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Easter: A time for new life

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If Lent is a time for conversion, then Easter is a time of joy and new life. Not only do we rejoice in the Resurrection of Jesus and the new life he promises us, but we also celebrate the new life of those who are received into the Church during the Easter season.

As a young priest, one of my favorite parish duties was teaching the RCIA class (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults). It was always uplifting to greet newcomers and share the faith with those who had a desire to learn more about Christ and his Church. Needless to say, their questions were challenging, but they were always sincere in their desire to understand. And it was a special joy to accompany them as they made the decision to enter the Church through the sacraments of initiation at Easter.

Several weeks ago on the first Sunday of Lent, hundreds of people from all over the diocese gathered at the Cathedral of St. Mary in Fargo for the Rite of Election. This yearly ritual, which is part of the RCIA, is an important moment of preparation for the coming celebration of Easter.

During the rite, those who wish to be baptized were presented by their godparents, and enrolled in the Book of the Elect. And then those who are already baptized were presented by their sponsors as candidates for confirmation and reception of the Eucharist. Their reasons for coming were various. Some have been influenced by the Catholic faith of a spouse or future spouse. Others were invited by a family member or close friend to consider joining the Church. Some have been searching for a spiritual home for a long time, and finally have found that home in the Catholic Church. Many expressed a great longing to receive Christ in the Eucharist.

As they filled the sanctuary of the Cathedral, I was impressed by their eager faith and their willingness to step forward in such a public way. It isn't always easy for a person to enter into the Catholic Church. There may be obstacles along the way, the same obstacles faced by some of the great saints. Pressure from family or friends, or just the secularizing power of our culture, can often dissuade those who might be interested in exploring the Catholic faith. But they, and others like them around the world, came forward and professed their desire for new life in the Catholic Church. These men and women stand in a long line of converts to the Catholic faith, including St. Augustine, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Blessed John Henry Newman, St. Edith Stein, and many others. Who knows, maybe a modern-day St. Paul was standing among us in the Cathedral that day!

The sacramental initiation of those who enter the Church at Easter is always a sign of God's grace at work in their lives and in the life of the Church. It is God who touches their hearts and draws them toward his Church. And it is God who lives within his Church, animating all the faithful with a missionary spirit. We sometimes hear in the media of persons who have abandoned the Catholic faith and the Church. However, it is also important to know of the many persons who joyfully embrace the Catholic faith and enter the Church every year.

Greeting and welcoming these aspiring members of the Church is encouraging and challenging. It is always a joy to welcome new members into the family. But it also reminds us that each one of us has a responsibility to these new members. Each of us must be ready to pray for them and support them with our love. And we must show them by the example of our lives what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

We should also never forget that there are many others who might be looking to us, perhaps waiting patiently for an invitation to come and see what the Lord has given to us. We must be ready to show them the face of Jesus living within his Church and eager to witness to the grace that we have received. As Peter tells us, "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15).

Our newly initiated brothers and sisters also inspire us to live our faith more deeply and actively. It is easy to become lukewarm or to take for granted the incredible and undeserved gift of faith or the

treasure of the sacraments. Our culture distracts us in so many ways, and we might tend to push Christ and our faith lives to the back burner, behind career, entertainment, sports, family, and many other attractions. But those who have stepped forward to seek full communion with Christ through his Church and the sacraments can be an example for all of us. Seeing their courage should renew the fervor and love for the faith in the hearts of all Catholics.

When you meet one of these “new Catholics” who just entered the Church, realize that they truly are our new brothers and sisters in faith. Make a point to welcome them, let them know you are happy to meet them, and promise your prayers for them. It’s the least we can do for those who have responded so beautifully to the grace of God.

To each one of you, and especially to those who have just entered the Church, I wish a happy and blessed Easter. May the Lord’s resurrection give us overflowing joy, undying hope, and the courage to live our faith with renewed zeal.