



parishioners," says Judy Lavoie, the center's secretary.

For years, the Christian Life Center offered Cursillo retreats, but Deacon Don Clavette says that so many Catholics in The County had made Cursillos, he was looking for something that would build upon that spiritual foundation. He found it when he attended an ACTS retreat in Tewksbury, Mass.

"The talks were about real problems and how God transformed their lives from what they were to where they are now. It kind of reminded me of St. Paul

A center of faith

"It was very profound. It was absolutely amazing."

When Karen Ouellette attended a Cursillo retreat at the Christian Life Center in Frenchville, she hadn't been in a church for years. She only went on the retreat because her sister-in-law wanted someone to accompany her.

"So I said, 'Sure, whatever.'"

Whatever turned into "What happened?"

"I came here, and I had an experience of God, and it changed my life forever."

Karen says the retreat was so well put together, with each talk building on the next, that she came to realize what she had been missing. She started attending daily Mass, started reading the Bible and started praying. She became active in her parish and discovered she was being called to youth ministry. She is currently high school youth ministry coordinator at St. John Vianney, Fort Kent.

Each year, hundreds of people like Karen attend retreats and programs at the Christian Life Center. Located along the St. John River, the unassuming building is easy to miss, but make no mistake, it is a vital piece of the Catholic landscape of Aroostook County.

"I think the spirituality of the St. John River Valley, especially, is largely attributed to what goes on here at the Christian Life Center," says Karen. "So many people are touched by the Holy Spirit when they come into this place."

The Christian Life Center first opened in Caribou in 1973 and moved to its current location, a former convent, in 1980. The center offers Charismatic retreats, Mary Speaks to Us retreats, a Valentine's Day retreat, marriage preparation programs, and the center's most well-attended offering, ACTS retreats.

"The purpose is to help the retreatants enter into a newer and deeper relationship with our Lord and fellow

who had a complete transformation," says Deacon Don.

Deacon Don says when he expressed interest in the retreats, the group from Massachusetts offered to travel to northern Maine to help.

"Not only did they come up, they left all the stuff we needed to start our retreat. They gave it to us. And when they got home, they sent a check of almost \$1,000 to give us some seed money to get started. I said, 'My God.' You could sense the faith these people have."

It convinced him more than ever that ACTS was the answer.

"It really became the Cursillo for us. Not only has God given us a new retreat, but He's given us something that we can use as leaven for the parishes."

ACTS stands for:
Adoration: the Love of God; **Community:** love and caring for each other; **Theology:** the study of Scripture; and **Service:** to both God and His people.

The retreats are presented by groups of people who have previously attended ACTS retreats, creating a community of evangelists.

"You're taking all these little teams, and you're putting them into one big team, and they're all different groups. Some did it in 2008. Some did it in 2012," says Judy. "Then they become another group, and they carry that, and they bring that to the parish."

Deacon Don says the goal is to not only change lives but to enliven parishes.

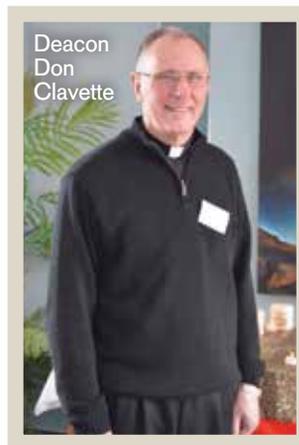
"Let's say you get 50 people who are going to an ACTS retreat from one parish, and they come together," he says. "Christ sent apostles two-by-two to change lives. Can you imagine what 50 could do if they're really on fire? That's the dream that I have, and I keep praying, 'Lord, in your time, not mine.' We'll get it done."

Although that dream has not been fully realized, the



Judy Lavoie

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Deacon Don Clavette

ACTS and Cursillo retreats have planted the seeds.

Judy decided to participate in an ACTS retreat in 2008, not knowing what to expect.

"I said, 'OK, I'll come in with an open mind.' And I didn't talk much. I listened."

But when it was over: "I left here Sunday and I went to Mass, and I cried throughout all of Mass because I felt this closeness, and I felt more of a bond with God."

