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**Homily for the First Sunday of Lent
Rite of Election
Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help**

March 9, 2014

Again, welcome to all of you this afternoon for the Rite of Election. It is good that we gather here as a Diocesan Faith Community, coming from all over the Diocese, to celebrate how God is calling you to a deeper relationship with His Son through the Easter sacraments. Thank you for your response to this invitation to God's call.

You have been judged sincere in your desire to respond to Jesus' invitation. This season of Lent begins the Period of Purification and Enlightenment. These 40 days of prayer, fasting and almsgiving – leading to your ongoing conversion – is the time for a final and more intense preparation for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation for you catechumens, and for those of you who are already baptized, for your entry into full communion with the Catholic Church.

Each of you brings with you today your very own unique story about how God has led you to this moment in your lives. No matter how this has happened, I welcome you, our diocese welcomes you, and your own faith communities welcome you. But as unique as each of your stories may be, it is always important to remember that you are here because of God's invitation. You are the "*Elect*" of Jesus Christ. It is always Jesus who calls and we respond to his invitation to follow wherever he may want to lead us. But it takes great courage to follow wherever Jesus leads us. True discipleship is not for the faint of heart!

On Ash Wednesday, a few days ago, as ashes were put on the foreheads of Catholics, we heard the words, "**Repent and believe in the Gospel.**" This is the hallmark of the season of Lent, this period of purification and enlightenment.

Repent & Believe - For much of my life, I have thought of Lent as a season of looking only inward, a time of taking personal inventory, a period of self examination, taking an honest assessment of myself, looking at my failures and sinfulness. Like for Adam and Eve, the temptations of Evil One are very subtle, convincing us that God is our rival and that He does not want what is best for us... that we can do better by ourselves. Satan plays on our passions and desires to want us to be like God. We give in to this unwanted advice from Satan and it leads us to sin. So it is important for us to look at ourselves.

Looking at ourselves in such a way isn't the easiest task, nor is it the most pleasant exercise to embrace. In fact it can be very painful. But yet it is what you and I are called to do during this season, regardless whether we are already Catholic or desiring to come into the Church.

But it must be done in the light of grace. If this self examination is done in the light of grace, we will see and experience the power of Jesus' redemptive love. As St. Paul shares with us today, *"For if by the transgression of the one [Adam], many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many."* This is what we hold onto when we look at our sins and sinfulness through the light of grace.

When we do this, it gives us resolve to change... to grow in faith... to cultivate new hope, and to be more fervent in our love. This is the "REPENT" part to which Jesus invites us. This personal experience of Lent is necessary for conversion... to see ourselves through the light of grace.

But there is the other part of the summons, "**Believe in the Gospel.**" The Gospel is the greatest love story ever told. It is about the Father sending his Son to tell us how much we are loved and forgiven.

Our Holy Father has recently said in an interview, *"Tenderness and mercy are the heart of the Gospel. Otherwise, one doesn't understand Jesus Christ, or the tenderness of the Father who sends Him to listen to us, to cure us, to save us."* – Interview with Il Corriere della Sera March 5, 2014.

To "believe in the Gospel" means that we also have to turn our gaze away from ourselves in order **to look at God**; in quiet prayer we silently gaze upon His love in the eyes and heart of Jesus.

And if we really think about it, turning our gaze away from ourselves in order to look at God **IS the work of repentance.** "To believe" means to turn back to the covenant that God has made with us through Christ Jesus in our baptism. For those of you who await baptism, it means sitting in the quiet and reflecting upon the great gift that you will receive and what it will mean for your life.

When we sit in the stillness of quiet prayer and set our gaze upon God, He will show us a better life. He will show us who we could be, who He has created and graced us to be.

There is a marvelous story about a traveling artist.

Hoping to find a few days work, a traveling portrait artist stopped by a small rural South Dakota town. One of the his clients was the town drunk who, in spite of his dirty, unshaven face and bedraggled clothes, sat down for his portrait with all the dignity he could display. After the artist had labored a little longer than usual, he lifted the painting from the easel and presented it to the man. "This isn't me," the astonished drunk slurred as he studied the smiling, well-dressed man in the painting. The artist, who had looked beneath the exterior of the drunk and seen his inner beauty, thoughtfully replied, "But it's the man you could be."

So this is the other half of Lent – coming to know the person that we could be, like this town drunk. He came to see the person that he could be. The artist showed him what could be.

When our gaze is upon the eyes of Jesus, we won't need to tear others down or enter into gossip; others will be affirmed instead.

When our gaze is upon the eyes of Jesus, our personal needs will not come before others, but the hungry will be fed, the thirsty will be given a drink, the oppressed will be set free.

When our gaze is set upon the eyes of Jesus, we will live in patience instead of discouragement;
Success will not mean material things, but a way of being, a way of loving;
and our suffering takes on meaning and value, instead of being rejected and spurned.

When our gaze is upon Jesus, our nearsightedness compels us to look at others with new eyes and a warmer heart and with open hands. We let go of the things of this world that we attempt to possess – people, power and things.

We will discover anew that our righteousness doesn't come from anything that we have done but from what Christ Jesus has done in giving up His own life for us.

Jesus came out of his desert experience with great confidence, peace and trust in what God was about to do through him. Jesus was now ready to reveal the Kingdom to anyone who would follow. He was offering a life that was far better than people were living or desiring.

This Lenten Season, we are invited to repentance. But we are also invited to sit down before the Great Portrait Artist. To do so we must put aside the video games, turn off the TV for that half hour or hour of quiet time with the Lord every day, take ourselves away from the computer... so that we can allow God to paint a picture in our minds and hearts, and to show us who we could become. It will be a magnificent portrait – guaranteed.

This is the process of repentance and believing in the Gospel. Our desire to look inward will lead us to repentance; our desire for repentance will turn our gaze upon God, so that this Heavenly Artist can show us the kingdom of which we are to believe.

These forty days in the desert are meant to flood us with the presence and power of God who insists on loving us first, freely and forever. This is the gift and grace of Lent. God awaits!