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Catholic schools help swell ranks of Easter converts

by Adelle M. Banks by Religion News Service

WASHINGTON -- With less than two weeks to go, fifth-grader Simone Marshall ticked off what she was looking forward to most as she awaited the Easter Vigil where she would officially become a Roman Catholic.

"I cannot wait to get baptized so I can be born again and I can be closer to Jesus," she said, dressed in her plaid school uniform from St. Augustine Catholic School. "I cannot wait to receive the blood and body of Jesus."

Last year, 19 non-Catholic children at St. Augustine entered the Catholic Church at the elaborate vigil the night before Easter, when the Catholic Church typically receives thousands of new members in the U.S.

This year, Simone will be one of more than a dozen children from St. Augustine who will don purple robes for their baptism, and then change into white robes for their first Communion.

Across the country, Catholic schools have become nontraditional mission fields for the large number of non-Catholic children who enter their doors. More than 700 non-Catholic students, parents and staff joined the church last year, according to an informal survey by the National Catholic Educational Association.

In many dioceses, just one or two children became Catholic. But some archdioceses reported they came by the dozens -- 100 in Philadelphia, 76 in Miami, and 74 in Baltimore.

The Catholic ethos of the schools -- regular Masses, prayers and religious education -- prompt non-Catholic students to consider conversion, often when they come from unchurched or Protestant backgrounds, students and staff say.

“That’s just kind of the perfect setting for people to be receptive to the faith,” said Karen Ristau, president of the NCEA, based in Arlington, Va. “They build these wonderful communities, they teach the faith well and consequently new people are joining the church.”

At St. Augustine, the school day ends with a child’s voice on the public address system asking fellow students to “please stop for a moment and get ready for the afternoon prayers.” Students’ drawings of the Stations of the Cross line the main hallway, which ends at a statue of the Virgin Mary, draped in a purple scarf for Lent.

In the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, at least 41 students, 60 parents and eight teachers became Catholic last year. At this year’s Easter Vigil in Oklahoma City, 15 students, three teachers and 28 parents are joining the church.

Sister Catherine Powers, the archdiocese’s superintendent of schools, said students who choose a Catholic school must respect its religious practices, even if they don’t embrace the faith outside of school. But some decide to make it a way of life.

“Our whole philosophy is anyone is welcome to come to our schools, but our reason for existence is religion,” she said of the schools, where one in five students is non-Catholic. “All are welcome but it’s not pick-and-choose what you want to be a part of.”

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In Memphis, Tenn., the overall Catholic student population is about 30 percent non-Catholic. Its inner city schools are 80 percent non-Catholic, a drop from about 92 percent a few years ago that Superintendent Mary McDonald attributes to evangelization. This Easter, 16 students and 10 parents are joining the church.

“I had one boy tell me that he really wanted to be a priest,” McDonald said. “I said, ‘That’s wonderful ... but first you’re going to have to become Catholic because all the priests are Catholic.’ Sure enough, a couple of years later that boy and his family came into the church.”

John Convey, a professor of education at Catholic University of America, said African-American students in urban Catholic schools may be more likely to switch from a Protestant faith. But however students come to join, schools are focused on evangelization rather than proselytizing, often following up when students inquire about the faith.

“It happens by example and by helping students see the value of religion as seen through the Catholic faith,” he said. “It’s not, ‘Oh, here comes a non-Catholic. I want to make sure that this child becomes a Catholic before the end of the school year.’ ... Evangelization is more of an invitation than it is an act of recruitment.”

Catholic conversions also occur on Catholic college campuses. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University found that 4 percent of students who entered as non-Catholics in 2004 converted before their senior year, while 8 percent of Catholic students left the faith during that time frame.

In the Archdiocese of Miami, where 8.5 percent of the Catholic school student body is non-Catholic, obligatory religious activities during the school day are augmented by voluntary evening programs for

high school students.

As some of the dozens of students were added to the Catholic fold at last year's Easter Vigil, their decisions helped renew the faith of school staffers, said Brother Angelo Palmieri, interim superintendent of schools in Miami.

"Easter is always such a time of rebirth, re-creation," Palmieri said. "This certainly gives life to the church, gives life to the schools, gives additional meaning to what we're trying to do in the Catholic schools."

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