

Indepth

'Contagious' faith braces team to face RCIA's challenges

By Teresa A. Parsons

Most of the nine men and women who serve on Blessed Sacrament Parish's RCIA team volunteered to teach newcomers to the Church about Catholicism.

But if, as team member Donald Webster proposes, Catholicism is a "contagious" way of life better transmitted than taught, you might be surprised at who's catching it from whom.

Webster spent uncounted hours learning the Church's rules and traditions from the priest who formally prepared him for initiation seven years ago while he was studying at the University of Dayton. But he "caught" Catholicism from his friends and from fellow members of a Bible-study group.

Blessed Sacrament's process, he believes, integrates that infectious spirit of faith with solid instruction. "It's very important work, different than the traditional committee-type work," he said. "The people challenge you to deepen your own faith. ... Like I've found with a lot of church work, I get more than I give, and I learn more than I teach."

A "cradle" Catholic and product of a parochial-school education, 30-year-old Patty Boldt joined the RCIA team several months ago "looking for growth, for a group of people with whom she could share ideas."

"It's been that, plus much more," she said. "I didn't realize I would be learning so much from the people in the group."

What attracts volunteers to Blessed Sacrament's RCIA team is a simple, yet essential exchange: information for enthusiasm, experience for renewal.

"When you start talking to other people, you get familiar with other ideas," explained team member John Kostecki. "Sometimes you will get a totally new revelation from what someone else has said."

"If I feel rotten about something," he added, "I usually go out of here feeling better."

A wealth of experience

When Xerox transferred Kostecki to Rochester from Fort Worth, Texas, two years ago, Blessed Sacrament was among the first places he visited, seeking a source for involvement and new friends. Having served in his Fort Worth parish's RCIA, he was immediately interested when he learned Blessed Sacrament also offered the process.

The approaches of the two parishes were very different, however. In Fort Worth, the parish deacon usually lectured to participants, and team members played a minor role. At Rochester's Blessed Sacrament, Kostecki noted, everyone takes part.

"I'm a proponent of cross-fertilization," explained Elizabeth Webster, coordinator of the team and of the parish's religious-education program. "If people only hear me, it becomes Liz Webster's process, and I think it's really important for people to use their gifts to share their faith."

Chief among those gifts ranks individual experience. Blessed Sacrament's team includes the Jesuit-educated and the newly initiated, survivors of divorce and the newly married, the

shy and the outspoken.

The team's diversity is no accident. Webster tries to strike a balance between what she terms head people and heart people — those with strong theological backgrounds and those whose strength lies in relating life experiences to issues of faith.

Sharing their experience of faith is what drew most team members to the RCIA process. Their average age, meanwhile, belies a stereotyped lack of involvement among young Catholics. More than half of the nine are 30 or younger. Many of the younger team members were first drawn to Blessed Sacrament by its Young Adult Planning Team, which organizes activities and service projects for men and women between the ages of 18 and 35.

Testifying to the strength of the RCIA itself is the fact that four of the team's nine members are former candidates or catechumens who were initiated either at Blessed Sacrament or at other parishes.

Catholicism was a mid-life change of course for Patricia Eldridge. A participant in Blessed Sacrament's RCIA, she was initiated just two years ago this Easter. She has since plunged into a host of parish ministries — caring for the homeless, serving in liturgical ministry and on the RCIA team. "As ministry in the church goes, (the RCIA) is the one area that I believe takes the most time, but for me, it's the most worthwhile kind of ministry," she said. "What I enjoy most of all is when you first get the catechumens and candidates, they talk about Christ as a very general part of their life ... With time that begins to change and they speak of Christ as a very personal friend. It happened to me, and to see it happen to others is great."

Companions on the journey

Such are the rewards that help offset the RCIA's demands. Most team members at Blessed Sacrament plan and lead an inquiry, dismissal or study session approximately every six weeks, in addition to attending weekly sessions. They are also asked to serve on subcommittees that plan particular segments of the rite, such as the Easter Vigil.

The team, meanwhile, meets for monthly planning sessions. Besides organizing the process currently underway, members are studying the implications of the RCIA's newly finalized rite, adopted this past September after being approved by both Vatican officials and the U.S. bishops' conference.

Team members are also seeking ways to offer more effective sessions. "We've talked about the need to do more reading before the sessions," Kostecki explained. "It gets people 'up to speed' — thinking about things beforehand so they're prepared."

In addition, some team members attend courses and RCIA-related programs offered by the diocese and/or other parishes. Boldt and several other team members, for instance, are currently attending an adult-education series at nearby Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Brighton.

