

The Rite of Election or Enrollment of Names

ELIO CAPRA



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The Rite of Election was celebrated in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Melbourne, Australia, on March 4, 2001, with Archbishop George Pell presiding. It is a celebration that is always both inspiring and humbling: 110 catechumens asking to be admitted to the sacraments of initiation and 85 candidates, already baptized, asking to come to full communion with the Catholic church. What is the meaning of this rite for the individual, for the parish and for the whole church?

The Rite of Election signals the end (*culmen*) of the catechumenate period and the beginning (*fons*) of the period of purification and enlightenment. The catechumens must have shown signs that they “have undergone a conversion in mind and in action and . . . have developed a sufficient acquaintance with Christian teaching as well as a spirit of faith and charity”¹ before they can start their immediate preparation for baptism, confirmation and eucharist.

The Elements of the Rite

The liturgical structure of the Rite of Election consists of the following actions and prayers: gathering; presentation of the catechumens and affirmation by the godparents and the assembly; invitation and enrollment of names and act of admission or election; intercessions for the elect and prayer over the elect; the dismissal of the elect.

The Gathering

The first liturgical action in the Rite of Election is the gathering in the main diocesan church in the presence of the bishop.² This action represents a progressive and deepening experience of the Christian community as church. It began through the

ELIO CAPRA is a Salesian priest and the RCIA coordinator of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, Australia.

precatechumenal meeting of “families and other groups of Christians”;³ the Rite of Acceptance and the period of the catechumenate introduced them to the whole local church, where they participated in the liturgy of the word;⁴ their election or enrollment of names, “marked with a rite of such solemnity”⁵ through the presence of the bishop or a priest and deacon representing the whole diocesan assembly, extends the experience of church even further.

The Liturgy of the Word of God

The next important liturgical action is the celebration of the liturgy of the word of God, which has accompanied them throughout their journey. They first encountered the word of God during their precatechumenate, a time of evangelization during which “faithfully and constantly the living God is proclaimed and Jesus Christ whom he has sent for the salvation of all.”⁶ During the Rite of Acceptance at the end of the precatechumenate, they accepted the gospel, which the community presented to them,⁷ and through the signing of the senses⁸ they were now reminded that they had to become living witnesses of the gospel in their actions, their words, their thoughts. During the catechumenate they began to gather with the rest of the Christian assembly for the liturgy of the word and then they were sent forth to break open the word, which concluded with an exorcism, an anointing and/or a blessing.⁹

During the Rite of Election, the catechumens celebrate the liturgy of the word with the community, who celebrate the conversion that has already taken place, and who will be a source of light and strength for the coming lenten journey. The first thing the bishop asks the godparents about is whether catechumens have faithfully listened and responded to the word of God.

The word of God will continue to accompany the elect during the lenten period. It will be central to the celebration of the scrutinies, and it will be solemnly proclaimed during the Easter Vigil. The word of God will continue to challenge them, and act as a double-edged sword that probes their hearts and challenges them to an ever-deepening conversion.

Affirmation by the Godparents and the Assembly

During the Rite of Election, the relationship between the word of God and conversion is brought out in the three questions asked to the godparents by the bishop.

First the bishop asks the godparents: “Have they faithfully listened to God’s word proclaimed by the Church?” And the godparents answer: “They have listened faithfully (*fideliter audierunt*).” The second question: “Have they responded to that word and begun to walk in God’s presence?” The godparents’ answer is: “They have begun to walk in God’s presence (*coeperunt*).” This implies that the response to God’s word has already begun but it does not finish because it is ongoing. The third question is not about the word of God but about the godparents’ commitment to the community: “Have they shared the company of their Christian brothers and sisters and joined them



Photo by John Zich

The Word of God will continue to accompany the elect during Lent. (Shown here is one of the scrutiny rites.)

in prayer?” Their answer: “*Adhaeserunt*” (which literally translates: They have been “sticking” to their brothers and sisters).¹⁰

The Intercessions

Since this ritual is celebrated before the bishop and representative of the local and diocesan community, the OICA text speaks also of the role of the community. The intercessions for the elect are an expression of ecclesial solidarity and acceptance.¹¹

