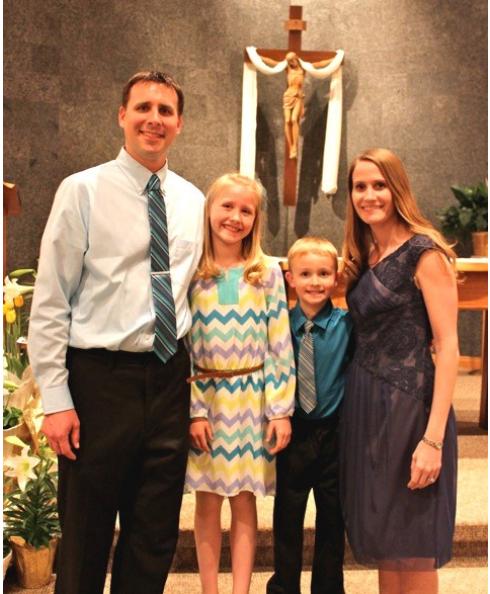


The Journeys of some who Joined the Church at Easter (continued on next page)



Josh Lyons

My RCIA experience this past year lead me to a stronger understanding of the Catholic Church as well as my own spirituality. I have always had a belief in God or at least in a higher power, but I never really understood what that meant in the context of my own life.

Our family has been a member of the church for several years because my wife, Michelle, is Catholic and grew up going to Mass with her family. I, on the other hand, did not grow up attending church for various reasons. As a family attending St. Mary's, I have always gone, but without understanding or really wanting to understand. It was just the "right" thing to do for the family and kids.

Over the past few years my attitude and interest changed in the church due to my daughter receiving her first communion

and other various life events that gave me pause about my life and purpose. I wanted to know more and understand my spirituality and faith in a different way and go deeper. I knew there was something more. This is when I turned to the church and knew it was time to join not just as a "member" but as a true participant for both my family and myself.

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The RCIA experience this past year has given me a renewed sense of who I am and where I belong. Father and the Deacons were very much vested in our learning as a group and did not hesitate to answer questions about the Catholic faith and its traditions. We had many great discussions about the history of the church but even more so about Jesus Christ and the lessons he teaches us through scripture. The RCIA experience allowed us all as new members to the Catholic Church to become a family in faith together as we developed this new found understanding of not just what it means to be a Catholic but what it means to be Christian and to live the life that we were meant to have. The Kingdom of God is within each of us.

Jessica Wulfkuhle



My faith journey started when my son Max was born in the summer of 2013. Max had an eventful first 6 months of life. He had airway surgery in September and a scheduled heart surgery in December.

While discussing Max's baptism, Father Vrba handed me RCIA class forms and told me that although life was crazy, come when I could. And I did.

Max went in for heart surgery and was in the OR for 2 hours before his surgeon and cardiologist came up to the PICU to tell us they were not doing the surgery and that we'd be going home that day! I put my head in my hands, sobbed, praised God, thanked Jesus and went to recovery to get my baby!

Soon calmer days arrived, classes continued and Max got healthier every day. Tyler (my very patient 9 year old son) had more of my attention and I was becoming more involved in the church. At Easter Vigil, we received the Sacraments. It wasn't until that night that I realized just how bonded we all are. We grew together to know God and His Son. We all started our faith journey for different reasons, but we all crossed the bridge towards God. What a blessing it has been to know, learn, share and pray with them over this past year!

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God used Max to bring our family closer to Him and truly, my journey has just begun. I find myself spending more time in prayer. Finding the message that scripture is telling me. Letting the Holy Spirit enter my heart and guide me. Healing has begun, not only on Max but in my heart too.



Kimberly Cullens

My desire to learn more about the Catholic Church started after my husband and I moved back to Iowa from Denver, CO to be closer to family. My husband and his family are Catholic. Growing up Lutheran, and experimenting with various Protestant denominations, I told my husband that I would *never* convert. I can be quite stubborn when I want to be, and unfortunately I was taught that Catholics were not Christians. So, I firmly "held my ground." However, I went to Mass with my husband when he wanted, and secretly wished I could partake in receiving communion.

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I floored my husband when I told him I was signing up for RCIA classes. There were never any epiphanies associated with my interest in Catholicism. I just felt a strong desire to create unity in my marriage in every way that I could. I then began to feel empty from not having received any type of communion since starting RCIA classes. I couldn't just go to a Lutheran church and receive communion anymore, because I knew the true meaning of the practice. I also began to learn that not only are Catholics strong Christians, but they are technically the very first Christian Church.

I had no idea! That alone led to a strong conviction that Catholicism was the right path for me.

