

# **A welcome home: Catholic Church opens arms to prodigal faithful, newcomers**

**Sunday, April 17, 2011**

Keene — Although its metaphorical, if not literal, doors are always open, the Roman Catholic Church in New Hampshire is making a special outreach to those Catholics who have fallen away, as well welcoming new people to the faith.

Beginning Ash Wednesday and extending into June, area parishes such as the Parish of the Holy Spirit — which holds services at St. Bernard Church on Main Street and at Saint Margaret Mary Church on Arch Street, as well as Immaculate Conception Church on School St. in Troy — will have large banners above their doors, welcoming people to come within.

The campaign to bring Catholics back into the fold and also to bring new people into the church is the idea of a group known as Catholics Come Home. Locally, this movement has spawned a group called Welcoming Catholics Home, which is sponsoring a Meet and Greet with a group of parishioners to explore the opportunity for lapsed Catholics to return to the regular practice of their faith. It will be held on Monday, May 2, 2011 at St. Margaret Mary church hall at 6:30 PM.

According to the groups' website at [www.catholicscomehome.org](http://www.catholicscomehome.org), there is "a crisis of faith in our world" (local website <http://swnhcatholics.com/welcomehome.html>).

Only 33 percent of U.S. Catholics attend Mass on a weekly basis, CCH said, while "the number of Americans identifying themselves as non-religious/secular increased 110 percent from 1990 to 2000!"

CCH estimated that some 100,000 baptized Catholics in the U.S. drift away from Church each year and, in response, the group advocates evangelization, as expounded by Pope John Paul II. The late pontiff "realized that the old methods from the past needed refreshing, stating, "This vital field of action for the Church requires a radical change of mentality, an authentic new awakening of conscience in everyone. New methods are needed, as are new expressions and new courage."

With the late Holy Father's words for inspiration, CCH created a series of television commercials and a website. The commercials, which began airing recently on stations in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, invite people to go to the CCH website, help them find a local parish and "return home."

Following a CCH campaign, the Diocese of Phoenix reported that a review revealed a 12 percent increase in Mass attendance even as the diocese's population remained level. CCH said the Diocese of Corpus Christi showed a 17.7 increase in attendance at Mass after a bilingual CCH effort there.

The Rev. Daniel Lamothe, pastor of the Parish of the Holy Spirit, said if Catholics Come Home brings one former or new believer to his parish, then it has been more than worth it.

"We'll have resource tables for people who've been away from the church, as well as for our parishioners, books about what their faith is really about."

The Parish of the Holy Spirit website ([swnhcatholics.com](http://swnhcatholics.com)) asks parishioners to be open to the "seekers" who may "simply slip into our pews at a given Mass" or who may have questions about what it means to be a Catholic. Parishioners are advised to hone their listening skills and to listen without a personal "agenda;" to listen with their hearts; to invite more conversation; and ultimately, to "Trust in the inner workings of God; and the God within the other person. Above all, listen to their stories! Listen to their hurts! Listen to their disappointments! And then Jesus will speak through you!"

Lamothe said the doors of St. Bernard, St. Margaret Mary and Immaculate Conception churches are open to those "who may have been away from the Church from divorce, annulment or the Second Vatican Council or who maybe have been hurt by a decision of the church."

"Even if one person returns home, it's worth everything to prepare to receive them. Just this past week, two people who were away for at least 30 years had seen the commercials on TV and decided to reconnect. It was a delight to welcome them back, " said one local parishioner.