

TESTIMONIES OF NEW CATHOLICS AND SPONSORS, 2019

Each week during the next few months, we will be sharing the RCIA experience and stories of our new Catholics who joined the Church this Easter as well as comments from their sponsors.

Unlike many in my RCIA group, I am converting not only to Catholicism but to Christianity as a whole. I spent the first 40 years of my life as an unbeliever. On April 25, 2018, I saw the light, literally. I started this day like most others, consumed with hatred and divisiveness in my heart. Knowing it wasn't healthy and just looking for some relief, I pulled into the parking lot of ICC. It was at the Jesus statue under the trees that I poured my heart out and for the first time in my life asked Jesus for help. Almost immediately, I felt the Holy Spirit wash over me. The hatred in my heart was removed, and I began feeling the most overwhelming sensation of love that I have ever felt. It was at this moment I knew what I needed to do. I began researching the faith and started the RCIA process. This has been a wonderful process and this parish has made me feel like I was family since day one. If you are looking to join the faith or return home after a long separation, I highly recommend you contact Tammy Jackson and her wonderful team.

Joe Hines X

When I was child riding with my father, he would make the sign of the cross every time we passed a church. I would ask him, "Why do you do that?" My father would say, "I make the sign of the cross out of respect and because I'm Catholic." I knew this was important to him, so I wanted it to be important in my life also. My father was raised Catholic and my mother was Methodist; she never converted to the Catholic faith.

In 2000, I graduated from Our Lady of the Lake College. I was Methodist, but I wanted to learn and be a part of the Catholic faith. Most of my friends at the college were already Catholic. The awards ceremony for our class was held in the Catholic Church, and the reverence in the church was calming.

In 2001, I began working as a paramedic. I could see that without God, any job would be difficult. I was able to attend the Catholic Church with a friend, and I knew then I wanted to become Catholic. I soon married and was pulled in a different direction.

Many years later, I was invited to accompany my now sponsor to church. When I arrived, I felt like I was finally home. I simply thanked God for allowing me to worship Him. I knew at that point I would become Catholic.

Mia Terrell X

A few years ago I realized I needed to get myself and my youngest daughter in church, but just wasn't comfortable at any that I visited. I grew up Baptist/Non-Denominational and was in and out of church for several years never getting anything out of it. Yeah, some days I would really like a song or I would really get the message, but it just never felt right. I went with a couple of friends to try different ones and there was always something that was just off, so I stopped going altogether. Well, my oldest daughter started talking to me about her wanting to become Catholic and she kept asking me to join RCIA with her. I didn't want to.....I really didn't, but she just would not stop. Then when I was driving my youngest to enroll her in school, which just happened to be right next to the school (God knows what he is doing!), I saw the RCIA sign and decided to just go. I figured I would go for one class, tell her that I didn't like it and I would be free from her bugging me about it. Again, God knows what he is doing, because from the moment I walked into the building...not the classroom, not when anyone talked to me, but the actual moment I walked through the doors something happened to me and I knew I was home. I am crying as I write this because I have never known this feeling and it is incredible. I have learned so much and look forward to continuing my growth. The Catholic faith just fit right into with the

life I was starting to live. I sometimes wonder if my changes before finding you guys was God's way of slowly reaching me and preparing me to be accepting of him completely, and one of the best parts of this is that I was able to make this journey together with my girls!!

Thanks for everything you have done for my family.

Lori Graphia x

Because of so much negativity in my life, I found myself begging God to help me. I wanted more, but I had no idea where to even start. Talking to several friends who each practiced different religions, Catholicism always crossed my mind.

For months I studied on my own without completely understanding, I finally just knew it was where I wanted to be.

On November 14, 2018, I was bringing my daughter to school (she attends ICC ELC) and for once we were early. I felt the Holy Spirit guiding me to walk into the office. I was so intimidated not knowing anyone.

