

Features

The new rite: Part II

Rite's power shines through messy process

By Teresa A. Parsons

Liz Webster has conceded that in spite of her best organizing efforts, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) is messy.

And against all her own inclinations, she grants that it should probably stay that way.

When Webster was appointed director of religious education at Blessed Sacrament Parish more than five years ago, she inherited one of the first RCIA processes to be established in the Diocese of Rochester. Since then, the 33-year-old Brighton native has continued to build and revise the parish's process, which is now regarded as a model in many respects by diocesan officials and other parish coordinators.

Nevertheless, Webster still struggles with weeks like last week, when she planned a Rite of Acceptance for three adults and wondered if more than one would show up.

The Rite of Acceptance marks an individual's transition from an initial stage of the RCIA, known as the period of inquiry, into a time of more intensive study and preparation, known as the period of the catechumenate.

Seven days before the planned ceremony, Webster couldn't reach one woman — a graduate student who planned to seek baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. Meanwhile, a man seeking to be a candidate for confirmation and Eucharist told Webster he had decided to remain in the inquiry process for the time being.

By the time 10 a.m. Mass began last Sunday, Webster had managed with a barrage of phone calls to contact the graduate student, who was received into the catechumenate along with a young man seeking confirmation. But the religious education director remained on tenterhooks as she prepared for a later Mass and a second Rite of Acceptance — issued earlier this year — to welcome five children into the Rite of Christian Initiation of Children (RCIC) — a process which the parish will offer this year for the first time.

"What can I say? It's a messy process," Webster concluded, "but the Holy Spirit is working in it somehow."

Inquiry was the stage at which the RCIA

process officially began for the eight men, women and children accepted at Blessed Sacrament last Sunday, as well as for six other men and women who were introduced into the period of the catechumenate at the parish earlier this year.

A period during which a person decides whether he or she wants to seek full membership in the Catholic church, inquiry is aptly named since it is almost solely defined by participants' questions. "We answer people's basic questions, getting them to the point where they can find out 'Is this community for them?'" Webster explained.

Michelle Marchand didn't take long to answer that question for herself. Soon after the young commercial credit analyst attended her first inquiry session, she knew she wanted to seek full membership in the Catholic Church.

Yet, as an uncatechized adult — one who has been baptized, but has received little or no religious education — the road Marchand hopes will soon lead her to the sacraments of confirmation and Eucharist has been a long one.

She began attending inquiry sessions along with her sister in April, 1987. "The attraction was that I started going to Blessed Sacrament, and I liked the people that I met," she recalled. "(But) I knew that I should know more."

So, for more than a year before Marchand celebrated the Rite of Acceptance, she brought her questions to the parish's Thursday night inquiry sessions. "They were very small, very informal and very open, so it wasn't a situation where people were trying to make you feel the way they did," she said.

If there are typical topics of discussion at inquiry, they range from "What's the Old Testament about?" or "What's Jesus' life story?" to "Who was Thomas Merton?" or "What do Catholic traditions — like genuflecting — mean?" Sessions are guided by just one rule — no question is unasked. Nor are the questions always readily answered. "(The sessions) are very open," said Dennis Wood, who began inquiry last spring. "People are not afraid to admit what they don't know."

Besides answering inquirer's questions, sessions are a time to share stories about their

"journeys of faith" — RCIA jargon for the experiences that have led them to the Church. "Whatever your experience is, it's all right. There's no reason to be nervous about sharing it," Wood said.

A 32-year-old graduate student at St. John Fisher College, Wood learned about inquiry sessions from a friend and roommate. Although he was baptized as a infant, Wood had long been "inactive spiritually" and wanted to learn more about Catholicism.

"I expected something more rigorous," he recalled. "To me, the word Catholic sort of denoted a more strict adherence to what I now know is old Catholic practice ... I was actually pleasantly surprised."

How long inquiry continues depends largely on the individual. A person is generally ready for the Rite of Acceptance if he or she decides to continue seeking full communion with the Church, and if the parish RCIA team members are satisfied that the inquirer's desire is founded in a fundamental understanding of faith and Church teaching.

Although the rite marks an inquirer's entrance into the period of the catechumenate, not all inquirers become catechumens. Those who have already been baptized are known as candidates; those who are unbaptized are termed catechumens. During last week's Rite of Acceptance at Blessed Sacrament, Father Bruce Ammering, the pastor and celebrant, welcomed new catechumens and candidates at the church entrance. Proceeding to the sanctuary, each candidate and catechumen expressed to the community his or her intent to grow in faith and knowledge; was sealed with the sign of the cross by both the celebrant and their individual sponsors; and was presented a Bible.

From this point, both candidates and catechumens will attend Mass on Sunday, celebrating the Liturgy of the Word as Catholics. After the homily, the celebrant will dismiss them to reflect on and study the readings and homily with an RCIA team member.

Following the dismissal sessions, other team members and sponsors typically join the group for a general religious education session.



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Dismissal has remained controversial in many parishes, including Blessed Sacrament. Some parishioners regard sending the catechumens and candidates out of the church after the Liturgy of the Word as discriminatory and unwelcoming.

Theologically, however, dismissal is a sign that "our baptism makes a difference in our relation to the community," according to Father Robert Kennedy, a professor of liturgical studies at St. Bernard's Institute.

For similar reasons, newly finalized guidelines for the RCIA stress that catechumens and candidates not be "lumped together," in Father Kennedy's words.

