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Mercy Sr. Donna Marie Paolini on the hermitage steps at the Center for Solitude in Belmont, New York (Courtesy of the Sisters of Mercy)



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About 60 miles southeast of Buffalo, New York, the Center of Solitude offers those seeking to immerse themselves in silence a remote location to delve within on their spiritual journey: no internet access, no television, sketchy cellphone signal. Those who have ventured into the lone hermitage on the 60 acres experience a transformation that often defies words.

Mercy Sr. Donna Marie Paolini opened the Center of Solitude in 1992 after discovering the benefits of silence and solitude for herself.

Now 91 — "still functioning," she quipped — she entered the Sisters of Mercy in Buffalo in 1947. While teaching sixth grade at Mount Mercy Academy in Buffalo for more than two decades, she got into retreat work when a group of husbands and wives asked her to give them a retreat.

"I found I had a gift for that kind of work," Paolini said.

She later served in retreat ministry at the House of Prayer run by the Mercy Sisters in Le Roy, New York. When that facility downsized in the mid-1980s, Paolini took some time to discern her next step. She spent six months during the 1980s at Christ in the Wilderness, a hermitage retreat center in northwest Illinois founded by a Sister of St. Joseph of La Grange, Illinois, that features three hermitages, a chapel and a main building.

"That's where I got the message to do this," she said.



The pond at the Center for Solitude in Belmont, New York (Courtesy of the Sisters of Mercy)

Paolini took her inspiration back to New York and continued to live in solitude while the idea solidified.

Her original intention was to build three hermitages and a chapel but, advancing in age, she stopped at one, with retreatants mostly coming during summer and autumn.

She leaves it up to the visitors to pay what they can for their time in the hermitage.

"I wouldn't charge anything if I could do that," she said. "Spiritual life is more important than materialism."

Over nearly three decades, people have come to value the solitude found in the single hermitage. One comment Paolini found touching came from a retreatant who wrote, "After being there, my image of God changed from aloof to much more personal and intimate." Another noted, "I had an interior explosion."



Mercy Sr. Donna Marie Paolini in her office at the Center for Solitude in Belmont, New York (Courtesy of the Sisters of Mercy)

***GSR*: What is the story behind the location of the Center of Solitude?**

Paolini: I started looking for property [in the early 1990s], and I wasn't finding anything. Then, I had a dream.

First, I saw a man on the road, and I asked him where something was. I forget now what. He told me, "Go down there and make a left, and you'll see it." That's when I saw a big sign, like a street sign, but large. It had white letters on a green background, and it said "Genesee." That's all it said.

So, I knew I had to look at anything that had the word "Genesee" in it. When I found this property where the center is now located, I had no idea that it was in the Genesee Valley, near the Genesee River, off of Genesee Road. When I drove into Belmont and I had to make a left on the road that took me to the property, I looked up and saw the word "Genesee" and said, "Oh, my God!"

My dream also had cattle in it, and when I got to where the guy told me to go [in the dream], I got out of the car, and there were cows there, roaming around. The property was once a cow pasture.



The signpost for the Center for Solitude in Belmont, New York (Courtesy of the Sisters of Mercy)

The property had everything I was looking for: remote, accessible, beautiful, woods, meadows, ponds. It's just perfect. When I talked to the owners, they had been trying to sell the property for a number of years. Every time they got close to it, [the owners] withdrew. When they got my offer, the husband and wife looked at each other and said, "She's the one we've got to sell to."

Why they said that: Their youngest son, who had died driving to the property at midnight one night, had wanted to buy a yacht. When he found the one he wanted, it had the name "Donna Marie" on it. He wouldn't let his father change the boat's name.

The couple held the mortgage on the property for 10 years, and with fundraisers, we paid it off.

God has been in this thing from day one and still is. The center was built on donations and fundraisers, and it's been maintained on it. It still amazes me. It's just a peaceful place.

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Why is solitude important on the spiritual journey?

Silence brings us to the depths of ourselves, the innermost self, the spirit, the soul. It just brings you there, and that is where God's life is. That's where the Holy Spirit resides. You learn that as you go deep inside yourself, not being concerned about the outside, materialistic stuff that we have to do every day to live life.

Our main problem in this country is that materialism has taken over, and people are so busy with getting things they need and want, they're ignoring the treasure within, as St. Paul says: God's very life within us.

The Holy Spirit resides in all of life — not just nature, but you and me and every human being. We're all one because we all have that same one life of God in us.

This place is for the people who feel the need to find silence and solitude and grow in their self-knowledge and knowledge of God. It's the most important thing in life.

People are too busy to even take time away. Some people are afraid of being alone. A lot of people are afraid of silence, because once you're silent, you start hearing all the stuff inside. It surfaces, and some people don't want to deal with disturbing stuff.

You work through that, and then, you get to the deeper place. You have to do it to know it.