

The Rite of Election: Two Questions

Paul Turner

The Rite of Election is a curious treasure. Each year this diocesan liturgy has been prepared with care, celebrated with enthusiasm, and created memories that last a lifetime. But its fundamental meaning has been obscured by the peculiarity of its title, the celebrity of the bishop, the beauty of the cathedral, the expanse of dioceses, and the presence of baptized candidates preparing for their reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church. It raises two questions.

This liturgy is supposed to celebrate God's mysterious invitation to baptism, to membership in the New People, the Body of Christ. Prior to the celebration, the Church has affirmed this election through a process of discernment. According to RCIA 119, "This step is called election because the acceptance made by the Church is founded on the election by God, in whose name the Church acts." Godparents, representing the rest of the Church, voice this acceptance, and should speak with integrity during the ceremony about the readiness of the candidates for their initiation.

The word "election" should call to mind "the chosen people," a concept stemming from Old Testament accounts of God choosing Abraham and his descendants for the eternal covenant.

We Christians believe that this same covenant extends through the coming of Jesus, who invited disciples to follow him. Just as Jesus is God's chosen one (e.g. Luke 9:35 and 1 Peter 2:4), so the people who profess faith in him through baptism become the new chosen people.¹

The word "election" conjures up unfortunate cultural allusions to campaigns, partisan politics, and majority rules. It makes people feel summoned to render kind and unkind judgments about individuals competing for office. The connection between "election" and "chosen" - as in "chosen people" is easy to lose. The Rite of Election suffers from a title that begs to be misunderstood in colloquial English.

The way we celebrate it does not help. By placing the rite at the cathedral during a word service under the presidency of the bishop or his delegate, and in many cases combining it with the call to continuing conversion, the liturgy unwittingly adds disparate meanings to the ceremony. As Rita Ferrone has observed, "It is not unusual to find reflections on the meaning of the diocesan Rite of Election dominated by awe at the numbers of initiates, wonder at the beauty of the cathedral church, and

¹ Rita Ferrone has treated this thoroughly in her Forum Essay, *On the Rite of Election* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), pp. 37-58. Her work remains the single most important treatment of this topic.

surprise at the scope of the diocese. Does all this have anything to do with election?"² Not really.

So, where did it go wrong? Probably at the doors of the cathedral.

Members of the study group who created the restored catechumenate after the Second Vatican Council knew their liturgical history. They knew that a ceremony of election or enrollment of names could be found in numerous sources from the 4th c. *Diary* of Egeria and the 5th c. sermons of Augustine to the 6th sermons of Caesarius of Arles - in areas as far-flung as Jerusalem, North Africa and Gaul respectively. They also knew that the first minister of baptism in any diocese is the bishop; priests and deacons baptize as his representatives.

Bishops are the chief stewards of the mysteries of God and leaders of the entire liturgical life in the Church committed to them. That is why they direct the conferring of baptism, which brings to the recipient a share in the kingly priesthood of Christ. Therefore bishops should personally celebrate baptism, especially at the Easter Vigil. They should have a particular concern for the preparation and baptism of adults.³

² *On the Rite of Election*, p. 31.

³ *Christian Initiation: General Introduction*, 12.

In the history of the catechumenate, bishops did indeed preside for a rite of election, but they also presided for a rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens, for scrutinies, for the initiation rites, and for the mystagogical sessions at celebrations of the eucharist during the Octave of Easter. There is nothing unique to the meaning of the Rite of Election that ties it to the role of the bishop. *Baptism* belongs to the bishop. In an ideal world, if catechumens can have only one liturgical celebration with the bishop, it would not be the Rite of Election. It would be baptism.

But that is nearly impossible, given the size of dioceses today. Those who restored the catechumenate realized this. They could not suggest that all bishops baptize all adults in their dioceses. But they liked the idea of linking initiation with the bishop in some way. They chose the Rite of Election as the vehicle. By placing it under the presidency of the bishop, they intended to locate the call to baptism within the broader framework of what it is to be Church. It was not a bad instinct.

However, it could be argued that the restored Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults did not envision that the Rite of Election would become a single diocesan celebration taking place at the cathedral. It speaks its preference for the bishop to

preside at election in the same breath as its preference for him to preside at baptism:

It is hoped that, presiding if possible at the Lenten liturgy, he will himself celebrate the rite of election and, at the Easter Vigil, the sacraments of initiation, at least for the initiation of those who are fourteen years old or older.⁴

This paragraph equates the likelihood of the bishop presiding for the two ceremonies. If there could possibly be one diocesan Rite of Election, there could logically be one diocesan celebration of initiation. If not the latter, then not necessarily the former.

The rite says the presider for election is the bishop "or his delegate" (122, 125, and 129, for example). In other words, the bishop could delegate pastors to lead election, as he does for initiation. The one place where the cathedral is explicitly mentioned is in paragraph 127, where the word was inserted into the American edition of the RCIA. A more literal translation of the Latin original appears in both the Canadian and Australian editions of the RCIA: "The rite should take place in the church, or, if necessary, in some other suitable and fitting place."⁵

⁴ RCIA 12.

