

## **Rite of Election/Call to Continuing Conversion**

**(103: 54 Catechumens; 49 Candidates; 29 Parishes)**

March 10, 2019

2:00 p.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Readings: First Sunday of Lent (Dt. 26:4-10; Rom.10:8-13; Lk.4:1-13)

**Introduction:** *(right after the Opening Hymn)*

**Good afternoon---Please be seated.**

On this very blustery and gray March day, I hope you all arrived safely after your trips here to Kalamazoo from your parish homes around the Diocese---maybe with the Wind, you might have arrived quicker or maybe it took longer depending on whether the winds were tail winds or head winds.

Before we actually begin, I'd like to take this moment to welcome all of you for this very special Liturgy of the Word, known as the "Rite of Election/Call to Continuing Conversion".

This very same Rite is taking place in every Cathedral in every Diocese around the world, as Bishops in each Diocese welcome their people to this very same Rite of Election.

You have come to our Cathedral Church, which is very often affectionately referred to as "the Mother Church" of the whole Diocese. I assume that for most of you, this may be your first visit to the Cathedral. (Is that true?) You are welcome today, and always.

There are 103 of you who have come from 29 parishes around the Diocese, representing just about half of our 59 parishes in our 27 Collaboratives; I think we can affectionately call you the "Class of 2019"! 54 of you are here as "Catechumens"; 49 of you are here as "Candidates"---and all of you have been on a journey of faith because you have heard the Lord calling you to enter into the life of faith in the Catholic Church.

Since we have just begun the Season of Lent, we are only six weeks away from the Easter Vigil when 54 of you will be Baptized, and 49 of you will make a Profession of Faith, and all of you will become full members of the Catholic Church.

I am grateful that you have responded to God's call to this spiritual life-changing moment for you, and that you have come together here in our Mother Church---our Cathedral Church---to join with me as the Bishop of the Diocese, to formalize your "Call to Conversion".

I am so happy to welcome your sponsors, your family members, and all those who are accompanying you on this journey of faith as we are all so excited to welcome you into the Church as our brothers and sisters in the Catholic faith.

And so please stand.....and let us enter into this Rite of Election in the way that we begin all our times of prayer united with our Loving God.

### **Homily:**

What a joy it is to see all of you here today for this beautiful Rite. I just returned late last evening from several days of meetings in Baltimore with a group known as the National Advisory Council who are to advise the U.S. Bishops regarding matters to be discussed at their upcoming meeting(s), composed of about 50 people---a kind of microcosm of the Church, made up mostly of a diverse group of lay people, with a few Religious women and men, several priests and three bishops. When I mentioned that I was leaving the meeting early to return for the Rite of Election, they all agreed that this was their favorite Liturgy of the entire year---- I couldn't agree more.

I look forward to this Rite of Election every year, and I am always inspired by those of you who are making this momentous decision in your spiritual lives to be baptized into Christ, and the Mystery of our Faith; or if you've already been baptized, that you are deepening your relationship with Him by entering into full Communion with the Church and by being able to participate in the sacramental life of the Church. But why do we call this the "Rite of Election"?

That word, "election", may be charged with lots of emotional triggers for a number of us----but let's make very sure that we do not at all confuse the Rite of Election with anything comparable to our political process. None of you here are running for office; we won't be hearing any campaign speeches; and it doesn't depend on how many votes you get from your fellow parishioners, or even from

me, as to whether you can enter into the Church. There are not winners of the election or losers. It's not like that at all.

"Election" means being "chosen". It comes from the Latin word, "eligere"---"to choose". The most important understanding of election is that we have been chosen by God, as unworthy as we are. God chooses us, and claims us as His own. That's what we refer to as the Covenant that God makes with His people: "You will be My people, and I will be your God", says the Lord!

But, as part of the journey of faith that all 103 of you, members of the "Class of 2019", have been on, it's obvious that your journey began long before you went to your first RCIA class. That's one of the factors that makes this gathering so inspiring to me, because each of you has a very unique story about what it is that has brought you to this point in your life.

There's no doubt that you have made a decision to begin this process which we call the RCIA. But don't ever lose sight of the fact that it is God who has called you---it is God who is touching your heart--- it is our Loving God and Father who has been waiting----for some of you, perhaps He has been waiting a long time----for YOU to make the decision to respond to His call.

So, that's one, and really the most important and profound, aspect of election. The other aspect has to do with what we're doing here today---the Church also needs to choose you. Once again, we're so glad that you have made a choice to consider entering into the life of faith in the Catholic Church. But the Church also has a responsibility to make sure that you are doing so for all the appropriate reasons, and that you have an adequate understanding. And that's why every Catechumen or Candidate in the RCIA process, in every Diocese throughout the world, comes to the Cathedral, as you have come here to ours, so that as the Bishop of the Diocese---the Shepherd of this Local Church and the Chief Pastor of each of the 59 parishes in all nine counties of our Diocese---I can formally and officially acknowledge your request. In other words, I, your Bishop, get the joy and the privilege of saying: "You have been elected!" You can move forward toward the Easter Vigil which is now less than six weeks away, when you will be Baptized or make a Profession of Faith, and when you will then receive the Sacraments of Initiation of Confirmation and Holy Eucharist.

