

**“The Essence of the Message: Living the Kingdom of God Now and Unto Eternity”**  
**Homily for Rite of Election**  
**February 21, 2021; St. Mary’s Cathedral**

**Introduction**

It is my pleasure to welcome you all here to our Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption for this annual Rite of Election. This is always a great moment in the life of our Archdiocese, which shows the great diversity of our local church, and the work of the Gospel that continues here, often otherwise unnoticed and unacknowledged by many. And even though we have to observe this ceremony this year with severe restrictions in order to do our part to help curb the spread of the coronavirus, and therefore with only a few of you here of all those who really should be, it is nonetheless a happy occasion for all of us. And so I want especially to welcome all of you who are following this ceremony today via the Cathedral’s livestream system. We are happy that we can connect this way, and still be at least spiritually present to each other.

**Essence of the Message**

As is prescribed every year for this ceremony of the Rite of Election, the readings are taken from the First Sunday of Lent, which we heard earlier at Mass. We always begin Lent on this Sunday with hearing the account of our Lord being tempted by the devil in the desert for forty days. This year we heard the version of that story from Gospel of St. Mark. Notice the sequence of events: our Lord retreats into the desert for forty days, and then he emerges to begin his public ministry. As Mark describes it, the first words out of our Lord’s mouth in beginning his public ministry capture the essence of his message and of that very ministry itself, of the very reason why he came into the world: “This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand.”

The proclamation and establishment of the Kingdom is the essence of our Lord’s mission. And this, really, is the work of restoration. Going way back to the beginning of the Bible, we see that the life of our first parents in the Garden of Eden (before the fall) was one of harmony: all was in perfect harmony, the man and the woman with each other and with creation, heaven with earth. And we can see how that is prefigured here in St. Mark’s depiction of our Lord’s forty-day retreat in the desert: “He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.” After the fall, when sin entered into the world, this harmony was destroyed. God’s work of salvation, then, is restoring this harmony by reestablishing His Kingdom.

But there is more to this story. There is a certain implication to the Kingdom of God being at hand. Notice what else our Lord says right after this: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” These words should sound familiar, as we just heard them last Wednesday, the formula for when ashes are imposed on Ash Wednesday. This call to repentance and belief indicate what are really the *two* implications to the Kingdom of God being at hand. “Repent” means a change of life, the ethical dimension of the life of faith, or as we say in colloquial speech, “clean up your act.” But why? It is a consequence of the second implication: “believe in the Gospel.” This indicates a change of attitude, toward belief, and since that belief must be put into action, it brings about the change of life, only made possible by great humility.

This is the purpose of Lent, a time of renewal: so we begin with the external sign of penance, ashes placed on the head (although this year we had to do it a bit differently, on the top of the head!).

## **Baptism**

Restoration is also the meaning of the story of Noah and the flood. It is all indicative of the cycle of creation, fall, and restoration. Notice the restoration that God promises after the flood subsides: “I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood.” This cycle is something we know from everyday human experience. I recall, for example, how I once heard someone describe the stages of marriage (at least, for those couples who persevere and figure out how to be successful at it): “the ideal, the raw deal, and the new deal.”

In God’s plan of salvation, baptism is the new deal. The waters of the flood are a symbol of that, a symbol of the waters of baptism that wash away the old life of sin and corruption and open up the freedom to live a new, purified life with a new attitude of belief. This often happens, for example, to people who get deceived into indulging themselves in that corrupt way of life (deceived into thinking it was the ideal) and then eventually figure out that it was really the raw deal. They discover how much better is the new deal!

Likely many of you have experienced this Good News, and that is why you are here today. I thank God for that! I also thank all of you catechists, directors of religious education, pastors and sponsors, and all of you who have had a role in bringing our brothers and sisters who will receive sacraments of initiation this Easter to this point in their lives.

In our second reading, St. Peter explains the sacramental meaning prefigured in the story of Noah: “God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few persons, eight in all, were saved through water. This prefigured baptism, which saves you now. It is ... an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” A clear conscience: that is the change of life, living the new deal, which begins with the external sign of the water of baptism.

## **Goal**

And so the Church puts this vision before us on the First Sunday of Lent every year, in order to keep our eyes fixed on the goal: the celebration of Christian initiation at Easter, and the renewal of baptismal promises for those already initiated. We rejoice with those of you who will be initiated into the faith of Christ this Easter, and those of you who have answered the call to continuing conversion and will be received into the full communion of the Church. For all of us – catechumens, candidates, and those already fully initiated – this all has to do with living out those two implications of the essence of Christ’s message, the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

The proclamation of the Kingdom, as some of you will recall, is the third luminous mystery of the rosary. It was Pope St. John Paul II who, in his Apostolic Letter on the rosary, “The Rosary of the Virgin Mary” (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*), gave us these luminous mysteries. These mysteries, he explains, are those that are manifested in our Lord’s public life. Whereas the joyful mysteries have us meditate on the infancy narrative and his childhood, and the sorrowful mysteries on his Passion and death, and the glorious mysteries on his glorification and the promise of his glory to the saints, these luminous mysteries, or “mysteries of light,” fill in the gap of his public life, from his baptism (the first luminous mystery) to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper (the fifth luminous mystery).

