

Rite fosters an intimacy of shared faith

EDITOR'S NOTE: This week we conclude our seven-part series on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults with a follow-up look at changes the process has made in the lives of participants at Blessed Sacrament Parish.

By Teresa A. Parsons
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — A year ago, most of the 15 or 20 men and women whose friendly banter has echoed through the empty halls of Blessed Sacrament School on recent Sunday afternoons were strangers.

Drawn together by a hunger to develop the spiritual dimension of their lives, they struggled during their first gatherings to fill strained silences with halting descriptions of the thoughts and experiences that led them to seek full reception into the Catholic Church.

Since then, the silences have grown contemplative rather than awkward as participants have prayed together, eaten at one another's tables, calmed one another's fears, and helped to soothe one another's grief. Above all, they have created a kind of intimacy peculiar to people who have shared the intimate visions of God and experiences of faith that seldom surface in everyday conversation.

Is it any wonder that most participants in Blessed Sacrament's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults don't want the process to end?

"In this group, I can talk about things without feeling like some kind of religious freak," explained Cheryl Andres, who has been baptized and received confirmation and Eucharist. "I feel open and honest in being able to express my feelings."

"We have really grown close through this," agreed Lois Houlihan, a former candidate for confirmation and Eucharist. "I was really afraid in the beginning of standing up and saying, 'I want to be Catholic.' ... To stand up for something you really want like that makes you feel vulnerable. But from that, I gained a lot of strength, and I don't feel vulnerable any more."

Happily for Houlihan, Andres and five



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

Along with many fellow neophytes, Cheryl Andres, who is shown above during her baptism at Blessed Sacrament's Easter Vigil service in March, welcomes the newly extended follow-up period to initiation.

other adults received during Blessed Sacrament's Easter Vigil in March, their part in the RCIA process won't end with the Easter season. Instead, following the course approved last year by Vatican officials and the U.S. bishops, the post-initiation period known as mystagogia will continue until next Easter.

"If someone had asked me a year ago, I would have said that two years is too long," said Deborah Snyder, who spent a year preparing to receive confirmation and Eucharist during the vigil. "But now ... I'm looking forward to mystagogia. To lose all that right after (initiation) happens would be kind of a shock."

Newly initiated Catholics aren't alone in welcoming the change. "To me, mystagogia is the most important part of the whole process," said Elizabeth Webster, the parish's director of religious education and RCIA team coordinator. "Because we are such a huge church, people need support. You can't take them through such an intense process and then drop them."

In spite of the new demands an extended period of mystagogia will place on RCIA team members, Patricia Eldridge can attest to its importance from personal experience. She likens her own initiation two years ago to "going from a two-lane road to a major highway."

"I kind of looked at it that on the day I received Eucharist, that would be it, I'd know it all, I'd be 'there,' and that would be the end of it," she recalled. "But when you receive Eucharist or confirmation, I found out it's not the end. It's just the beginning."

As the excitement of the Easter Vigil and initiation fades, new questions typically arise among newly initiated Catholics, or neophytes. Full of enthusiasm, they are also searching for new roles in the parish community. "It's like reaching a point and not knowing which direction to go," Andres explained. "(The process) has really deepened and enriched my life. Before, things just happened, and I didn't think too much about them. Now, it's like everything happens for a reason, and you really have to search for that."

To aid new Catholics in their search for answers and acceptance, Blessed Sacrament will offer mystagogia sessions each month between Pentecost and next Easter. Yet neither the new initiation rites nor diocesan sacramental guidelines provide a blueprint for what to do during all those additional sessions.

The omission points to what has long been a weakness of Catholic religious-education and sacramental programs in particular, according to Webster. "We have no good mystagogical models," she said. "We know how to get (people) ready for sacraments, but we don't know how to follow up."

In the absence of experience, Blessed Sacrament's team is relying on common sense and curiosity. Beginning next month, neophytes and their sponsors will choose topics about which they'd like more information, and plan each month's session. For June's gathering, they have invited representatives of various parish organizations



to describe the kinds of resources and activities offered at Blessed Sacrament. A subsequent session will outline useful books, magazines and newspapers that focus on spiritual topics, and bookstores where these publications are available.