I was told I needed to contact Tammy Jackson just as she walked past. She had a meeting that she was about to go into, but she promised to call me within the hour. We met a few hours later.

The first RCIA retreat was days away, but she sensed my determination and my NEED to be there fully ready to accept God's grace. I watched all the videos, read all of the handouts, and continued to study to catch up with the group that had been preparing to become Catholic.

I just KNEW it was where I belonged and where God wanted me to be. Never in my life have I felt more wanted, loved, welcomed, or embraced. I truly feel I am at home.

I have learned so much but not nearly enough to fill my wants and desires. I have met and become close friends with so many others going through the same thing in their lives.

The Holy Spirit hit my heart like a ton of bricks the moment I saw the kids that were in RCIA-C. I knew God wanted me to help teach the children. Next year I will teach both RCIA-C and PSR.

With everything falling into place, I still had a weight on my shoulders. My past was trying to haunt me. I was afraid I would not be able to let go of the guilt and fully let myself surrender and accept forgiveness of all my wrong doings.

At the Easter vigil, I was happy, excited, and anxious for my baptism.

As I got out of the water, I was released of all my negativity and wrong doings. I honestly felt like I was a different person.

I want everyone in the world to feel this feeling, to love God as I do, and to feel His love, know His acceptance, and most importantly, ACCEPT THE FACT THAT HE LOVES YOU. He will fully forgive you of anything you've done wrong. YOU have to accept it.

Becoming Catholic has truly been the most important and best decision I have made in my life. I truly encourage anyone who is considering it to dive in.

Haley Mason X

I felt called to the Catholic Church in the spring of 2018. I was born to a Catholic father and a Protestant mother. I was not raised Catholic, and I was frightened by the things I heard about the Catholic church via the Protestant churches. One Sunday, I went with my fiancée to St. Mark's in Norman, Oklahoma when my weekly Baptist buddy could not make it. I was completely on guard because of all the scary things I had heard went on in that Church. When we entered the Church, I looked up at Jesus on the cross. I did not realize how long it had been since I had actually seen the suffering that Christ received because of His love for us. All the churches I had attended had crosses, but this was the

first time in years that I saw Jesus hanging crucified. My eyes filled up with tears. My eyes stayed filled with tears as I felt the Church call out to me, and I knew before Mass even started that I was home.

A few months later, when I found out we were moving to Baton Rouge from Oklahoma City, I found the website for Immaculate Conception and called for more information about the RCIA program. Because of delays in moving, we missed the first session. I had a lot of apprehension going in to that second week. I had just moved after 37 years in the Oklahoma City area, I knew no one, and I had not made it to the first class. I made my "cradle Catholic" fiancée (now husband) attend with me, and we both absolutely loved it from the moment we walked through the door. And to our surprise... they loved us even though we were OU fans! The sessions, stories, and environment were exceptionally truthful, real, and emotional. We were reminded every week that a conversion to the Catholic faith was going to be our decision. No pressure - just a room filled with faith, love, and acceptance. What surprised me was that my "cradle Catholic" husband was enjoying learning and continued to come enthusiastically to the classes as well.

I was assigned to my sponsor Ann Munson and loved her so much. I was a little concerned that the fun class session times were over when we began the second phase and that we were going to get down to business, but it was quite the opposite. It was clear at this stage that we were a part of a family. There were no limits on questions during class, and if additional information was needed, texts and emails were handled quickly and efficiently. It was amazing to learn the history, traditions, and beliefs of the Church. The Easter Vigil, as well as the rest of the rites were very emotional and spiritual for me. My First Communion was a very sacred experience.

Jesus has led me back to the foot of the cross, to His Church, to my God-loving husband, and to Immaculate Conception's RCIA program. I know that God knew where he wanted me before I even knew I was moving to Louisiana.

And, there was another phenomenon that happened as well... we are now LSU fans. Geaux Tigers!

