

California woman to be baptized by pope at Easter Vigil

WASHINGTON - This year, parishioners at St. Joseph Church in Modesto, Calif., are more excited than usual about Easter.

That's because 40 of them, along with their pastor, Father Joseph Illo, will be in Rome during Holy Week, and one person in their group, Heidi Sierras, will be baptized by the pope during the Easter Vigil at St. Peter's Basilica.

Sierras will be in a group of five - representing different areas of the world - who will be baptized by Pope Benedict XVI April 11. The 29-year-old mother of four will represent North America.

"It's hard to put into words how I feel," Ms. Sierras told Catholic News Service in a March 2 telephone interview from her home in Ceres, Calif. "I feel honored. It's an amazing opportunity."

Father Illo said the whole parish was caught up in the excitement. "If she were a different type of person, they might be envious," he added, but because she is so nice they are glad for her.

Getting picked for an event of this magnitude falls somewhat in the "it's all about who you know" category, because each year, just in the United States alone, tens of thousands of people are baptized during the Easter Vigil.

Ms. Sierras learned of the possibility of the papal baptism more than a year ago after a St. Joseph parishioner who frequently visits Rome found out from a friend of a friend of a Vatican official that there was an open slot for a North American representative to be baptized by the pope in 2009.

The parishioner gave this news to Father Illo, who in turn asked the director of the parish's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program to choose someone. The participant would have to stay in RCIA for an additional year. After several letters were exchanged between the parish and the Vatican, Sierras was told it was official.

Ms. Sierras, who had no religious upbringing, began attending Mass with her husband, who is Catholic, about three years ago. When she started asking him questions about the Catholic faith, he advised her to take part in RCIA at St. Joseph.

Now, after more than two years in the program, her questions have been more than answered.

She said the weekly classes reviewed “every aspect of the Catholic faith,” which confirmed her desire to join the church. “I have no doubts this is what I want to do,” she added.

Ms. Sierras is one of 34 people in RCIA this year at St. Joseph. The Easter Vigil, during which catechumens and candidates are received into the church, is the culmination of what is typically a yearlong RCIA program.

Father Illo described the Easter Vigil as the “mother of all vigils.”

He told CNS Feb. 25 that there have been many years when he has remained in the quiet church afterward, long after the congregation has gone home, just to “bask in the glow” of the newly baptized.

This year’s Easter Vigil at St. Peter’s Basilica will hold even more significance for the priest. He said it would be “an affirmation of my priesthood” in which he will have the opportunity to “almost be a collaborator with the pope and the RCIA process – working together to bring people to the sacraments.”

A double blessing, he said, is that while he is in Rome, his bishop, Stockton Bishop Stephen E. Blaire, will celebrate the Easter Vigil at St. Joseph.

Ms. Sierras planned to leave for Rome April 2 with her husband and two of their children. The group of parishioners joining them has obtained tickets to many of the papal liturgies during Holy Week. Ms. Sierras, along with others to be baptized at the Easter Vigil, will attend morning catechesis sessions and afternoon tours of churches.

“I think I’m going to have a lot of opportunities to think, prepare, pray and reflect on all this and not get too caught up,” she said.

And in the meantime, she has already talked a fair amount about her faith. News of her upcoming, and unique, baptism has put her choice to become Catholic in a public spotlight and has raised all kinds of questions from friends, family members and co-workers at the veterinary clinic where she works.

“It’s incredible,” she told CNS. “My weakness is that I tend to be shy but now I have a good opportunity to evangelize.”