Unlike all the other mysteries of the rosary, though, the Proclamation of the Kingdom does not refer to one specific moment or concrete action. Rather, it is a mystery that is repeated

over prolonged period of time. But because this is the essence of the message, it is rightfully a mystery worthy of our meditation.

In that apostolic letter, John Paul relates the mysteries of the rosary to the meaning of Christian Baptism, which also, in its own way, sums up the meaning of Lent for us:

Christian spirituality is distinguished by the disciple's commitment to become conformed ever more fully to his Master (cf. *Rom* 8:29; *Phil* 3:10,12). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Baptism ... makes [the believer] a member of Christ's mystical Body (cf. *1 Cor* 12:12; *Rom* 12:5). This initial unity, however, calls for a growing assimilation which will increasingly shape the conduct of the disciple in accordance with the 'mind' of Christ: 'Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus' (*Phil* 2:5). In the words of the Apostle, we are called 'to put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (cf. *Rom* 13:14; *Gal* 3:27).

The rosary, too, is another way the Church gives us to keep our ultimate destination always before our eyes, as it is an opportunity for us to meditate on the saving mysteries of our faith in the life of our Lord and our Lady on this earth. This is why it is so important to pray the rosary every day. The Church encourages us to do this, as does our Blessed Mother whenever she appears anywhere in the world. It is also part of the spirituality of living the consecration of our Archdiocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which I had the great grace to celebrate over three years ago now. We live this consecration by praying the rosary daily, by spending an hour of Adoration of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament at least one hour a week, and by observing bodily fasting and other acts of penance – yes, most especially during Lent, but also on Fridays all throughout the year

### **Conclusion**

The Church gives us these constant reminders to help us keep the ultimate goal always before our eyes: a change of attitude to that of faith, a change of life to one of an ethic of faith, purified in thought, word and deed, in order to live in conformity with Christ and so begin to share life with him now in this world, and the fulfillment of that life forever in the world yet to come.

### **SUMMARY IN SPANISH**

Como se prescribe cada año para esta ceremonia del Rito de Elección, las lecturas se toman del Primer Domingo de Cuaresma, que escuchamos antes en la Misa. Siempre comenzamos la Cuaresma, en este primer domingo, escuchando el relato de nuestro Señor siendo tentado por el diablo en el desierto durante cuarenta días. Este año escuchamos la versión de esa historia del Evangelio de San Marcos. Noten la secuencia de eventos: nuestro Señor se retira al desierto durante cuarenta días, y luego emerge para comenzar su ministerio público. Como lo describe Marcos, las primeras palabras que salieron de la boca de nuestro Señor al principio de su ministerio público capturan la esencia de su mensaje y de ese mismo ministerio, de la misma razón por la que vino al mundo: “Se ha cumplido el tiempo y el Reino de Dios ya está cerca.” El mismo propósito por el cual Jesús vino al mundo fue la proclamación y el establecimiento del Reino de Dios.

Pero hay más en esta historia. Hay una cierta implicación en la cercanía del Reino de Dios. Noten lo que nuestro Señor dice inmediatamente después de esto: “Arrepiéntanse y crean en el Evangelio.” Estas palabras deberían sonar familiares, ya que las acabamos de escuchar el miércoles pasado: es la fórmula para la imposición de cenizas el Miércoles de Ceniza. Este llamado al arrepentimiento y a la fe indica cuáles son realmente las dos implicaciones para que el Reino de Dios se acerque. “Arrepiéntanse” significa un cambio de vida, la dimensión ética de la vida de fe. ¿Pero por qué? Es una consecuencia de la segunda implicación: “crean en el Evangelio”. Esto indica un cambio de actitud, hacia la creencia, y dado que esa creencia debe ponerse en práctica, trae consigo el cambio de vida, sólo posible gracias a una gran humildad.

Este es el propósito de la Cuaresma, un tiempo de renovación: entonces comenzamos con el signo externo de la penitencia, las cenizas colocadas en la cabeza (aunque este año tuvimos que hacerlo un poco diferente, ¡en la coronilla!). Por eso la Iglesia nos presenta esta visión el Primer Domingo de Cuaresma de cada año, para mantener la mirada fija en el objetivo: la celebración de la iniciación cristiana en Pascua y la renovación de las promesas bautismales para los ya iniciados. Nos regocijamos con aquellos de ustedes que serán iniciados en la fe de Cristo esta Pascua, y con aquellos de ustedes que han respondido al llamado a la conversión continua y serán recibidos en la plena comunión de la Iglesia. Para todos nosotros, catecúmenos, candidatos y aquellos ya plenamente iniciados, todo esto tiene que ver con vivir esas dos implicaciones de la esencia del mensaje de Cristo, que es el establecimiento del Reino de Dios.