

March 5, 2017 3:00 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

Rite of Election of Catechumens/Call to Continuing Conversion

(130: 70 catechumens, 60 candidates; 26 parishes)

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

Before we actually enter into this beautiful “Rite of Election” this afternoon, I’d just like to say a few words of welcome and explanation.

I am so happy to welcome all of you to St. Augustine Cathedral on this First Sunday of Lent, and this first Sunday of March. For me, March is one of my favorite months since, in just a little more than two weeks, it will be Spring. We’ve been blessed with a relatively mild winter, but Springtime is a time when the world of nature begins to come back to life, when the world around us starts to look new again, and when we ourselves can have a bit of a sense of relief that Winter is over and now all things are new. In that same sense, as you probably know, Lent is an old English word which means Springtime, so “Lent” is the Springtime in the Church’s Year---it’s a time for spiritual growth, renewal of our relationship with God, and a time for new life within the Church. Those of you here today who are Catechumens and Candidates going through the Rite of Christian Initiation into the Church are the living evidence of that “new life” about to renew the Church here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. And so I am very happy to welcome you to St. Augustine Cathedral!

Since I assume that for many of you, this is your first visit here, let me tell you a little bit about the Cathedral. First of all, this is the Church that is “home” for every Catholic in the Diocese. And very soon, this will be YOUR spiritual “home” as well. We sometimes refer to the Cathedral as the “Mother Church”. No matter where you live within the Diocese---no matter to which of the 28 Collaboratives and 59 parishes you might belong to in Allegan or Barry, Van Buren, Kalamazoo, or Calhoun; Berrien, Cass, St. Joseph, or Branch Counties---all of us are a part of the Diocese of Kalamazoo. So, when we talk about the Diocese of Kalamazoo, we aren’t just talking about the City of Kalamazoo or the parishes here in Kalamazoo County. No, the Diocese of Kalamazoo includes all of us.

Why is this Church called a Cathedral? It comes from the Latin word “Cathedra”---which means “seat”. This Chair is called the “cathedra”; only the Bishop sits in this Chair, representing his primary responsibility to teach/lead/govern. And that’s why I get to be here for this very

special celebration of the Rite of Election, because I am the Bishop of the entire Diocese; or to put it another way, I am the Pastor of this whole Church here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. It's my privilege to be your Bishop---your Pastor---your Shepherd. I am grateful to those who are the Pastors of your local Parishes, many of whom are here with us today, and each of those pastors and parish priests represent me to all of you.

I, in turn, help to keep us focused on the important fact that we are a part of the Catholic Church throughout the world---the Universal Catholic Church which is led by our Holy Father, Pope Francis. As a matter of fact, I was just in Rome two weeks ago, and had the wonderful privilege of personally greeting our Holy Father, bringing him the personal greetings of all the Faithful of our Diocese---on behalf of all of YOU. Being "Catholic" means being a part of something that goes beyond myself, my parish, or even our Diocese---it means being a vibrant part of the Body of Christ and the Church which Jesus founded 2000 years ago and which continues to flourish in all parts of the world. And that's why we say we should be proud to be Catholic.

In a particular way I want to welcome our 130 "Special Guests of Honor" who have come here from 26 of our parishes; I also welcome your Godparents, Sponsors, Catechists, Family members, and many of your parish priests who are here with you. By the time you leave here this afternoon, you'll be known by different terms. The "Catechumens" will be known as "the Elect"---those chosen to become baptized and confirmed at the Easter Vigil. The "Candidates" will be known as the "Illuminati"---those who will be Enlightened by being received into full communion with the Church.

Finally, I just want to explain that today's Rite of Election is not a Eucharistic celebration---that is, this is not a Mass. This Rite of Election is celebrated in the context of a special Liturgy of the Word, during which we rejoice with those of you to be baptized and received into the Church, and we look forward to that special day just 6 weeks from now, when we all will be able to share in the Holy Eucharist---the sign of our Unity and Oneness in the Lord. And so, with all those introductory comments, let us all Stand....., and let us begin this beautiful Liturgy as we begin all our prayers: "In the name of the Father....."

Homily:

We've just listened to these 3 beautiful Readings from God's Holy Word. I'd like to reflect with you briefly about each of them.

Our First Reading was from the Book of Deuteronomy---the last of the first 5 Books in the Old Testament known as the Torah---the Law. In this Reading, Moses had just come down from Mt. Sinai where God had given him the Ten Commandments. After Moses read and explained each of those 10 basic commandments to the People, we heard him say: *“These then are the commandments, the statutes and decrees which the Lord, Your God, has ordered that you be taught to observe.”* Moses went on to explain why God had given the Commandments. It is clear that it was only because God wanted His Chosen People to be happy---in the words of the Reading, *“to have long life in the land flowing with milk and honey”* --that God gave Moses those commandments. In other words, God’s commands are signs of His Love for us, His People. Moses concluded his instruction by saying: *“Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength.”*

From our Christian perspective, we know that it was 2000 years later when Jesus, Who is sometimes referred to as the “new Moses”, when asked which of all the 613 commandments/laws found in the Torah was the most important, answered by saying: *“The greatest of all the commandments is to love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments, the entire Law is based.”* In other words, these two commands make up the **one** that is most important.