This journey of faith is not easy. I'm sure every one of you, whether you're a Catechumen or a Candidate, could tell me stories about the challenges you may

have encountered along the way. Perhaps there was some family resistance or even unacceptance; perhaps there were those who might have tried to stop you. I hope that there has been far more who have been encouraging you along the way. As we all know, we're living in a time when those who live lives of faith are not very well considered by the rest of society, which is steadily and alarmingly moving away from basic respect for God and God's ways, let alone adherence to God's basic commandments. People of Faith can be looked down upon in general; Christians can be categorized with certain labels from those who consider themselves to be advanced, sophisticated, highly educated or politically correct; and Catholics have always been a little suspect. And sadly, in these recent months, as we have been enduring another several rounds of scandals about our priests, and in particular some of our Bishops and even a Cardinal, for terrible crimes and grave sins---that is very painful for all of us.

On top of all of that, we know that Satan, the Father of Deceit, is constantly doing all that he can to keep us from being good Catholics, active Christians, people of faith. No one is excluded from that statement, including Jesus Himself, as we heard in the Gospel passage a few minutes ago.

We're all familiar with this famous Gospel. The Church, in Her wisdom, makes sure that we hear some version of it every year on this, the First Sunday of Lent. It helps us to be reminded what, and who, we are up against---a Force for Evil to be reckoned with! As we know, there were three temptations, which all were based on the proposition: "*If You are the Son of God....*" Satan KNEW better than anyone who Jesus was. He knew that he was tempting God Himself, and was delusional enough to think that he could actually defeat Him. And so the temptations were: First, to turn stones into bread---Jesus was famished.---so the temptation targeted Jesus' physical need. The second temptation was that Jesus could ask for anything His heart desired; all He had to do was to worship the Devil, the falsest of all "gods". So temptations can be targeted to our emotional needs, our desires for greatness, success, well-being; all good things in themselves, but not when they cause us to forget our relationship with God. The third temptation tried to force Jesus to presume on God's goodness and care. We too can be tempted to test God Himself, when we need to make sure that we are always trusting.

But, dear Friends in Christ, there are three little phrases in this Gospel passage that we might miss if we don't pay close attention, and which are very important to recall. The first is at the very beginning when St. Luke tells us: "*Filled with the*

*Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan....”\_What was He doing at the Jordan? He was being baptized. So, Satan waited until after His Baptism, which confirmed His identity; remember that scene: the Heavens opened, the Holy Spirit came upon Him, and the Voice from the Father said: “This is My Beloved Son; Listen to Him!” Satan loves a challenge, so we cannot think that our Baptism into Christ, or our Profession of Faith, are safeguards against difficulties and struggles; in fact, that may intensify them because that’s how Satan works.*

The second phrase reveals that Satan waited until the 40 days of Jesus prayer and fasting were over. He waited until he knew that Jesus’ human defenses were weak, and that His human needs were critically high---food. Satan won’t necessarily attack us when we’re being vigilant, but will wait until we’re vulnerable, hurting, weakened in one way or another.

The third phrase is at the very end. *“When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from Him.....for a time.”* You can almost hear him adding: You might have won this round, but I’ll be back for more. We can assume that Jesus was tempted with frequency, perhaps even during His passion and death. Similarly, the Devil will never give up and just go away for any of us; we have to always be on guard “against the malice and snares of the Devil” (as the Prayer to St. Michael reminds us).

But, wait a moment; let’s remember what our faith does equip us with; our Faith gives us what we need to keep us strong against the Devil, or any other forces that might try to work against us. Just as was the case with Jesus Himself, the Holy Spirit---the One who St. Luke told us in today’s Gospel “led Jesus into the desert for 40 days”, but Who also stayed with Him throughout those 40 days---- that same Holy Spirit is God’s Gift to us, through Baptism, through Confirmation, and through the regular and fervent practice of our Faith. The Holy Spirit is our strength, our wisdom, our courage, and our joy.

We have no cause for fear, or to feel in any way that the cards are stacked against us. In fact, it’s just the opposite. For us who are united with Christ---for those of you who are on the way to be united with Christ---for all of us as the Body of Christ----we share in the Victory over Sin and Death which we will celebrate on Easter, and that Victory includes the victory over all evil, including the Prince of Evil.

That is what you get in exchange for being counted among the Elect---that's what make you "winners". That is why the Catechumens will sign the Book of the Elect when you come forward. And that is why the Candidates, when you come forward, you will once more renew your commitment to the Baptism you've already received.

My dear Friends, thank you all for the choice you are making by being present here today, and for the ongoing movement toward your reception into the Church. It is also important for me to thank all those who are accompanying you on this journey of faith---your Godparents/Sponsors, Catechists, family members, your priests and deacons, and the remainder of the Body of Christ.\_The whole Church rejoices today because God, our Loving Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has chosen, that is "elected", you for His very own. May you live your faith with joy, with enthusiasm, and with confidence. And may God, Who has begun this good work in you, bring it to fulfillment. God bless you, now and always!