the Church and those in need.”¹¹

I now turn to you, our dear candidates for the completion of your Christian initiation. 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 the 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 forty days of Lent, the faithful will accompany you in the works of increased prayer, fasting, and alms-giving that complete faith.¹² 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.*¹³

So, 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 Matthew 4:19.

² Ephesians 1:9.

³ Ephesians 1:10.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Ephesians 1:4.

⁶ Matthew 5:16. The summary of the five components of the Rite of Baptism is based on St. Robert Bellarmine, *The Art of Dying Well* (First published in Latin in Rome in 1620 under the title, *De Arte Bene Moriendi*; English translations by the Society of Jesus [London: I. Dalton, 1720, and London: Richardson and Son, 1847]; reprinted with extensive editorial revisions and improvements in the translation in Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1998 and 2005).

⁷ See *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Martin Luther,” at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09438b.htm>.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1547.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 901; quoting from *Lumen Gentium* 34.

¹⁰ Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Fourth Diocesan Synod (2017), Declaration n. 9.

¹¹ Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, Fourth Diocesan Synod (2017), Declaration n. 10.

¹² Cf. James 2:22

¹³ Pope Francis, Homily for Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2014.