

BLESSED SACRAMENTS

Members of the Canisius community grow in their faith through the college's Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. STORY BY: KRISTIN E. ETU '91

Kristy Ciccarelli MS '09 was baptized in the Catholic Church but as a child she didn't go to Mass on a regular basis. As a teenager, she sought a more meaningful spiritual life so she went to Lutheran services with a friend's family. Later, as a graduate student in Canisius College's College Student Personnel Administration Program, Ciccarelli attended Mass on weekends with her boyfriend's family. That's when she became interested in learning more about her Catholic roots.

"Because I went to Mass infrequently when I was young, I realized that as an adult I understood very little about it," says Ciccarelli. "At Canisius, I felt the Jesuit influence and witnessed the wonderful campus ministry program. At this point in my life, the time was right to take the next step."

Ciccarelli was among 13 members of the Canisius community who participated in the college's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program during the 2008-2009 academic year. The Canisius RCIA program prepares students, alumni, staff and their spouses to receive the Catholic sacraments of initiation: baptism, Holy Eucharist and confirmation.

More than 230 people have expanded their knowledge of the Catholic Church, deepened their faith, and received sacraments through RCIA over the last 20 years. Participants range from those who seek "full communion" (they have never been baptized and wish to receive all three sacraments of initiation) to those who have been baptized (Catholic or Protestant) but have not had significant religious education and have not received the Holy Eucharist and/or confirmation. Still others merely seek guidance for a religious expression of their spirituality.

Susan A. Fischer, associate campus minister, coordinates RCIA and instructs the weekly, hour-long classes. The lessons are based around the church's weekly liturgy.

"We read the Gospel, we pray with it and then we talk about how it applies to our own lives," says Fischer. "Students always have the opportunity to ask questions about the Catholic Church. In fact, the first few weeks are exclusively question and answer sessions."

Because candidates are at various knowledge levels, they learn the basics about the sacraments and the ritual of the Catholic Mass, according to Fischer, who went through the process herself as a college student.

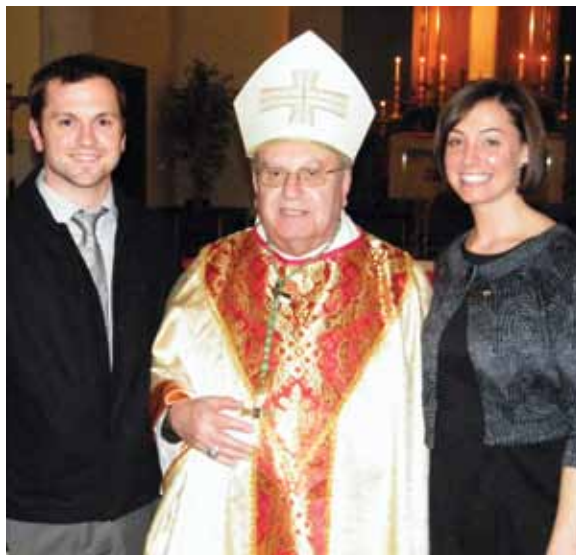
"I think college is a time in people's lives when they truly search and seek," she adds. "For me to be a part of that for these students is a real privilege."

When **Jennifer J. Herrmann MS '07**, associate director of disability support services, had her son nearly two years ago, she decided that she wanted the ability to comfortably worship as a family. Baptized Catholic, Herrmann felt she had no "real religious foundation."

"Where I grew up in California, most of my friends were Jewish so I went to a lot of Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. That was my only exposure to religion," Herrmann recalls. "I always had faith and believed in God but when I went to church, I didn't know when to sit, kneel or stand."

She previously considered RCIA but her work schedule and other obstacles seemed to get in the way. But last fall, all the pieces of the puzzle fell perfectly into place.

"I married my husband (**Kurt '92**) in 2002 at Christ the King Chapel and five years later Father Tunney (**Rev. Michael F. Tunney, S.J.**, professor of fine arts and rector of the Jesuit community) baptized my son there," says Herrmann. "It seems as if it were meant to happen here all along."