As neophytes adjust to less frequent formal sessions, they are likely to rely more than ever on their sponsors as sounding boards for ideas and questions, and as sources for suggestions and support.

Ellen Donovan regards such obligations as a privilege. "(Sponsoring Lois Houlihan) has been a wonderful experience for me," she said. "It was such a great additional supplement to the Mass to be able to sit down and talk about the readings every week. ... It has been very special to be able to take that time with a group of people."

Donovan was among the first to encourage Houlihan to attend an RCIA inquiry session. The two women had long shared friendship with a spiritual dimension, often attending Mass together on Sundays. But having once been an inactive Catholic herself, Donovan hesitated when Houlihan asked her to serve as sponsor. "I wasn't sure I should do it because I hadn't been a real active Catholic, but I knew I could support her in the way she needed — (which was) not so much theology as just encouragement," she said.

Since November, the RCIA has wrought some profound changes in both women. For Houlihan, church has become a more comfortable place. "I used to think 'OK, 10 more minutes' and I'd read the words in the hymnal to see how many more lines we had to go," she recalled. "Now (Mass) goes so fast it's unbelievable, and it feels really nice and homey. I never feel strange about going there by myself, because I know quite a few people. It's amazing what a difference that makes."

Donovan credits the RCIA's focus on prayer and reflection for the positive direction her friend's life has taken. "Lois seems to have a whole lot more strength and faith that it's all going to work out," she observed. "She doesn't panic. It has changed everything in her life for the better."

As a sponsor, Donovan may have been equally affected by the process. A single parent who has recently returned to school, she credits some of what she has learned in the RCIA for helping her squeeze more time from her already hectic days. "Without prayer, I don't know how I would do it," she said.

Since the Easter Vigil, Donovan has noticed a change in the friends' relationship. "I feel less of the support and more of the friendship needs to be there," she said.

Both women are determined to continue learning and searching for ways to act on their faith, although Donovan's return to school may delay her intentions for a while. "I don't know where it goes from here — I just know it will," she explained.

Among the possibilities Donovan has considered is joining Blessed Sacrament's RCIA team, which could sorely use the added help. Not only is the team beginning mystagogia sessions, but members are also continuing year-round inquiry and catechumen sessions.

Meanwhile, as Webster concludes her first year of implementing the new initiation rite, her review is mixed. Among the rite's shortcomings, she said, is its failure to address adult confirmation candidates — either separately, or by including them with candidates for Eucharist and confirmation.

She also reserved judgment on the rite's more flexible approach to initiating candi-

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Dennis Carroll and Judy Murphy (at right) are proud parents of neophytes Jenna (third from right) and Erin Christiansen (crossing altar).

Initiation bolsters family ties

The hectic routine and hyphenated status of the Carroll-Murphy-Christiansen household illustrate how greatly Catholic families have changed during the past several decades.

Both Dennis Carroll, a Department of Transportation engineer, and Judy Murphy, a nurse/educator at the Rochester Psychiatric Center, work full time and often on weekends. Married last November, Dennis and Judy live with Judy's two daughters from a previous marriage, Erin and Jenna Christiansen, aged 11 and 10, and expect another child this summer.

But during the past year, the Carroll-Murphy-Christiansen clan has rediscovered one of the pleasures of a earlier

era — the family Sunday.

Before last August, only Dennis attended Mass regularly. Judy, although raised Catholic, had stopped practicing. "It was always kind of nagging at me that I should be giving (the girls) some kind of religious upbringing," she said. "I don't think I'd have done anything about it if not for (Dennis)."

What Judy and Dennis did last fall was to enroll Erin and Jenna in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Children at Blessed Sacrament Parish. In March, along with three other children, the girls were initiated during the parish's Easter Vigil, receiving the sacraments of baptism, Eu-

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