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Capuchin Fr. Keith Clark, director of Monte Alverno Retreat and Spirituality Center in Appleton, is pictured in the center's chapel.

Capuchins to end sponsorship of Monte Alverno retreat center

Center's lay advisory group seeks to prevent its closure

BY STEVE WIDEMAN | FOR THE COMPASS

APPLETON — Efforts are underway to find a new sponsor for Monte Alverno Retreat and Spirituality Center after the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph announced May 28 plans to end its nearly 80-year sponsorship of the Appleton retreat center on Dec. 31.

Province officials cited dwindling personnel and financial resources as primary reasons the Capuchins decided to drop sponsorship of Monte Alverno and St. Anthony Retreat Center in Marathon, located near Wausau, said Capuchin Fr. Keith Clark, director of Monte Alverno.

"If we don't find new sponsorship we'll just fold up, as far as I know. It's just one of those unknowns," said Fr. Keith, who came to Monte Alverno in 2005 after serving as president of St. Lawrence High School Seminary in Mt. Calvary.

Members of a 13-member lay advisory group at Monte Alverno, the first retreat center built in Wisconsin, promise to do all they can to prevent the closure, said advisory board chairman Tom McMillen of Appleton.

"We are certainly exploring all our options and alternatives to closing," McMillen said. "No decisions have been made and nothing is really concrete at this time, but absolutely we plan to keep Monte Alverno open."

Monte Alverno, hidden within 25 wooded acres next to St. Joseph Cemetery, annually attracts 2,300 retreat and program participants, according to Fr. Keith.

The plan to pull Capuchin sponsorship of Monte Alverno began three years ago as part of an ever-changing pastoral plan and review of operations by the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, Fr. Keith said.

He said friars from the province, which encompasses the Midwestern states, meet every three years to form a pastoral plan.

As part of the most recent pastoral planning process, the friars directed provincial officials to "make the hard decisions" to deal with declining ranks of friars and tight finances.

"On April 30 they announced to us that in this new pastoral plan the province would not sponsor Monte Alverno," Fr. Keith said. "The pastoral plan has changed many times. I am not anticipating between

now and Dec. 31 that they (province officials) are going to change their minds, but I don't know."

The announcement Monte Alverno could close, at worst, or transition to new operators, at best, came just days after the lay advisory board approved raising \$1 million to be donated to the Capuchins to defray provincial costs to operate Monte Alverno in future years.

"Provincial sponsorship includes providing personnel and financial support as needed," Fr. Keith said. "Provincial financial support has been needed. The (\$1 million) funding initiative is pointed toward getting Monte Alverno beyond the need for any financial support from the province."

The retreat center currently has a staff of four Capuchin friars, a Franciscan nun from Manitowoc and five clerical, maintenance and cooking staff.

The \$1 million funding initiative is one of three initiatives begun in the last year aimed at, ironically, assuring the retreat center's long-term survival.

The remaining initiatives include attracting more retreat participants and developing a professional marketing plan for Monte Alverno, Fr. Keith said.

Provincial officials were unaware of the initiatives when they announced their decision to drop support for Monte Alverno, Fr. Keith said.

He said the initiatives will continue despite the announcement "but now the focus of the advisory board is not just to secure Monte Alverno as a ministry of the province, but to make it attractive to an alternative sponsor."

The retreat center recently began giving certificates to retreat participants to distribute for free retreats for first-time visitors, especially those in their 20s and 30s, to Monte Alverno.

"A lot of people have been coming here for retreats for 20 or 30 years. They are dying off and we've been minimally successful in attracting the younger generation," Fr. Keith said.

But 30 of 35 people redeeming the free retreat certificates have been 30 or younger, Fr. Keith said.

"One was a junior in high school. I was shocked, but very encouraged," he said.

MONTE ALVERNO | P5

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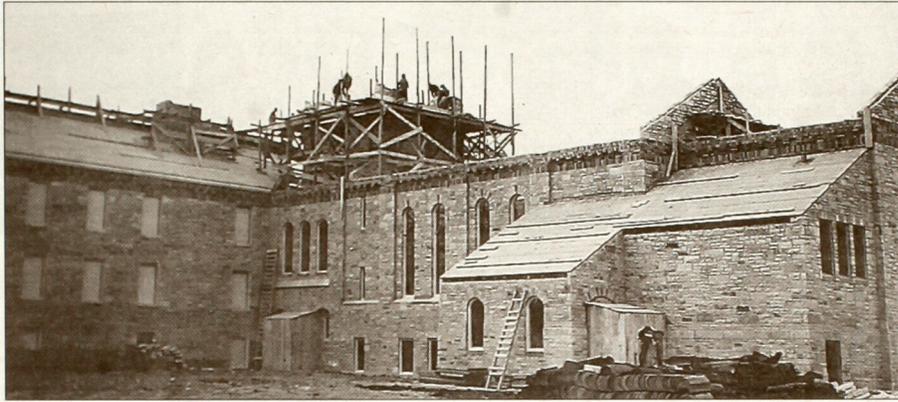


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Construction workers make progress on the roof of the Monte Alverno Retreat and Spirituality Center in 1934.

Monte Alverno seeks new sponsorship

FROM PAGE 4

Word of the possible closure came April 30, hours after leaders of the Province of St. Joseph, headquartered in Detroit, broke the news to friars operating St. Anthony Retreat Center in Marathon.

Monte Alverno has its roots in St. Anthony's. A group of Appleton Knights of Columbus members in 1923 asked the Capuchins to give them a retreat. The most suitable place at that time was St. Anthony's, then a theology school for Capuchin seminarians preparing for ordination.

Meanwhile, an Appleton woman,

Mary Merkel, agreed to donate land along the Fox River for a Capuchin retreat center.

By 1934, construction began on Monte Alverno, named after the mountain where St. Francis received the stigmata — the wounds of Christ in his hands, feet and side.

Monte Alverno, with room for 34 retreatants, was dedicated April 4, 1935. The first retreat, with 23 Knights of Columbus present, took place May 4, 1935.

The popularity of retreats prompted a major expansion of Monte Alverno in the 1960s to allow 56 retreatants.

"There were so many people who

wanted to make retreats that every weekend was filled and there was a waiting list. Now we rarely fill the place," Fr. Keith said.

In 2012, Fr. Keith preached at the final Mass at the closing of the School Sisters of Notre Dame convent in Mt. Calvary after 160 years.

"I started out the Mass by saying 'This feels a lot like a funeral,'" he said. "At Monte Alverno I'm hoping there won't be a funeral, but if there is, there is. There are only two things certain at this point. The province will not continue sponsorship after Dec. 31 and our advisory board is trying to put something together allowing the ministry here to continue."