An Exploration of the Communal Enactment of the RCIA Scrutinies

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This essay offers important background and insights into the scrutinies that can assist ministers in proper practices that accentuate the power of these rituals for the ongoing conversion of the people of God.

The celebration of the scrutinies in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) could well be described as the lifetime journey of conversion encapsulated in ritualized prayer. Unfortunately, these intense rites, usually celebrated at the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent, are also often some of the most misunderstood and poorly enacted in contemporary liturgical praxis, at least in the U.S. context. The scrutinies’ purpose is to call people to recognize their need for ongoing conversion. Helping leaders of liturgical prayer and others to avoid misunderstanding and malpractice of them—two characteristics that are often integrally interrelated in contemporary liturgical celebration in general—is this essay’s purpose.

The scrutinies are offered to “enlighten” both the elect and the assembly about the need to name realities of sin and brokenness in our lives, communities, and the world, while recognizing the power of God at work in Jesus Christ to transform these hurtful situations into the beginnings of liberation and salvation. They are thus ritual acts that are a deepening of the conversion experience that each of the elect is experiencing through prayer, self-searching, reflection on the Scriptures,

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and living the Christian life. They also can serve as an expression of a profound communion ecclesiology and ongoing mystagogy for the assembly.

In order to understand better how the scrutinies can work on both the level of the elect and the Sunday assembly, this essay briefly reviews the foundations for the scrutinies in the Scriptures and the theological and liturgical tradition of the church, with a particular focus on the practices of the early first millennium. I will then analyze the structure of the RCIA and the rites themselves, along with the insights of some contemporary liturgical theologians. It is hoped that this presentation will stimulate additional reflections on pastoral and liturgical practices that can enhance the meaning of the scrutinies for the elect and the gathered assembly.

**Foundational Scriptural Themes: Conversion, Sin, and Reconciliation**

Turning first to the Scriptures, there are a number of texts that recognize a process similar to what is at the heart of the scrutinies—the need to respond to the reality of sin and its effects, transformation and redemption through communal experiences of God, and ongoing reflection on living lives of faithfulness. In the Old Testament (and in Judaism today), such realities can be seen in a theology of atonement. The rituals describing the celebration of the Day of Atonement, for example, implicitly recognize the sinfulness of the whole people of Israel and the need to deal both with sins and with the destabilizing effects of sin within the covenant community (see Lev 16 and Harlow, 530–47). Furthermore, there are numerous examples in the Prophetic Writings and Wisdom literature that mirror this awareness. In particular, a number of the prophets recognized the inherent connection between worship of God and the practice of “integrity and justice” by members of the covenant community, and how the lack of these social responsibilities made worship in the temple empty and sinful (Isa 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8). The Wisdom literature, too, recognizes that, in order for one to receive the wisdom of God, one must be righteous and strive to observe the Torah, that is, God's Law (Sir 1:26; 15:1-20; Wis 1).

In the New Testament there is also a recognition, particularly in the writings of Paul, that communities and individuals must deal with the effects of sin. The heart of Paul's theology is based on the understanding that the death of Jesus on the cross effected reconciliation between God and all of humanity. It is also quite clear that because Christ’s death has redeemed all believers from the power of sin, it is necessary to strive to live lives free of sin—an effort in which the Spirit of God assists and strengthens us (Rom 3:21-26; 6; 8). Finally, the account of Paul's conversion, of Prisca’s and Aquila’s explanation of the “Way of God” to Apollos, and
Paul’s teaching about baptism to the disciples at Ephesus reflected the need within the early Christian communities for acknowledged leaders in the community to assist new believers in the expression of their faith and as a preparation for baptism (Acts 18:24–19:7). These few scriptural images, along with many others, form a firm foundation for the theology and practice associated with the contemporary RCIA in general and the scrutinies in particular. Indeed, they became the basis for the historical development of the catechumenate within which the scrutinies were first practiced.

**Foundational Liturgical Praxis:**
**Scrutinies in the First Millennium**

Significant historical research by liturgical scholars has disclosed how the above scriptural themes translated into liturgical practice in the patristic period and early medieval era. Indications are that the post–Vatican II restoration of the catechumenate and the reconstitution of the scrutinies in the later part of Lent represented an effort to draw from the rich theological understandings that were contained in the scrutiny rites as practiced in various parts of the church for several centuries in the first millennium. Research that has spanned the period from the 1940s to the present has helped prepare the way for the implementation of the scrutinies in the RCIA and the contemporary liturgical context. Here it will be helpful to focus on the insights of two scholars, the groundbreaking historical work of French liturgical theologian Antoine Chavasse and the present analysis of Dominic Serra, with Serra both complementing and building upon Chavasse’s insights.