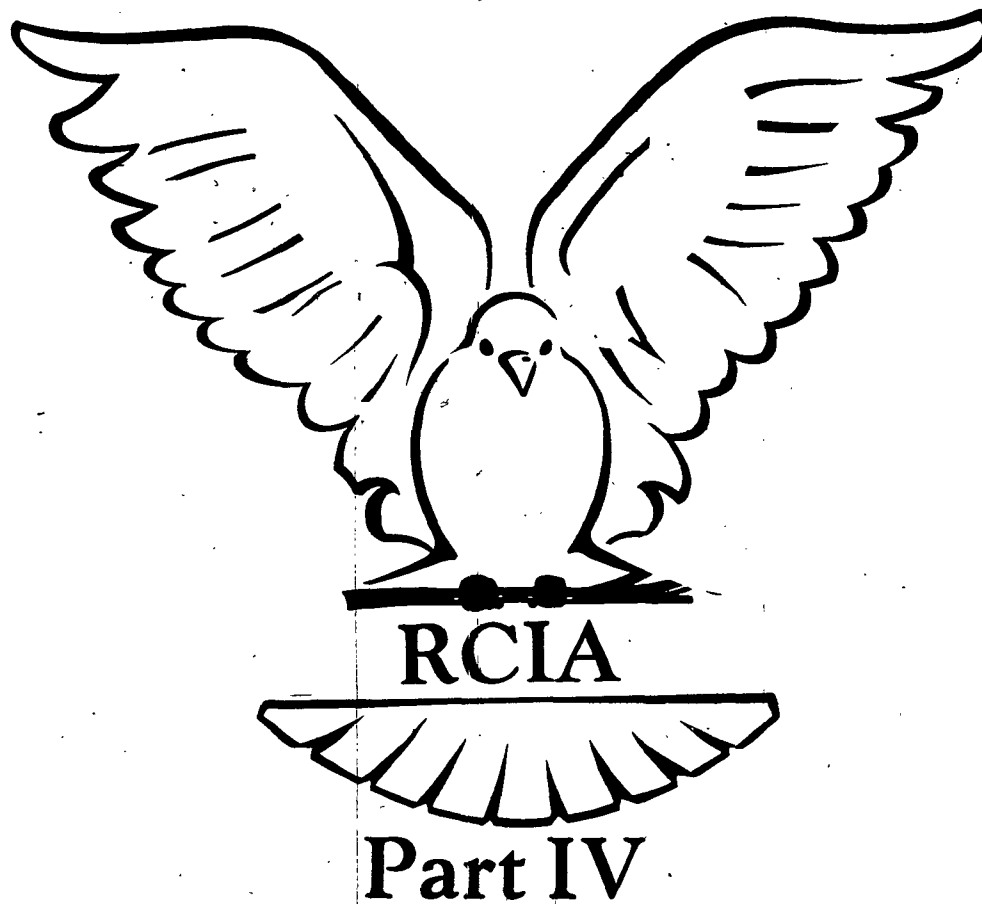
This year, in light of the introduction of the finalized rite, Webster observed that the diocese has offered parish RCIA team members more and better training opportunities than ever before. However, most training for Blessed Sacrament's team occurs "on the job." New team members may observe a number of sessions before attempting to plan one — usually with help from a more experienced colleague.

The amount of preparation required to lead a session varies, depending on the individual and the week's topic. Although Patty Boldt spent nearly two hours reading Scripture and background material on the feast of Epiphany, she acknowledged feeling "a little nervous" about leading her first session Jan. 8.

After the session, Boldt confessed that she had disregarded much of her planned agenda in favor of a lively discussion that took an unexpected turn. More experienced team members confirm that their most meticulous planning often gives way to the needs of participants. "You can't really prepare for everything," Kostecki said. "Things sometimes go off in another direction, and you have to let that happen."

Eldridge recalled one carefully thought-out inquiry session she abandoned to talk about a suicide that struck close to home for one inquirer. "The most important thing is to be flexible. You're there to help them on their journey, so you have to take them where they are," she said.

Even under less dramatic circumstances, team members often find that the session for which they prepare is often not the session that occurs. When confronted with a question they are not prepared to answer, team members are urged to admit "we're not the experts."



"Liz has always told us to say 'I don't have the answer to that, but I'll get back to you,'" Eldridge said, noting that such questions are promptly logged so that they can be researched and addressed at a later session.

