

PAUL TURNER

Step up to join the elect

With the start of Lent, people preparing to become Catholics will be attending the Rite of Election at cathedrals around the world. It marks the final stage in their formation which ends with reception into the Church at Easter

The Rite of Election or Enrolment of Names has become a major event in most dioceses, but its connection to the parish can be easily lost.

The outline of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) calls it the rite “by which the Church formally ratifies the catechumens’ readiness for the Sacraments of Initiation and the catechumens, now the elect, express the will to receive these sacraments”. It is called election “because the acceptance made by the Church is founded on the election by God, in whose name the Church acts” (RCIA 106).

The word is connected to the biblical concept of God’s chosen people. In former times, God chose one nation for a special covenant and brought them through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan River into the promised land. So now, in Christ, God chooses people to enter a new covenant through the waters of baptism. On or near the First Sunday of Lent, the Church celebrates a rite in which those preparing for baptism are no longer merely called “catechumens”, but rather “the elect”.

Prior to the rite, some deliberation is to take place at the parish level to establish the suitability of the catechumens for their baptism. This is to avoid any semblance of mere formality in the Rite of Election (RCIA 109). The discussion can be made by the clergy and laypeople who minister to the catechumens and it may even include other catechumens. Together they may propose such questions as these: Have the catechumens participated in catechetical sessions? Have they joined the rest of the community for prayer at church on Sundays? Do they behave the way Christians should behave? Do they share the joy of the Gospel with others?

When the catechumenate in stages was restored after the Second Vatican Council, the length of formation raised some concerns. In the Early Church, preliminary rites marked the stages of a lengthy preparation, but by the Middle Ages these were collapsed into

one rite, baptism. In the centuries before Vatican II, preparation for adult baptism lasted months or weeks. After Vatican II, preparation grew in length as the preliminary rites were restored. Some people feared that a longer catechumenate would place an undue burden on godparents. Hence, their role was divided into two. Sponsors accompany catechumens from the start of their journey up to their election, and then godparents step in. In practice, many sponsors become godparents, which is perfectly acceptable.

The Rite of Election usually takes place at the cathedral, where the bishop normally celebrates it (although he may delegate someone else to preside). Although the Roman Missal envisages that this ceremony is taking place during a Mass, most dioceses arrange the rite as a Liturgy of the Word without the Eucharist.

After the homily, the catechumens are presented as a group to the celebrant, who invites them forward together with their godparents. The celebrant asks the godparents ritual questions about the readiness of the catechumens. Their response to these constitutes the affirmation of the deliberation that has preceded the rite. In fact, these questions may supply the content of the preceding deliberation.

Next, the celebrant asks the catechumens if it is their will to be fully initiated. When they respond in the affirmative, the celebrant invites them to sign their names in the Book of the Elect. They step forward and sign their name, a simple act by which we put our very selves on whatever paper lies before us. In this case, each catechumen is giving the name by which God is calling them, the name that they will hear in the words of baptism: “N., I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Following this enrolment, the celebrant declares that the catechumens are now “elect”. The godparents accept them into their care, and the ceremony concludes with intercessions.

The cathedral can become quite full for this event. All parishes are invited to send

their catechumens there. The gathering of catechumens, godparents, catechumenate directors and clergy from each parish may leave little room for anyone else. Consequently, many faithful Catholics from the parishes may not be able to attend this important occasion.

To remedy this, in the US the RCIA adds a parish Rite of Sending to the cathedral for the Rite of Election. The catechumens who will be eligible for baptism may thus be presented to the parish community for its prayer and approval.

In the Rite of Sending, the parish may hear testimony about the suitability of the catechumens. This ceremony includes the option of having the catechumens sign their names on a sheet of paper in front of the parish community. Those papers may then be presented to the cathedral for the Rite of Election. In this option, however, the catechumens still do not become “elect” at the Rite of Sending. That happens when the celebrant declares them so during the actual Rite of Election.

In my parish, on the Sunday before the Rite of Election, I ask the catechumens and their godparents to come for a designated Mass. After the homily, I invite the godparents or some other representative to give some testimony about the catechumens, one by one. After each testimony, I ask the seated congregation, “Would those of you who know this catechumen please stand?” Usually a few people will stand up. Then I’ll ask, “Do you agree with the testimony you have just heard?” They say that they do. This gives everyone a chance to have some voice in the deliberation, and to state publicly their support for those who are petitioning the Church for the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist.

Parishioners who have supported the progress of catechumens should have some opportunity to stand with them at the significant rites of passage. The Rite of Election marks a major turning point for the catechumens and for the faithful whose numbers they will soon join.

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TO DO

Discuss the readiness of the catechumens for the sacraments with their godparents and catechists

Get a godparent or some other representative to give testimony about the catechumens and involve the parish community by asking if they agree with it

Invite some people to attend the Rite of Election to support the catechumens as they begin the final stage of their preparation