In a 1948 analysis of the extant ancient liturgical texts related to the Lenten scrutinies in Rome, Chavasse made several points that recognized the very early origin of these rites and their association with preparation for baptism into the Christian community. Based on an in-depth analysis of the ritual texts of the *Gelasian Sacramentary* (compiled during the eighth century), Chavasse noted that “the Roman discipline of the scrutinies evolved from the fifth century to the end of the eighth” (Chavasse, 361). Citing other sources that attested to the scrutiny celebrations before the end of the fourth century, he noted that the Gelasian corpus unmistakably lists these scrutinies as taking place on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent, because the title of the Mass propers on these days mention them. Even though there were no rubrics or prayer texts related to the scrutiny rituals in the Gelasian material (Serra, 524), subsequent authors, including Serra, have nevertheless verified that the prayers and rubrics in the Mass formularies are some of the most ancient of the Gelasian material due to a “Latin style . . . [that is] unmistakably Roman and unaffected by later Gallican and Frankish influence”
The scrutinies were, in general, very malleable and inculturated celebrations. This thus indirectly suggests great antiquity concerning the celebration of scrutinies at Rome, though no direct evidence of associated rituals is found in the Gelasian material.

Chavasse devoted a great deal of space in his article to the demonstration of how the Johannine gospel pericopes of the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus were originally linked to these scrutiny rituals on the third through fifth Sundays of Lent, but that, over time and for various reasons, these readings were moved to other ferial days in Lent, losing their euchological link to the scrutinies, even though the latter retained some references to this biblical content (Chavasse, 340–61; 364–68 for a detailed analysis). However, indications are that this transfer of readings to the ferial days led to the addition of three additional scrutinies on those days, and the rites of Holy Saturday morning were understood to be yet another scrutiny, bringing the total to seven scrutinies by the seventh century (Chavasse, 369–74). Chavasse further notes that some of these changes seem to have reflected the shift to more frequent infant baptism and the dissolution of the adult catechumenate that was occurring over these centuries until, by the end of the eighth century, these multiple scrutinies became enormously simplified and celebrated at one time, in the context of infant baptism (Chavasse, 375–80).

Thus, Chavasse’s textual analysis paved the way for the post–Vatican II Lectionary to return the three Johannine pericopes to prominence on the latter Lenten Sundays, while also reemphasizing the strong baptismal dimension of Lent, so that, in the words of Serra, it can be clearly seen that “[L]ent renews the baptismal commitment of the whole church as it prepares elected catechumens for baptism” (Serra, 516). Serra expands this view based on further textual analysis and argues that the Sunday scrutiny Masses can also be seen as celebrations that specifically focus the emphasis of the entire Lenten season as a “season of scrutiny” (Serra, 525). He argues that, within this much broader context that invites the deep reflection of the entire Christian community, the scrutinies described above came into being. Here, Serra solidifies Chavasse’s earlier claims by rooting the scrutiny texts within the broader lex orandi of the church of the time.

In addition to this insight, Serra also notes that sources from other communities throughout Europe and North Africa provide additional, and even more ancient, confirmation of the trends Chavasse detected in the Roman euchological texts. For
example, a communiqué between a Roman synod and some Gallican (French) bishops around the year 400 references the celebration of a scrutiny and the anointing of a catechumen with oil as part of that celebration. Serra sees this as confirmation of the trifold scrutiny process for baptismal candidates in Rome by the fifth century (Serra, 518). The synod itself suggested the practice had been in place in Rome since the end of the third century, though Serra also notes the scrutinies are not linked to a specific liturgical season in this particular text (Serra, 518). Additionally, he cites a source from Carthage and St. Augustine from Hippo as indications of scrutiny rites in places far beyond Rome in the fifth century. These instances of the scrutinies are noteworthy because of their “primarily exorcistic rites” and “highly dramatic actions and settings” (Serra, 520). The “dramatic actions” Serra notes are attested to in the fact that these particular scrutinies were celebrated at night, in a darkened church, and involved trampling upon goat-skins—symbols of the catechumens’ desire to trample sin underfoot (Serra, 520). Additionally, the exorcism prayers and rituals were likewise quite vivid in which the devil is “cursed and hissed at by the exorcists” (Serra, 521). In such dramatic fashion, the catechumen was invited to reject Satan so as to then participate in the reception of the Creed (Serra, 521).

Serra additionally notes that these extra-Roman scrutiny rituals, while always retaining a focus on preparation for baptism, may not have occurred in the context of a Sunday Eucharist. However, there are indications that they may have been celebrated during an all-night Saturday vigil prior to the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent, so the link with these Sundays was not severed entirely (Serra, 520, 522). It seems the drama of these extra-Roman scrutinies suggested a night vigil rather than a Sunday Eucharist. Additionally, particularly since fasting and other ascetical practices were often a part of the catechumens’ disciplinary practice in advance of the rite, this may have mitigated against a Sunday celebration in these diverse locales (Serra, 522–23).

