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St. Mary Parish sees the fruits of encountering Jesus in 'Light of the World' BY TANYA CONNOR --THE CATHOLIC FREE PRESS

They see a difference in themselves, others, their parish. Friends and family members seem to see a difference too. And God gets the credit. "I think all pastors are looking for the fix for their parish," Father Nicholas Desimone, pastor of St. Mary Parish in Uxbridge, told The Catholic Free Press. The only way to get it is through "an encounter with Jesus Christ," he said. "At St. Mary's, that encounter has been through Light of the World." The parish has held several Light of the World Evangelization Ministries' retreats, which 120 people, mostly parishioners, have attended, he said. As a result, 10 small, faith groups are now meeting, usually twice a month, in people's homes. Father Desimone is one of those who sees the fruits. "I have volunteers coming out of the woodwork," he said. "I have new ministries springing up." People are more eager to learn about and share their

St. Mary's is an example of how parish programs work. Most of those who attend the retreats do so because of a personal invitation from someone who previously attended one. Father Desimone recalled one parishioner who was not active in church who really needed the retreat to "work" for her. She was in a difficult situation and had tried everything. Jesus was sort of her last option. The retreat gave her a reason to go on. She isn't the only one who's benefited. "It's been a game-changer even in terms of my own priestly ministry," Father Desimone said of the program. He said that each time he attends as much of the retreat as he can, and each time is brought closer to Christ himself. And seeing parishioners come closer to Christ "gives me an energy that I might not otherwise have," he said. It was parishioners – not a priest – who got him into this. One of his closest friends from seminary, Father Jonathan Bakkelund, a priest in the Diocese of Rockford, Ill., had tried. "For years he had been telling me about Light of the World and that I should do it," said Father Desimone, who assumed it was just one of many programs available. But when he went to visit Father Bakkelund, he met two ordinary couples from his friend's parish who spoke passionately about their love for Jesus. "I wanted to know where that came from," Father Desimone said. "For them it came from Light of the World." So he brought the program to St. Mary's. He expresses gratitude that his parishioners trusted him enough to try it. Timothy and Denise Rogan said they made the first Light of the World retreat at St. Mary's, and have helped with all the subsequent ones. Asked if anyone came to Christ as a result of Light of the World,

Denise Rogan said, "My husband is the perfect example." She said she invited him to the first retreat, which she was going to attend, and he said "no." But the night before it started he asked if he could come. Both said they didn't know what came over him. "I think the Holy Spirit came and conked him on the head," Mrs. Rogan decided. "He has really, truly, turned his whole life over to Christ." "I'm a totally different person after Light of the World," Timothy Rogan said. "I went to church before, but I was never really engaged. Now I'm fully engaged. I just want to help people and do all I can." He said he's been a facilitator for small groups – something he never thought he'd do. He and his wife said they've helped with all the subsequent retreats and with service projects. "Even some of our friends outside of the Church are noticing that we're different ... more joyful, more helpful to people," Mrs. Rogan said. "It just kind of comes natural. We've really learned to turn our problems over to the Lord. I did do it, but not the way I'm doing it now. I think people have noticed we're not as anxious as we used to be." Their adult children seem to notice a difference too, she said, adding, "Some of the conversations they'll start with us ... We're more free to talk about our faith." They're growing into a parish family too. Mrs. Rogan said she and her husband used to leave after Mass. But now they almost have to be kicked out – they're so busy talking with their new friends from Light of the World. Emile and Sheryl Ethier also said they attended the first Light of the World retreat at St. Mary's and have helped with the subsequent ones. Mr. Ethier said the most important thing he's received from the retreat is "a deeper understanding of my Catholic religion and a deeper relationship with Christ." He added, "I think that it does that for anybody who attends. ... People come closer to each other through Christ." "You can feel the work of the Holy Spirit," said his wife. "The Holy Spirit touches every single person. ... I feel like it's really changed my life." Has it helped them to bring others to Christ? "Absolutely," said Mr. Ethier. He watches each person come closer to the Creator when they attend the retreat. Mrs. Ethier talked about sharing their stories and being loving and nonjudgmental, promoting the retreat at Masses at their parish and helping St. Roch Parish in Oxford hold one of the retreats.