

The Scrutinies-Paul Turner

Tell people they will face a scrutiny before they can join your community, and they will probably say, "Thanks, but no thanks." Boldly, our church expects not one but three scrutinies of elect before their baptism at Easter. Scrutinies are rites of self-searching and repentance. When people from another spiritual background seek baptism in the Catholic church, they do so by stages. First we accept them into the order of catechumens. Then as they complete their catechetical formation we enroll them among the "elect," or those chosen for baptism. This rite of election generally coincides with the beginning of Lent. Three times during Lent the church prays the scrutinies to encourage a spirit of repentance among those who seek a worthy celebration of baptism.

Although scrutinies have returned fairly recently to Catholic parishes, they originated early in church history. St. Ambrose and St. Augustine celebrated them in the fourth and fifth century to mark the spiritual progress of the catechumens. The moral preparation of catechumens included prayers of exorcism to drive out the spirit of evil which kept them from embracing Christ as their light. In the scrutinies the church discerned if those exorcisms had achieved their effect. Catechumens entered the church, stood barefoot on goatskin and renounced evil influences all night. Those unworthy of baptism had to wait another year for Easter to roll around again.

Today's scrutinies seem less intense. They still include an exorcism, in which the priest or deacon prays that the spirit of evil may be replaced by the spirit of good. Their purpose is not so much to examine the candidates' mental readiness but their spiritual readiness. Scrutinies offer the catechumens the support they need to approach the waters of baptism worthily.

For those who are already baptized, the scrutinies invite us to embrace the same spirit of self-searching and repentance. At Easter we renew our baptismal promises as we see the catechumens baptized. So during Lent we renew our repentance as we see the elect scrutinized. The scrutinies remind us of the seriousness of our Christian life and inspire us to turn from evil and pursue good. They enliven our recommitment to Christ at Easter.

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These rites are intended to purify the catechumens' minds and hearts, to strengthen them against temptation, to purify their intentions and to make firm their decision. They are designed to help the elect recognize anything that is weak, defective or sinful in their hearts so it may be strengthened. In other words, these rites are to be focal points in the ongoing conversion of the elect, times for coming to grips with the reality of evil and the struggle necessary to root it out of their lives (and our lives as well).

The scrutinies are celebrated on the Third (St. Joseph's), Fourth (Guardian Angels), and Fifth Sundays (Good Shepherd) of Lent. The Roman Ritual of the R.C.I.A. states that ordinarily Cycle A readings are used for these three Sundays, regardless of the year. Each scrutiny occurs after the homily at Mass in the presence of the community. The scrutinies consist of prayers for the elect by the whole community and an exorcism with an imposition of hands. The elect are then dismissed from the assembly.

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