

## Rite of Election of Catechumens/Call to Continuing Conversion

February 14, 2016 3:00 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

**(143: 61 catechumens; 82 candidates; 30 parishes)**

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

It's so good to see all of you filling this Cathedral, which is much more beautiful because of you! For the 143 of you who are our "special persons" here with us---the "Class of 2016" so to speak, for you this is a once-in-a-lifetime moment, and we truly rejoice with you. For me, I have the privilege of being here every year, each year welcoming a different group of "special persons" into the Church, but still---each year---having this great vantage point of seeing those of you who have been touched and inspired by God at the depths of your souls to make this very significant spiritual decision to enter into the Catholic Church. I look forward to this event every year with great joy. And so, it truly is very good to see all of you here this afternoon.

We've just listened to these three Readings from God's Holy Word and I'd like to offer very briefly a reflection on each of them and how those Scripture Readings are really speaking to the hearts of all of us here today, but in a particular way, to those of you in the Class of 2016. It seems to me that each one of the Readings has a particular message for us.

The first Reading, from the Book of Deuteronomy speaks to us about our basic **relationship** with God, and focuses on what our **responsibility** is, to God and to neighbor. As we heard, Moses was the "go-between". He was the one that God spoke to, who in turn was responsible for passing on to the people what God said. In that sense, Moses was one of the first "priests" because that's one of the basic responsibilities of every priest and bishop: to be "go-betweens" between God and our people; to faithfully teach God's Word and the teachings of the Church.

And so Moses was very clear in telling the people that they were not only supposed to faithfully observe what God commanded them to do, but they were to pass those commands on to their children, their grandchildren and their great grandchildren. And besides that, in rather graphic words, Moses told them that they were to "*take to heart the words which I enjoin on you today (and) Drill them into your children.*" It was the sacred responsibility of one generation to make sure that God's "statutes and decrees" were understood and observed by the next generations.

Moses told us what that basic command from God was: *“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.”*

Those words are probably known by *all* of us off by heart, whether we're life-time people of faith or just recently coming to live as faith-filled people. Those words are almost universally known, and familiar; however, whether we actually **live** according to those words is another question. As Christians, those words are extremely familiar to us because it was Jesus, Who we sometimes refer to as “the new Moses”, Who *also* used those very same words to sum up what the most important of all the Old Testament commandments were.

We're all familiar with the 10 Commandments. But in Old Testament writings, especially through those first five Books known as the Pentateuch, there were 613 commandments that the Jewish people were trying to faithfully observe. So, when Jesus was asked by the lawyers of His day, known as the pharisees, what was the most important of all the commandments, Jesus used those same words of Moses to answer: *“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.”*

Dear Catechumens and Candidates, becoming Catholic is about so much more than following Commandments, obeying Church regulations and living according to the teachings of the Church. It *is* those things, but so much more. We heard Moses in that first Reading tell us the purpose of faithfully living according to those commandments: *“so that you may have long life....that you may grow and prosper...in the land flowing with milk and honey (which the Lord your God promised to give you).”* Understanding what our basic “relationship” to God and neighbor is, and living out that basic “responsibility” by loving God and neighbor has a purpose for all of us as well: so that we too may have that “long life”----a faithful life in this world, and eternal life with God in Heaven.

In this afternoon's Second Reading, from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, we come to understand more about our **identity---who we are**. St. Paul reminded 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. In St. Paul's words, Baptism gives us a *“spirit of adoption through which we cry ‘Abba, Father!’...We are children of God....and heirs with Christ.”*

For the 61 Catechumens who will be baptized in just six weeks at the Easter Vigil, you will experience this new, and life-changing relationship with God for the first time. You will soon rejoice in being able to experience God as Father, and to know that you are His precious child, and a part of the Body of Christ.

For the 82 Candidates who will be received into full communion with the Church at the Easter Vigil, your identity as someone already baptized into Christ will be enriched and strengthened through the Sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Eucharist.

But for all 143 of you in the Class of 2016, and everyone of us here with you, that sense of Identity is extremely important for us to keep in mind what Paul tells us all: *“We are children and heirs of God...and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.”*

And that brings us to the third Scripture Reading and the third very important Word: **mission/purpose**. Moses told us about our basic relationship with God and neighbor and what our **responsibility** to them was; St. Paul told us about our **identity**----who we are as a child of God and heir with Christ. But in the Gospel of St. John, Jesus gives us our **purpose**----the “why” behind the “what” and the “who”.

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 that 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 speak directly to the “Class of 2016”. 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 interesting and 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 Who has been calling you throughout your lives; it’s been Jesus Who has been inspiring you to turn your heart over to Him. We rejoice with you that you have “heard” God’s

call and responded. God is the One Who has chosen you, and there's no one happier about your decision to respond to His Call as you're doing 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 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 and 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.

My dear Family of Faith, this is truly a happy and joyful day. As we reflect on our "relationship, our "identity" and our "mission", we take the greatest comfort in Jesus' words: "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" Jesus has already done that for us---His friends. Through His suffering, death and resurrection, He has won the victory, and that victory is ours!

God bless you, now and always!