Pamela Hardy X

My experience here was amazing. It was great being able to join everyone to be able to attend classes to be confirmed. I have a great sense of relief in now being confirmed. I had been unable to be confirmed at the time I was supposed to. It has really helped me. I even found the perfect saint for my life to help me along the way. This class has definitely given me wonderful memories that I can look back on.

Mercedes Foreman X

I have always felt drawn to the Catholic Church because my mom's family is Catholic. She married a Baptist, and so I was raised Baptist. We would attend Mass for special occasions in the family. A few years ago, I went to a Pentecostal Bible study at my brother's home. The things they taught about how bad the Catholic Church and pretty much all other religions made me want to learn more about the Catholic Church because I knew those bad things couldn't be true from what I had experienced. I attended the summer apologetics classes with my aunt and was immediately shown how misunderstood the Catholic Church is. It almost felt natural to be here.

I love the reverence and beauty of the Mass. I love how the Church welcomes everyone and shows no judgement. I hope to show through example Christ's love, kindness, and forgiveness.

Janet Williams X

Becoming Catholic was something I had pondered for a while, but put much thought into it. Then one day, I passed the sign out front, and I just knew I had to.

The first day I came to class, I knew I was in the right spot. Mr. John and Mrs. Ann were so sweet and welcoming. I began to look forward to Thursday sessions. I stressed about how I would balance work, college, and RCIA, but it is just amazing how God will guide you when you seek Him. I never once got behind. This journey has been nothing short of amazing. There were still moments throughout when I wondered if I was where God was calling me to be. One session, Durwin Walker gave a talk and that's when I realized that I was exactly where I needed to be. I learned that you will go in and out of things, but if you continue to seek and follow God, he will guide you.

Destinee LaFleur X

The idea of me becoming Catholic has been a concept for the last 24 years. I married a Catholic, and we raised out four children Catholic. I have been coming to Mass weekly for years. But, this year, the Holy Spirit told me that I needed to make the leap, get better educated, and set my ducks in a row. I had been raised Baptist. RCIA educated me to better understand the things that were holding me back. I studied the truth, and I came to understand that I have found my home.

Brian Vigé X

When I walked into RCIA, I had no idea what it was. I really liked it, and it started helping me with my life. I began making better decisions and doing what is right. It has helped me with a lot of things I was going through.

Ty Patt X

When I walked into the room, I had no idea what RCIA was. I found that it is a way to help you understand about the Church and the Catholic faith. It changed my life by helping me understand who Jesus is. I had a great experience.

Ethan Terrell x

We are new to Louisiana. Because of Matthew's job placement, we moved away from all family and friends, and came to Denham Springs in 2018. We were very apprehensive about the changes taking place in our lives; and everything was changing so quickly. To leave our family and our friends behind was the hardest part of moving to Denham.

Matthew and I quickly agreed that we needed to find a church home ASAP. We believed that a church home would fill our longing for family and allow us to quickly make new friends while also opening our hearts and lives centered around Jesus.

Quick church background for us- I grew up Southern Baptist, Matthew grew up mostly Catholic, but he quit going to church regularly as a teenager.

When we got married (2005), we joined the Methodist church.

When we moved to Denham, we visited many local churches. Our new neighbors are both Catholic, and one night we had a discussion about the Catholic Faith. Growing up Southern Baptist I had been "taught" how wrong Catholics were and my new friend answered many of my questions. One afternoon she suggested that I go by the ICC church office and meet with the RCIA leader.

Prior to doing this- Matthew and I discussed what we were searching for in a church family. We wanted a large youth program so that our kids could grow up active in the church, we wanted various opportunities to attend church services, and we wanted to find a church with service options for us so that we could grow closer to God and meet people along the way.

After meeting with Mrs. Tammy for the first time in early June, I knew without a doubt ICC is where God wanted us to be.