For practical purposes, most parish RCIA processes must offer joint sessions and rites for candidates and catechumens. However, the rite which took effect in September encourages a process flexible enough to respect the baptism and faith background of candidates. Thus, those who are ready to be received into full communion should not face delays simply for the sake of scheduling their initiation at a particular time of year — including the Easter Vigil. "(The new rite) encourages a radical respect for the individual's faith journey to this point," Father Kennedy said.

Respect for the individual was among the factors that attracted Dennis Wood to Blessed Sacrament's RCIA process. Although he agreed with team members that he was prepared to enter the catechumenate last Sunday, Wood felt overwhelmed by his studies and the demands of his personal life. "This program allows me to go at my own pace," he said. "I told (team members) 'I can't, I just can't do it right now,' and they said OK."

'Joshua' author encourages theology of freedom and spiritual growth

By Lee Strong

Seven years ago, Father Joseph Girzone faced a dilemma.

Forced by ill-health to retire from active ministry as a diocesan priest in Albany, he wanted to find a way to pursue his priestly work while saving his limited energy.

Father Girzone, who had already published one book, decided that writing would be the best way to continue his ministry. "What is my work as a priest?" he asked. "To get the authentic word of Jesus out."

In 1983, he published his fourth book, *Joshua*. The book, subtitled "A Parable for Today," has since sold more than 250,000 copies and brought the priest attention as a speaker and retreat director.

The Albany priest was in Rochester November 18-19 to conduct a two-day workshop sponsored by the Spirituality Institute of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The workshop focused on a new approach to understanding Christianity and a new path to spirituality through understand-

ing the authority of the Church and personal freedom.

In an interview prior to his presentation, Father Girzone explained that the new understanding of authority and personal freedom is one he developed during 30 years of priestly ministry.

"I saw so many hurting people, and to me it didn't make sense," Father Girzone said. "Jesus said he came to bring peace, but I saw pain and hurt and alienation. I felt the message of Jesus got lost in the translation."

According to the priest, one area where the message of Jesus got lost is that of Church authority.

"Jesus gave us a concept of authority based on service, on caring, on ministry — not an authority based on issuing laws, edicts and censures," Father Girzone noted. "What he was trying to teach basically was freedom of the individual that would allow the spirit to grow."

Jesus wasn't teaching anarchy, Father Girzone observed, but "he was teaching an ob-

servance that goes beyond a mechanical observance of the law." That mechanical observance of the law was personified by the Pharisees of Jesus' day "who had centered their lives around rules and regulations."

Such rules and regulations, when forced on people, bring with them guilt and a rigidity of spirit, Father Girzone said. "The purpose of religion," he countered, "is to be a support for God's children. Once we get away from the rigid, mechanistic observance of the rules we grow from within spontaneously, and as we grow we become more holy, more real."

Freedom leads to a whole new spirituality, Father Girzone explained. "The new spirituality is based on our freedom and the love we found in a new relationship with God. We find a willingness to listen to God, a willingness to let God accomplish things through us, a willingness to follow where the spirit leads us."

Father Girzone sees in the Church today some of the same rigidity and legalism that Jesus saw in his day. The priest confronted the

legalistic Church in *Joshua* by bringing Jesus back to earth and placing him in conflict with Church authorities.

"I felt the book was the best way to get Jesus out into modern times so that people could get a sense of who he is, how much we miss him and how much we missed the point of his message," the priest explained. "Joshua has the same understanding of authority that Jesus did. He's against rules that hold people back from being free the way God meant them to be."

In the book, Joshua is eventually summoned to the Vatican because he preached about the validity of different faiths, challenged Church teachings about marriage and divorce, raised questions about blind obedience to Church authorities, and took issue with the wealth and comfort those authorities enjoyed.

Father Girzone acknowledged that in writing the book he was walking on ecclesial thin ice. "It's very carefully worded," he noted. "I

Continued on Page 5

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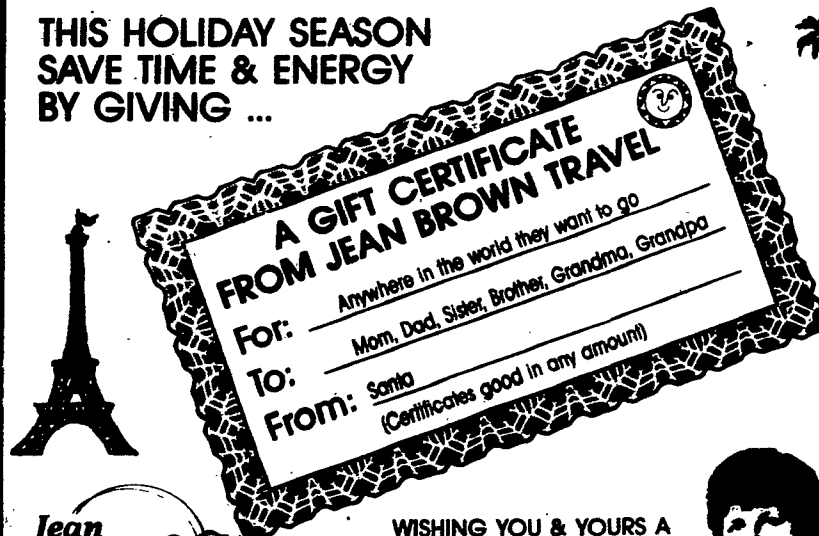
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