

February 18, 2018

3:00 p.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Rite of Election/Call to Continuing Conversion

(89: 35 Catechumens; 54 Candidates; 29 Parishes)

Readings: Dt. 6:1-7; Rom.8:14-17,26-27; Jn. 15:9-17

Introduction *(right after the Opening Hymn)*

Before we actually begin, I'd like to take a minute 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 just about 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. You are welcome today, and always.

There are 89 of you who have come from 29 parishes around the Diocese, representing just about half of our 59 parishes in our 28 Collaboratives; I think we can affectionately call you the "Class of 2018"! 35 of you are here as "Catechumens"; 54 of you are here as "Candidates"--- and all of you have been on a journey of Faith because you have felt the Lord calling you to enter into the life of Faith in the Catholic Church.

Since we have just begun the Season of Lent, and we are only 6 weeks away from the Easter Vigil when 35 of you will be Baptized, and 54 of you will make a Profession of Faith, and all of you will become full members of the Catholic Church, you have been invited to come together here in our Mother Church---our Cathedral Church---to gather with me as the Bishop of the Diocese, to formalize your "Call to Conversion".

I am so happy to welcome you here today, and to welcome you into the Church. And so let us enter into this Rite of Election by doing what we Catholics do to begin all our prayers.

Homily

We have just heard God speak to us in four beautiful and powerful passages of Holy Scripture: from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy; from Psalm 1; from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans; and from Jesus Himself in St. John's Gospel. Every time we listen to God's Word

as People of Faith, we know that God is speaking directly to each and every one of us. But in a special way today, I believe, that God is speaking to the 89 of you here today who have been working so hard, participating in the RCIA process in your parishes, guided by others who are accompanying you on your journey of Faith.

We all know what RCIA means---the **R**ite of **C**hristian **I**nitiation of **A**dults. Well, I'd like to reflect with you on those same letters, but to think about four other words that are basic to our understanding of RCIA: **R**elationship; **C**ommunity; **I**ntity; and **A**postolic Activity.

Relationship: The basic, and very important, matter of Faith that all of us need to know, and remember, throughout our lives, is that the God of all the Universe---the God Who created all that exists---the God Who is all-powerful and perfect in every way---that same God loves us. And not just "us" collectively, but each of us individually. It is by God's Will that you came into existence; it is by God's will that you remain in existence; God loves YOU, and has a plan for your life and for your ultimate future. That in itself is pretty powerful. But, so far, it's just one-sided.

As in any relationship, for it to be successful and fulfilling, both parties must be fully engaged. There is no doubt about God's engagement with each of us; the only question is on our "side". What about us? What about me? What about you? It might be difficult for some people to believe that God could love them; for some people, they might not even love themselves, so how, they conclude, could God love them? But that has to be the absolute basic reality of our Faith that we come to accept, and ultimately to treasure: to allow God to love you, so you can love yourself, and in turn, you can love God.

That's what we heard in today's First Reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. Moses had received from the Lord God the 10 Commandments, which I hope we understand are a sign of God's Love for us---that He cares enough about us to give us the 10 basic ways to avoid sin, which leads to death, and to choose the right ways of living, which lead to life with God. And so after the 10 Commandments, Moses gives the most basic of all the Commandments: "*Hear o Israel. The Lord is God...Therefore you shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.*"

If that sounds familiar, it's because that's one of the two commandments of the Old Law that Jesus chose when He was asked a thousand years later what is the greatest and most important of all the commandments---Jesus chose this very one, along with the one from the

Book of Leviticus which said: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. On these two commandments, Jesus told us that the entire Law and the Prophets rests.

And so our Relationship with God is the most basic and important part of our life of Faith--- for those of you who are Catechumens and Candidates, and for all of us who are already living our Faith. We must always keep that in mind---that our relationship with God is a two-way street, as God loves us unconditionally, and as we are to love God in return in the same way, unconditionally. There should be no one, and nothing else, that we love more, or put before, our love for God.

Community: While our personal relationship with God is basic, our nature as human beings calls us to be communal in how we live our lives. We are social beings. We seek community, primarily in marriage and in our family life; we find strength and comfort in our local communities of people with shared interests; and we come together to worship God as a “Community” of Faith. Jesus came to save the world---He came to call all people, from every time and place, to turn away from sin, and to believe in and live according to His Gospel.

Jesus came to stand against the forces of evil which work against the good of people, and which work only for our destruction. The greatest force for Evil of course is Satan, who as we heard in the Gospel for today’s First Sunday of Lent (that you would have heard earlier today at Mass) did battle with Jesus for 40 days in the desert, tempting Him in every way imaginable, to distract Him from His mission to save the world---which was also to defeat Satan.

Every year we have this Season of Lent---these 40 days---to remind us that we need Lent to strengthen us against the battle that is waged against every one of us who is committed to turning away from sin and living in the Gospel of Jesus. Every one of us here experiences temptations. Every one of us here is a sinner. But every one of us here lives always in Hope because Jesus has conquered evil, sin and death. It is through the Community of the Church where we find all the ways that Jesus has provided for us to remain faithful to our calling. It is in the Community of the Church where we find the Sacraments, most especially the Eucharist, which all 89 of you will soon be able to participate in along with those of us who accompany you, and as we really welcome you to the Table of the Lord. While we are called to experience the Love of God for us and our Love for Him individually, we need the Community of the Church to give us what we need to faithfully and joyfully live out our Faith.

