

# Easter Vigil marks a new beginning for RCIA participants

By Teresa A. Parsons

Two years ago, Pattie Johnston expected little more than a handout from any church she visited.

But a lot has changed in her life since then. This Saturday, during the Easter Vigil celebration at St. Agnes Church in Avon, Johnston and her three-year-old daughter, Erica, will be baptized into the Roman Catholic Church.

Johnston has always believed in a God. His presence, however, has seemed rather remote during most of her 25 years — while she was growing up in foster homes, living on her own in storage lockers and train cars, fighting despair with drugs and alcohol, and fending for her infant daughter, Erica, as they wandered from one friend's house to another's.

Sometimes Johnston wondered how God could care for her and yet allow her life to go so wrong. Other times, she wondered whether she had so greatly offended Him that He could never forgive her.

Judging by the reactions of church people whom she occasionally approached for help, Johnston believed that God must indeed be intent on punishing her. Usually, she now recalls, they treated her like a nuisance and told her to move on.

Then, one day Johnston ran into some church people from Avon who didn't send her away. Instead, Pam Masterson and Georgiana Delles helped her find an apartment and straighten out her social service benefits. They convinced her that she could master her temper and be a good mother and friend.

Through Delles' quiet example during the past year and a half, Johnston learned how



effectively God could handle her problems when she turned to Him in prayer.

Gradually, Johnston found that when she was flat broke or needed a babysitter, prayer would bring her an answer.

"That's when I really believed — when I could see God working in my life," she said.

Because she wanted Erica to grow up experiencing that kind of faith and trust,

Johnston sought to have her child baptized a Catholic. Last September, she acknowledged the same need herself, joining four others in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) at St. Agnes.

Johnston never really expected to be accepted as a catechumen once RCIA team members learned about her past. "I didn't lie ... and they said they'd love to have me," she recalled in wonder. "And they've always made me feel that way."

Pattie and Erica Johnston are among nearly 450 people throughout the Diocese of Rochester whose journey of faith has led them to the Catholic Church through the RCIA.

This year, more than 80 diocesan parishes participated in the RCIA, a process of educating and supporting adults who are seeking full membership in the Catholic Church through the sacraments of initiation — Eucharist, confirmation and/or baptism.

Although the RCIA was designed for use with adults, six of this year's 14 candidates and catechumens at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Hamlin are aged 16 or under.

Young adults, teenagers and even some children have sought initiation at St. Elizabeth's during each of the past five years since the Hamlin parish began offering the process, according to Sister Mary Kay Ryan, religious education coordinator.

Some have been raised without any religious affiliation. Others have been baptized as Catholics or into other churches, but have not practiced any faith or received any other sacraments.

One 16-year-old boy decided to join the RCIA this year after undergoing surgery to have a pacemaker implanted.

"These are people who are in extraordinary circumstances," Sister Ryan explained. "Through a variety of experiences, they discovered that they needed God in their lives, and sometimes the only church they were aware of is that one that reached out to them."

Hamlin had no Catholic church prior to the founding of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. As a result, Sister Ryan speculates that some people stopped attending church when they moved to the area. After the parish was established in 1982, some parents began asking how their children could receive the sacraments.

Even parents whose children decided in-

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