

More than 600 throughout Archdiocese of Baltimore seek entrance into the Catholic Church

In Annapolis, Baltimore and Emmitsburg, 611 people seeking full communion with the Catholic Church gathered for the Rite of Election and the Call to Continuing Conversion March 10.

The 219 catechumens and 392 candidates are to be fully initiated into the church on the Easter Vigil April 20.

Catechumens are those who have not been baptized in another Trinitarian faith tradition, and are preparing for the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. Candidates are those who have already been baptized, and are preparing for the sacraments of confirmation and Eucharist.

More than half the catechumens and candidates were gathered at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland, where Archbishop William E. Lori presided. Auxiliary Bishops Adam J. Parker and Mark E. Brennan presided at the rites at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg and St. John Neumann in Annapolis, respectively.

In this rite, catechumens become “the elect” and enter into the next phase of their journey, “Purification and Enlightenment,” marking the end of formal studies and the beginning of a period of intense prayer and preparation coinciding with the 40 days of Lent.

“Being Catholic isn’t just being at your parish,” said Julie Grace Males, director of the Archdiocese of Baltimore Office of Divine Worship. “We are all one in the body of Christ globally. ... This is just another level up in knowing that we’re not alone.”

In his homily, Archbishop Lori discussed the daily choices a person makes, and how

those gathered did not simply choose a new religious denomination.

"You are here because you are convinced in your mind and heart that the Catholic Church offers the fullness of the Christian faith," the archbishop said. "You are here because you believe that in this community, you can be deepened in God's love and be authentic followers of Christ."

Those gathered, he said, have "said 'yes' to the action of the Holy Spirit" in their lives.

"With the support of your sponsors, you are asking to be chosen, to be elected for baptism and reception into the church at Easter," Archbishop Lori said with a smile. "You certainly have my vote!"

The Rite of Election is a requirement of RCIA - the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

"(The rite) is significant in that in this ongoing process of discernment ... that they are recognized by the bishop, who is standing in for Christ," Males said. "He stands in the place of Christ in coming forward and recognizing them in this journey."

RCIA itself is also a rite of the Roman Catholic Church, and is included in the Roman Missal. Males considers it "one of the very best parts of the Catholic faith."

"(RCIA) is about seeking the Lord (and) walking with another to see the Catholic lifestyle," Males said. "It is one of the best things the Catholic Church has ever done because it talks about forming a real relationship with Jesus Christ. ... It's about walking the walk."

In the opening processional at the cathedral, catechists for nearly 50 RCIA programs at area parishes carried Books of the Elect containing the signatures of the catechumens. Every parish in the archdiocese has its own book that it maintains and brings to the rite. Some dioceses - such as the Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana, where Males worked before moving to Baltimore - have one large book for the entire entity.

Signing names in the book, Males said, signifies the person's presence and

commitment to the RCIA process.

“The bishop recognizes that by signing the book himself,” Males said.

Ahead of the Rite of Election and the Call to Continuing Conversion, the catechumens and candidates participate in the Rite of Sending, an official sending forth from each individual parish.

Mission Helper of the Sacred Heart Sister Sonia-Marie Fernandez, pastoral associate and director of religious education at St. Gabriel in Woodlawn, said some catechumens and candidates might feel embarrassment that they are teenagers or adults and have not received any or all of the sacraments of initiation. Coming together on the diocesan level, she said, lets them know they are not alone.

“I think it gives them a bigger understanding,” said Sister Sonia-Marie.

St. Gabriel’s Spanish- and English-language programs are to bring a combined 24 people into full communion with the church this year. Sister Sonia-Marie appreciated that the rite was bilingual, with only a couple exceptions.

“It’s more inclusive,” said Sister Sonia-Marie, who ministered at the former St. Michael the Archangel in Fells Point for 12 years before serving 11 at St. Gabriel. “I’ve seen a change over the years.”

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Email Emily Rosenthal at erosenthal@CatholicReview.org