She says she had struggled for years to cope with the loss of her sister who died in a tragic accident, but during the Cursillo, she found peace.

"When we would go to bed at night, I felt her here. I don't know why," she says. "I kind of felt like she was trying to say to me, 'I'm OK now. Don't worry about me.'"

Paul Ouellette attended both a Cursillo retreat and an ACTS retreat. He says when he made his Cursillo, back in 1982, it was his first real religious experience. Up to that point, he says he primarily attended church out of obedience to his parents and the Church.

"I was always searching for a better reason to attend church, and what the Cursillo did was it helped me to recognize how important that spiritual life really, really was. It kind of created a hunger in me, I suppose, a hunger for greater understanding, a hunger for more relationship, for more intimacy with my Creator, Christ," he says. "And in understanding more, I grew closer to God."

He says the Cursillo gave him many gifts, but two stand out. He says he grew up in a time when men didn't show their emotions but remembers, after Cursillo, going home and giving his father a big hug.

"I cannot tell you what a joy that was. I cannot tell you," he says, his voice breaking even now, years later. "I kind of broke that traditional mode."

The second gift was the ability to appreciate what he had. "My life changed from

a life of asking, and asking, and asking, which continues, but more importantly, my life is one of gratitude. So when I go to church now, my first and foremost reason is to say thank you. Thank you for all I've got, and also to be fed by the homilies and to be fed by the Eucharistic bread," he says.

"Today, when I'm facing an obstacle in my life, whether it's employment or my family, regardless of where it comes from in society, I have a relationship that I can go to, to seek divine help."

Paul says he still tries to attend retreats whenever he can.

"I'm a busy guy. I work two jobs, but I know this only makes my job better. It makes my relationship with God better."

He and the others stress the importance of having a place like the Christian Life Center.

"This is the only facility that we have where people can stay over, where we have everything," says Judy. "You have your meals here. You have the chapel. You have the priest here."

"We can so easily be swayed by what's going on outside in the world and what we see on the television or hear on the radio, but that's all not important compared to our spirituality, compared to how we bring up our children," says Karen.

"I know we can make a difference," says Deacon Don. "I see it. I see the people at the retreats. I see what happens."

The Christian Life Center strives to keep costs low, but finances are often a concern. It receives money from the Catholic Appeal and also holds a giant yard sale each August to raise money.

Deacon Don says he puts his trust in God that all will work out. "I totally trust that God intervenes in this place. I know that when I walk into the center, there is the presence of God here for me. And I totally rely on that. We can't do otherwise. If we don't rely on Him, where do we turn?"

**Christian Life Center
 Upcoming Retreats**

Mary Speaks to Us – May 4
 Men's ACTS – May 9
 Teen ACTS – June 27
www.clc4me.org
 207.543.6193

Lay Teacher Pensions

"Maine Catholic schools are part of the saving mission of the Church."
 – Sister Rosemary Donohue

Maine's diocesan Catholic schools, located from Sanford to Bangor, serve more than 2,400 students.

The schools strive not only for academic excellence but to educate students as disciples of the Lord.

"As centers of evangelization and catechesis, the responsibility of our teachers and administrators is to ensure that all who enter our schools will know without a doubt that Christ is indeed the reason for this school. I am most grateful to our school personnel for their wonderful ministry to so many of the youth of our diocese," says Sister Rosemary Donohue, the diocese's superintendent of schools.

While parishes pay most

of the cost of the schools, two important pieces, the Catholic Schools Office and lay teacher pensions, are covered by the Catholic Appeal. The diocese currently has 237 lay teachers.

Father Joseph Daniels, pastor of Corpus Christi, Waterville, which includes St. John Regional Catholic School in Winslow, stresses the importance of getting that assistance.

"Many of our families come to our school from the farms and smaller

towns that surround greater Waterville," he says. "The cost of education per student is high at our small school; about one quarter of our parish offertory is dedicated just to make the operation of a school that serves many rural families possible. We're rather unique as a school in that regard. That the appeal pays for our teachers' pension program is a recognition of the extra sacrifice our parish makes to support our precious Catholic school."