

**Homily for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent - Cycle A  
March 3, 2024**

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

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Two weeks ago, on the First Sunday of Lent, after my homily we had a brief ceremony called the Sending of the Catechumens for the Rite of Election, during which Father Alford in his capacity as Rector of our Cathedral, said to Kirsten “Evie” Fountain and Darrell Hurst, “My dear catechumens, this community gladly recommends you to the bishop, who, in the name of Christ, will call you to the Easter sacraments.” Later that same day, I celebrated the Rite of Election here in our Cathedral, during which Evie and Darrell and 115 other catechumens from parishes across our diocese were enrolled in the Book of the Elect, that is, those chosen to receive the Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil.

After the morning Mass two weeks ago, someone asked, “What was that we just saw after the homily?” That brief ceremony was part of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, referred to as the RCIA for short.

Since the RCIA is a relatively recent innovation, many Catholics are not familiar with its various elements, so I would like to describe them briefly for you here.

In the 1960's, the Second Vatican Council called for the revision of the rite of baptism of adults and decreed that the catechumenate for adults, divided into several steps, should be restored. The time of the catechumenate is intended as a period of well-suited instruction for adults preparing to be initiated into the Catholic Church through the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist, normally received at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night. The period of preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation would also be sanctified by a number of liturgical rites to be celebrated at successive intervals of time.

The Congregation for Divine Worship promulgated the Latin typical edition of the RCIA on January 6, 1972, the Solemnity of the Epiphany. Use of the English translation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* became mandatory in the dioceses of the United States of America on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1988.

The initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful. By joining the catechumens in

reflecting on the value of the paschal mystery and by renewing their own conversion, the faithful provide an example that will help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously.

The rite of initiation is described as a spiritual journey of adults that includes not only the periods for making inquiry and for maturing, but also the steps marking the catechumens' progress, as they pass, so to speak, through another doorway or ascend to the next level.

1. The first step: reaching the point of initial conversion and wishing to become Christians, they are accepted as catechumens by the Church.

2. The second step: having progressed in faith and nearly completed the catechumenate, they are accepted into a more intense preparation for the sacraments of initiation.

3. The third step: having completed their spiritual preparation, they receive the sacraments of Christian initiation.

These three steps are to be regarded as the major, more intense moments of initiation and are marked by three liturgical rites: the first by the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens; the second by the rite of election or enrollment of names; and the third by the celebration of the sacraments of Christian initiation.

The steps lead to periods of inquiry and growth, which may also be seen as preparing for the next step.

The first period consists of inquiry on the part of the candidates and of evangelization and the pre-catechumenate on the part of the Church. It ends with the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens.

The second period, which begins with the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens and may last as long as needed, normally about a year, includes catechesis and the rites connected with catechesis. It comes to an end on the day of the Rite of Election.

The third and much shorter period, which follows the rite of election, ordinarily coincides with the Lenten preparation for the Easter celebration and the sacraments of initiation. It is a time of purification and enlightenment and includes the celebration of the rites belonging to this period.

The final period extends through the whole Easter season and is devoted to the post-baptismal catechesis or *mystagogy*. It is a time for deepening the Christian experience, for spiritual growth, and for entering more fully into the life and unity of the community.

Thus there are four continuous periods: the pre-catechumenate, the period for hearing the first preaching of the Gospel; the period of the catechumenate, set aside for a thorough catechesis and for the rites belonging to this period; the period of purification and enlightenment (Lenten preparation), designed for a more intense spiritual preparation, which is assisted by the celebration of the scrutinies and presentations; and the period of postbaptismal catechesis or *mystagogy*, marked by the new experience of sacraments and community.<sup>1</sup>

Today after this homily we will celebrate another one of these brief ceremonies with Kirsten “Evie” Fountain and Darrell Hurst, this one known as the First Scrutiny. The scrutinies are meant to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good. For the scrutinies are celebrated in order to deliver the elect from the power of sin and Satan, to protect them against temptation, and to give them strength in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. These rites, therefore, should complete the conversion of the elect and deepen their resolve to hold fast to Christ and to carry out their decision to love God above all.

Because they are asking for the three sacraments of initiation, the elect must have the intention of achieving an intimate knowledge of Christ and his Church, and they are expected particularly to progress in genuine self-knowledge through serious examination of their lives and true repentance.

In order to inspire in the elect a desire for purification and redemption by Christ, three scrutinies are celebrated. By this means, first of all, the elect are instructed gradually about the mystery of sin, from which the whole world and every person longs to be delivered and thus saved from its present and future consequences. Second, their spirit is filled with Christ the Redeemer, who is the living water, as we hear in the gospel of the Samaritan woman in the first scrutiny on the Third Sunday of Lent; the light of the world, as heard in the gospel of the man born blind in the second scrutiny on the Fourth Sunday of Lent; and the resurrection and the life, as prefigured in the gospel of Lazarus in the third scrutiny on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. From the first to the final scrutiny the elect should progress in their perception of sin and their desire for salvation.

