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Easter Vigil rejoices in Christians reborn

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ROCHESTER — As the Easter Vigil begins, lighted candles dispel a darkness redolent of sin and death, and an entrance procession passes newly blessed fire among the hundred-or-so members of the congregation.

At the center of the procession and of this Holy Saturday night service at Blessed Sacrament Church are a dozen men, women and children whose lives are about to begin anew as they become full members of the Roman Catholic Church.

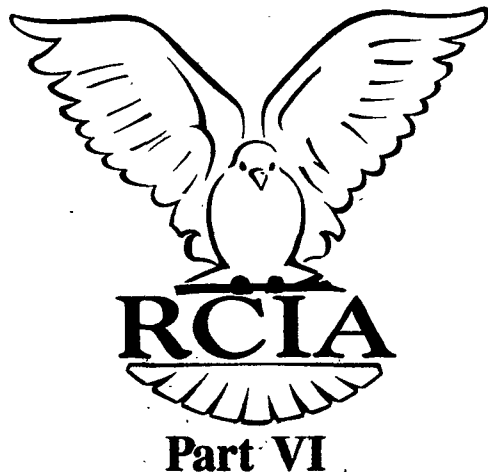
Some are baptized "children of the light." All are confirmed and later receive Eucharist — some for the first time.

As with any sacrament, these Easter Vigil rites of initiation are only the external signs of inner transformations. But as leaven is to bread or salt to soup, so are these "neophyte" Catholics to the community they join: few in relative number, but strong in their witness to the enduring power of beliefs those around them claim to share.

What continues to draw people to a church that appears so riven with internal divisions and discord? Like the woman at the well described in one of the Lenten Gospel readings, Michelle Marchand was captivated by the promise of "living water."



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier
Father Bruce Ammering, pastor at Blessed Sacrament, baptizes sixth-grader Marissa Mangiola, one of five children welcomed into the parish at Saturday's Easter Vigil.



"In retrospect, I guess I was thirsting for God's love in many ways, but never (looked for it) through religion," she said. "I'm hoping that (the vigil) represents a fresh start in my life."

Where she will be led by the fresh start she gained from confirmation Saturday night, Marchand isn't sure, except that her search will begin with some new parish activities, such as teaching religious education. "I find myself asking more and more often, 'What will it mean to me to be a Catholic? How will I reflect that in my life?'" she said.

John Billington hoped that his reception at the Easter Vigil would help fuse what have been disparate elements of his life, changing the "road map" of his life to a more spiritual orientation.

He began the RCIA process in part because he wanted to share faith with his wife as they raise their infant daughter. But Billington found that the changes he underwent during months of study and preparation reached beyond the personal realm.

"Something I always wanted to take place, and that is taking place more and more as I go through the process, is that I want Christ involved in every decision in my life, in my business life and my personal life," he explained. "I think after Sunday, it's going to be a seven-day-a-week Christian life (for me), and I'm excited about that."

As the visible enactment of such profound transformations, the Easter Vigil — with its blessing of new fire and water; its tracing of the history of God's covenant from creation to the sacrifice and resurrection of His Son; its rites of sprinkling and anointing that end years of searching and begin another chapter in the lives of the newly initiated — has few rivals for sheer drama in Catholic tradition.

Yet among many lifelong Catholics, the vigil's drama is overshadowed by its length and lack of familiarity. In fact, those who attend the service year after year grow accustomed to a small exodus when, after the first hour brings no sign of conclusion, those who had hoped to quickly satisfy their "Easter obligation" realize their mistake.

Such parting comments as "When did they start doing this?" stem from the Easter Vigil's roots in ancient rather than recent church tradition. Influenced at least in part by the threat of persecution, the earliest Christians developed elaborate rites of initiation upon which they elaborated great importance. The preparatory period of teaching or catechumenate routinely lasted several years.

Those who were finally "elected" for initiation would gather with the whole



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier
Friends and family members, including William Garvin, 6, shared the joy of 12 newly initiated Catholics at Blessed Sacrament's Easter Vigil service.

Christian community late on the night before Easter Sunday. These elect were "marked for Christ" with holy oil, and literally "threw off their old selves," discarding their worn clothing and immersing themselves during baptism, then donning clean white linen robes symbolic of their new life in Christ.

As adult initiation gave way to infant baptism and the eventual separation of confirmation and Eucharist, the Holy Saturday vigil became a ceremony of symbols without content. During the 1950s, the Easter blessing of new fire and water was often relegated to the early morning hours and observed by no one but the presiding priest. Meanwhile, most adults who wished to enter the church or sought full reception were privately instructed and initiated throughout the year.

With the advent of the Second Vatican Council, the vigil returned to late Holy Saturday evening, timed so that the Mass itself would begin at midnight. As a result of post-Vatican II reforms in 1969, parish-



Neophytes Michelle Marchand (left), Cheryl Andres (right) and John Billington (rear) follow the altar server in the offertory procession.

es began to celebrate the vigil just after dark on the day before Easter. But not until 1972, with the restoration of the RCIA, did the Easter Vigil begin to recover its original significance.

The initiation rites' latest modifications, adopted in September, 1988, corrected a tendency toward overkill. Many parishes had been timing the acceptance of already-baptized adults to coincide with the vigil. The revised rite requires only that the unbaptized — catechumens — be initiated

during the Easter Vigil. Parishes may receive other adults and older children into full communion throughout the year, depending on each individual's readiness.

Like their earliest predecessors, today's candidates and elect may spend months and even years in preparation for their initiation. Yet they are told little about the actual rites beforehand. Such secrecy — once a means of protection from a hostile society — now serves to protect the rites' potency.

"Preparing people too much takes the power out of the vigil," explained Elizabeth Webster, coordinator of Blessed Sacrament's RCIA team and parish director of religious education. "You let the rites speak for themselves."

Thus, pre-vigil rehearsal sessions at Blessed Sacrament focus mainly on prayer and reflection, followed by a short briefing on when to come forward and where to stand.

For lifelong Catholics — many of whom were drilled like Marines in preparation for First Communion or penance — the lack of last-minute preparation is difficult to accept.

"Is it risky? Yes!" Webster conceded. "But my experience of three years doing it this way says it's true — by not telling them as much, they have a more powerful experience. I have faith in the power of the sacraments."

The 12 men, women and children upon whom last week's vigil focused likewise relied on faith in the parish team as they somewhat blindly approached the climax of the RCIA process.

Weekly sessions just before Easter focused on the scrutinies — former rites of exorcism that remain rich with the symbolism reflected in the vigil — light and darkness, water, death and rebirth. Just before the candidates and elect were dismissed from Mass each Sunday, members of the congregation paused to pray over them as a group.

The presiding priest also prayed over each individual, laying hands upon them. "It made us feel like a part of the parish, like everyone was praying for us," Marchand said. "The laying-on of hands added a very personal touch."

Aside from the scrutinies and weekly sessions, most candidates and elect prepared for the vigil with extra prayer. Billington, for one, fasted and cut back on his work schedule during Holy Week to spend more time with his family and with God. "I just don't want to go into (the vigil) rushed and hurried, which is often the way I

Continued on page 10

