



Retreatants sit on benches lining the Stations of the Cross path outside Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua. File photo

Retreat house marks double anniversary

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

CANANDAIGUA — William Kramer remembers the day Notre Dame Retreat House opened in 1967.

Then-Bishop of Rochester Fulton J. Sheen, along with an estimated 1,500 people, had gathered at the newly built retreat house on Foster Road for the dedication on July 9, 1967.

Kramer, currently a parishioner of St. Joseph's, Penfield, was among those who gathered for the event.

"There were clouds and thunder," Kramer recalled, adding that organizers feared that a storm might ruin the ceremony.

The sun broke through the clouds instead, and the dedication continued as planned.

"It was perfect," said Kramer, who served as president of the Notre Dame Retreat League from 1967-69. "I like to think that was Father Downing still



Father Michael G. Downing, CSsR

watching."

Kramer was referring to Father Michael Downing, CSsR, who had served as rector of Notre Dame Retreat House at 246 Alexander St. in Rochester from 1961 until his death Feb. 23, 1967. Father Downing coordinated the planning, fundraising and construction of the new retreat center in Canandaigua — only to die before it was dedicated.

In all likelihood, Father Downing was also watching Sunday, May 17, 1992, when approximately 200 people gathered at Notre Dame for a Mass celebrating the 25th anniversary of the retreat house.

The event also marked the 50th year the Redemptorists have provided retreats in the diocese. Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Father Edward J. Gilbert, provincial superior of the Redemptorists, served as concelebrants for the celebration.

The last 50 years have witnessed the retreat center moving three times. Notre Dame, which originally offered only weekend retreats for men, now serves men, women and youths. The center provides a variety of retreats and facilities for groups to conduct their own retreats and sessions — ranging from 12-step programs to business groups.

Lay weekend retreats had actually begun in the diocese in 1914 at St. Bernard's Seminary on Lake Avenue in Rochester. Diocesan and visiting priests continued to offer the annual retreats until 1941.

The following year, then-Bishop of Rochester James E. Kearney asked the Redemptorists to take over the retreat ministry. The order's priests began conducting retreats for men at Geneva's Our Lady of the Lake Retreat House on Lochland Road. A Laymen's Retreat League — renamed the Notre Dame Retreat League in 1967 — was formed to assist with organizing and recruiting people for the retreats.

That facility was not open year-



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

Lector Judy Shafer raises her arms in prayer during a May 17 Mass celebrating the Notre Dame Retreat House's silver anniversary.

round, however, and — after the number of men applying for retreats increased — the program was moved in 1950 to the Alexander Street building. The center was then named the Notre Dame Retreat House.

According to Kramer, the retreats eventually outgrew the Alexander Street house as well. In addition, the former location — next to Genesee Hospital — was not ideal for quiet retreats, he remarked.

"There were ambulances pulling in day and night," Kramer said. "It wasn't convenient."

Robert Stevenson, a parishioner at St. Louis Church in Pittsford and president of the Notre Dame Retreat League from 1983-88, began attending retreats at Notre Dame on Alexander Street in the 1950s.

"It was fire and brimstone," Stevenson recalled. The retreats largely consisted of the directors speaking while the retreatants listened, he added.

During today's retreats, Stevenson noted, "It's not just up to the priests to run the whole show. You get sometimes heated discussion."

The order also wanted to move away from providing only men's retreats so, in 1972, Notre Dame began offering weekend retreats for women.

Pat Albrecht, currently Notre Dame's associate director, began attending women's retreats in the

mid-1970s. The retreat house now offers six weekend retreats a year for women, she noted, and the hope is that the number of retreats for women will continue to increase.

Part of what makes Notre Dame attractive is the location, Albrecht said. "When you drive up the hill and see the lake from here, there is a sense of peacefulness for me," she said.

Father Tim Keating, CSsR, the house's current rector, acknowledged that the center did see fewer people take retreats in the 1970s. He added, however, that the numbers have increased in recent years.

In 1991, Father Keating estimated, 1,300 men and 400 women made weekend retreats. The number of people attending married couple retreats, youth retreats, days of recollection and individual retreats — along with groups using the facility for their own workshops and retreats — raised the total to around 4,500, he said.

Stevenson, for one, would like to see those numbers continue to increase — both for the sake of Notre Dame and the people who make the retreats.

A retreat, he said, "is a tune up."

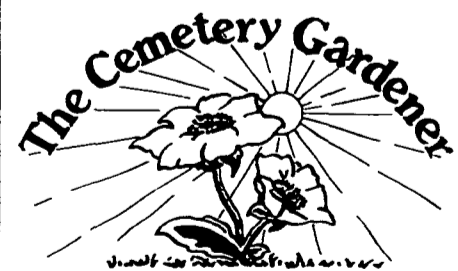
"It's more of a long-term confession, a weekend confession to yourself," Stevenson said. "It's a chance to look at your life and just think things over."

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