In spite of how taxing RCIA ministry already is, the rite newly finalized in September requires a minimum of one year's preparation for catechumens. Whereas Blessed Sacrament's process has concluded at Pentecost, the rite now extends the period of mystagogia, which follows initiation, for a full year.

Meanwhile, Blessed Sacrament has this year introduced the Rite of Christian Initiation for Children, or RCIC, which prepares children of "catechetical age" — usually regarded as school-aged or older — for the sacraments of initiation.

Consequently, after next month's Rite of Election, the nine members of the team will be conducting four different types of sessions: simultaneous weekly enlightenment sessions for children and adults preparing for initiation this coming Easter; continuing catechumenate sessions for those preparing for initiation at a later date; and inquiry sessions for newcomers to the process.

Next spring, if new arrivals dictate a full process, the parish team will need to conduct all of the above in addition to mystagogia sessions for those already initiated.

God's humble instruments

To fully implement the rite as envisioned by the bishops, Liz Webster estimates that Blessed Sacrament's RCIA process could use at least a dozen team members in addition to a pool of people willing to serve as sponsors and companions for candidates and catechumens, and hosts to offer hospitality on behalf of the entire parish. "We need parishioners willing to sit in on sessions, to get to know the people, to be hosts," she said. "The RCIA should be something integrated into the community, not something outside it."

But increased parish involvement has been an elusive goal. On the contrary, Webster feels fortunate when she maintains the team's membership from year to year. At present, she is the only member of Blessed Sacrament's team who has remained for three years or more. An edge

Inauguration vigil scheduled

St. Joseph's House of Hospitality is sponsoring a march to the Federal Building Friday, Jan. 20, to mark the inauguration of George Bush as president of the United States.

Participants are asked to meet at St. Joseph's, 402 South Ave., at 6 p.m. Weather permitting, those gathered will walk to the Federal Building carrying flashlights or candles to symbolize hopes for an "enlightened Bush administration." The marchers are asked to bring letters to the new president, describing the needs of the people they serve. After mailing the letters, they will return to St. Joseph's for dinner and conversation.

For information, call Sister Marilyn Pray, 716/232-3262, or Mary Rose McCarthy, 716/458-2711.

of helplessness slips into her voice as she acknowledges that although she intends to implement a year-round mystagogia after Easter this year, she doesn't "have any idea how" she'll find people to staff it.

Located between the unusually transient Park and Monroe avenue neighborhoods, Blessed Sacrament suffers more rapid parishioner turnover than most congregations. However, even parishes in more stable neighborhoods struggle to recruit volunteers for an expanding range of programs. "People are too busy, they say they feel unworthy or they're afraid they don't know enough," Webster said.

On the other hand, Eldridge pointed out that Webster has thus far avoided the temptation to solicit team members at random. "Liz is very careful of not just putting more bodies on, but looking for the right person who will fit in," she said.

Although some team members are apprehensive about the challenges of the finalized rite, most favor its new form. Those who were initiated through the RCIA particularly favor the lengthening of mystagogia and catechumenate periods.

Although mystagogia formally ended for Eldridge just 40 days after her initiation, her sponsor remained closely involved with her for a much longer period. "I am fully in favor of a year-long mystagogia," she said. "(Otherwise) people who don't have (that kind of sponsor), and who have been nurtured along, could feel lost."

Don Webster agrees that the new rite is an improvement, yet he also recognizes the potential for burnout among team members. "Speaking for myself, I don't know where that extra time would come from in my personal life," he said.

Liz Webster has tried to avoid burnout with careful scheduling, such as spreading catechetical sessions two weeks apart when possible. Yet she acknowledges that no amount of scrupulous planning can produce the contagious spirit of faith that powers an effective RCIA process.

"As a team, you become very humble," she said. "You know that you won't meet the needs of the people in front of you. You place it in God's hands and trust that He knows what he's doing — you trust that you're his instrument."

School sets registration dates

St. Joseph's School, 39 Gebhardt Rd., will be registering students Monday, Jan. 23, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 7 to 8:30, and Tuesday, Jan. 24, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Parents are asked to use the rear entrance opposite the convent due to construction.

Church plans vigil for 'Life'

The theme of this year's annual March for Life prayer vigil on Sunday, Jan. 22 at St. Jude's Church, 4100 Lyell Ave., in Rochester is "Light for Life."

Marchers will then board buses to Washington, D.C., for a noon rally on Monday, Jan. 23, protesting the Court's Roe vs. Wade decision to legalize abortion.

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