

MARTIN JAKUBAS

## The necessary presence

The elect, that is those preparing for baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist, can provide the focus for the whole church community during Lent

**A**t the time of writing I have just returned from taking part in the Rite of Election at our cathedral. I have witnessed 41 adults being called by our father in Christ, Bishop Kieran, to enter into a special time of preparation before entering the waters of baptism, being anointed with oil and the Holy Spirit and thus prepared to come to the table to eat and drink, in communion with the Church, the body and blood of Christ.

I also witnessed some 119 adults called to a continuing conversion as they enter this time of retreat that we call Lent so that they also can be ready to share fully in the Eucharist with us for the first time this Easter. Thus as a pastor I find myself asking in what ways the whole community of the Church, and here I include myself, are ready to walk with them in faith during these Lenten days.

In recent generations I believe that Lent has been much misunderstood. The principal reason for this has been the separation of adult baptism from the Easter Vigil, and thus the lack of catechumens, or rather the newly elect, as a focus for this season. Part of this did of course lie in a lack of a clear vision of the mission of the church community. Thus Lent over centuries degenerated into a period for private spiritual growth, marked by personal penances and efforts at strengthening willpower. While there is certainly a place for such efforts in the Christian life, surely Lent should be much more than a personal spiritual workout. Surely it is meant to be a communal experience of renewal and recommitment to mission.

As soon as we hear the word Lent, the first two words that should come to mind are "baptism" and "conversion". It shouldn't surprise us if another set of words is the first that come to mind. After all, the challenge of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has only been with us for a few decades. Forty-one elect for our diocese only amounts to about a third

of a catechumen for each parish and the one I am working in has none this year. So the problem remains.

Thus I find myself asking, how is this community that I am challenged to challenge this Lent to gain a true perspective, as we don't have the focus of those preparing for baptism, confirmation and Eucharist? How are we to enter this period of renewal of our baptismal commitment without the encouragement of those for whom this is all so new? If we had them we would be able to celebrate the Scrutinies on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent. How I will miss them this year. I shouldn't, though, dismiss the thought of using them as I can always use them whether there are elect or not.

There is something immensely powerful about seeing the elect coming forward with their godparents and in the light of the great gospels from John (the Samaritan woman at the well, the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus) giving permission to this community to pray that they will be set free from the powers of darkness and enter into the light of the Lord; and then dismissing them to go and continue to reflect on what they have heard in the Scriptures this Sunday.

There is little doubt in my mind about the power of this dismissal. When the assembled people of God then go on to proclaim their faith in the Creed and pray for the Church, the world and all in need it is with a new respect for their own baptism. It is because they are baptised that they have the right and the duty to do these things, and more will be coming to share in this task this Easter. Thus the elect challenge us to a real conversion of heart ourselves. That great trio of almsgiving, prayer and fasting that mark this joyful season are not intended to be for a renewal of our stomachs or our knees for that matter, but of the heart, precisely where we are most weak.

The very celebration of the Scrutinies gives the baptised a real focus for their own con-

version of heart in Lent; thus providing a focus for a well prepared communal celebration of the Rite of Penance. It is not without significance that children of catechetical age preparing for baptism at Easter celebrate their own Scrutiny at a Penitential Service. When there have been such children we have celebrated this rite on the same occasion that we have had other children celebrate this Sacrament of Penance for the first time. We should never forget that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is always a new washing away of the sins we have committed since all our sins were washed away in the waters of baptism. After all, we have no right to celebrate Easter without feeling the hardship of Lent. We can only trumpet the words "Christ is risen" if we have died with him in Lent.

To conclude, I leave myself with the problem with which I opened. I don't have an answer as to how to truly celebrate Lent without the focus of the elect. All I know is that, when I do have them, they really change Lent for the whole parish family if I am prepared to trust the rites and use them with care.

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**TO DO**

**When** you have people preparing for baptism, whether adults or children of catechetical age, make sure to celebrate the Scrutinies

**Do** not be afraid to dismiss the elect after the Scrutinies. It can have a profound effect on the baptised

**Remember** that you can always use the Year A readings each Lent whether you have elect or not

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