

# RCIA numbers hold strong, give hope to Church

All politics is local, as Tip O'Neill, the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, used to say.

The same can be said of the Catholic Church.

In a time of crisis and scandal related to clergy sex abuse, people still are approaching their local parishes to inquire about becoming Catholic and enrolling in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). In small rural parishes and large urban churches, pastors, lay staff and volunteers across the country say more people than ever are deciding to enter the Church, regardless of the controversies pertaining to priest-abusers and negligent bishops.

"It is strange, because considering everything that happened last summer, I thought our (RCIA) numbers would be down," said Father Richard Mullins, the pastor of St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Washington, D.C.

Father Mullins was referring to headlines last August about the explosive Pennsylvania grand jury report that documented evidence alleging 301 priests in that state sexually abused more than 1,000 minors over a 70-year period. That report has prompted dozens of other states to launch their own investigations into clergy sex abuse. Also last summer, the Church in America was rocked by revelations that former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the erstwhile archbishop of Washington, D.C., had been credibly accused of sexually abusing minors and seminarians for several decades. McCarrick since has been removed from the clerical state.

## **'Bigger than the scandals'**

But while the scandals cast a dark cloud over national episcopal conferences and the Vatican, that apparently has not discouraged thousands of people from different Christian backgrounds and other faith traditions from wanting to be baptized Catholic and receive the sacraments.

"Everyone who joined our RCIA last summer has stayed with it. It's amazing to see. They realize the Church is bigger than the scandals and the problems," said Father Mullins, whose small urban parish will have six people entering the Church at the Easter Vigil on April 20.

"Last year we had three people received into the Church," Father Mullins told Our Sunday Visitor.

In the Archdiocese of New York, 350 catechumens – the unbaptized who are coming into the Church – went to St. Patrick's Cathedral this year to participate in the Rite of Election with Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the archbishop of New York. "The numbers are holding steady," said Joseph Zwilling, the communications director for the Archdiocese of New York. The 350 catechumens are up slightly from previous years. In 2018, 277 took part in the Rite of Election at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Said Zwilling, "It is remarkable and a very hopeful sign that, despite all the bad news that seems to dominate the headlines about the Church, so many people feel and follow through on the call to join the Church."

## **'That is not the Church'**

In the Archdiocese of Chicago, more than 500 catechumens and 200 candidates will enter the Church this year. In comparison, 371 catechumens and 252 candidates in Chicago entered the Church last year. In 2014, 413 catechumens and 380 candidates were received into the Church.

“From what I can tell, the scandals have turned zero people away from coming into the Church,” said Kathy Schulze, a volunteer member of the RCIA team at Holy Trinity Church in Gainesville, Virginia. Schulze, who was raised Presbyterian, became Catholic in 2015. Not too long after, she said a friend wrote her to ask how she could enter the Catholic Church “with all those pedophile priests.”

### **What Happens at the Easter Vigil**

At the Easter Vigil – this year on April 20 – catechumens will be baptized and receive their first Communion and confirmation. Candidates – those already validly baptized – will make a profession of faith, receive their first Communion and confirmation.

“What I shared with her was, ‘Look, those are human beings. Those are men. That is not the Church,’” Schulze told OSV, adding that the priests who run the RCIA meetings talked about the sex abuse scandals early on in their first few gatherings. “We don’t skirt around the issue,” said Schulze, whose parish of 4,000 families every year has about 30 people who join RCIA.

At St. Mark Church in Huntersville, North Carolina, 36 people will be received into the Church at the Easter Vigil, said Amy Berger, the parish’s public relations coordinator.

“Our church is a growing, vibrant parish that has remained strong, and our RCIA program is growing,” said Berger, who also told OSV that 29 people in the parish last year became Catholic at the Easter Vigil.

In 2016, St. Mark Church – a large parish with more than 5,000 families and 85 active ministries – welcomed 23 people into the Church. In 2015, Berger said that number was 19.

“We haven’t really seen any impact,” Berger said. “You also could say, ‘Where else would we go? This is our Church.’”

## Addressing the issues

Having pastors and RCIA leaders who acknowledge and directly address the scandals seems to go a long way in convincing catechumens and candidates that they are not making a mistake in becoming Catholic. Said Father Mullins: "Yes, we're the Church universal, but it ultimately comes down to: Are you being served by your parish? Are you being served by your priest? Do you feel a sense of community and common purpose in your parish family?"

Explaining why many parishes are seeing increases in RCIA enrollment, Father Dennis Gill, the director of the Office for Divine Worship for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, said the clergy sex abuse crisis "is happening on two levels."

"I think in strong Catholic parishes, things are good. But on the international level, things are not as good," said Father Gill, who is also the rector of the Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia.

Father Gill said the cathedral parish this year has eight adult and four children catechumens and 10 adult candidates. He said those numbers are "twice as many" as the parish had last year in those categories.

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia as a whole also has seen slight increases in not only catechumen and candidates, but also in the number of parishes that sent people to the Rites of Election and the Call to Continuing Conversion.

"It almost always has to do with a relationship with Our Lord. That, I would say, is the principal reason for why people want to be received into the Church," Father Gill said.

Dianna Rottiers, the pastoral associate at Holy Trinity Church in Comstock Park, Michigan, told OSV that the RCIA numbers have been holding steady at her small rural parish, which usually has two or three people enter the Church. This week,

someone called her about enrolling in RCIA.

“They are a light and a hope for us,” Rottiers said. “They’re able to see beyond the headlines. They’re able to follow their heart in what God has already been doing in their lives.”

*Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*

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