

Q What is the Period of Purification and Enlightenment, and what happens during this third stage of the Christian initiation process?

A The season of Lent is closely tied to the preparation of new Christians for Baptism. It coincides with the Period of Purification and Enlightenment that follows after catechumens are chosen for Baptism by the bishop and become “the elect.” Just as Lent is a kind of annual spiritual retreat for the whole Church, this period of initiation is intended to be a time of intense prayer and reflection for the elect as they prepare for their initiation at Easter.

To help the elect in this preparation, the Church celebrates the scrutinies with them on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. The rites are an ancient part of the initiation process intended to liberate the elect from the power of sin, to help them resist temptation, and to give them the strength of Christ (RCIA, 141).

When these rites are celebrated, the readings from Cycle A are always proclaimed. The Gospels for these Sundays, the Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:5–45), the Man Born Blind (John 9:1–41), and the Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–45) each tell the story of someone whose life was radically changed by an encounter with Jesus. The woman hears Jesus’ proclamation, believes it, and brings her neighbors to faith. The blind man is healed to reveal God’s works in the world and becomes a witness to Jesus’ healing power. Lazarus is raised from the dead to a new life by Jesus. Like the figures in the Gospel accounts, the elect are called to hear the Word, respond to it, be healed, and be raised to new life.

Each week of the scrutinies, the elect are asked to search themselves and to repent so that they can be healed and strengthened. The assembled faithful are encouraged to

pray for the elect and also draw strength from the rite for themselves. Each scrutiny ends with an exorcism, a prayer in which the Church asks that the elect be freed from evil and brought to salvation.

During the Third Week of Lent, the elect may be presented with the Creed, and during the Fifth Week, with the Lord’s Prayer. They are asked to memorize them—the Church’s most central belief and its most treasured prayer—since they will recite them publicly when they are baptized. When those preparing for baptism are dismissed from the Sunday Mass, they do not take part in three central actions of the Christian faith: professing the Creed, interceding for the world in the Universal Prayer, and celebrating the Eucharist. The gift of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer prepares the elect to begin to take part in these duties of all the Christian faithful.

Finally, on Holy Saturday, the day leading up to their Baptism, Confirmation, and first Eucharist, the elect are asked to spend the day in prayer and reflection, observing the Paschal fast. They may gather at the church in the morning for the optional preparation rites: the presentation of the Lord’s Prayer if it has been deferred, the recitation of the Creed, given earlier in Lent, and the ephphetha rite, in which the celebrant prays over their ears and mouth, so that in Baptism they might “be opened” (the meaning of *epphetha*) to hear God’s Word and to proclaim it. They may also choose a new name for their Baptism at this time. After these rites, the elect are blessed and dismissed until the great Vigil of Easter begins in the night.

