

# Parochial schools can nudge some students to convert

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Sometimes, when Protestant students attend parochial school, they feel the Holy Spirit lead them to enter the Catholic Church. With more than 650 Arkansans preparing to enter the Church this Easter season, three students shared their faith journeys as they prepare to become Catholic.

## **John Bohannon**

### **Catholic High School, Little Rock**

John Bohannon, a senior at Catholic High School in Little Rock, was raised Methodist but has attended Catholic schools his whole life. He said he originally fell away from religion because he felt like he was forced to participate in religious activities.

“I stopped going to church when I was 8, or 10 or 11. ... I never really felt a connection to the Methodist faith,” Bohannon said.

But Bohannon said things were different at Catholic High.

“They didn’t force it on me. Of course, we had to go to Mass with everyone once in a while, which I didn’t mind,” Bohannon said.

Whenever Bohannon found himself feeling remorse for something he’d done, his first

inclination was to go to Mass and pray, despite being what he considered an atheist.

Soon, Bohannon made friends with devout Catholics and his classmates. When Bohannon went with other seniors to Rome last summer, he found himself asking his friends questions about the faith, Church history and the Vatican.

“After that, I came back, and I started to get more involved in my faith,” Bohannon said. “I felt a connection to Catholicism, I think mainly because I grew up in it.”

Soon, he was attending Catholic Youth Ministry events at Christ the King Church in Little Rock with his close friends. Bohannon began asking Father Patrick Friend, chaplain for Catholic High, questions as well.

“John has spoken with me at various points on his journey to the faith,” Father Friend said. “He will stop by my classroom or see me during lunch to ask questions or catch up on what he is learning.”

Soon, Bohannon made the decision to convert. He will be confirmed and receive the Eucharist during the Easter Vigil at Christ the King Church.

In recent years, Catholic High School has seen several Protestant students enter the faith while attending the all-boys’ high school.

“Christ is the reason for Catholic High,” Father Friend said. “It is hard to turn in any direction without seeing some reminder of him as you walk through our school. ... We come together to celebrate the Mass that he gave us, and we frequently offer confession, adoration, as well as seasonal devotions like the stations of the cross. Our faculty is made up of many faithful witnesses to the faith. I think this environment puts our students in contact with the Lord Jesus, and, for that reason, their hearts are open to his Church.”

Father Friend said Bohannon’s conversion, and the conversion of Catholic High students, is proof of hope in the world.

“There is power in any conversion story, but to see a young person begin to take the faith so seriously is an incredible witness,” Father Friend said. “Many of the polls published today warn of doom and gloom for the future of the faith in our country. However, John’s zeal for our God and the Catholic Church is a sign of hope.”

## **Rhys Shipley**

### **St. Joseph School, Fayetteville**

Rhys Shipley, a sixth grader at St. Joseph School in Fayetteville, has had his share of challenges on the path to the Catholic faith.

Shipley’s family was Methodist and Southern Baptist, but he has attended parochial school since pre-kindergarten. In pre-K, Shipley developed epilepsy and was later diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder.

Shipley’s mother, Jamie Shipley, said these challenges brought Rhys closer to God and made him more interested in religion.

“Rhys is really, really interested in religion,” Jamie said. “He spends so much time in and out of

the hospital, and it's super important to him, because it's the thing that you can take anywhere and do anywhere. There's not a lot of judgment associated with learning about God, whereas there's a lot of judgment about keeping up with your math class."

Rhys's love for religion continued to grow, even as he fought health issues and worked to keep up in school. He often told his mother that he wanted to be Catholic.

"He wanted to be a part of it and fit in with his friends at school," Jamie said. "But I think more so than that, he really, really likes the discussion of God at school. ... The repetition is really great for him. The ceremony and the ritual make sense to him — things are not always changing, and it's comforting."

Together, Jamie and Rhys started RCIA classes in 2018. As things began to return to normal after the COVID pandemic, Rhys reminded his mother — it was time to finish what they had started years before.

