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‘Diversity is the tie’

Two Catholic converts share different perspectives on journeys

by KATIE MOORE
staff writer

Editor’s note: This is the fifth and final story in a series of conversion stories.

BELMONT — At Queen of the Apostles Church in Belmont, 19 people will enter into full communion with the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil April 11.

Their journeys are different, but their goal is the same.

Two of those converts share their experiences and the different circumstances that brought them to this point.

The searcher

For a long time, David Viola was a man on a mission.

He spent years experimenting with different fundamentalist and non-denominational religions. But he couldn’t find what he was looking for.

“I wanted a venue where I could properly worship the Lord with a body of believers who were like-minded,” Viola said.

He was looking for a faith that was rooted in tradition.

“The Baptists had no traditions,” said Viola. “The Anglicans and Lutherans got away from tradition.”

Then he found a faith that was rooted in history.

“The Catholic Church has held together for 2,000 years,” he said. “Tradition helps keep the church together.”

Growing up a fundamentalist, Viola was taught that “everything the Catholics believe is dead wrong.”

“I had to do a lot of praying before I could even consider coming into the Catholic Church,” he said.

But when he and his wife, Laura, who also is entering the church at Easter, first stepped into the Abbey Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Belmont, they knew they were finally home.

“As soon as we walked in we knew that was where we belonged,” Viola said.

“The reality of the Eucharist was important for them,” said Father Cancro, pastor of Queen of the Apostles Church. “For them that was really a starting point in terms of their own exploration of Catholicism.”

The Violas enrolled in Right of Christian Initiation (RCIA) at Queen of the Apostles Church.

For David, the decision to convert was reinforced during the Rite of Election.

“As soon as I put my name in the book, I just knew that this was the thing to do,” he said.

The Rite of Election marks the beginning of the candidates’ and catechumens’ final, and most intense, period of preparation.

Catechumens, people not yet baptized are preparing to receive the sacraments of initiation — baptism, confirmation and first Communion. Candidates, who are already baptized Christians, will enter full communion with the church by receiving confirmation and first Communion.

“Everything that I see in the Catholic Church points to Christ,” said Viola. “The tradition and the Word and the way they are combined — it just creates worship.”

The scholar

For Dr. Beth Kreitzer, the journey to Catholicism was one of intellectual discovery.

A professor at Belmont Abbey College, Kreitzer earned a doctorate in religion in the field of Lutheran studies.

“To make the switch at this stage of my life is actually a bit of a challenge in some ways,” said Kreitzer, who studied the Protestant Reformation and did her dissertation on Martin Luther.

When she first started considering a conversion, she thought about the impact it would have on her studies and her career.

“It was something that I’ve had to keep in mind,” she said.

Fortunately, she teaches at a Catholic college.

At Belmont Abbey “they won’t mind if I’m Catholic,” she joked.

Keitzer was initially drawn to Catholicism because she wanted to practice the same religion as her family.

Her husband is Catholic and their three children were all baptized in the Catholic Church.

“For me it was more of a feeling that I wanted to be all together in one church with my family,” she said.

With such an extensive background in religion, Kreitzer has approached her conversion on a scholarly level.

“I had to try to discern whether I could, in good conscience, become a Catholic and accept the things that are different from the tradition in which I was raised,” she said.

“I think I’m looking for something different than a lot of people are. I’m trying to figure out theological points, more than spirituality or to gain some form of formation,” she said.

“It’s clear that someone like Beth is in a very different place theologically than some of the others,” said Father Cancro.

“To be willing to move from her educationally-solid, theological understanding to now respond to the heart is a testament to the witness of her family and her own life of prayer,” he said.

Like Viola, Kreitzer also appreciates the history and traditions of the Catholic Church, particularly the devotion to the saints.

“I think one of the things that I appreciate about the Catholic tradition as opposed to the Protestant tradition is the appreciation and accommodation to the saints,” said Kreitzer.

“It really adds an extra dimension to religious practice,” she said, and it is “something that I certainly didn’t find as a Lutheran.”

Common ground

“Every year I am always edified by the witness of these people who come to a point where it’s clear that they have to say ‘yes’ to God,” Father Cancro said about the candidates and catechumens.

He said he also admires their “willingness to change in a world that doesn’t really accept change easily.”

He appreciates the unique perspective that each individual brings to the RCIA program and he admires the respect that they have for one another.

Despite their varying religious backgrounds “they seem to accommodate each other,” said Father Cancro.

“Diversity is the tie” and there is “always that notion of patience,” he said. “My basic premise and the basic premise of the church is that this is the work of the Holy Spirit.”

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