

The RCIA: "the Elect" & the Scrutinies of Lent

The Scrutinies: Introduction

Over three consecutive Sundays (the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent), those parishes with adults and older children preparing for initiation into the church at Easter will celebrate rituals called the "scrutinies" during Mass. They are part of a series of rites belonging to the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) that are celebrated during the season of Lent.

Some people feel quite uncomfortable with the term "scrutiny". The word "scrutinize" means to examine in minute detail, and we may feel that it is intrusive or hypocritical to pry into the lives and motives of those who wish to join the church. Because of those misgivings, the term "rites of healing and strengthening" is sometimes used instead. The ritual book says that the purpose of the scrutinies is to "heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect" and "to give them strength in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life". The rite also describes the scrutinies as "rites for self-searching and repentance".

Every time we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, we ask the questions, "Do you renounce Satan... and all his works...and all his empty promises?" These are serious questions. We should consider them carefully before answering. And that is what the elect, those preparing to be baptized at the Easter Vigil, spend much of Lent doing.

For those who are making their final preparation for baptism, Lent is a time of purification and enlightenment. In the light of God's word, they examine their lives and ask the entire Christian community to pray that whatever is weak and sinful within them may be eliminated and that whatever is good and holy may be affirmed.

After the homily, in a litany of intercession, the power of Jesus over all sin is proclaimed. A prayer is then said over the elect asking for their deliverance and strengthening. The presider, catechists, sponsors and other members of the community may also lay their hands on the heads of the elect in an ancient sign of forgiveness, healing and empowerment. Because the entire community will renew its baptismal promises at Easter, we all take this opportunity to examine our way of life and ask ourselves whether we are truly living as Christ's disciples, as people of the Gospel.

The Introduction to the Lectionary recommends using the Gospels of Year A in Years B and C when there are catechumens because these scriptures are of major importance in regard to Christian initiation. They are the stories of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at the well, the man born blind who is healed and who comes to faith, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. By examining ourselves through these readings, we come to know that we have become dry and barren, that we have been blinded, and that we have become deadened through sin.

When we and the elect are asked at Easter to renounce Satan, evil works and empty promises, our answer can be a thoughtful, strong and heartfelt "I do".

The Scrutinies: Examined

The scrutinies, which are solemnly celebrated on three consecutive Lenten Sundays and are reinforced by an exorcism, are rites for self-searching and repentance and have above all a spiritual purpose. The scrutinies are meant to uncover, and then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the Elect; to bring out, and then strengthen all that is upright, strong and good. Yes, the scrutinies are celebrated in order to deliver the Elect from the power of sin, to protect them against temptation, and to give them strength in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. These rites, therefore, are meant to 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 (baptism, confirmation and holy Eucharist), the Elect must have the intention of achieving an intimate knowledge of Christ and the 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** (first scrutiny with the gospel of the Samaritan woman at the well), **the light of the world** (second scrutiny with the gospel of the man born blind), and **the resurrection and the life** (third scrutiny with the gospel of Lazarus being raised to life). From the first to the final scrutiny the Elect progress in their perception of sin and their desire for salvation.

In these three weeks—the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent—please pray that our Elect may grow in God’s grace as they approach His sacraments this Eastertide.

CHURCH OF ST. MARY
AT CLINTON HEIGHTS