

# RCIA impact felt in Arkansas and beyond

written by Tara Little |



The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has made an indelible mark on the Catholic Church in Arkansas. Sister Mary Glynn, SJC, diocesan director of religious education and Christian initiation, estimates more 11,000 people have entered the Church through RCIA since 1984, the first year statewide enrollment was recorded.

The U.S. bishops approved RCIA as the official method for adult initiation in 1988. It was a process begun by the world's bishops when they reinstated the adult catechumenate at the Second Vatican Council. In the early Church, those seeking baptism (catechumens) were adopted into small faith communities where they learned the Christian way of life over time. Through RCIA adult formation takes place within parishes over several months and culminates with initiation at the Easter Vigil. Both the unbaptized and those already baptized in other Christian churches enter through this process.

Msgr. J. Gaston Hebert, diocesan administrator, said RCIA is "the most effective manner of the proclamation of the Gospel that we have in the local Church today. It has been an avenue by which we can approach people and tell them about what Christ teaches us in the fullness of the teachings of the Catholic Church."

Sister Mary said RCIA is not simply a theology class, it is also a formation, "an apprenticeship through which people come to know Christ." It involves the entire Christian community, not just the priests. The goal is not just intellectual change, but also "a conversion of heart."

Those who made the journey seem to want to be active, and that is the proof that RCIA is working, she said. The purpose is to become a disciple who shares the faith with others.

Now, nearly 25 years after RCIA began in the Diocese of Little Rock, Msgr. Hebert said he has witnessed converts "become central in the educational, cultural, social and liturgical life of the Church."

"If you look around in all your parishes, whether it's the diocesan level or the parish level, wherever it is, we are filled with the riches that God gave to us through RCIA," he said.

Converts "want to be involved deeply in the Church. Your average RCIA person doesn't want this to be some kind of shallow conversion. They want it to be a true conversion into the life of Christ within the Church."

In March, Arkansas Catholic asked Catholic parishes, schools and religious orders across the state to identify RCIA converts who are making a difference in their communities.

The response was impressive. Many who have entered the local Church through RCIA are now deacons, religious sisters, Catholic and public school educators, RCIA coordinators, diocesan and parish employees, Knights of Columbus, Cursillo leaders, theology students, catechists, youth ministers, extraordinary ministers of Communion and lay oblates for religious orders. And that's just a sampling from those identified.

In three very different ways, the following stories highlight the impact of the state's RCIA process not only on Arkansas, but the world.

Dr. Don Greenway, deacon  
Christ the King, Little Rock

After surviving a life-threatening battle with cancer in 1989, Dr. Don Greenway resolved to submit to God's will. From that point on, obedience became his daily prayer.

Since then God has not only brought Greenway into the Catholic Church, but also into the ordained clergy as a deacon. He also started a Honduras medical mission for his parish, Christ the King in Little Rock.

"God did all of this," Greenway said.

Until his cancer, he had happily attended the Methodist church all his life. He and his Catholic wife Jan attended separate churches for 25 years while they raised their three sons in the Catholic Church. They had a happy home.

After participating in a series of spiritual retreats, Bible studies and other religious activities, the Greenways steadily grew spiritually. In 1993 they decided to attend RCIA so they could better teach their sons the faith.

Though he had no plans to become Catholic, Greenway said by the spring of 1994, "God began to open my eyes and I realized that he was calling me to this church." He entered the Church at the Easter Vigil Mass in 1994.

Greenway was eager to serve. He and his wife helped with the parish's youth ministry until former pastor Msgr. Hebert asked the doctor to start a medical mission. After nearly two years of hard work and planning, and several obstacle-removing acts of God, the first weeklong mission trip to Trujillo, Honduras, took place in the spring of 1997, Greenway said.

Since then at least 60,000 Hondurans have received basic medical treatment and medicine through the mission's walk-in clinics.

In addition, Little Rock medical professionals, also perform several surgeries at the Trujillo hospital. And at least two Honduran children are brought back to Little Rock each year for major orthopedic or heart surgery.

The annual mission also assists six Catholic churches and schools in the Trujillo area. A construction team has built several structures for these as well as the hospital and a Catholic orphanage. The hospital has also received a generator and x-ray and ultrasound machines. Being a part of the mission has "helped me see Jesus as I have never seen him before in a very real and living way. It has made me aware of the call that we all have to help others."

Becoming a deacon in 2002 was a call that Greenway said was "already in my heart" even before he became Catholic. Serving in this way is "a humbling experience."

This year the Greenways are RCIA sponsors for their niece and nephew, who will enter the Church at Christ the King's Easter Vigil. The deacon married the couple at a local Methodist church two years ago. Jan Greenway is now director of religious education for the parish.

Greenway, a gastroenterologist, who also works 60 hours a week, serves on the medical ethics committee at St. Vincent Infirmiry Medical Center in Little Rock. He has been an advisor on cases dealing with end-of-life issues.

"I spend a lot of time in my practice involving my faith and I consider that one of my primary

community ministries," he said.

Msgr. Hebert said of Greenway, "I think he is a prime example of what can be done through conversions through the RCIA process."

Dee Pillow, principal

St. Mary School, Paragould

It was St. Mary School that introduced Dee Pillow, her husband Arthur and their daughter Julia to the Catholic Church in the late 1980s. Julia transferred to the school in first grade and loved everything about it, so did her parents.