⁵ 114 in both editions.

But the American translation says more than this: "The rite should take place in the cathedral church, in a parish church or, if necessary, in some other suitable and fitting place." In both languages, once the preliminary paragraphs are out of the way, the rite refers to the presider as "the celebrant" - never as "the bishop."

A similar phenomenon occurs in the Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil. The liturgy moves along quite nicely with the priest presiding for the events, but when it comes time for confirmation, the rubrics say, "If the bishop has conferred baptism, he should now also confer confirmation. If the bishop is not present, the priest who conferred baptism is authorized to confirm."⁶ Most parish priests would be astonished to see the bishop appear out of nowhere to confer baptism and confirmation in their parish church. The RCIA envisions the presence of the bishop in these rites from a theological perspective, not necessarily from a practical one. It mentions the bishop in the confirmation ceremony because of his connection to that sacrament, not because anyone believes he is going to be in your parish church to confirm this Easter. Just as the bishop has priests who baptize and confirm in their parishes at the Easter Vigil, so,

⁶ RCIA 232.

one could argue, he could have his priests preside for the Rite of Election in their parishes as well.

By having one diocesan-wide celebration of the Rite of Election, the ceremony has taken on a different meaning. Many people refer to it as the time when catechumens and candidates go to meet the bishop, as if that is the purpose of the liturgy. This interpretation is enhanced by the inclusion of a ceremonial handshake with the bishop, which the rite never envisions. In some places, bishops have actually signed the book of the elect, another custom that never appears in the rubrics of the liturgy. Surprisingly, when the United States Catholic Conference published its study of the implementation of the RCIA in the year 2000, it printed on page 16 a photograph of what appears to be a vested bishop signing the book of the elect.⁷

In its perception that the Rite of Election is best celebrated at the cathedral, the American edition of the RCIA also included a different celebration for parishes: the Rite of Sending of the Catechumens for Election. This optional rite included an optional signing of names. Many dioceses practice this option - having catechumens sign their names in books of the elect in parish churches, and having them formally presented at the cathedral, where the bishop or his delegate proclaims the

⁷ *Journey to the Fullness of Life: A Report on the Implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), p. 16.

catechumens elect. This has left the impression in many a parish that the signing of names constitutes election. It does not. The act of admission or election, which occurs during the Rite of Election, constitutes election. There the celebrant says, "N. and N., I now declare you to be members of the elect, to be initiated into the sacred mysteries at the next Easter Vigil."⁸

The Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age opens Part II of the RCIA. A rite of election for children was included in the American edition; it does not appear in Latin. Apparently the framers of the restored catechumenate thought that they should simplify the liturgies for children, eliminating election, and reducing the number of scrutinies from three to one. A Rite of Election for children now appears on paper in the American edition (RCIA 277-290), but it is rarely used. It is more common to see children included in the ceremony for adults at the cathedral church under the bishop's presidency.

So the first question to propose at this stage of the history of the restored catechumenate is, "Where does the Rite of Election belong?" At the cathedral? Or in the parish church?

⁸ RCIA 133.

The second question is, "Should baptized candidates celebrate the Call to Continuing Conversion at the Rite of Election?" Many dioceses follow a widespread practice of celebrating a combined rite that the RCIA ponderously calls the Celebration of the Rite of Election of Catechumens and of the Call to Continuing Conversion of Candidates Who Are Preparing for Confirmation and/or Eucharist or Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. That is the real title, but almost no one uses it in catechesis, celebration, announcements, or printed programs at the cathedral church. Most people just call it the Rite of Election - even if candidates are there.

This combined rite for catechumens and candidates on the First Sunday of Lent sets up the combined rite of baptism and reception at the Easter Vigil. The practice of receiving baptized candidates into the full communion of the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil is a common but questionable practice.⁹ Just as candidates may be received into the Church at any time of year, so can their proximate preparation take place at any time of year. There is no reason why baptized candidates need to wait for Easter to be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church, and hence there is no reason to include them in ceremonies on the First Sunday of Lent. By celebrating

⁹ I have argued this within the pages of this journal in my article, "Receiving Candidates One by One," *Catechumenate* 29/4 (July 2007):2-7.

the combined Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion, dioceses are promoting an unnecessary timetable for validly baptized Christians who yearn to have a place at the Catholic table.

The combined rite is therefore diluting the meaning of the Rite of Election. Election is about God's invitation to be numbered among the chosen people of the new covenant. It has nothing to do with validly baptized Christians, who have already been numbered among the chosen people of the new covenant for all their Christian lives. Sensitive to this, the American edition of the RCIA created the Call to Continuing Conversion as a parallel, not an equal rite for them. Its meaning comes down to this statement by the celebrant:

N. and N., the Church recognizes your desire (to be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and) to have a place at Christ's eucharistic table. Join with us this Lent in a spirit of repentance. Hear the Lord's call to conversion and be faithful to your baptismal covenant.¹⁰

The celebrant recognizes the candidates' desire for communion. Does this require a diocesan-wide ceremony? He invites them to join Catholic Christians in the repentance of Lent. How is that different from the meaning of Ash Wednesday?

