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Church invites Catholics back

A few years back, Matthew A. Fountain was Catholic more out of a sense of obligation than a sense of desire. "I felt I had to go to church, and I didn't always want to go, so, instead of finding a new church, I took the path of least resistance and just decided not to go," Fountain said.

He said he and his wife, Susan, did attend church sporadically, mainly because of influence from family members. They began increasing their attendance once they had their newborn son baptized at Guardian Angels Church, Henrietta, in 1994, he said, noting they felt obligated to set an example for their son.

At Guardian Angels, however, their encounters with various faith-filled individuals gradually began to give the Fountains a more positive view of their religion, Matthew said during a phone interview. Currently a professor at the State University of New York at Fredonia, Fountain and his wife moved from the Diocese of Rochester to Dunkirk last fall.

A turning point in Fountain's life was Guardian Angels' first annual "From Ashes to Fire" program in 1997, he said. The program consists of a parish mini-mission, Bible study groups,

penance service, liturgies and other activities from Ash Wednesday throughout Lent and up to Pentecost Sunday.

Designed to strengthen the faith of Guardian Angels' parishioners, "From Ashes to Fire" is also intended to encourage parishioners to invite their friends and family members back into active church life, according to Dean Condon, the parish's pastoral administrator. Condon added that at least 30 people have given the parish public testimonials about the program's effect on their faith.

Fountain said the small group discussions he experienced in "From Ashes to Fire" changed his view of his fellow Catholics.

"You started to know some of the people in the community, rather than just going to church with them," he said. Eventually, Fountain and his wife became active members of Guardian Angels. Fountain even became a pioneer member of a men's group at the parish. Only one year after participating in "From Ashes to Fire," Fountain gave a testimony about his faith during a 1998 program session.

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STORY BY ROB CULLIVAN

