

Road to redemption

Living in East Baltimore, Steven Allbright had plenty of options where he could come into the Catholic Church.

Something about Historic St. Francis Xavier, however, set it apart. Reading up on the first black Catholic parish in the U.S., Allbright was stopped by the date in 1864 when one of its previous worship spaces had been dedicated.

September 21.

That's the same day, in 2014, that Allbright walked out of the Maryland State Penitentiary Complex, after being incarcerated for more than five years.

"I shook my head when I read that," he said. "This is not just another coincidence. This is God at work."

Allbright was among the more than 600 in the Archdiocese of Baltimore who came into full Communion with the church this Easter, as he received the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil April 20 at St. Francis Xavier in East Baltimore.

He was first introduced to Review readers in September 2017, when the Least of These series [looked at prison ministry](#).

He had entered prison in 2008 with a domestic violence conviction but a year of sobriety to his credit. Allbright made several Catholic friends on the inside, who piqued his interest in the faith and helped him find employment on the outside.

"A lot of people look at me and keep saying, why, when people are running from the Catholic Church, am I running toward it?" Allbright said. "I tell them about what I've

experienced from Catholics personally.”

Raised Presbyterian, Albright was leading a Buddhist study group in prison and meditating in solitude when he accepted an invitation to sit in on the Monday night Communion service led by Deacon Martin Wolff, who would introduce him to the writings of the late Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk.

The Communion service regulars included Bill Gaertner, who went from a domestic violence conviction to founding the Gatekeepers, a Hagerstown-based agency which assists ex-offenders.

A seminarian in the 1960s, Gaertner is now a lay Dominican. He stood as Albright’s godfather.

“If we were playing a word game, Steve was competitive and thorough,” Gaertner said of the circumstances in which they met. “He was intense. Anything he did, he was all in. I watched him do his tasks. He helped me do mine. Suffice it to say, you come out of prison better or worse. Steve, obviously, came out better.”

Allbright mentioned a trio of priests who aided his journey. The first was [Father Charles Canterna](#), who has ministered in Baltimore’s prisons since 1982. Gaertner had a hand in introducing him to the other two.

Gaertner’s early allies in Hagerstown included Father J. Collin Poston, now a pastor in Frederick County and the chaplain of the Table Foundation, created by Father Leo Patalinghug to harvest “the power of food to do good.” Albright, who went to culinary school after prison, was its first hire.

“Steven exemplifies personal redemption,” said Father Poston, himself a convert. “He’s been maturely studying, contemplating and discerning the faith. He knows the Lord in a unique way, because of what he’s gone through. ... The Lord is going to

use him, to inspire people and introduce them to the faith.”

Allbright is now the associate director of culinary services at the Lighthouse, a homeless prevention support center in Annapolis.

His study of the faith was furthered during the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults at St. Francis Xavier by Jocelyn Alexander, its director of religious education, Avis Butler and Kirk Gaddy.

In addition to the parish history, Allbright raves about other signs from God.

A family friend from New Jersey, a Catholic, sent Allbright spiritual care packages in prison. On a visit to Texas, a friend of hers began to gift her a laminated photo of St. Maximilian Kolbe, the patron of addicts and prisoners. When the Texan heard about Allbright, she insisted he have the photo.

His confirmation name?

Maximilian.

“If there was ever a person,” he said, “that needed to get out of his way and follow the path of God ...”

Email Paul McMullen at pmcmullen@CatholicReview.org

Also see:

[The Least of These: Care for prisoners doesn't stop after release](#)

[Catholic Baltimore Radio program on prison ministry](#)