The scrutinies also include a minor exorcism, which is not to be confused with a major exorcism, which is only used when someone is

diabolically possessed. A minor exorcism is a simple renunciation of Satan and all his works and empty promises, which we do every time we renew our baptismal promises. In the rite of exorcism during the scrutiny, which is celebrated by a bishop, priest or a deacon, the elect, who have already learned from the Church as their mother the mystery of deliverance from sin by Christ, are freed from the effects of sin and from the influence of the devil. They receive new strength in the midst of their spiritual journey and they open their hearts to receive the gifts of the Savior.<sup>2</sup>

The season of Lent is a special time for all of us to reflect more deeply on these gifts and to make them more of a daily reality in our lives. In an address to the faithful in St. Peter's Square on Ash Wednesday a few years ago, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted this opportunity when he told the crowd:

The Sundays of Lent, in this liturgical year of Cycle A in a quite particular way, introduce us to the experience of a baptismal journey, almost as if we were retracing the path of the catechumens, of those who are preparing to receive Baptism, in order to rekindle this gift within us and to ensure that our life may recover a sense of the demands and commitments of this sacrament which is at the root of our Christian life.<sup>3</sup>

It can be helpful, then, to approach Lent from this perspective, to see it as an opportunity to renew this awareness of the significance of our Baptism, something which we will call to mind in a very special way on Easter Sunday when we will renew our baptismal promises and be sprinkled with holy water.

The Gospel for today presents to us the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. This story is full of baptismal themes and imagery. The first and obvious image is that of water. Throughout the conversation, this theme of water gradually unfolds in meaning. The woman begins by considering water on a purely natural level. She had come to the well to draw water so as to satisfy her need for it. The woman is very interested in the words of Jesus when He tells her: "whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst" (John 4:14). She responded by saying: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (John 4:15).

The Lord is guiding her to a deeper understanding of the gift of life-giving water that He has come to bring through the gift of Baptism. He is inviting her to see that the gift of God's grace which is poured into the soul



at Baptism brings with it a satisfaction that earthly desires could never fulfill. This satisfaction is not just a temporary one, as with regular water, but one which has the ability to last for eternal life.

Connected to this notion of satisfaction and fulfillment is another image that is far less prevalent in this story, but very important to its deeper meaning. The image that I am referring to is that of the water jar that the woman brought to the well. This was a normal thing for people who came to the well. The well was deep and therefore required a way of drawing the water up to the surface. The water jar was a daily necessity because one would have to go back to the well every day to get the needed water for each day.

Several commentators of this passage have recognized a spiritual significance to this image which they see in the brief, often overlooked passage which says that, after having come to the deeper understanding of the gift Jesus had to offer, she “left her water jar and went into the town” (John 4:28).

St. Thomas Aquinas makes the following insightful observation regarding this seemingly minor point:

The water jar is a symbol of worldly desires, by which men draw out pleasures from the depths of darkness—symbolized by the well—i.e., from a worldly manner of life. Accordingly, those who abandon worldly desires for the sake of God leave their water jars.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that she brought the water jar to the well each and every day signifies that she had been living her life totally guided by worldly desires. We understand this very well when we consider some of our natural functions, such as food, water, and sleep. We may, for a time, find fulfillment in these areas, but it does not take long before we need to have those needs and desires met again. It is, of course, not wrong for us to eat, drink, and sleep. The need that we have for these things, as well as so many other desires, can easily become disordered to where we become like slaves to them. They control our lives to where we feel like we cannot live without them, so we keep going back to the well to satisfy our thirst for the desires they fulfill.

Lent is a time that we are encouraged to be particularly mindful of any area of undue attachment in our life. It can be more than just with food and drink. Other examples might include attachments to the use of the

Internet and various types of social media, an overly self-centered focus on what we wear or how we look, and unhealthy or inappropriate relationships with others, just to name a few. There are many ways in which we can become enslaved to those things, sometimes without even realizing it.

The practices of Lent help us to deny ourselves with regards to these desires and to redirect our attention toward Christ. The energy that we lost in being overly attached to those things can be redirected to loving Him and our neighbor, and in doing so, we allow the graces of our Baptism to become more operative and dominant in our lives. By living our life according to those graces, we experience the freedom of detaching from those worldly desires so as to be wholly dedicated to the Lord and what He asks of us in our lives. When we live in this way, we find the true satisfaction that the things of this world cannot offer and which cause us to thirst more and more for the source of the living water, which is union with Christ in Heaven.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist today, let us pray that this season of Lent may be a time for us to reflect on the great gift of Baptism that has been given to us. May we seek to live by those graces in our daily

lives, leaving behind those attachments which have held us bound, trusting that what God will give us will never leave us disappointed or unfulfilled, but will bring us true peace and fulfillment in this life, and even more importantly, in the life to come in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, nos. 4-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, nos. 141-144.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *General Address*, 9 March 2011.

<sup>4</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, no. 625.