Meeting every Tuesday night was peaceful for me. As a new mother, I found it helpful for me to take time for myself to relax. It was always a very relaxing and spiritual experience. Sometimes, I try to recreate the peace I felt every Tuesday evening at home by curling up with Catholic literature and drinking Chamomile tea. At the Easter Vigil, I felt like a child being welcomed into God's big family in a new and life-changing way. It still hasn't hit me yet that I am a true Catholic and always will be. It may take time for that to sink in, but the Easter Vigil definitely made me realize how fortunate I am to have such a great faith community who supports my spiritual growth. Not only that, but I feel blessed that I have a husband who is on the same page and supports me with utmost patience and understanding. I feel so confident in my Christian faith and in my religion, which is something that I have always wanted in my life. My daughter will now be able to ask both of her parents questions about the Catholic faith, and the journey is just beginning!



Dewayne Olney

Two and half years ago I experienced a brain aneurysm. As you can tell, I'm still alive. After my brush with death, I found out that only 25% survive. Why me? After a lot of thought, it had to be a higher calling. I grew up in a catholic home and graduated from Regina. So, the catholic religion was always in my life but never apart of my life.

After all that I was talking to Terry Rassmussen one night and asked him if he would go the journey with me and become my sponsor. He said, "yes". Not knowing what to expect, Terry, Fr. Jim, the parish family and my extended family in RCIA class made it so easy. The whole experience was the best thing I've ever done.

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I would suggest to anyone that might be on the fence, to sit in on some of the classes at first and talk with any of the parish families to see what their experiences have been. You won't regret it. If you still don't think it's for you, that's OK too. I will now and forever be thankful to everyone at St. Mary's with my journey of getting closer to God and his teachings. This experience has made my relationship with my wife, my children, and people in general stronger.

God Bless all of you from the bottom of my heart! Dewayne



Lisa Pfannebecker

I was first invited by Theresa Bonnema to participate in a mommy's book club through the church. I was happy to have a venue to share my motherly experiences and hear other moms' insight, so gladly joined. I was amazed at how warmly I was welcomed into the study, especially considering that I had no Catholic background. When the group was over, I very much missed our weekly interactions.

I had been wanting to explore and hopefully join a local church at some point, but had never even considered St. Mary's since I was raised Protestant and not Catholic. However, I felt compelled by God to visit Mass. Normally, I would have been hesitant, for fear of being pressured into committing or overwhelmed by people in my face or feeling out of place since I didn't know the Catholic traditions, but I didn't feel any of those feelings. I just felt very strongly I wanted to be a part of a group of such sincerely warm, caring, thoughtful, truly Christian people.

After a few visits, I again felt compelled by God to pursue joining the Church. While I felt that I was bypassing my obligatory

visits to the other two churches in town, I truly felt that would be a waste of my time because I knew exactly what I was supposed to do. I spent several weeks deliberating, reading and re-reading the section of the website that talked about joining the church, and discussing everything with my parents. Finally, I felt there was no denying what was so obvious to me, so I emailed Father Jim.

From my initial contact through the end of my RCIA classes and Holy Saturday (and still today, of course), I felt a strong, holy, soul-encompassing sensation of peace. I think Fr. Jim was very instrumental in making me feel welcome, yet not overwhelmed. He's a very strong, stable presence and that's what I needed. I could not be happier that God led me to St. Mary's. I feel that Catholicism answers all of my doubts and

questions I had as a protestant. I feel both sects of faith are intertwined, so my upbringing lends itself well to my new Catholic journey...but I feel there is so much more meaning and rooted historical context in Catholicism. I have been searching for

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Catholicism all my life and I finally found it! I feel I've finally found my Church family and so look forward to growing in my faith at St. Mary's, as well as raising my beautiful angel, Oliver, with strong faith, within our church family.



Lisa Pfannebecker's journey into the Catholic Church began with an invitation:

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evan·ge·lize *verb \i-'van-jə-,līz* to share the good news of Jesus Christ

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19).

Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.

Each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are. All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives. Our falling short of perfection should be no excuse; on the contrary, mission is a constant stimulus not to remain mired in mediocrity but to continue growing.

It has to do with bringing the Gospel to the people we meet, whether they be our neighbors or complete strangers. Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey.

The first step is personal dialogue, when the other person speaks and shares his or her joys, hopes and concerns for loved ones, or so many other heartfelt needs. Only afterwards is it possible to bring up God's word, perhaps by a Bible verse or relating a story, but always keeping in mind the fundamental message: the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship.

The Joy of the Gospel Pope Francis November, 2013