



# ‘I feel so much more fulfilled’

## Alana shares her journey to faith through the RCIA process

BY LYNETTE MAGNINO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ASHLEY MAXWELL

**S**omething stirred in Alana Kaur Saeltzer, 15, as she sat in freshman theology class at St. Francis Catholic High School in 2019. She really had her heart set on attending a public school in Sacramento.

“I think that actually religion was a big thing that steered me away” from wanting to attend, Alana offers candidly, remembering how the idea of theology class “just seemed like a burden.”

Yet, providentially if not ironically, her father enrolled her and there she was grappling, intrigued and curious with this “theology” before her. And then in math class, Dominican Sister Mariana McGlynn presented another dilemma, standing there teaching in her distinctive white habit.

“I guess I never thought that sisters were real,” Alana confides endearingly and with love for the friendship she

now enjoys with the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist. “I remember I was so terrified, so scared to go to her class,” Alana conveys, honestly expressing her shock in “seeing Sister Mariana in a habit.”

Kindly, for a few minutes every Friday at the end of her class, Sister Mariana invited questions about her life and community – about being a sister. Alana found it interesting and compelling.

“Then I realized why sister is a sister,” Alana reveals, quite comfortable now as a junior, and quite adept at recognizing the promptings of the Holy Spirit. “I realized Jesus loves me too,” she exhales poignantly.

### DISCOVERING CATHOLICISM

Alana wondered if she might receive her sacraments. Too nervous to speak to Sister Mariana directly, Alana deployed her father to “tell her for me.” On campus for the annual “SWAP Day,” when parents trade places with their daughters to experience their school day, Alana’s father delivered the news to Sister Mariana.

“I knew Alana and I loved having her in my class, but I had no idea she was thinking about this,” Sister Mariana expresses, unable to conceal her joy. “It’s definitely one of the happiest things,” she explains of times when students or anyone she encounters chooses to know God, and “to be a part of that.”

Sister Mariana began work immediately, consulting with school president, Theresa Rodgers, to ascertain whether any program existed on campus to prepare interested students for the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA); there was not. Alana’s inquiry and budding faith inspired efforts to develop a formation program, but it would take time.

“I didn’t want Alana to have to wait,” says Sister Mariana, who embarked on a unique eight-month catechetical journey in 2020 amid COVID-19 restrictions to prepare Alana for baptism, first Communion and confirmation. Coordinating with Father Stanley Poltorak, pastor of Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, they set Oct. 1, 2020 – the Feast of St. Therese of Lisieux – for Alana’s reception into the church.

Alana and Sister Mariana shared the same free block during the school day and would meet and discuss a succession of lessons all neatly organized in a Google document complete with corresponding links to additional files and websites. Alana researched, studied Scripture, attended daily Mass online and prayed.

“She always had tons and tons of questions,” Sister Mariana recounts, considering Alana’s questions as obvious indicators of the Holy Spirit working powerfully within her.

Alana sensed it too. She realized she lived a convenient two minutes from Presentation Church. With the pandemic shut down, she made time for eucharistic adoration and found an affirming peace and

confidence in her decision to become Catholic.

As Oct. 1 approached, however, outdoor Mass was still the rule. No music. No programs. Only 10 guests allowed. Alana and Sister Mariana fervently prayed a novena to St. Therese of Lisieux imploring her intercession.

“Two days before,” Alana effuses, “we found out Mass could be inside!” All the complicating factors melted away. “It was a moment for me,” she discloses of that intangible, transcendent instant when she knew “the saints were praying for me...God wanted this to happen.”

### **EVANGELIZING EFFECTS**

“I feel like everything now has a purpose and I see God in everything,” Alana announces with captivating enthusiasm. “I feel so much more fulfilled,” she adds, perhaps unaware of the many evangelizing effects of her mission to “try my best to be who God is calling me to be.”

Alana shared her heart at home and inspired her father to turn to the RCIA process and receive confirmation last Easter. Today, she teaches third grade Catholic faith formation at Presentation Parish. And she inspires friends with her philosophy of “having an open heart and just trust God” as she also immerses herself in the St. Francis High School community, taken by “how faith is so visible and lived out here.”

“She’s a great apostle,” Sister Mariana affirms, citing that often she felt she was “talking to someone who had been Catholic her whole life.”

“And now we have a program approved by Bishop Jaime Soto where students who are interested can come at lunch once a week,” Sister Mariana explains of a collaborative RCIA program which strives to work with students individually per their respective preparation needs.

Some students who attend have all their sacraments and simply come to learn more. Others may be baptized and now seek additional sacraments. Sister Mariana works with these girls to connect them to their home parish, if possible, to receive the sacraments.

“We really focus on girls who do not have a parish yet and who are basically here on their own, and want to become Catholic,”

Sister Mariana explains, noting how the lunch meetings replicate the program Alana experienced. Students who complete the program will join catechumens at adjacent St. Mary Parish for full initiation at Easter Vigil Mass.

Alana goes to the meetings, too.

“I go and ask questions like anyone else would,” Alana says in solidarity with fellow students learning about Catholicism. “I want to be there for them,” she says, committed to supporting their journey to faith as she continues her own. †

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**- Alana Saeltzer**



■ Father Stanley Poltorak, pastor, baptizes Alana inside Presentation Church.



■ Alana and Sister Mariana outside Presentation Church.