

Web Exclusive: RCIA efforts blossom

The Archdiocese of Baltimore had 1,081 people receive sacraments for the first time during Easter Vigil Masses.

Many of them were at a Mass celebrated by Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien April 18. It's a record number of new Catholics and a reflection that the church is making inroads in bringing people to the faith through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program. Sharon Bogusz, coordinator for evangelization and adult catechesis, answered a few of The Catholic Review's questions about the successes.

Catholic Review: What might be the biggest reason for such a large number this year?

Sharon Bogusz: Without sounding too pious, there is an ancient saying in the Church that Christians are "made not born" referring to the power of God actively working in the sacraments of the Church and the sweat, love and labor of parish communities that model Christ's invitation to discipleship.

It is my firm belief that God continues to call people to newness of life in Christ Jesus. Christian initiation is always first the work of God the Holy Spirit who stirs the hearts of every person to respond to the Gospel. For their part, more and more Catholics across the Archdiocese are coming to a better understanding of their role in the work of inviting friends, neighbors and family members to "come and see" what Catholic really means. Catholics are beginning to understand that they are evangelizers! In the past, Christian life was something that was quietly witnessed. Today, Catholics are engaged in proclaiming the Gospel in the silent witness of their lives and in the sharing of God's activity in their lives.

In more widespread and public witness the Archdiocese's service to people in need, acts of charity, education, Archbishop (Edwin F.) O'Brien's own invitation in commercial spots, and even "the light is on for you" let people know that are doors and hearts are open to them.

CR: Are there societal reasons for this big number?

SB: Amid moments of crisis – war, economic downturns, and natural disasters – people remember that they need more than just themselves to get through life’s challenges and hardships. In the Catholic Church we share the “good news” of God’s love – it is a solid and true message of hope. We are a community of faith committed to making the world a better place.

CR: How special of a moment is this for the Catholic Church?

SB: While Christian initiation incorporates us into Christ and forms us into God’s People, it is in the context of this faithful people that the inquirer, then catechumen, then elect and finally neophyte is welcomed, instructed, accompanied, encouraged, challenged, prayed for, prepared, initiated and nurtured.

When we witness others changing their lives, giving up old ways of doing and being and committing themselves to Jesus Christ, it cannot help but inspire all of the faithful to recommit ourselves as well. And when the members of the parish recommit themselves to Christ, the parish community is renewed.

CR: What can be said about the RCIA staffs in parishes all over the archdiocese that help make this happen?

SB: The RCIA leaders and teams are some of the most faith-filled and dedicated people I have ever had the honor to serve. They are models of Christ’s unconditional love and acceptance. The sweat, love and labor of parish RCIA teams is extraordinary.

CR: How important is it for the church to continue to help grow the faith of these new Catholics after The Easter Vigil?

SB: The process of initiation continues even after the Easter Vigil celebration. The Church calls this period “mystagogy.” The word comes from an ancient Greek word signifying a deepening understanding of the mysteries of our faith. During the Easter season, the neophytes (newly initiated) gather each week to deepen their understanding of the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection into which they have just been incorporated.

The Church uses the period of Mystagogy to help the neophytes understand and live out their new lives as part of the Body of Christ. The new Christians, share in (the) work of every Catholic and must now go forth with us to continue the mission of Jesus Christ.