All summer, we anxiously awaited RCIA Thursday night classes. Once classes began for us, our boys (10,12) had classes to attend, and our daughter (5) went to nursery while we had class with other adults with similar yearnings for themselves and/or their family. Dinner was served at ICC on Thursday's and we all looked forward to the food and fellowship. The testimonies given were my absolute favorite part of Thursday nights. These were powerful and emotional.

Each Thursday, we learned something new and vital about the Catholic Faith. On our ride home on Thursday nights, our kids would race to share something they too had learned. To go through this experience with my husband was wonderful, but as a family- it was truly beautiful. We would discuss things we learned which often brought us to forming new questions. Google would sometimes confuse us, so we would write the question down and ask someone next week. Deacon George was the best at answering our questions and clearing any misconceptions.

In January- we were assigned our sponsors, Denise and Mark. Wow! Jackpot!! They loved us all from day one. Selfless in every way. Funny. And caring. These two guided us every step of the way.

I laughed one day- (I'm a teacher) and at lunch we teachers were having a discussion and I blurted out, "yes, my sponsor told me...blah, blah, blah... Everyone froze.

Then I realized what I had said. It ended up being a great way to let my coworkers know about my family's journey with the Catholic Church. My coworkers continue to be interested in things we are learning and our special moments at church.

I could write much more about this experience, but I will leave it at this- we went into this looking for a few things needed in our lives. We are finishing this experience with our eyes, hearts, and minds opened to the true love of Christ, new friends, and an amazing church family. We will forever be thankful for ICC, the RCIA staff and sponsors, and we look forward to continuing to learn and grow as Catholic Christians. **Danielle & Matthew Latimer X**

When I was 15 years old and time to be confirmed, I rebelled and told my mom no. Fast forward 20 years and I seriously regretted it. I had stopped going to church for many years. I drove by the church and saw signs about RCIA. It gave me a chance to start going to Mass again waiting for RCIA to begin. The people involved in RCIA are so kind and loving. It is truly a wonderful experience. I was not too sure about having a sponsor paired with me, but I have grown to love Ms. Helen so much. She is truly a wonderful person.

I want to continue my experience with the church. I'm excited to find where I fit in the church. I'm excited to start. **Margaret Guidry X**

Team – Sponsors

As a cradle Catholic, you would think I would know everything about my religion. I have learned that is not true, but the resources and people necessary to teach me are here and available to all of us. The process of learning about being a Catholic is a lifelong process I am happy to partake in.

I have learned that being Catholic without service is only half Catholic. I have been so selfish with my time and talents and need to share them. Thanks to all the wonderful RCIA staff that have shown me joyfully and lovingly how much I want to be a part of what y'all do.

Leigh Mathis X

I have sponsored many people over the years. I am always honored to do it. Every time I have a new wonderful experience because everyone is different and special in the eyes of Jesus. They are all so nervous and unsure of the unknown, and yet they follow their call to the Easter sacraments. They all become happy Catholics and so am I.

Helen Gautro X

This year was my first opportunity to serve my Lord as an RCIA sponsor. Being a “cradle Catholic”, you don't realize what you take for granted. You also realize what an example to others you are called to be.

Being with the candidates and other sponsors, you become a family watching each other grow in faith. And, you realize that you are getting as much out of the lessons as anyone else. I have loved this experience and will continue to sponsor new Catholics as long as I can.

Melanie “MiMi” Day X

I did not choose my candidate this year as I did last year. The Holy Spirit did. I helped sponsor a whole family and was reminded that the family unit resembles the Trinity. The truth of God's love and His desire to be loved by us is beyond anything that we can grasp.

Samantha Causey X

Being a sponsor has been an amazing asset to my on-going faith journey. As a “cradle Catholic”, we can always continue to learn more about our Catholic faith. It was beautiful to watch my candidate, Amanda's, own journey. She is a precious soul with the voice of an angel. It was an honor to pray with her and share our love of Christ. She and her beautiful family will always be part of my heart. She inspires me to be a better person and a better Catholic.