These prayers speak about the fact that conversion takes place within the community of believers who have already provided and continue to provide a progressive and increasing role of support. The community of believers have supported and prayed for them during the catechumenate, and they have promised their continued support through the godparents’ placing of their hands “on the shoulder of the candidate.”¹² Now they begin “to surround the elect with prayer, so that the entire Church will accompany and lead them to encounter Christ,”¹³ and through the bishop’s

hands outstretched over the candidates,¹⁴ this community becomes a visible symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The church prays with confidence that God will continue to lead the elect in their process of moving away from sin (*apotaxis*) and moving toward Christ (*syntaxis*). The church, through the concluding prayer of the presider, prays with authority and confidence, because the prayers are addressed to a God who is *conditor* (creator) and *reformer* (author of its renewal). In the second prayer (option B in the English translation) the presider prays to a God who is *Omnipotens dilectissime Pater* (Father of love and power) and to a God who has already won victory over the adversary and has therefore established everything anew in Christ (*qui omnia vis instaurare in Christo*). Even though this process toward God is beyond the strength of the elect and of any human being (*quod non potuerunt assequi per naturam*), God has chosen to make them *filiis adoptionis* and *filiis promissionis effecti*, and desires to share this victory with them and with the whole church.¹⁵

The Meaning and Significance of the Rite of Election

Response to God's Call

The invitation and enrollment of names¹⁶ is expressed as a response to a call that the elect heard from Christ.¹⁷ It is first and foremost the work of God, through Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The role of the church is subsidiary: to discern what God has been doing in the lives of the catechumens.

In the text the terms used to describe the role of the community and in the church are *judgment* and to *judge*. In the section preceding the description of the rite, the text states, “the Church judges their state of readiness and decides on their advancement toward the sacraments of initiation.”¹⁸ During the ritual the same terminology is used twice: “Those who know them have judged them to be sincere in their desire”¹⁹ and “Your own godparents and teachers [and this entire community] have spoken in your favor. The church in the name of Christ accepts their judgment and calls you to the Easter sacraments.”²⁰

The context quite clearly mentions that the community's and the church's judgment is and must always be based on discerning what God is doing in the lives of the catechumens. The terms *iudicare* and *iudicium* ultimately refer to God. Right judgment is listed as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is therefore a process that can only begin with God, is sustained by God and is brought to completion with God's help and assistance.

The phrase “those who know them have judged them to be sincere” must therefore be read in a theological context. The psychological process of judging the readiness of the catechumens is only one of the aspects of this larger theological context. It therefore cannot simply be based on the personal opinion, feelings or emotions of one person or one group. It requires a true process of discernment that must include prayer, reflection on the catechumen's journey and story of conversion, consultation with the

catechumen, sponsor and other members of the parish team. It is accompanied by the prayers of the individual and of the whole parish community.

A Gradual and Progressive Journey of Conversion

The Rite of Election is presented as part of the catechumens' gradual and progressive journey of conversion. The God who at the beginning called them through the Holy Spirit opening their hearts²¹ is the same God who called them to conversion through the power of the word of God during the catechumenate and is the same God who now demands a deepened commitment to that call. This ritual echoes the story of Genesis in the garden (see Genesis 3:9): "God called Adam and asked him: 'Where are you?'" Because of the serpent's deceit, Adam responded out of fear and shame. But here, because of Jesus Christ's victory over the deceiver, and because of Jesus Christ's victory of the evil one in their lives, the godparents can gratefully and honestly proclaim, "*Eos Dignos esse iudicamus.*"²² When the catechumens are asked whether they wish to enter fully into the life of the church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and the eucharist, they can answer humbly and yet confidently with a full-hearted response to God and to the ecclesial community and proclaim, "*Volumus.*"²³

A Process of Reversal

This ritual has a twofold effect. The first is a reversal of the Genesis story: The elect give a negative and resolute response to the adversary and a positive response to the God of Jesus Christ. Second, in Genesis God promised that the serpent's head would be crushed by the woman (see 3:15); through this ritual the church (the new bride) celebrates the victory over the adversary. God's promise is realized, even though not fully yet.

The Journey toward Initiation

The statement pronounced by the bishop as the act of admission or election is the turning point of the ritual. Before, the emphasis was on the catechumenal journey (*culmen*); now it turns to the journey ahead, which will lead them "to be initiated into the sacred mysteries at the next Easter Vigil."²⁴

Once again the words that the bishop speaks to both the catechumens and their godparents contain many hints and echoes of the fact that they have accepted the challenge and the struggle of becoming living characters in the plot of God's story of salvation: The catechumens are urged, "*fidelitatem vestram offeratis*" to the God "*qui fidelis est.*" The faithfulness of God is contrasted with the human faithfulness so easily shattered, broken or forgotten. But the catechumens have learned to open their hearts to the power of their God rather than focus on the poverty of their weakness. They accept the gift of God's faithfulness, and they assume the responsibility (*munus*) of responding to God as faithfully as they can. *Contedatis pervenire* is a term that speaks about a struggle to reach one's aim; *ad plenam veritatem* speaks about the fact that the catechumens have not yet reached the fullness of truth. During the catechumenate they have learned that God's word of truth

disturbs the adversary, who wants to oppose it at all costs. Therefore their striving toward the fullness of truth will not happen without the adversary's opposition. This is the reason why the godparents' task is not finished, but they have to continue to support them: "*eos fraterna opere vestra et exemplo prosequentes.*"²⁵

