



Mission's mother
Susan Blum, co-author of the Isaiah 43 mission, came to Rochester to guide one diocesan parish through the evangelization program. Page 6.

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Converts take varied paths to church

Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He said, "Who are you, sir?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do."

Acts 9:1-9

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Saul, scourge of the early Christian church, went on to become St. Paul, one of the church's most influential evangelists. His is probably the best-known instance of conversion to Christianity, but the method of his conversion bears little resemblance to the ways modern converts join the Catholic-Christian community.

Indeed, most contemporary stories of conversion are marked not so much by flashes of light and voices from heaven as they are by flashes of insight and the voices of family and friends gently moving a non-Catholic toward the church.

"In my experience, (people convert) because they know someone else who is a part of the Catholic community," said Barbara Carroll, the diocese's Monroe County consultant for religious education. Prior to taking her position with the diocese earlier this year, Carroll directed a Christian formation program at Geneva's St. Francis de Sales Parish for 10 years.

Carroll's emphasis on the importance of contact with the Catholic community is confirmed by Sheryl Zabel's conversion story. Zabel, pastoral assistant at Assumption Parish in Fairport, credited her colleagues at a Catholic high school in Ohio for starting her on the road to Catholicism. A couple of decades ago, Zabel was hired fresh out of college as a French teacher at the school, which was run by the Notre Dame sisters.

"I was impressed by the atmosphere of the school," she said, adding that she was intrigued by the distinctions of her employer's religion — "the saints, the Mass, and the rituals."

Having grown up in a non-religious family, Zabel nonetheless briefly joined a Protestant church in her teens, but became more interested in Catholicism as she grew older.

"I found myself being fascinated with all the changes in the papacy in '78, so you ask (yourself), 'Why are you so fascinated?'"

Zabel answered her own question after attending a Catholic Mass on a whim at Rochester's Holy Redeemer Parish during Lent, 1980. "I went in there and had the strongest sense of being home, and (wondered) why was I denying being Catholic?"

According to Dean Hoge's 1981 book, *Converts, Dropouts, Returnees — A Study of Religious Change Among Catholics*, Zabel fell among the 12 percent of all converts are who are "seeker converts," or persons "who come to the Catholic Church

in search of an answer to spiritual need or a sense of void or meaninglessness."

But Hoge's book demonstrates that far more converts come to the church through marriage or a family relationship than through a solitary search for God. For example, most of the "intermarriage converts" Hoge studied were motivated to join the church more by a desire to strengthen their marriages with Catholics than by a desire to strengthen their faith.

Generally, Hoge found, "family-life converts" — non-Catholics raising their children as Catholics — expressed a desire to enter the church out of concern for their family's religious unity.

"In a lot of cases, people have told me they've decided that their family is so important that they need to be in the same faith, too," Carroll said.

Statistics showing that more than 60 percent of all converts are married or

engaged to Catholics bear out her contention that the majority of converts join the church because they have learned of the faith through their Catholic mates.

"In a lot of cases I'm looking back at, the Catholic partner is very committed (to the church)," she said.

Such was the case with Doug Vining of Fairport. Both his late wife, Joan, and his current wife, Dolores, were Catholic and influenced Vining's decision to join the church. Now a parish-council member at Our Lady of the Assumption Parish, the 58-year-old Vining was raised Baptist, but never regularly attended church services until his marriage to Joan. Following her death, Vining continued the practice begun in his first marriage when he remarried in 1977.

Vining said he grew up in a religiously tolerant

family that included a great-grandfather who once left a Dutch Reformed congregation and started his own church after members of the Ku Klux Klan were allowed to denounce Catholicism in front of the congregation.

With such a background, Vining never learned the kind of anti-Catholic prejudice that might scare off other potential converts. "My family has always been open to people who were Catholics," he said.

Vining, who was baptized into the church four years ago, said the church's continuity from its first pope, St. Peter, always impressed him. "Also, I think the reforms of Vatican II made it easier for Pro-

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Conversion of St. Paul, Caravaggio. 1600-1601. Cerasi Chapel, S. M. del Popolo.

