



Lakeshore
couple's faith
journey in
2010 includes

RCIA, marriage

T

he loose affiliation 29-year-old Alex Alvarez had with Catholicism underwent a transformation this Easter season as the part-time construction worker prepared to be welcomed into the faith during Easter Vigil Mass at St. Francis de Sales Church in Holland.

Beside him will be 36-year-old Mayra Amaro, a petite, dark-haired woman who nudged him into the church. She also happens to be his fiancée. The couple met nearly five years ago and became engaged last summer. Amaro, who has an apartment in Holland, regularly attended Mass by herself. Alvarez, who lives in Grand Haven, slept in or watched football on Sunday mornings.

"I'd just say 'I'm going to church' and let Alex know he was welcome to come with me," she said. "I wanted this to be his decision."

Amaro, raised in a devout Catholic home in southern Texas, did not pressure Alex to join her, but prayed for a conversion. It happened more than a year ago on what was an otherwise typical Sunday.

"Alex said he'd go, too. I didn't want to act over-excited, but inside my head the Halleluiah chorus was going off," Amaro beamed. "This is what I had been praying for."

Her prayers, and months of joint preparation in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) will bear fruit the evening of April 3 when Alvarez will receive the sacraments of baptism, holy Eucharist and confirmation. Amaro, who was not confirmed as an eighth grade student, will be confirmed. And in about five months, they'll join together in the sacrament of holy matrimony – also at St. Francis de Sales.

Marriage is one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. Baptism, holy Communion and confirmation are required before marriage.

"It's going to be quite a year for us," Amaro said with a smile.

Alvarez smiles and nods in agreement. "Even before we got engaged, I wanted to receive the sacraments, to be baptized," he said. "It's been a great learning process that's enriched my faith – our faith."

The journey home

Amaro and Alvarez come from different backgrounds and different parts of the country. She was born and raised outside Brownsville, Texas, the middle of five children. They were regular church-goers, but for some reason, she was not confirmed.

"We went to church every Sunday, it was very important in our family," she said.

Alvarez was born in Holland and raised in Fennville, the youngest of three boys. He has vague recollections

of attending San Felipe de Jesus, a Hispanic mission about five miles south of Fennville.

“We kind of fell out of it, but I really don’t know why,” he said. “I still had my faith, but I wasn’t what you’d call a practicing Catholic.”

The change began when the two met in June, 2005. At the time, he worked for an overhead door manufacturer in Muskegon and she worked for an Ottawa County nursery. While dating, they realized they had much in common; particularly a love for football. She’s a Dallas Cowboys fan and he’s a Minnesota Vikings fan – so long as Brett Farve remains quarterback.

But storms tossed their storybook romance – literally. Alvarez’ Grand Haven home was flattened by a vicious storm in July, 2008. Five months later, both lost their jobs within two weeks of each other due to the recession. Alvarez said the hardship brought him closer to God and his own fledgling faith.

“I kind of felt guilty going back to church when things were going bad, as though that was the only reason,” he said. “But with the trials, losing my job while building a house, I wanted spiritual help.”

He started attending church with Amaro, who lives in Holland. Last June, he asked for her hand in marriage. The wedding proposal was scrawled in wet driveway cement and hidden with cardboard until June 26 – the anniversary of their first date.

“I thought the cardboard was left-over from construction and wanted it thrown out,” she said. “He was always able to distract

me, saying he’d take care of it later. When he had me move the cardboard, I turned around and he was down on one knee. It took a moment to sink in.”

They approached Marilyn Torborg, director of faith formation at St. Francis de Sales, where Amaro is a parishioner. They began RCIA classes in September and finished just before Easter. Classes took place weekly after the 10:30 a.m. Sunday Mass.

“I’ve been touched by their openness and sincerity on this journey of conversion, and their support for each other’s growth,” Torborg said of Mayra and Alex. “They’re always open to questions and discussion on the many topics of faith.”

Alvarez was nervous at first; he had many unanswered questions.

“I was worried I’d be the only guy being baptized with a bunch of second-graders,” he laughed.

Among 20 catechumens at St. Francis, Alex was one of five to be baptized. During Easter Vigil Masses on April 3 over 560 people from parishes throughout the 11-county diocese also joined the church. While youth are usually confirmed at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew by Bishop Walter Hurley, those completing RCIA are confirmed in their respective parishes during Easter Vigil Masses.

The weekly RCIA classes, which run from 90 minutes to two hours, were invaluable in helping Alvarez grow spiritually and leading Amaro to a deeper appreciation of her faith.

“It’s a pretty broad curriculum. We get a lot of questions answered and misconceptions addressed,” she said. “It has been a great spiritual tool for both of us.”

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>> (far left) Alvarez shown during Rite of Election held Feb. 21 at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew, in downtown Grand Rapids.