Kristy Ciccarelli MS '09 (right) with her sponsor, Jack Jamison, and Bishop Edward U. Kmiec



Jennifer Herrmann MS '07 with her sponsor, Caitlin Logue MS '09

Melinda C. Cruz '11 learned about the RCIA program during Welcome Weekend and also believes that Canisius was the ideal place to take the next step in her faith journey.

“My mother is Catholic but my siblings and I never received the sacraments of Holy Communion and confirmation,” says Cruz. “As an adult, if you take it upon yourself to receive the sacraments you have more knowledge of the process. When I came to Canisius College, it was the perfect opportunity for me to do this on my own.”

Cruz puts her beliefs into action as a service intern for the Office of Campus Ministry at the Niagara Lutheran Home. In addition, she traveled to Mexico for a service trip and participates in campus ministry retreats.

“The RCIA process helped me to be much more at ease when I pray in front of groups of people, such as on Kairos retreats and at the 9:30 p.m. student Mass,” adds Cruz.

As Cruz did in 2008, confirmation candidates choose a sponsor to lead them through the process and to serve as a witness to the commitment they make to Christ. Sponsors attend weekly classes with the candidates and present them to Bishop Edward U. Kmiec. They also stand alongside the candidates at the anointing of the Holy Spirit during the confirmation ceremony, which is held in Christ the King Chapel in late April.

While many RCIA candidates ask a family member or friend to serve as their sponsor, others have one selected for them by Fischer. Canisius students, who go through a screening process, volunteer to serve as sponsors.

“Student sponsors actually present guest lectures on topics in which they have special expertise,” adds Fischer. **Peter F. Tassini '10** spoke on Mary and the Rosary. **Josie R. Diebold '09** gave a talk on Catholic social teaching.

Herrmann says she appreciated the student sponsors' perspectives.

“These students are very involved in campus ministry activities and retreats; it is part of their everyday lives,” says Herrmann. “Josie’s lesson on Catholic social teaching provided some good insight in terms of what she considers when faced with particular situations.”

“It can be difficult for some students to reconcile Catholic social teaching on issues such as war and poverty,” adds Fischer. “There are things in our faith that we wrestle with and I tell the candidates that it’s important to pray through those things.”

The highlight of the year for RCIA candidates comes during the Eucharistic Liturgy in Christ the King Chapel when they receive the sacraments.

“I was so nervous before the ceremony but Bishop Kmiec made everyone feel at ease,” says Cruz. “It was a beautiful ceremony and the candidates truly felt the support of family, friends and everyone in the chapel.”

Ciccarelli is also glad that she went through the RCIA process as an adult and says that her parents are proud that she came to the decision on her own.

“I have a whole new spiritual life that I can turn to, especially now as I try to find a job in these difficult economic times” adds Ciccarelli. “I know there are greater things out there for me and I know God has a plan. I can let it go.” ■

AUTHOR’S NOTE



I was among the first participants in the college’s RCIA program and was confirmed in Christ the King Chapel in April 1989.

I was raised Lutheran but strongly influenced in my faith by my Catholic grandmother, with whom I spent a great deal of time. As an undergraduate student at Canisius, I became familiar

with campus ministry’s dynamic faith community. My Catholic friends in the dorm always invited me to attend 9:30 p.m. Mass. When I told them I wasn’t Catholic, their response was that I should come anyway. I’m glad I went to experience the welcoming atmosphere of the student Mass.

Sister **Marlene G. Butler, GNSH**, former director of campus ministry, spoke at my dormitory about what activities and services the Office of Campus Ministry offered to students. Something about Sister Marlene made me realize that it was time for me to take the next step. I approached her after the meeting to see if Canisius had an RCIA program. Initially she gave me private instruction but eventually an RCIA class formed on campus with a seminarian from Christ the King Seminary in East Aurora as its instructor. In spring 1989, I was confirmed in Christ the King Chapel. Twenty years later, I continue to actively practice my faith with my husband, **Michael '91**, and three children, **Thomas '13**, Hanna and Nathan, at St. Joseph University Church on Main Street in Buffalo.

- Kristin E. Etu '91