My dear Catechumens and Candidates, becoming a Catholic is not just about following God’s Commandments and the Church’s regulations, and abiding by and living according to the teachings of the Church. It IS all those things, but it is so much more. Just as God gave Moses the 10 Commandments as a sign of His Love ---His concern---for His People, so too the Church teaches dogmas, and provides regulations, for one primary reason: so that we can find the happiness God intends for each of us to have---so that we can enter into a loving and personal relationship with Him through Jesus and His Church---and ultimately, so that we can live our lives in this world in such a way that we will be able to receive the reward of Life Eternal in Heaven.

In today’s Second Reading, we heard St. Paul remind us that through our Baptism, we enter into a special, intimate relationship with Jesus---we enter into His death and resurrection, and we share in His Victory over sin and death. Baptism gives us, what St. Paul called: *“a spirit of adoption through which we cry ‘Abba, Father!’....We are children of God...and heirs with Christ.”*

For you 70 Catechumens who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil, this will be a new, and life-changing relationship with God that you will experience for the first time. You will soon rejoice in being able, not just to see God as some far-off, distant all-powerful Being, but through your Baptism into Christ, you will see Him as the One Who created you, and the One Who loves you unconditionally---as the One you can call "Father".

For you 60 Candidates who are being called to "continuing conversion" today, you are already "baptized Christians" and part of God's holy Family, and God has been at work in your life in ways known only to each of you. But clearly God's grace has brought you to this point in your lives when you are asking to become Catholics---to be received into full communion with the Church. At the Easter Vigil in just 6 weeks, you will make a Profession of Faith, and you will be given the special Gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation.

For all 130 of you, those beautiful words of St. Paul apply to each of you: "*The Spirit (of God) comes to the aid of our weakness... (and) intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will.*"

And that brings us to the Reading from the Holy Gospel. Jesus tells us that we must "*remain*"----always----no matter what----in His Love. And as long as we "*remain*" in His love by faithfully living the most important of all the commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor as Jesus loves, we will be full of joy. Jesus also reminds us of something very important in this Gospel passage. And let me now speak directly to the "Class of 2017".

I'm sure you've been asked many times why you have decided to become Catholic----why you want to be baptized, or why you are seeking to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church----why you've decided to participate in this beautiful RCIA process over the past year or more----I'm sure that each of you has your own particular reasons and explanation---your own unique "story" that is, I'm sure, both interesting and inspiring. But listen again to Jesus' words in today's Gospel: "*It was not you who chose Me, but I who chose you.*" God in His Providence has a Plan, and you are all a part of God's Plan----ALL of us are a part of God's Plan. But you need to remember that it is our Loving Father Who has been calling you throughout your lives to this moment; it's been Jesus Who has been urging you to turn your heart over to Him; it's been the Holy Spirit who has been inspiring you to make this conversion of mind and heart at this point in your lives. All of us here, and the whole Church, rejoice with you that you have "heard" God calling you, and that you are responding. But believe me, there is NO ONE happier about your decision to respond to His Call than God Himself!

After Jesus reminds us that He is the One Who chooses us, He then goes on to tell us what His “*mission*” is for all of us: “*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---to be Disciples of Jesus in a world that’s not all that interested in paying much attention----to be witnesses to the Gospel and to live our Faith with conviction and courage.

Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, wrote a beautiful Message to the Church as the season of Lent began. He tells us that Lent is a time when we are all “urgently” called to conversion. For those of you who are making this major life-changing step in your life, the “conversion” does not end today, or at the Easter Vigil. In fact, as followers of Jesus, all of us need to be constantly aware of in what parts of our lives we need to experience ongoing conversion. The ONLY way for us to do that, Pope Francis tells us, is by deepening our relationship with Jesus, and he tells us that there are 3 important ways we can do that: 1) by coming to know Jesus more intimately through reflecting regularly on His Holy Word; 2) by coming to know Jesus through more frequent and worthy reception of the Sacraments. For those of you who are about to be baptized and/or to receive your First Holy Communion for the first time, we know that the Sacrament of the Eucharist is essential to our coming to know and love Jesus more deeply every day; and finally 3) by coming to know Jesus in our neighbor. It is by loving our neighbor as we love God and our selves; it is by showing compassion to our neighbor who lives next door, or the neighbor who lives in India, or Iran, or Syria, or Mexico, or South America---and doing everything we can to make sure that they too are living life with the dignity every human being should have.

My dear Family of Faith, this is a truly happy and joyful day. For those 130 of you who are about to be “Chosen” and “Elected”, and for those of us already “called”---God’s Holy Word, the Sacraments, and our call to love our Neighbor---are not only the 3 ways for us to get to know Jesus more intimately and deeply; they are also ways to help us to more regularly and generously respond to God’s call in our own lives.

Let us choose to hear God’s Word and stay close to Jesus through the Catholic Church so that, as Moses promised, we “*can have long life*”; and as St. Paul told us, we can cry out with confidence “*Abba Father*”, and that with Jesus, we will choose to “*Remain in His Love as His chosen Friends.*”

God bless you now and always!