In comparison with the Roman scrutinies, which were celebrated on Sundays (and thus did not necessarily have ascetical practices directly associated with them), these other forms of prebaptismal preparation also serve as a counterpoint—a recognition of great diversity of practice with regard to the scrutiny celebrations. It suggests that the scrutinies were, in general, very malleable and inculturated celebrations, adapted to the style of celebration in the various rites that were a part of Western Christianity during this time. This also highlights the reasoning employed by the reform at Vatican II, which did not simply want “duplications of . . . historic forms” of the scrutinies, but “very careful restorations of the tradition” in ways that convey their symbolic, emotional, and spiritual power today (Serra, 526–27). Thus, historical retrievals, such as those highlighted here, were essential to the development of the RCIA in its current form, as an adapted, modern version of these ancient prebaptismal scrutinies.
Like its ancient counterpart, the current rite locates the scrutinies during the period of purification and enlightenment, which begins with the Rite of Election. This period, which “customarily coincides with Lent,” provides a time for “intense spiritual preparation, consisting more in interior reflection than in catechetical instruction,” not just for the elect, but for the local community as well (RCIA, nos. 138–39). These directives are indicative that the scrutinies, along with the presentations of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer that occur during this period, should be celebrated in such a way that they are seen as opportunities for preparation and reflection for the elect on their journey to initiation, as well as for the baptized assembly. Although we see from history that different areas of the early church celebrated the scrutinies at times other than the Sundays of Lent, the current RCIA views those Sundays as the normative time to do so, but also retains the possibility of celebrating them at other times “because of unusual circumstances and pastoral needs” (RCIA, no. 146).

The RCIA indicates that the scrutinies serve the period of purification and enlightenment by assisting the elect in progressing “in genuine self-knowledge through serious examination of their lives and true repentance” as they are “instructed gradually about the mystery of sin . . . and their spirit is filled with Christ the Redeemer” (RCIA, nos. 142–43). In short, these rituals are designed to “uncover, then heal all that is weak . . . or sinful,” and “bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good,” both in the elect and the assembly (RCIA, nos. 141, 145). Finally, this process should be integrally joined to the proclamation of the Scriptures for the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent in cycle A of...
the Lectionary, which highlights the traditional Johannine gospel stories of the Samaritan woman at the well, the healing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus (RCIA, no. 146).

In general, the process of the scrutinies follows a more general understanding of conversion present in the whole RCIA. Liturgical theologian Robert Duggan notes, in an in-depth analysis of the development and implementation of the current RCIA, that the rubrics and texts presume three key points:

1. Conversion is understood as an ecclesial event and not just an individual’s response.

2. Conversion occurs primarily for Christians in the sacramental (understood in its broadest sense) encounter between divine grace and human freedom that gets expressed in the entire chief rites of the church.

3. Conversion is not a once-for-all moment but a lifelong process of transformation, including ongoing intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and ethical development in the faith. (Duggan, 209–221)

These central themes are recognized in the importance of the celebration of the scrutinies with the gathered Sunday assembly, the powerful symbolic and emotional content of the ritual, and the prayer texts that speak of an ongoing journey into deeper faith.

Another liturgical theologian, Thomas Morris, helps analyze how the scrutinies can serve the dual purpose of purification and enlightenment for both the elect and the assembly. He notes that the Rite of Election, usually celebrated in dioceses on or near the First Sunday of Lent, draws the catechumens-become-elect into a type of “Lenten retreat” (Morris, 166). With proper coordination and catechesis, the Sunday assembly can also be invited into a retreat mentality for Lent. This effort would concretize the RCIA’s retrieval of the early church’s celebration of Lent as a preparation period for initiation and facilitate the development of a strong ecclesiology of communion within the assembly. The scrutinies, if done well, can contribute to a development of consciousness about sin in the lives of the elect and the assembly while also orienting them “toward life . . . freedom . . . [and] salvation” (Morris, 171–72). Because this consciousness-raising occurs through the liturgical acts themselves, the scrutinies can be excellent moments of liturgical catechesis (Morris, 168).

Morris is aware that sin and salvation are to be emphasized in the scrutinies and that the basic structure provided in the RCIA can and should be adapted to the particular needs of the elect in helping them and the assembly reflect adequately on both. This is a key point. The rubrics themselves reflect an awareness of the need for adaptation of the prayers presented in the official text (RCIA, no. 35, as one example). This seems to suggest a belief that the rites are not meant to
be slavishly followed with the exact wording in the official text but adapted to the needs of the elect and the assembly. Such inculturation of the texts is always to be preferred. Such efforts can be accomplished by individuals on the initiation team meeting with the parish liturgist(s), liturgy committee, and musicians to develop the intercessions for the elect that are at the heart of the scrutiny rituals. In places where these intercessions take the place of the normal prayer of the faithful (which is itself a helpful adaptation of the rubrics), they should also be broad enough to “include the needs of the local community and the world” (Morris, 172–73).