Kellee Hennessey Dickerson X

This was my second year sponsoring someone in RCIA. The graces and friendships that I gained have been a life-changing blessing. It has been a humbling, joyful, and enlightening journey to participate in walking with my candidate and his whole family. I realize that through joys and suffering, the Holy Spirit brought them here to the Church, and I got to cooperate in that work to bear fruit for our Lord. Through RCIA, my family grows larger every year.

Rhett Causey X

My experience this year as a RCIA Team member and sponsor was challenging. Illness and disruptions throughout the year caused me not to be able to participate totally in RCIA like I wanted. Aside from that, I loved meeting all the new members of the Church. My candidate, Sarah, and her family were wonderful to work with through this process. Both she and Haley have become part of my family. I have new friends in the faith. I believe we were all meant to be together “in a very special way” as Fr. Frank says. It has been a joyful and fulfilling process. I love seeing everyone go through this journey. By the end of the classes, they are on fire with the Holy Spirit. I pray that they continue to move forward.

Amanda Collins X

In May of 2018, my niece expressed that she had been feeling a pull to the Catholic faith. She had been to Mass a few times on her own and said it felt like home to her. I told her I was going to attend the Summer Leisure Learning classes on Thursday evenings and asked her to join me. It all just flowed from there. She continued the RCIA Thursday classes in the fall, and I watched and listened from the sidelines. I wanted it to be her experience. When she was ready to commit, I was happy to walk beside her, to sponsor her, and to answer questions. As a cradle Catholic, it was my first experience with the RCIA process. I learned so much about my faith on this journey. When people use to ask me questions about why we Catholics did certain things, I always would say, “We’ve just always done it that way.” Now, I can actually answer them with the scriptural or traditional basis of why we do what we do. The RCIA catechists here at ICC are a fount of knowledge and faith. Our parish is beyond blessed to have this team.

Colleen Montgomery X

I am a sponsor. It is very rewarding for me to be able to do so. I get to witness my candidate grow in her faith, and in turn, that strengthens my faith journey. We are all journeying, and we should always be an explorer in our faith. It is so vast and beautiful. Each session I attend I learn something new, so I feel right at home alongside my candidate.

Ella Butler X

I began my RCIA experience in 1986 in New Orleans, then later in Chalmette, and in Violet. I have been on the team for nine years and have sponsored eight of those years. It is a privilege and an honor to walk with the candidates and catechumens on their way to full communion. To see how enthusiastic, they are to become a part of the Church inspires me in my walk with Jesus, so I too, continue to grow in holiness. It does a soul good to be a part of the Holy Saturday Easter Vigil to experience the high energy of the evening.

Judy Chiappetta X

Going through RCIA this year as a sponsor was the most extraordinary experience. With only a year of being Catholic under my belt, I knew I wanted to give back and walk with those taking this journey. Through the classes as an inquirer, we are told that your sin doesn't just affect you, it affects the entire Body of Christ. This experience showed me firsthand how so. On the days I wasn't my best self, or if I was grumpy and tired on Sunday mornings, I could see how it affected the person I was sponsoring. This experience opened my eyes to the grace, love, and mercy God has for us. He calls us to be the face of Jesus to all we encounter. It was amazing how much I learned this year when I attended all of the same classes just a year prior. Being a sponsor is an unmatched experience. Not only do you get to witness the grace of God and His Spirit move through the inquirers, but you also get to know your true self more intimately. You come to know deeper your mission as His son or daughter. **Victoria Landry X**

My RCIA experience was very nice. I joined as a sponsor for my sister to help her complete the steps to be confirmed. I enjoyed and loved being able to help her through her journey and to watch her experiences through this beautiful process. Overall my favorite thing was to watch her choose her saint. When she finally did, I enjoyed hearing the reasons she had. I was also able to help and watch my sister-in-law become Catholic which was a very beautiful thing as well. **Tiffany Foreman X**