

Marking stops on faith's journey

Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Four times last week I had the privilege of presiding at the Rite of Election, in which we as a Catholic community formally accept those preparing for baptism (catechumens) and those already baptized who seek full communion of life with us (candidates). In accepting these individuals, we pledge our continued prayer and affection for them as their journey of faith continues. We also express our common need for continuing conversion and our desire to grow more like Christ during these holy days of Lent.

There is something deeply touching about the Rites of Election. I can best understand their special character when I remember that each person present has a heightened awareness of the loving presence of the Holy Spirit in his or her life. Additionally, the rite makes them conscious that the same Spirit joins them in bonds of faith and affection with women and men just like them from all corners of the diocese. It is a common occurrence for catechumens and candidates to tell of their excitement about the life and vitality of the Catholic community.

For my part, I tried to help our new friends understand more deeply how important the witness of their faith is to all of us who now join them in their Lenten journey. They bring a spirit of joy and openness to God, which is a true gift to all of us. They remind us of the enduring and gracious love of our God, which calls us to new life every day that we live.

I mentioned another dimension of our Christian experience in which catechumens and candidates always bring me en-

couragement and new hope. That dimension is their spirit of obedience to the call of God in their lives. They know from the instruction they have received that we are joined by the sacraments of initiation to the dying and rising of Jesus. Participation in that mystery is not an exemption from the suffering of the human condition. Rather it is a sharing in the power of Christ's love, which conquers sin and death and remains in us even in our deepest suffering. There is nothing shallow and frilly about such love. The fruits of it are enduring and bring peace to the heart.

Catechumens and candidates know quite well that they are becoming members of a community that is on a continuing pilgrimage of faith — that we are by no means perfect or finished. Yet they see somehow the fruits of God's loving care for all of us and that, I hope, is a strong encouragement to our community.

A fifth significant experience I had this

week was the meeting at St. Theodore's in Gates at which I announced acceptance of the recommendation made to me by the bishop's Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools in Monroe County. The point here is not the content of the recommendations. Their message has been communicated in other ways. What I found in that experience was another manifestation of strong faith and a care for one another among people which I found quite inspiring.

Misunderstandings and disagreements have occurred during this process, but I really don't know how it could have happened otherwise in such a complicated matter about which so many people have such strong feelings. The important thing is that we have come to a new moment in that process. I have great confidence that we can make the process work and do so to the enrichment of our entire community.

The reorganization process is a different



stage in the journey from the one in which our catechumens and candidates are now engaged, but it is no less real than theirs. I hope that we can support all of these journeys with our Lenten prayer. Peace to all.

Signs, images should reflect unity of the season

**By Sister Estelle Martin, RSM
Diocesan Liturgical Commission**

The environment of our worship spaces can set the tone and reinforce the message of the Gospel for any liturgical season. Decorations that combine artistic quality with liturgical appropriateness enable us to enter more deeply into the spirit of the season.

The celebration of Eucharist is already rich with signs and symbols: the gathered community at prayer, the proclamation of the Word and the sacramental sharing of bread and wine. It is the responsibility of the parish environment and art team to choose tangible signs "capable of bearing the weight of mystery; awe, reverence and wonder which the liturgical action expresses" (EACW #21).

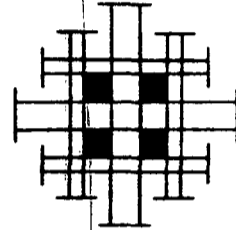
A well-planned setting for worship visualizes the pulse of the current liturgical season without calling undue attention to itself. Objects which are poorly made, shoddy or artificial have no place in the worship setting.

Careful preparation of the liturgical setting maintains the importance of the primary centers of focus: the altar, the ambo/lectern and the presider's chair. No matter how beautiful the arrangement of flowers or the objects in the setting, they must never obscure or detract from these central places of action in the liturgy.

An effective environment extends throughout the entire worship space, spilling over into the assembly area and sometimes even into the outside door- and stairways. It is also important that the setting be allowed to speak for itself. A "quiet" tapestry (without any words) remains an open invitation to the community to contemplate the message of the season on many different levels.

During Lent a kind of visual fasting is introduced. Unused furniture is removed from the sanctuary, plants and flowers are reduced to a minimum if used at all, candles are limited, and unnecessary lights are dimmed or turned off. A penitential tone is established by the use of somber

From
Repentance
to Rebirth



colors of violet and earth hues in vestments and tapestries.

Dignified, yet austere decorations of dried weeds, leafless branches, clay pottery and woven baskets express a stripping away that acknowledges that it is the Divine Creator who shapes us. Rough fabric textures image our frailty, brokenness and sinfulness, and emphasize our need for reconciliation. The dryness of weeds or an empty container becomes a prebaptismal sign of no water, emptiness and a waiting to be filled.

It is in the darkness of the Easter Vigil that the light burns bright, the empty bowl gushes with fresh water and the barren branch nestles amid the bright array of flowers. Seeds planted in earthen pots during the Lenten time stand tall in rows of new growth.

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"BUT THE COMFORTER, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."
JOHN 14:26

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