

Kelley Callahan was baptized a Catholic but spent her childhood apart from the church.



BETH BALBIERZ / THE RECORD

### **Adults on Saturday completed a spiritual journey that will make them members of the Catholic Church.**

"My parents got divorced and we moved," said Callahan, a freshman at William Paterson University. "We didn't find a church we liked, so I just didn't go."

Gyna Meneses, a junior at the university, had a similar experience. After her family emigrated from Ecuador when she was 5, there was little time for church.

"My mom always worked on the weekends," Meneses said.

But at a campus chapel Saturday night, the two women reconnected to the church they had left behind. They were among a small group that received the sacrament of confirmation during an Easter Vigil Mass and accepted into full communion with the Catholic Church.

They are participants in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults — a faith journey that culminates at Easter and is undertaken by hundreds of North Jersey residents every year who want to join the Roman Catholic Church.

It's a journey that the Rev. Lou Scurti, the Catholic chaplain at the university, has helped launch for decades.

Scurti, a charismatic priest, is accustomed to ministering to people with little or no background in the Catholic Church. Participants in his eclectic ministry feed the hungry at Eva's Kitchen in Paterson, visit the developmentally disabled at North Jersey Developmental Center and produce a television show — "The Word: Alive and Well."

"People come in here with the idea that they needed something in their lives," said Scurti, who oversees the Bishop Frank J. Rodimer Catholic Campus Ministry Center. "Our theology is that the Holy Spirit led them to this moment. That is how I explained it. It's not an accident."

Both Callahan and Meneses said they found the campus ministry after hearing about it from friends.

"It's very homey," said Callahan, a Monmouth County resident. "You don't have to worry about people judging you for the bad things you have done."

The center includes the Jesus Christ Prince of Peace Chapel, as well as a social hall and meeting rooms.

Meneses said the center is helping her to have peace of mind.

"I worry a lot," she said. "That sense of 'God is going to help me through it' – I never saw that as much as I do now."

The RCIA process dates back to the early church, when an increasing number of gentiles were joining the ranks of the fledgling Jesus movement. It was formally reintroduced by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and is now a staple at most parishes. More than 1,100 people are participating in RCIA this year in the Newark Archdiocese, which covers Bergen Hudson, Essex and Union counties.

Participants begin RCIA simply by expressing interest to a priest or church minister. After an initial discernment period, or testing of the waters, they increase their role by taking classes, going on retreats and attending Mass.

"They are learning how the Christian life is lived," said Catherine Wollyung, a pastoral associate at St. John the Baptist Church in Hillsdale. "It's a lived experience that's lived in the heart as well as the head."

Abby Lundy, who was born Jewish but raised with no religion, has been in RCIA for nearly two years at the Hillsdale church. She has been learning about the sacraments, teaching catechism class and participating in a church women's group.

"When I ended up at St. John's, I felt like I found what I had been looking for for years," she said. "They were so welcoming. I started attending meetings, and I would hate when they were over."

Until Saturday night, Lundy and other non-baptized RCIA candidates had been dismissed from Mass before Holy Communion, the serving of the consecrated bread and wine that Catholics believe is the body and blood of Christ. Because they are not in full communion with the church, they adjourn to another room and study that week's Bible readings.

During a Holy Thursday Mass last year, Lundy simply watched Holy Communion from behind the glass doors of the worship hall.

"I felt like a little kid stuck up in my room," she said. "I just wanted to be part of that."

Saturday night, Lundy was expecting to don a white robe, which symbolizes rebirth and a cleansing of sin, and receive baptism, confirmation and her first Eucharist.

"This always seemed to be the natural progression for me," said Lundy, whose 7-year-old son will also be participating. "Jesus was real. He did die for me. This was something I just always felt."