Conclusion

The elect proclaim their desire and willingness to enter into the challenging lenten battle with their joyful "*Deo gratias*"²⁶ and "Amen"²⁷ because they rely on the power and support of the Spirit-filled prayer of the whole community and on the power and faithfulness of God who has already given them signs of being more powerful than the adversary. Therefore their catechumenal victories over the adversary become an expression of their faithfulness to God, and, most importantly, they become visible signs of God's constant and everlasting faithfulness toward them and toward the whole church.

Endnotes

1. In this article OICA means the Latin *Ordo initiationis christianae adultorum*, and ICEL refers to the official English translation of the OICA text made by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy. Because of lawful changes made by the bishops of the United States, the numbers in the U.S. text sometimes differ from the ICEL text. Where this is the case, it will be noted. ICEL 107; see OICA 23; U.S. 120: "*...attinet conversio mentis et morum, sufficiens doctrinae christianae notitia, fidei caritatisque sensus.*"

2. "The bishop, in person or through his delegate, sets up, regulates, and promotes the programme of pastoral formation for catechumens and admits candidates to their election and to the sacraments. It is hoped that, presiding if possible at the Lenten liturgy, he will celebrate the rite of election and, at the Easter Vigil, the sacraments of initiation . . ." OICA 44 / ICEL 12.

3. See ICEL 38; OICA 11; U.S. 38: "*... cum familiis et coetibus christianorum . . .*"

4. See ICEL 41: "... the candidates . . . declare their intention to the Church and the Church in turn . . . accepts them. . . . God marks their reception and first consecration by the Church." See also OICA 14, 15, 68.

5. See ICEL 108; OICA 135; U.S. 121: "*... electio est veluti centrum attentae erga eosdem catechumenos sollicitudinis . . .*"

6. ICEL 36; OICA 10.

7. ICEL 52; OICA 76.

8. ICEL 55; OICA 83 – 86.

9. See ICEL 89, 94, 97, 101–102; OICA 108, 110, 119; U.S. 84, 92, 96.

10. OICA 144; ICEL 118; U.S. 131B.

11. See ICEL 121; OICA 148; U.S. 134A.

12. See ICEL 120; OICA 147; U.S. 133.

13. ICEL 108; OICA 135; U.S. 121.

14. See ICEL 122; OICA 149; U.S. 135.

15. See the celebrant's prayers over the elect: OICA 149; ICEL 122; U.S. 134A. The text gives two options: The first is the ancient one from the Gelasian Sacramentary (see Duggan, R., *Conversion*, 165–166) while the second is of more recent composition. The first has a strong emphasis on salvation and redemption; the second instead is more christological and trinitarian.

16. See ICEL 119; OICA 146; U.S. 132.

17. ICEL 119; U.S. 132: “Since you have heard the call of Christ, you must now express your response to that call . . .”; OICA 146: “. . . *Nunc igitur vestrum est, qui iam diu vocem Christi adiuvistis, responsum coram Ecclesia reddere, . . .*”

18. ICEL 106; OICA 22; U.S. 120.

19. ICEL 118; OICA 145; U.S. 145A.

20. ICEL 119; OICA 146; U.S. 132. See also n. 121 which says: “Before the rite of election the bishop, priests, deacons, catechists, godparents, and the entire community, in accord with their respective responsibilities and in their own way, should, after considering the matter carefully, arrive at a judgment about the catechumens’ state of formation and progress.”

21. See ICEL 36; OICA 9: “. . . *Spiritu Sancto cor ipsorum aperiente . . .*”

22. The literal translation: “We judge them to be worthy.” See OICA 145; U.S. 131A.

23. The literal translation: “We want to.” See OICA 146; U.S. 132.

24. ICEL 120; see OICA 147; U.S. 133.

25. OICA 133; ICEL 147; U.S. 119: “. . . accept them now as chosen in the Lord and continue to sustain them through your loving care and example, until they come to share in the sacraments of God’s life.”

26. OICA 147; ICEL 120; U.S. 133.

27. OICA 149; ICEL 122; U.S. 135.