

SCRUTINY

by Rev. Paul Turner

Tell people they'll face a scrutiny before they can join your community, and they'll probably say, "Thanks, but no thanks." Boldly our church expects not one but three scrutinies of catechumens 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 catechumens 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.

This bulletin insert originally appeared in *Ministry & Liturgy*, a pastoral planning resource used by the worship leaders in your parish as an aid for better liturgy. Copyright © 1996, Resource Publications, Inc. 160 E. Virginia St. #290, San Jose, CA 95112, (408) 286-8505. This article may not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher. For permission e-mail info@rpinet.com. Paul Turner, pastor of St. Munchin Parish in Cameron, MO, holds a doctorate in sacramental theology from Sant' Anselmo University in Rome.