"He just kept after me, saying, 'Mom, I want to join the Church. I want to join the Church.' So we started going to Mass again," Jamie said.

Jamie finished her RCIA classes and joined the Church in the fall of 2023. But with Rhys' busy schedule of tutoring and therapy and school, it was impossible to attend classes. Father Jason Tyler, pastor of St. Joseph Church in Fayetteville, and Deacon Jason Pohlmeier, principal of St. Joseph School in Fayetteville, worked with Rhys to complete the RCIA process. Rhys received his sacraments March 22 and traveled to Memphis the following Sunday for brain surgery.

Pohlmeier said he has found inspiration in Rhys' determination.

"Rhys' life has been full of obstacles that he and his family continually overcome. It seems poignant that even his final steps to the sacraments faced an obstacle," he said. "What has inspired me most is that there was no hesitation from his family to adjust and seek the sacramental grace before his Holy Week surgery. What a special blessing for him to have that sacramental grace so close to his heart during this next challenge."

From his hospital room, Rhys told *Arkansas Catholic* how he's feeling about his long and determined religious journey.

"I want to meet God, and in the meantime, I want to study and learn about God," Rhys said. "I'm very satisfied to become Catholic after waiting so long. It's been a long wait with a lot of interruptions. I want to thank my Mom for all the hard work to help me join the Church, and Father Tyler and Principal Pohlmeier for being so nice about the timing."

## **Hayden Johnson**

### **Ozark Catholic Academy, Tontitown**

When Hayden Johnson, a senior at Ozark Catholic Academy in Tontitown, told his family he wanted to enter the Catholic Church, he couldn't believe their response — his mother, father and two younger brothers wanted to join too.

Rachel and Jeremiah Johnson were raised Baptist, but after getting married, the two began attending the Presbyterian church, into which Hayden, 18, and his two brothers, Myles, 14, and Wyatt, 11, were baptized.

At the beginning of 2022, the Johnsons sent Hayden, a sophomore at the time, to Ozark Catholic Academy. His classmates embraced him and soon Hayden was playing football with his new friends every day and attending Masses at the school.

But in April 2022, Hayden fell ill. He struggled to “bounce back,” and wanted to stay at home and pray the rosary instead of attending a Protestant church service with his family.

As he rested on the family couch, Hayden taught his mother how to pray the rosary.

“It was just inspiring to me that Hayden wanted to stay home and pray the rosary,” Rachel said. “He felt like that was more meaningful than going to church. So I started learning how to pray the rosary.”

It was through the rosary that Rachel began to ask much bigger questions about her own faith while Hayden navigated his own at school.

“I’d been praying Hail Marys and really started to feel like, this is Jesus’ mother — why is she so hidden or non-existent in all the Protestant churches that we’ve gone to? The only time that Mary is ever mentioned is at the birth of Christ,” Rachel said. “But I am a mother and I related to her so much as a mother. Why is she so hidden in Protestant churches?”

As Rachel continued to read and research about saints, Hayden worked to deepen his own faith after being diagnosed with meningitis.

“I just kept on praying to Mary to intercede for Hayden,” Rachel said.

The Johnsons are preparing to complete RCIA at St. Stephen Church in Bentonville. In between exams and senior events and RCIA classes, Hayden told *Arkansas Catholic* how he’s feeling about his faith journey.

“I decided to become Catholic because all my Catholic friends seemed to have a staunch faith. Also, in a world that is constantly changing, the Catholic Church holds firm to their beliefs, despite popular culture,” Hayden said. “My immediate family is converting with me ... my friends are mostly Catholic, so they were very excited.”

As Hayden looks to the future, he’s excited for what’s to come, eager to face the path with his newfound faith.

“I don’t plan to go to college, but I plan to raise my future children Catholic,” Hayden said. “I am very excited to be coming into the Catholic Church this Easter — I am excited to finally be converting after wanting to for a couple of years.”