

Easter Vigil

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seek full initiation at St. Mary's, Auburn, after attending Mass with her husband frequently over the years. "The desire to receive the Eucharist became so strong that it was very frustrating to go through a Mass," she explained. "I thought about it for a few months, and the desire was still there."

Coming from an Episcopalian background, Ferro felt comfortable with the Mass right from the beginning, but not with the RCIA sessions. "In the beginning, it was scary, and it seemed like a long time," Ferro said. "But suddenly, the interest was there, and I couldn't get enough. The day of the Easter Vigil, I thought 'It's here and I still have so much to learn.'"

That sense of eagerness to continue learning was echoed again and again by other initiates. "I've just started — there's so much I still want to know," said Pamela Arsenault, who was received at Immaculate Conception, Ithaca, along with 16 others, including her mother.

Arsenault, a 31-year-old Brooktondale resident whose husband is Catholic, learned of the RCIA through the baptism of their son.

"I have two children by a previous marriage," Arsenault explained. "Sister Flise (Immaculate Conception's pastoral assistant) asked if we were going to send them to Bible study, and she suggested that I might like to go to the RCIA to know more about what the children were learning. She made it very easy for me."

"When it came time to receive Eucharist, I didn't have any doubts in my mind. It just came," she said.

Through the RCIA, Arsenault found a very different Church from the one in which her husband was raised. "I thought it would be a lot more strict, but I guess that has to do with Vatican II," she said. "I went into it thinking you had to learn certain prayers. I found out that isn't so important. When you pray it's between you and God, and you can talk to Him like you would to anyone else."

Once Arsenault began attending RCIA sessions, she mentioned them to her mother, who joined the group soon afterward. On Saturday night, Arsenault was confirmed and received Eucharist along with her mother, who was also baptized. In May, Arsenault's daughter will also receive her First Communion and "she can hardly wait," her mother said.

Much has been said and written of the witness value of RCIA to the larger parish community. St. Mary's in Elmira has consistently drawn some of the largest RCIA groups in the diocese with 26 people initiated last year and 14 candidates and five catechumens this year.

"When everyone was there we took up just about the whole front of the church, and everybody wanted to know who those people were," said Jerry Harrington, religious education and RCIA coordinator. "When



Father Richard O'Connell baptizes Grace Malatesta as Phyllis Schneider and Judy Clark witness the event.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

they find out, it's a tremendous witness and sign. People react by saying, 'If these people are spending so much time with their faith, maybe I'd better.'"

Particularly striking to the congregation was the Middaugh family, all six of whom were received last Saturday. "When we announced the family, the whole congregation broke into spontaneous applause," Harrington said.

William and Jane Middaugh, 44 and 41 respectively; their three daughters, Elizabeth, 21, Martha, 16, and Susan, 13; and their son Michael, 20, joined the RCIA last October. But their journey began long before that.

"We had always been a bit curious," Jane explained. "My husband said last week that he remembered back in high school he always envied the Catholics he knew because there seemed to be something special about them."

Jane remembers making her own decision almost subconsciously two years ago when her father was hospitalized at St. Joseph's in Elmira. "You can't believe the comfort we were given by the staff. The priest who is chaplain there and the nuns prayed over my father, who was Presbyterian," she said. "To have people praying with us even

though we were Methodist was such a comfort ... One sister even gave me a rosary at the hospital, which meant so much to me."

Jane and William discussed the idea of becoming Catholics and "decided we were going to see what it was all about."

When they told their college-aged children, Elizabeth and Michael, the two began attending RCIA sessions at Ithaca College. "It was nothing new to either one of them, but it has been overwhelming that they wanted it as much as we did," Jane said. "I can't say enough about Father John DeSocio (Ithaca College chaplain). I can't begin to tell you the effect he has had on my children."

Although their two younger daughters have not been as verbal as the older ones about the RCIA experience, Jane believes the whole family had an equal appreciation for the sessions. "Never once did we look at the clock, wishing it would end," she said. "We got something positive every week. The sessions were thorough and informative, and the kids enjoyed it. Not once did they say they were bored."

"They're all normal kids — they like to have a good time," Jane added. "I can't tell you how it makes me feel as a mother to have your kids want to go to church."

The Middaughs remain eager to continue learning and to share their new-found faith. William hopes to become a lector and both he and Jane would like to serve as RCIA

sponsors in the future. "We have never been so happy," she said. "It's the best thing we've ever done."

Jane harbors only one regret. "We should have done it a long time ago," she said. "I said to my brother (who joined the Church years ago), 'I can't believe you didn't let me know what I was missing all these years.'"

Despite the praises heaped upon the process, at least one coordinator agreed that the RCIA is not for everyone. "It's not a purely intellectual lecture approach," said Peg Herstine, RCIA coordinator at St. Mary's, Auburn. "Participants do learn doctrine, but from the other way around ... by putting into long-established rituals what they have experienced."

"I listen to them struggle with words that can describe how they are different than what they were when they began. Suddenly they can't hold the words back anymore," Herstine said. "It's almost frightening. It's very sacred ground we're walking on ... and I wonder every year if I'm worthy."

Retreat for women only

For Women Only, a retreat given by women for women, is scheduled by the Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal the weekend of May 16-18. The offering is \$55. For more information, contact The Cenacle Ministry Office by calling (716)271-8755.

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