

Thoughts in the Time of COVID-19 #12—April 8, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters,

All during these weeks when the churches have been closed, I have had a special concern for our “catechumens” (Christian converts under instruction before Baptism), the women, men and children presented to me on the First Sunday of Lent and whose names were written in the “Book of the Elect.” These chosen ones, who take part in the “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults” (RCIA) in close to forty parishes in the archdiocese, were expecting to be initiated into Christ—becoming members of his Body, the Church—at the Easter Vigil (Holy Saturday evening).

After receiving Baptism, Confirmation, and Reception of Holy Communion from their pastors (I would baptize and confirm several at the cathedral) they would be known as “neophytes”—the newly “reborn” disciples of Jesus, with their sins forgiven. They had died to sin with Christ and risen to the risen life with Him in baptism. Usually a week or so after Easter these “newborns” would share in the Mass of the Neophytes at the cathedral.

Unfortunately, with the closure of churches and small groups being disallowed for health safety reasons, these plans were interrupted and put on hold. Lent links catechumens and the baptized in a period of purification and enlightenment. For both the Elect and the local community, the Lenten season is a time for spiritual recollection in preparation for the celebration of the Paschal Mystery.

On the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent, the catechumens take part in the “Scrutinies,” rites for self-searching and repentance that, above all, have 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, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good. 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.

These ancient rites may seem strange to us. Nonetheless, they are profoundly rooted in human experience. We need to examine (scrutinize) how we are, the areas of our lives where we are tempted, or seriously sin-in what we do and what we fail to do. We need healing and the strength that can come from the support of our sisters and brothers.

One of the most powerful moments of the Scrutinies is how they begin. After the homily, the Elect are invited to come forward with their sponsors and to kneel. Then, the whole assembly is invited to pray for them in silence. It is a solemn moment. The community which has cared for these Elect for some months on their journey helps them to reflect more and more deeply on the Word of God.

For this year’s special circumstance, the rite of initiation of the Elect and the reception of baptized Christians has been deferred to Pentecost Sunday (on the Vigil or the Solemnity itself, as is judged opportune). If this turns out to not be possible, the pastor is asked to choose an

alternative date and to notify the Chancellor. Pastors are also given permission to make adaptations regarding the Scrutinies that have not yet taken place. So, in these closing days of Holy Week, let us keep in prayer the Elect of this Year of Grace 2020.

God bless you.

✠ Terrence