

Tens of thousands, including ex-atheist, to join church at Easter

WASHINGTON - Tens of thousands of new Catholics, including an 89-year-old former atheist, will join the church at the Easter Vigil, April 3.

Those seeking baptism, called catechumens, and those already baptized who will be brought into full communion with the Catholic Church, called candidates, have reached the church through a variety of paths. Some have been led by family and friends, while others were motivated by powerful or painful personal experiences.

Jean Henry of Easton, was raised a Methodist and “drifted” into the Episcopal Church, but rejected Christianity more than four decades ago after a major spat in the women’s guild.

“I tried to heal it but I could not,” Henry told *The Dialog*, newspaper of the Diocese of Wilmington, Del., which includes Maryland’s Eastern Shore. “I thought I had a good, strong faith, but it was too shallow.”

Henry, who turns 90 April 16, said she “started out agnostic and went on to become an atheist because I never do things by halves. If I was going to doubt, I was going to doubt all the way.”

But she found that “this life is hell if you’re an atheist,” she said. “I had gotten to the point where life didn’t seem worth living. I’m not suicidal, so I’m not saying that, but why be here if you’re an atheist?”

She reached that point shortly before she turned 89 last year. But she also found hope and new life through what she considers “an intervention by God.”

“It was as if all of this atheism was gathered up on both shoulders as if it were a loose garment, and it simply fell onto the floor,” recalled Henry, who will become Catholic at Ss. Peter and Paul Church in Easton. “I sort of figuratively stepped out of it. Since that garment of atheism fell off of me, I have never thought of it, questioned it, had one argument in my head about it.”

As she was preparing to become Catholic, Henry said she believes “the true story is the strength and persistence of God’s faith. I was in his arms all the time, but I was too stupid, too stubborn, too focused to realize that was always there, every minute.”

Now she realizes all she has to do is accept God’s love.

“There’s not much fuss or feathers here because I feel I’m home,” she said.

Across the country in Portland, Ore., Brad Wright, a 42-year-old teacher, was brought to the Catholic faith by substituting in Catholic school classrooms. When he saw students going to Mass and really enjoying it, he decided he wanted that for himself.

“It’s the community,” said Wright, who will be baptized at Christ the King Parish in Milwaukie.

Karl Hellberg, a 41-year-old special agent with the National Marine Fisheries Service, is another of the approximately 900 people joining the church this year in the Portland Archdiocese.

“I feel like I have (been) guided by divine providence through my life, through all the things that happened to me,” said Hellberg, who will become Catholic at St. Mary, Star of the Sea Parish in Astoria.

According to the 2010 edition of a yearbook published by the National Council of

Churches, in the United States and Canada membership numbers have gone up 1.49 percent for the Catholic Church - the country's largest denomination with more than 68 million members.

This vitality is especially notable in the South and Southwest of the United States.

In Texas, the Diocese of Dallas will welcome more than 3,000 new Catholics into the church this Easter. The Archdiocese of San Antonio reports more than 1,100 new members, including nearly 340 children. The Diocese of Fort Worth will welcome approximately 1,000 catechumens and candidates, and the Diocese of Victoria will welcome 132 new Catholics from 14 parishes.

The Archdiocese of Atlanta reported that more than 1,800 people will join the Catholic Church at Easter. This is the largest group of new Catholics registered in Atlanta in any year on record. Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta presided over the Rite of Election and Call to Continued Conversion, when catechumens and candidates are formally presented to the local bishop, at a ceremony conducted in 11 languages at the Atlanta Civic Center.

The nation's largest archdiocese, Los Angeles, reported that nearly 2,400 catechumens and candidates will be received into the church on Easter. The Archdiocese of Seattle will welcome 682 catechumens and 479 candidates, for a total of 1,161 people.

In other areas of the country, the Archdiocese of Detroit will welcome 1,225 people. The Archdiocese of Cincinnati reported a combined number of 1,049 catechumens and candidates. The Archdiocese of Denver said it expects 1,102 new Catholics, and the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis reported 182 catechumens and 515 candidates.

In the Diocese of Arlington, Va., an estimated 1,100 people will be brought into the

church. The Archdiocese of Washington, which includes the District of Columbia and part of Maryland, will receive approximately 1,150 people, as well 18 students from St. Augustine School, the oldest African-American school in the district.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore will welcome 1,081 new members.

The Diocese of Nashville, Tenn., will welcome 400 new members. The Diocese of South Bend-Fort Wayne, Ind., will welcome 193 catechumens and 276 candidates, for a total of 469 people; and the Diocese of Allentown, Pa., will welcome 486 new Catholics.

Definite numbers won't be known until the fall parish censuses are completed. Although most catechumens and candidates are formally received into the church at Easter, some may join the church at other times during the year.

“When you make new members, it’s a witness to the whole church,” said Providence Sister Jeremy Gallet, director of worship for the Portland Archdiocese and organizer of the rites of election. She added that those joining the church “realize how much bigger this is than themselves.”