

What Are the Scrutinies?

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Not long before the start of Lent one year, a new minister of Christian initiation approached me. I could see he was agitated, yet hesitant to talk.

Finally, he told me he saw that scrutinies were scheduled to take place on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent for those preparing to become Christians at the Easter Vigil. He feared that during the rite, these individuals, whom we call the *elect*, or chosen, would be questioned before all assembled for Mass. I praised him for his concern and told him that the three scrutinies of the Christian initiation process do not parallel a courtroom cross-examination.

The scrutinies are formed in the language of liturgical prayer. During the scrutiny, those preparing for Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil typically kneel down, and the presider and assembly pray over them, asking God to strengthen and assist them to more clearly live out God's love. At this time, these individuals are also invited, with God's help, to turn away from sin and evil. The rite states:

The scrutinies are meant to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good. For the scrutinies are celebrated in order to deliver the elect from the power of sin and Satan, to protect them against temptation, and give them strength in Christ. These rites, therefore, should complete the conversion of the elect and deepen their resolve to hold fast to Christ and to carry out their decision to love God above all. (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 141)

This turning from sin and evil to God's love does not happen in an instant. Rather, the elect need to pray and receive support as they attempt to turn toward God's love and resist sin and evil. The scrutinies are meant to heal.

The benefits of the scrutinies are significant. First, the context is the liturgical assembly. The elect have been part of the already established prayer life of the Church, learning (or as Pope Benedict XVI aptly called it "being schooled") in the way the Church prays, lives, and breathes.

Secondly, the local church prays for and over these elect. Hands are laid on them in prayer, suggesting that the Church is not only asking God's strength and assistance—the Church itself is there to be a sign and presence of strength, especially in the face of trial. It is a healing touch.

Thirdly, the entire Church has the opportunity to consider its need for God's help to be healed and strengthened. The



The scrutinies are to heal what is weak and strengthen what is upright.

elect are not the only ones in need of God's assistance. Each person in the assembly needs to continuously look to God as they try to resist sin and evil. As we participate in the scrutinies as part of the assembly, we should examine our "schooling" in the love of God. All Christian disciples need to continually examine how they are open to participating in God's love. This rite is a witness to the "skills" (prayers) needed to live daily what Christian discipleship is about—God's love in the midst of sin and evil.