¹⁰ RCIA 454.

The postconciliar Rite of Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church was conceived without preliminary rites. The Rite of Welcoming, (paralleling the Rite of Acceptance,) and the Call to Continuing Conversion, (paralleling the Rite of Election,) are optional additions created for the American Church. They are not required, and one has to wonder, especially in the case of the Rite of Election, whether the combined rite is advisable at all. The idea behind revising the Rite of Reception was to give validly baptized Christians seeking membership in the Catholic Church a straight path. It would have surprised the creators of the postconciliar Rite of Reception that this straight path would take a detour to the cathedral, where Christians of various faiths would present themselves to the diocesan bishop before their own pastors would welcome them to the Catholic table. This was not a journey the ecumenical movement had in mind.

However, the liturgy has become something else. In its combined form, it has become the Preliminary Diocesan Rite for Becoming a Catholic in Your Parish at Easter. Bishops love it because they can see in a sweep of the eye the visible proof of faith growing throughout the diocese.¹¹ Participants love it

¹¹ "Bishops overwhelmingly say that they view the diocesan celebration of the Rite of Election as a highlight of their liturgical and pastoral year that draws together many diverse faithful of their dioceses to celebrate the call of others to join the Catholic communion." *Journey to the Fullness of Life*, p. 26.

because of the ceremonial attraction of a cathedral liturgy. Catechumenate teams love it because they can compare their numbers of initiates with those of other parishes. The liturgy has become a bit of a contest to see who is bringing the most, and how this year's crop compares with those of the past. Indeed, does any of this have anything to do with election?

A change may happen one day due to a factor that few people realize is related. As English-speaking Catholics are waiting for the new translation of the mass to be revealed, they are becoming aware that the rules for translation have changed. Those rules apply to all our ritual books, including the RCIA. So far, no work has been done on revising the translation we have. But according to the new rules, "the original text, insofar as possible, must be translated integrally and in the most exact manner, without omissions or additions in terms of their content, and without paraphrases or glosses."¹² Without additions. Does that mean that the American adaptations for baptized candidates and the combined rites will not reappear on some future date when the new translation is done? Possibly. It depends on how you interpret the new rules, which adaptations the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops chooses to request, and whether or not the members of the Roman

¹² Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Liturgiam authenticam*, 20.

Congregation at that time agree. But the continuance of the adapted rites is a question. This is not necessarily a bad thing if it makes us rethink what is catechetically and ritually appropriate for the reception of baptized Christians.

In the meantime, there are some strategies that could be taken on the diocesan and parish levels.

1. Parishes can work more diligently and individually with baptized candidates, offering them reception into the Church at different times of the year. This would eliminate the need for sending candidates to the combined Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion.
2. Dioceses could start celebrating only the Rite of Election - not the combined rite - at the cathedral. This would alert parishes that baptized candidates could and perhaps should be received at other occasions besides the Easter Vigil. It would also help clarify the meaning of the rite at the cathedral.
3. Bishops could delegate pastors to preside for the Rite of Election in their parishes. This would constitute a major shift for many dioceses, but there is no law preventing a bishop from doing so, and the recovery of the celebration within parish settings would allow more people in the community to mark the passage of

catechumens on the next step of their journey. This would also eliminate the need for parishes to celebrate the Rite of Sending. Parishioners would witness the actual election, not its preliminaries.

4. If number 3 happens, parishes celebrating the Rite of Election could include it as part of the mass for the First Sunday of Lent, which is how it was designed. The scriptures for that Sunday closely fit the meaning of the celebration. The Roman Missal (and the Sacramentary currently in force) lists the Rite of Election as the first of the masses pertaining to Christian Initiation. But most dioceses celebrate it as a word service, not a mass, and the texts go unused. In parishes, they could easily be recovered, where a dismissal of the elect would follow the normal pattern of the community's dismissal of catechumens. The role of the deacon, mysteriously absent from the Rite of Election in the RCIA, would immediately be clarified if the ceremony took place at a typical parish mass.

5. Bishops could give more attention to a sound suggestion found among the brief instructions for mystagogy:

To show his pastoral concern for these new members of the Church, the bishop, particularly if he was unable to

preside at the sacraments of initiation himself, should arrange, if possible, to meet the recently baptized at least once in the year and to preside at a celebration of the eucharist with them.¹³

Such a celebration would give the bishop the most authentic role possible with the neophytes: presider at the eucharist. The presidential prayers for the masses during the Octave of Easter presume that the neophytes are present. In most parishes, they are not. But if the bishop invited them to the cathedral that week - who knows? They might show up. If the bishop cannot baptize them, what would be second best? Presiding at the Rite of Election? Or presiding at eucharist?

Two questions: Where does the Rite of Election belong? Should baptized candidates be involved? The Rite of Election is a treasure that had been long lost to liturgical history. It was recovered with the restored catechumenate, but in practice one has to wonder if the real treasure has yet to be found.

Catechumenate: A Journal of Christian Initiation 32/2 (March 2010):2-10; reprinted 36/4 (July 2014):3-11.

¹³ RCIA 251.