



Area Catholics say faith in God gives them faith in church

By **LORI HALL STEELE**
Special to the Record-Eagle

The Roman Catholic church's crisis among clergy has not prompted a crisis of faith among northern Michigan parishioners. Rather, area Catholics say the ongoing scandal — in which priests nationwide have been defrocked for sexual misconduct with minors — is something that inspires more prayer, fortifying connections to their religion and churches. Claire Nixon is among a core group of about 50 parishioners who attend mass daily at St. Francis Church in Traverse City. The 77-year-old lifelong Catholic says hardly a day goes by that she doesn't

find new appreciation for her religion. "We're not really happy about what's going on, but I doubt that it has really jarred people's faith," said Nixon, who attended Catholic schools and graduated from a Catholic college. "There are all kinds of ways of looking at this. You can analyze it as a real challenge to your faith, but my religion doesn't revolve around the people in it, it revolves around my relationship with God. And believe me, there are a lots of us out there who feel like that." Madeleine Newman, 81, is among those whose faith is undaunted. "This hasn't fazed me, not one drop," said Newman, who has attended mass daily at St. Francis. "I'm even stronger

now." Pat Kleinrichert, too, said her faith has been fortified. The 59-year-old lifelong Catholic said she has prayed more, for priests and the church. Kleinrichert also is among St. Francis parishioners who attend mass daily or almost everyday. "Our faith does not lie in a priest," she said. "Our faith lies in our church, in the sacraments of the church. We know that Christ established the Catholic church and he is going to be with us until the end of time. This is a cleansing process that is going on in the seminaries and priesthood, and it's just going to make the church stronger." Kleinrichert, with her family, made a pilgrimage in 1988 to Medugorje, a small town in the former Yugoslavia where six children had seen a vision of the Virgin Mary. Like others, she said the crisis is a call to faith. "People who fall away from the faith because of the scandals are committing what is called a spiritual suicide," she said. "What they need to do is stay strong and pray for the priests and pray for the church." Many area Catholics also said the media has overdone coverage on the issue, and

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some say the Catholic Church has been singled out. "We're so big and universal they want to pick on us," Nixon said. "They say, 'It's really going to shake the foundation of the religion.' I don't honestly believe that for a minute. The fact that they would even suggest that this would shatter this religion is just crazy. "We've been around for 2,000 years and I'm sure we'll be around for a long, long time," she continued. "It's a good religion. We try really hard to be good citizens and love our neighbors." The situation, Kleinrichert said, is "more of a media frenzy than it is a crisis in the church." "There are obviously things that have been done improv-

erly in the church, but we're dealing with human beings," she said. "I know a lot of the priests in the diocese, and they're really wonderful men and they're suffering a great deal." Fewer than 2 percent of priests are involved, Kleinrichert said, and many of those have not been proven guilty. "The church is trying very hard to make right and to treat right the people who've been abused," she said. "This is just an awakening, and the church will be much stronger." When Kleinrichert's daughter expressed concerns about going to confession — "What if this priest was a pedophile?" she asked — Kleinrichert told her this: "No matter what the priest has done, when they perform the sacraments of the church, they are representing Christ, and if there's any punishment due to these priests, it will be done by God, not by mankind, spiritually," she said. "Spiritually, it is between man and God, and God will take care of it."

Lori Hall Steele is a local free-lance writer.

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THIS ISSUE

On the cover: Asbury United Methodist Church, St. Francis Church in Traverse City and Suttons Bay's community are just some of the places that have Bible School sessions.

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