

Features

Rite renews faith through mind and heart

By Teresa A. Parsons

Fifty-one times a year at Blessed Sacrament Church, a hardy group of men and women troop to the edge of the sanctuary to be dismissed by the celebrant in the middle of Sunday Mass.

Yet many parishioners — even at Blessed Sacrament, where the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) has been established for more than a decade — would be hard-put to explain why dismissal happens or what those people do after they leave.

As candidates and catechumens in Blessed Sacrament's RCIA, the dismissed may not yet be in full communion with the Church, but they are clear about what they're doing and why.

"We're not allowed to celebrate Eucharist yet," explained John Billington, a candidate for Eucharist and confirmation. "In dismissal, we are delving into the Liturgy (of the Word), which we all need to do."

Knowing why they are dismissed doesn't make dismissal easy for those who withstand the scrutiny of pews-full of people week after week. "I don't really like it because I stand out, and when I go someplace like church I like to sort of disappear," explained one catechumen. "I go to be private, to have some time by myself."

"We do feel like everyone is watching us," agreed Lois Houlihan, a candidate for Eucharist and confirmation. "Once I dropped my keys, and that was kind of embarrassing."

Giving up the second half of the Mass is more difficult for Houlihan, a high-school chemistry teacher who was raised in between Catholic and Lutheran traditions. "I would love to stay. I miss talking to people after church, and I miss Communion," she said. "When Liz (Webster, parish director of religious education) told me I had to stop taking Communion, I cried. When I left, I felt like nobody wanted us there. But Liz explained that wasn't the case, and now I'm reconciled that it's a special time for us."

For others, dismissal provides a welcome resolution to the Communion dilemma. Raised in a Protestant denomination, Billington began attending Mass with his wife, who is Catholic, more than five years ago. "Whether to receive Communion or not) was always a big indecision, and I've always been very uncomfortable at Eucharist," he said.

Even RCIA participants who dislike being dismissed appreciate what comes after the celebrant sends them forth with a blessing and a charge to reflect further on God's word. For the next half-hour, Blessed Sacrament's eight candidates and catechumens pause with a parish RCIA team member to consider and share their reactions to the week's Scripture readings.

"I get an awful lot out of that," said Billington, the 34-year-old sales manager for a financial services company. "In fact, when I first got into the (process), I couldn't wait to get it over with, but now I really want to take my time."

Dismissal sessions may be appealing because candidates and catechumens feel they can take an equal part regardless of their religious backgrounds or where they are in the process of formation and instruction known as the period of the catechumenate. "I had a strong Lutheran background," explained Houlihan. "But it's always good to study, share and reflect about Scripture with other people. It's good to hear other points of view."

Others prefer the intimacy of the small group. "It's easier to sit back and not participate (in a larger group)," Billington observed. "I get more out of it when I participate."

Liz Webster, who directs Blessed Sacrament's RCIA process, describes the dismissal session as "breaking open the word of God."

"It's not looking at the readings from what are they teaching us, but from what God is saying to our lives," she explained. "It's going for the heart of the person, the soul of the person, rather than the head."

The heartfelt contemplation of Scripture tends to evoke in candidates and catechumens what Webster terms "a real hunger for coming to know God better in their lives, a hunger for more information." Thus, on alternate Sundays, dismissal is followed by a second, longer session that addresses questions of Church teaching and practice.

The topics of teaching sessions, which last just over an hour and include team members and sponsors, are also determined according to Sunday Scripture readings — a process known as lectionary-based catechesis. "Its primary purpose is to let the liturgical year set the curriculum," Webster explained.

The revised version of the RCIA approved this year by the Vatican and U.S. bishops supports the use of both dismissal and lectionary-

based catechesis, according to Maribeth Mancini, diocesan RCIA coordinator. "The rite calls for 'suitable catechesis accommodated to the liturgical year,'" she said.

The revised rite also calls for catechumens in particular to spend at least year in the formational period of the catechumenate. On the other hand, the rite allows candidates' period of formation to be more flexible, depending on their varying backgrounds.

Webster anticipated the new rite by revising Blessed Sacrament's RCIA process to follow a lectionary-based format — including year-round dismissal and teaching sessions on Sundays — two years ago after she attended a national RCIA conference. "It was a risk for me," she recalled. "I like to control things and I can't control this the way I would like to."

Because it requires the team to abandon a pre-packaged curriculum, lectionary-based catechesis always raises concern that information important to the candidates and catechumens might be overlooked. And because most Catholic religious education has only recently included significant doses of Scripture study, many Catholics also remain uncomfortable with the Bible.

Webster opted to take the risk at Blessed Sacrament for several reasons. Educationally, she believes that adults learn more in sessions fueled by their own questions. "We use the readings to break open the Word of God. The readings raise questions, and we use the sessions to answer those questions," she said.

But the real advantage, Webster believes, is that relinquishing control over the curriculum has opened the process to the power of the Holy Spirit. "What lectionary-based catechesis says is that your life can't be separated from your knowledge. The Holy Spirit really pulls it together to where people are seeing God in their everyday lives," she said. "If we only learn about faith, we can become very intellectual Catholics, but never have experienced God's love in our life."

In a recent Sunday session on abortion, premarital sex and birth control, for instance, Webster outlined the Church's teaching, along with the positions of dissenting groups, both within and outside the Church. In the discussion that followed, candidates, catechumens, sponsors and team members talked about — and sometimes questioned — the implications of the Church's teaching on their lives.



The New Rite — Part III

One sponsor explained that while she accepted the Church's teaching intellectually, she struggled with its application in difficult situations, such as the cases of children who become pregnant as a result of incest, or of women whose lives are threatened by pregnancy.

A candidate questioned how the Church can insist on sex being both unitive and procreative, yet regard as acceptable a natural method of birth control that is 98 percent effective in preventing pregnancy while sanctioning an artificial means of birth control that may be less effective.

Another session shortly after All Saints Day ranged from the role of saints in the Church and the process of canonization to a discussion of Purgatory and such Catholic traditions as novenas and indulgences. "Can people be prayed into heaven with Masses?" one candidate wondered.

The discussions reveal a continuing theme in teaching sessions — what Webster describes as the continuum of Catholic belief. "We are a Church that is unified in Jesus Christ, but not uniform," she explained. "It's important for ... candidates and catechumens to see the whole view."

The whole view accommodates those Catholics who regard the Church primarily as an institution and those who consider it as above all, a community; those who believe that abortion is the primary right-to-life issue and those who consider euthanasia, the death penalty, and human rights of equal magnitude in the "seamless garment" of life; those who practice such traditional devotions as the rosary and novenas, and those who prefer using their own words to talk to God.

"It would be foolish to say that all Catholics agree with the Church's teachings — you can look around and see that there are Catholics who don't agree with its stand on the nu-

Continued on Page 21

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