

March 1, 2009

Each year on the First Sunday of Lent, we celebrate a deeply moving liturgy at Holy Angels Cathedral. Men and women, who are preparing to be baptized at the Easter Vigil, from nearly all of our parishes, gather for the Rite of Election. These catechumens publicly proclaim that they are allowing themselves to be claimed by God, that they embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and that they desire to be good and faithful stewards of the gifts which the Lord has given them.

Their sponsors and catechists testify to their seriousness of purpose and promise to offer their Lenten prayers, penance, and good works in their behalf as they make their final preparations for Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist.

In behalf of the entire Church, I formally accept the catechumens as candidates for Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. From that point, they are no longer referred to as catechumens but rather, “the elect.” Hence, we refer to the liturgy as the Rite of Election.

Those of us who have been baptized are reminded during this liturgy that we are truly free only when we love the Lord, our God, with our whole heart, mind, strength, and soul, and when we give ourselves in loving service to others in imitation of Jesus. We are reminded that our Lenten challenge is to keep our eyes focused on Jesus and on His example which reminds us that all we are is a gift from God.

The Rite of Election also reminds us that the Lord does not intend for us to make our Lenten journey as solitary pilgrims, but with a deep consciousness of our communion with one another in the Lord. We promise to pray for and with those who will join the Church at the Easter Vigil, and for one another that we will continue to live as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus.

After the liturgy, I meet with the new “elect” and with their sponsors and catechists in the Cathedral hall. Often I ask the elect what or who brought them to the Catholic Church. In nearly every instance, I am told that it is the example of a friend, family member, co-worker, or neighbor.

How often do we consider our Baptism as a gift of God to be shared with others through our own deep sense of hope and joy which we personally derive from living the experiences of our daily life in union with Jesus? We are all called to share the goodness, life, and love of God with others, sometimes with words, but always through the example of our lives.

There are 100 million people in the United States with no church family, 21 million of whom are inactive Catholics. Where are such unchurched people to hear the Good News of Jesus’ love and forgiveness except through us? Many inactive Catholics feel unwanted, not missed, rejected, excluded, or perhaps deeply alienated. Should we not be praying for them, and in the appropriate way extend a welcome home? There is a compelling sign outside of St. Paul Parish in Valparaiso which says: “Catholics are always welcome home.”

As disciples, we are all a work in progress. The various disciplines of Lent help us to keep our eyes more closely focused on Jesus who is for us the Way, Truth, Life, and Love of God Incarnate.

We are also all called through our own Baptism to experience the life and love of God in the Church which Jesus gave us with His Holy Spirit to guide us, and by our example to call others home to Christ’s Church. During this Lent, we might reflect upon the persons we might influence by the power of our words and especially our example.