

WORLD & NATION

New church members look forward to Easter

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — This year's Easter Vigil will mark a major turning point for the faith life of tens of thousands of Americans.

Throughout Lent, prospective Catholics have been going through the final stages of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, preparing to be baptized or to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church.

In the Chicago Archdiocese alone, more than 2,200 adults went through the RCIA process this year.

Those who are not yet baptized are called catechumens. At Easter they receive all three sacraments of Christian initiation — baptism, confirmation and their first Eucharist.

Those already baptized in other churches or baptized Catholic but not raised in the faith are called candidates. At Easter they receive confirmation and the Eucharist.

In dioceses across the country in the first two weeks of Lent, catechumens and candidates — most often in special diocesan ceremonies led by a bishop — participated in a Rite of Election (for catechumens) or a Call to Continuing Conversion (for candidates).

This year the Diocese of Rochester sponsored five such ceremonies, at Sacred Heart Cathedral, St. Michael's Church in Penn Yan and Immaculate Conception Church in Ithaca.

The diocese had 334 catechumens and 437 candidates.

Among Atlanta's catechumens was Don Massey, whose faith journey was certainly among the more unusual this year.

A professor of design at the University of Georgia in Athens, Massey traveled around the world on a commission from the new Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington to cast the hands of Catholics from many nationalities and walks of life — including the pope. The hand castings are on display in the center. (The center is featured on Page 13.)

Massey said he "really wasn't anything" religiously before the project, but the faith stories of the Catholics he interviewed around the world simply drew him to the church.

Wayne Brugger, a civil engineer in Muscatine, Iowa, was raised Presbyterian. He

had been attending Mass with his Catholic wife, Barbara, for 37 years and put all three kids through Catholic school before he decided to become Catholic.

Then in the midst of his RCIA program he got a six-month assignment in Ecuador to design an airport.

He took the job, 7,600 miles away, on one condition — that he be allowed to return home in early March to participate in the diocesan Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion and again in April to enter full communion with the church at the Easter Vigil.

Some other numbers in U.S. dioceses and archdioceses this year: Dubuque, Iowa, had 368 candidates and 135 catechumens; Lansing, Mich., 613 candidates and 506 catechumens; Baltimore, 450 and 225; Cincinnati, more than 900 and 700; Philadelphia, 751 and 516.

Among 505 candidates and 332 catechumens in Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., was Mark Beckloff of Kansas City, baptized a Methodist.

Beckloff's path to Catholicism involved caring for a sickly Great Dane named Amazing Gracie, which led to founding a successful dog-treat business, which led to an invitation four years ago from Mercy Sister Donna Ryan to set up a booth outside the cathedral at a blessing of animals on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi.

When Beckloff starting coming back for Sunday Mass, Sister Ryan — the cathedral parish catechumenate director — invited him to explore Catholicism. This year when she asked him to check his busy travel schedule, he found not a single out-of-town conflict with Tuesday RCIA classes, so he joined.

A Catholic News Service survey in Lent 1993 uncovered more than 23,400 catechumens and candidates in 47 dioceses. Those dioceses represented one-third of the total U.S. Catholic population, indicating that nationwide the total was in the neighborhood of 65,000 to 70,000.

Of the 180-plus U.S. dioceses, the bishops' national Office for Evangelization last year obtained 2000 data from 88 and 1999 data from 79. Its figures added up to slightly more than 50,000 candidates and catechumens in 1999 and just over 58,000 in 2000 from the dioceses included in the report — indicating that if comprehensive figures were available, they would almost certainly be well above 70,000 a year now.



CNS

World Youth Day

Young people from Canada accept the large World Youth Day cross at the Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square April 8. The cross was to be taken to Canada for the July 2002 international celebration in Toronto.

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