Identity: It is through the Church that we come to realize our “identity”, first as a son/daughter of God, but also as a brother/sister in Christ Jesus. Jesus has provided us the example of how to live by faithfully following the Father’s Will, not just day-in and day-out, but ultimately, by conquering those Evil forces which tried to keep Him from His ultimate victory through His suffering, death and Resurrection. Jesus helped us to be clear about our “Identity” first of all when He taught His disciples, and all of us, to pray by teaching us the Our Father. That makes it very clear, that God is “our Father”----Jesus’ Father, and the Father of each of us Who believe in and follow Jesus. And that is what makes us Jesus’ brothers and sisters, and therefore brothers and sisters of one another in Christ. And that’s why the Gospel Reading that we heard this afternoon is so special because we hear Jesus telling His Apostles on the night before His suffering and death: “*As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you. Live on in My love.*”

But then, He tells them: “*This is My commandment: love one another as I have loved you.*” Jesus goes on to say that they are no longer “slaves”; rather, Jesus says, “*I call you friends since I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father.....You are My friends if you do what I command you.*” That’s who we are----that is our “identity”. Yes, you will soon be known as Catholics; we are also known as Christians, because we follow Christ, Who told us that He is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life”. We are Jesus’ disciples---because we learn from Him, Who is our Master/Teacher. But the sweetest way of knowing our “Identity” is to be known as “Jesus’ Friends”.

As in any “friendship”, we have to always work at it. We have to make sure that we spend time with our Friend, Jesus, through regular Prayer; we have to make sure that we remain on good terms with Jesus, and if, we do something that betrays our Friendship through sins that we commit, we have to make sure that we restore that Friendship through the Sacrament of Penance. And we have to make sure that we keep our friendship nourished and vibrant through regularly participating in the Holy Eucharist, the Source and Summit of our Faith. That’s when we will rejoice with you 89 Catechumens and Candidates when you are one with us in celebrating the Sacraments, most especially joining us around the Table of the Lord at Mass, sharing in our common “Identity” as Jesus’ Friends.

Apostolic Activity: And that brings us to what Jesus wants all of us to do. He wants all of us to do more than just sit with Him in prayer and adoration, as important as that is. He wants us to share in His mission---His ministry of continuing to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel

to those who have never heard it. Jesus gives each of us, “His Friends”, an “Assignment” to share in the Apostolic Activity of the Church to be His Missionary Disciples.

Let me ask those 89 of you here today who are the “Class of 2018” a rhetorical question. When you are asked (as I’m sure you’ve been asked many times) why you have decided to become Catholic----why you have decided to be baptized and/or to be received into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil----why you have been moved to go through this beautiful, but somewhat challenging, RCIA process over the past year or more----I’m sure that each of you has your own particular reasons and explanations—your own interesting “story” that is both unique and I’m sure inspiring.

But, just remember what Jesus reminds ALL of us of in today’s Gospel: “*It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you.*” _God in His providence has a Plan, and nothing takes place in our world and in our lives without God’s Plan. _It’s been God our Father Who has been calling you throughout your lives; it’s been Jesus our Lord Who has been inspiring you to turn your heart over to Him; it’s the Holy Spirit Who has been prompting you to follow through when it’s gotten difficult. We rejoice with you that you have “heard” God’s call and had the courage to respond. God is the One Who has chosen you, and there’s NO ONE happier about your decision to respond to His Call than God Himself!

In today’s Gospel, after Jesus reminds us that He is the One Who chooses us, He then goes on to tell us what His Mission for all of us is: “*I have appointed you to GO-----and (to) bear fruit.*” We are to go into the world---our world---and live our faith with joy and conviction.

My dear Friends, these are challenging days for anyone trying to live in our world as a Person of Faith. In so many different ways, the world is hostile to faith in God in general, and to Christian/Catholic values and principles in particular. As we know, in a growing number of countries in the Middle East, Christians and Catholics are being openly persecuted and viciously tortured/killed. Here in our culture, the persecution and torture is less direct, but equally hostile. Choosing to do what is right and just in a world that wants to blur any/all lines of morality is a growing challenge for all of us. Being willing to live our Faith with Joy and let the Light of Christ shine out in our lives no matter what the consequences takes great courage and conviction for everyone.

But, as Jesus told us, as long as we “remain” in His Love by keeping His basic commandment of loving God with our heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving our neighbor

with the same, sacrificial love of Jesus, we will be joyful Catholics and faithful to our mission to go forth and allow our life of faith to bear fruit. And we are not alone. We have the help, support and guidance of the Church. And, as we heard St. Paul remind us in today's 2nd Reading, we have the Holy Spirit Who joins Himself to our spirit as we try to give witness as to who we are: "*children of God.*" As St. Paul went on, "*the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought.*"

My dear Family of Faith, It is because of our Relationship with God; because of our membership in the Community of Faith that is the Church and the Body of Christ; because of knowing and being faithful to our Identity as sons/daughters of God and "Friends of Jesus"; and because of our participating in the Apostolic Activity begun by Jesus and now guided by His Holy Spirit through His Church that you are here today as participating in the RCIA process.

May God bless each and every one of you as you complete this process over these next six weeks of Lent, and throughout the remainder of your lives as "Friends of Jesus" & beloved Children of God.