Morris also recognizes that the prayers and rituals associated with the scrutinies are only one dimension of their liturgical movement. It is critically important that these prayers reflect a natural progression from the Scriptures and homily that comprise the Liturgy of the Word for their respective Lenten Sundays. Morris is careful to note that the Year A texts for the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent should always be used when celebrating the scrutinies, even if their celebration occurs outside of Lent. (Questions have been raised as to whether the cycle of readings from the Lectionary for cycles B and C on the Third through Fifth Sundays of Lent might also be adaptable for use in the scrutiny rites. Although Morris clearly favors the use of the cycle A readings, I see no reason why the themes in the readings for cycles B and C cannot also be adapted, though, obviously, some of the images in the ritual prayers might need to be changed to reflect these other readings’ images.) The imagery of these readings should provide the basis for the metaphors in the intercessions and prayers of the ritual. Likewise, the homily should serve as a bridge between the Scriptures and preparation for the scrutiny rituals proper. Silent prayer and inviting the elect to different parts of the church so that all members of the assembly can see them are also encouraged as good ways to prepare for the actual intercessions and exorcism prayer (Morris, 174).

The intercessions themselves should capture experiences of personal sin as well as systemic evil but should avoid elaborate phraseology (Morris, 171, 173), since, in general, people can more readily truly pray for an intercession that utilizes concrete images, is succinct, and less conceptual. Morris also notes that the exorcism prayer and accompanying ritual (the imposition of hands) should “not [be] directed toward the Evil One” but focused on “the work and presence of God that brings life” (Morris, 175). Note that this is a shift from some of the more elaborate and dramatic scrutiny rites of the early church, but reflects a more contemporary understanding of the power of evil. This type of prayer leads quite naturally to a dismissal of the elect at the usual time (Morris, 175).

Furthermore, Morris makes an important point about respecting the nature of the ritual by celebrating the scrutinies only with the unbaptized elect (Morris, 185). Simply grouping the baptized candidates for full communion with the elect in the scrutiny rites problematically blurs the distinction between the elect and candi-
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members of the entire parish community and to ritualize expressions of solidarity between the assembly and the elect during the scrutinies’ liturgical enactment (e.g., kneeling at the same time the elect do). Additionally, he recommends the development of intercessory texts to allow for some or all parts of them to be sung by cantors, choir, the elect, and the assembly (Galipeau, 19, 20, 25).

The rationale for integrating the experiences of the elect and the assembly in the scrutinies, as Morris and Galipeau suggest, is expressed well by Marguerite Main. Rooted in a communion ecclesiology, she speaks of a decisive role for the entire baptized assembly (including candidates for full communion as members of that assembly) in the scrutinies (Galipeau, 19). If the intercessions, texts for prayers, and ritual movements are well prepared and executed, “the community as well as the elect can discover what it is in their own lives that needs to be uncovered before Jesus, in order to be healed and strengthened” (Galipeau, 20). In this way, this intensive process becomes a symbol for the entire community as it, too, comes to recognize the effects of sin and the power of God’s saving love at work in its midst (Galipeau, 20). Similar to the other authors above, Main suggests that a balance be struck between these two movements within the scrutinies, noting: “The scrutinies do not end with sin. The ‘Kyrie eleison’ response to the litany of intercession . . . is a powerful calling upon the mercy of Christ. Even in the midst of this evil and sinfulness . . . Christ has triumphed and will continue to triumph” (Main, 21; cf. Galipeau, 20–21).

Thus, the emphasis of Main is likewise on the positive dimension of ongoing conversion that is evoked in the celebration of the scrutinies and also reflects a strong eschatological hope.

**Conclusion**

Obviously, the above suggestions are only a few ideas about how the scrutinies might be communally enacted to benefit both the elect and the gathered assembly. Yet it is hoped that this envisioning of liturgical praxis, accompanied by the theological insights presented earlier, can serve to stimulate further reflection on these often misunderstood rites. The scrutinies are perhaps some of the most confrontational and evocative rites in the RCIA with respect to our need for ongoing conversion, purification, and enlightenment in the face of evil. Yet the rites themselves also remind us (if they are enacted well) that if we remain faithful to that process, God will indeed triumph over sin in our lives and our world, and will continue to assist those preparing for baptism and those who must reclaim baptism’s power as we all journey together in response to God’s call in Christ Jesus.
References