By third grade Julia wanted to receive first Communion like her friends had in second grade. After consulting with then St. Mary pastor Father Richard Davis, the couple decided to support Julia's decision by attending RCIA. Though Dee planned to become Catholic, her husband had no plans to leave the Methodist church, where the family had long been active members. After months of weekly RCIA sessions in 1990, Pillow said she began to feel a peace like she never felt before. An uneasiness she had always felt went away. Her husband was feeling the same peace and "the closer we got to the date, he finally said, 'I'm going to go with you.'" They entered the Church that December. Julia had received first Communion the previous spring. Today Dee Pillow, 54, is principal of the school that evangelized her and her family. After 28 years as a public school teacher, being a Catholic school principal was never part of her plan, but she said, it was obviously part of God's.

At first she turned down the job for financial reasons. Then nearly two years later, she was offered the job a second time.

"I started thinking about it, praying about; God wouldn't let me alone," she said. Then "all the little dominoes started to fall."

By that time she was able to retire with benefits from public schools and her husband, who had been self-employed, was offered a higher paying job that allowed her to take the job.

Pillow is in her third year as principal. The school has 75 students from preschool to sixth grade and only 50 percent are Catholic.

Catholics are a minority in Paragould, which, Pillow said, gives her many opportunities to teach others about the faith. Many parents inquiring about the school come to her with strange ideas about Catholicism and she sets them straight.

She said she also represents her Church by interacting with the community through the organizations in which she is a member.

"I have to be the example of what we should be or try to be when we're Catholic."

For her students she is an example both in and out of school. She helps teach sacramental preparation classes and serves as sacristan for the Saturday night Mass. "When I see my kids at Mass I make sure that I wave at them. I make sure that they see me," she said.

Pillow said she also makes sure the parish sees her students. They serve as altar servers and lectors at Masses and all special school events, like Christmas plays and graduations, are planned around the Mass.

When non-Catholic parents express hesitation about attending, she said she invites them to sit with her so she can explain the Mass.

Catholic schools superintendent Vernell Bowen said Pillow is key to her community.

"She has always been welcoming to all faiths and provides opportunities for non-Catholics to learn more about the Catholic faith in a non-threatening manner," Bowen said. "She is a convert who has embraced her faith."

Sister Magdalen Stanton, OSB

St. Scholastica Monastery, Fort Smith

For Lain Stanton it was the community of Immaculate Conception Church in Fort Smith that

inspired her to become Catholic in 1994. Later it was the Benedictine influence of Subiaco Abbey that directed her to the religious life in 1997. Today Sister Magdalen Stanton, OSB, is oblate director at St. Scholastica Monastery in Fort Smith.

Looking back Sister Magdalen, 69, said she remembers asking herself why she was converting because she loved her Protestant church.

"It was definitely God tugging, but at the same time I ended up in a place that a whole community was reinforcing it," she said.

She moved from Memphis, Tenn., to live near her sister, Patty O'Brien and her family in 1992. O'Brien was a convert and teacher at Immaculate Conception School. Stanton's 15-year marriage ended and she wanted to reconnect with family. She started attending Mass with the O'Briens.

"The people at IC were just beautiful examples of what I call Gospel behaviors," she said.

"They were truly hospitable."

In 1993 she began the RCIA process with "a frisky little Irish sister" as her sponsor, also known as Sister Mary Sarto Gaffney, RSM. She is the school's librarian and when she taught the faith, "she was dead serious."

After she entered the Church at the Easter Vigil in 1994, O'Brien started introducing her sister to various Catholic communities, including Subiaco Abbey and St. Scholastica Monastery. Sister Magdalen said she attended retreats at Subiaco's Coury House and became a lay oblate for St. Scholastica. Eventually she took a job at Coury House Bookstore, where she read every spiritual book available.

During that time, Sister Magdalen said she attended prayer with the monks and got very comfortable in the monastic setting.

She inquired about joining St. Scholastica. After getting an annulment and being Catholic for three years she could enter the monastery.

She started the process in the Diocese of Memphis where then Father J. Peter Sartain was her tribunal advocate. She received her annulment and entered the monastery as a postulant in 1997 at age 59.

She changed her name to "Magdalen" and learned to live by the Rule of St. Benedict. She made her first vows in 2000 and her final profession in 2003.

She redesigned the religious order's Web site in 2000 and became oblate director in 2001.

Oblates are lay Christians who choose to apply the Benedictine charisms to their lives. These include simplicity, hospitality, humility, service and balance between prayer, work and recreation.

St. Scholastica has 130 oblates nationwide. They are married and single, men and women.

Sister Magdalen welcomes oblates monthly from September to May to the monastery for Mass and meetings where speakers teach the Benedictine rule.

Being a sister and leading the oblate program brings numerous opportunities to teach the faith, Sister Magdalen said.

St. Scholastica prioress Sister Cabrini Schmitz, OSB, appointed Sister Magdalen oblate director. She said Sister Magdalen's background helps her relate better to questions about the Church's teachings.

"She can understand the questions and where they come from," Sister Cabrini said. "She makes people really feel comfortable in being here."

Sister Magdalen said she couldn't imagine doing anything else with her life.

"I love it," she said. "You come in to work toward a constant conversion."

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