



By Teresa A. Parsons
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — Four times a year, the Church of Rochester displays a heart-stopping spectacle of growth.

Lent is barely underway each year when hundreds of men, women and children come before the diocesan bishop at several sites to attest to the Gospel's impact on their lives by announcing their desire for full initiation into the church.

Few life-long Catholics understand these Rites of Election and Continuing Conversion, and fewer still ever experience their power. "Most people in the pews don't know that nearly 500 people come into the church every year (in this diocese)," said Elizabeth Webster, coordinator of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults at Blessed Sacrament Parish. "Everybody talks about people leaving the church ... but something must be right, because people are joining."

This month, the Diocese of Rochester recognized more than 300 diocesan candidates and 130 catechumens at Rites of Election and Continuing Conversion in Rochester, Newark and Horseheads. Among them were eight candidates and catechumens from Blessed Sacrament Parish, who celebrated the rites on Thursday, Feb. 16, at Sacred Heart Cathedral, accompanied by sponsors, godparents, friends, family and team members.

At first, Cheryl Andres was simply relieved to see other adults gathering in the cathedral Thursday evening. Because the 28-year-old computer support technician is the only one of six catechumens from Blessed Sacrament above the age of 12, she feared she might appear somewhat conspicuous. "It was pretty enlightening to see all the other people there," she said.

By the time the ceremony ended, however, Andres' self-consciousness had vanished. "It felt like a first step towards being accepted," she said. "It felt really exciting."

By taking part in the Rite of Election, Andres and other catechumens expressed to the diocesan community their intent to receive the sacraments of initiation — baptism, confirmation and Eucharist — during the Easter Vigil. Acting on behalf of that community, the presiding bishop "elected" to receive them. No longer known as catechumens, they became the "elect."

In the church's early years, when initiation rites were first developed, all converts were catechumens who received baptism, Eucharist and confirmation simultaneously. Today, however, catechumens are the exception rather than the rule.

Recognizing that most participants in the RCIA have already been baptized in other Christian denominations, the bishops who wrote the final version of the rites for adult initiation added a distinct celebration that affirms the integrity of that baptism. Known as the Rite of Continuing Conversion, it may be celebrated along with the Rite of Election or at times other than Lent, depending on an individual's readiness to receive the sacraments of Eucharist and/or confirmation.

"Candidates and catechumens have parallel, but different experiences," explained Maribeth Mancini, diocesan RCIA coordinator. "It makes sense for them to celebrate milestones on their journey of faith ritually."

The new rite, which took effect in September, 1988, also includes a formal Rite of Sending, celebrated just before the Rites of Election and Continuing Conversion.

Lenten rites show church's growth

Candidates and catechumens are called before members of their parish — usually just after the homily during Sunday Mass — to express their intention to proceed with initiation at Easter, and to receive the community's approval and support.

Some diocesan parishes, including Blessed Sacrament, have already celebrated some form of sending rite for at least half-a-dozen years. Nor is the Rite of Continuing Conversion entirely new to the diocese, although it was only formalized this past fall. Diocesan liturgists had adapted the Rite of Election to use with candidates even before last year, when Mancini and former diocesan liturgy director Father Thomas Mull opted to use advance copies of the new rite for introduction at the February, 1988, ceremony.

This year, however, marked the first time catechumens and candidates were called forth separately to celebrate their distinct rites — an innovation that allowed catechumens to sign the Book of the Elect.

In the early church, the Book of the Elect was among the most treasured possessions of the Christian community — a document that included every baptized Christian's name. Signing the book, particularly during times of persecution, could mean risking one's life.

"The early Christians saw (signing the book) as a sign of commitment," Webster explained. "To us, the book is a sign of the



Bishop Hickey greets Joshua Lyons, 7, one of six catechumens from Blessed Sacrament Parish 'elected' at Thursday's ceremony.

sacredness of the commitment the elect are making."

Webster helps prepare Blessed Sacrament's catechumens and candidates for that commitment by meeting with each individually in the weeks leading up to the February rites. Some, she said, develop last-minute jitters, fearing that they won't fit into the parish community, or that the church they have envisioned joining will somehow disappoint them.

On the other hand, many candidates and catechumens report that as the February rites approach, they begin to notice changes in themselves. "I feel the church becoming more a part of my life, affecting how I interact with other people, my attitudes toward service," said Deborah Snyder, a textbook sales representative who was drawn to Catholicism several years ago while attending Franciscan-operated Siena College in Loudonville, N.Y. "My emphasis now is not placed so much on what I can do for others, to make others happy."

Snyder, who was raised Episcopalian, hasn't developed cold feet, but rather a growing certainty that she is doing what's right for her. "I only see it as a big improvement. There was an empty space in my life that this fills," she said.



Auxiliary Bishop Dennis W. Hickey stands before candidates for the sacraments of Eucharist and confirmation Thursday, Feb. 16, at Sacred Heart Cathedral during the final of four diocesan celebrations of the Rites of Election and Continuing Conversion.

Such signs of "conversion in mind and action" are hallmarks of an intense new period of preparation that begins with the Rites of Election and Continuing Conversion and leads up to Easter initiation. Known as the Period of Enlightenment, it is a time not for teaching, but for prayer and growth in faith.

Included in the Period of Enlightenment are rituals known as scrutinies, which evolved from exorcisms performed to eradicate pagan beliefs from the early Christian converts.

Now celebrated on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent, scrutinies are intended to "eliminate barriers to coming closer to Christ," Webster explained. The ritual requires the newly elect to reflect on a series of questions prior to each of the three Sunday Masses. During the Mass itself, the celebrant prays over them, and their an-

swers to the scrutiny questions are incorporated into the intercessory prayers.

Scrutinies usually only involve the elect, but Webster has adapted the ritual to accommodate candidates and adult confirmation candidates as well.

The latter group is one pastoral reality that the RCIA's formal rite, despite its adaptations, continues to largely ignore. Adult confirmation candidates are, for instance, excluded from formally participating in such celebrations the Rites of Election and Continuing Conversion.

Blessed Sacrament's RCIA process nevertheless includes adult confirmation candidates in both the parish Rite of Sending and the Rites of Election and Continuing Conversion, which they attend to support their fellow RCIA participants. "It doesn't make any sense," protested Webster. "They should be recognized."

CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS INFORMATION NIGHT

Thursday, March 2
St. Theodore School

170 Spencerport Road
7:00 until 9:00 p.m.

Thursday, March 9
St. Ambrose School

31 Empire Boulevard
7:00 until 9:00 p.m.



CARDINAL
Mooney
High School

Mercy 50 Years Alive



Nazareth Academy

Refreshments following program