News



Fr. Christopher Masla holds the Book of the Elect at the Diocese of Richmond's Rite of Election at Our Lady of Nazareth Church in Roanoke, Va., March 1, 2026. In a record for the Diocese of Richmond, 900 people will be baptized, receive the Eucharist, and be confirmed in the Catholic Church at Easter Vigil Masses April 4. (OSV News/Diocese of Richmond/Ryan Hunt)

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A record number of people — 900 — will be baptized, receive the Eucharist and be confirmed in the Catholic Church at Easter Vigil Masses on April 4 in the Diocese of Richmond.

"People are looking for something that is true," said Chris Emsley, lead catechist at St. Stephen, Martyr Church in Chesapeake, "and the church has been true for 2,000 years."

"People are hungry for the Lord," echoed Rose Scott, catechist at Holy Rosary Church in Richmond.

The weekend of Feb. 28 and March 1, Bishop Barry Knestout of Richmond presided at the Rite of Election in each of the diocese's three vicariates. Cristy Barton, who works in the diocesan Office of Christian Formation, called each of the 900 catechumens by name.

After the Rite of Election, the catechumens are called "the elect" until they are baptized at the Easter Vigil Mass.

One notable characteristic of this class of catechumens is how young many of them are.

"At St. Stephen, Martyr, the average age is in the 20s," Emsley told The Catholic Virginian, Richmond's diocesan news outlet. "This generation was raised with the idea that truth is subjective and relative. They went through life feeling lost.

Unchanging truth is very attractive to the younger generation."

There are so many young people in the group that Emsley's wife, Ann — also a parish leader for the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults, or OCIA – had to organize a separate group for teenagers.

"This year, there were six high schoolers who called us, whose parents are not Catholic – or in some cases, not even practicing Christians," she said. "These teens are incredibly well-read in the Catholic faith. Some of these kids are reading St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine. And they are on fire for this beautiful faith."

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Samuel Cece is a 16-year-old in the OCIA program at St. Stephen, Martyr. Cece said he didn't know anything about Jesus until he was in third grade, when his teacher was explaining the difference between "B.C." and "A.D." in history class.

"I had this idea, when I was younger, that there's no such thing as God. I didn't even think of it as a possibility," said Cece. But for years, he continued to be interested in the person of Jesus.

Last year, his girlfriend gave him a comic book Bible.

"It explains everything with a visual representation. I read it every night for a month," said Cece. "It made so much sense to me."

His parents have been supportive of his journey. His mother gifted him his first real Bible — her own. It was the only thing that survived a house fire when she was a young girl.

"Now I'm experiencing my own journey to Catholicism," said Cece. "I researched all the denominations, and Catholicism makes the most sense — in part, because it was the first one."

The Richmond diocesan Office of Christian Formation has kept data on the number of catechumens joining the Church since 2015, when there were 242 newly baptized Catholics. Catechumens receive the sacraments of initiation — baptism, first Communion and confirmation.

Candidates are those already baptized who are entering full communion with the church at Easter and they will receive their first Communion and/or confirmation. The Richmond Diocese has several hundred candidates this year.

The diocese has achieved a new high in the number of catechumens in each of the past four years, culminating with 650 baptisms last year. This year's 38% spike mirrors similar signs of Catholic revival in dioceses and archdioceses across the nation.

Among them is the Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey, where there has been an extraordinary jump in the number of people seeking to become Catholic over the past five plus years. This year, 1,095 are expected to receive their sacraments this year, dwarfing the numbers from 2020 (566) and the years that followed: 2021, 386; 2022, 548; 2023, 582; 2024, 763; and 2025, 795.

It seems that there has been a "renewed search for God in a world where many people are longing for hope, love and peace," Denise Contino, director of the diocese's Department of Catechesis, told the Trenton Monitor.



Catechists hold the Book of the Elect at the Diocese of Richmond's Rite of Election at St. Bede Catholic Church in Williamsburg, Va., Feb. 28, 2026. (OSV News/Diocese of Richmond/Vy Barto)

Elsewhere in the country, the Archdiocese of Washington has over 1,500 catechumens and candidates this year; the Archdiocese of Seattle has 1,595 catechumens and candidates; and the Archdiocese of Chicago is preparing to welcome 1,059 catechumens and candidates.

In the Richmond Diocese, Isaiah Watrous, 24, said he joined OCIA at the Basilica of St. Andrew in Roanoke after learning about the Church on social media.

"What drew me in at first was the aesthetics, the beauty," he said. "Then I started watching theological debates on YouTube and Instagram."

Kaelynn Lake, a 21-year-old student at Hollins University, is also in OCIA at the basilica. She learned about the Church through content creators like Father Mike Schmitz, who produces "The Bible in a Year" podcast and YouTube videos offering Catholic answers to common questions.

"It began when I came to Mass with a friend for the first time, and then I started discovering Eucharistic miracles online," said Lake. "It's been a really beautiful journey."

"Young people are seeking fulfillment," said Lindsey McAllister, associate director of Catholic campus ministry at Virginia Tech, where there are 12 elect and 34 candidates for full communion.

"College campuses can be so isolating. You're surrounded by negativity," McAllister said. "But so many people are looking for a way to serve others, to serve something that is bigger than themselves."