

Benedictines' Ozark hermitage offers 300 acres for spiritual reflection

NEW BLAINE, Ark. (CNS) – As society gets more anxious, divisive and turbulent with each passing day, Hesychia House of Prayer has been a beacon of stability and peace.

There is something awe-inspiring in pulling into the 40-year-old hermitage amid the backdrop of the distant Ozark Mountains, the cattle grazing and 300 rolling acres the Benedictine sisters credit to God.

“Deep down, the fact that this property, this space has been dedicated explicitly, explicitly, for God since 1879, it’s permeated with prayer over a century,” said Benedictine Sister Louise Sharum, Hesychia’s founding director, about the property owned by the Benedictines.

Hesychia is a ministry of the Benedictines’ St. Scholastica Monastery, but last July the religious order began a partnership with the Religious Sisters of Mercy to lead the house of prayer. Two members of that order, Sisters Lisa Atkins and Anita DeSalvo, were chosen to be Hesychia’s director and assistant director, respectively.

In 1981, with the blessing of Bishop Andrew J. McDonald, then bishop of Little Rock, Arkansas, Sister Louise and two other sisters began the Hesychia House of Prayer. *Hesychia* is Greek for “resting in God.”

It is open to anyone who desires to connect with God without distractions. This can mean staying for a night or weekend to even months or years.

Sister Louise, 90, told the Arkansas Catholic, Little Rock’s

diocesan newspaper, that she knew right away Sisters Lisa and Anita were a “fit.” “Our charisms basically are very much compatible.”

For Sister Louise, the house of prayer started with a feeling. It came after she stayed at a hermitage in Canada to experience the concept of *poustina*, staying in a sparsely furnished space to fast and pray for 24 hours. She was looking to better understand her dissertation for her doctorate.

After that visit, “I knew deep down my call was not to be a college professor,” Sister Louise said. “I had no idea what it meant, but I knew something deep inside it was different than I thought.”

Little by little, she said she felt called to open a hermitage.

“Spiritual companionship,” or spiritual direction, is available with the sisters. Some guests choose to interact with the three sisters, while others prefer a visit of solitude. Sister Louise said it’s about letting people be who they are before God and letting God reveal his love.

“We can read that; we can hear everybody tell us that from the time we were knee-high to a grasshopper. But until God tells us that in God’s own way, we don’t really know it,” Sister Louise said. “But once you know it, and it’s gradual, you know it’s not the St. Paul experience, but you know deep down.

“In a way, that to me is the main thing that happens when people come here – it’s restful. But the real thing that’s going on underneath is they’re receiving God’s love.”

The four hermitages are named: St. Mark; Sacro Speco, a long-term hermitage; Mother Meinrada, named for the first prioress of St. Scholastica; and St. Hildegard. Each includes a full kitchen, microwave, utensils and coffee maker, heating and air conditioning, full bathroom and a twin bed. Wi-Fi hotspots are

available.

Visitors are responsible for their food and meal preparation. Daily Mass is offered at St. Scholastica Church, a short walk or drive from Hesychia. There also are three hiking trails.

A donation of \$50 is suggested each night for the first week of stay and \$35 a night after. For a one-day visit, a \$20 donation is requested. Sister Lisa said they would not turn away any short-term guests who could not afford the fee.

Since about 2004, Sisters Lisa and Anita have visited the hermitage for their annual retreat. However, in recent years, the sisters visited every weekend, allowing Sister Anita to care for her mother, who died in July 2020.

Before accepting the call to lead Hesychia, the sisters served in health care at Mercy Hospital Northwest Arkansas.

Sister Anita was at the hospital for 20 years, supporting the mission and education departments and was a part of the executive team for eight years as a representative of the Religious Sisters of Mercy.

Sister Lisa worked at Mercy as a board-certified nurse practitioner for 17 years. She helped start the community health and benefits department, working toward affordable housing, which will begin this fall.

“When I prayed about it, I really resonated with the call,” Sister Lisa said. “And it was almost as if a new rush of energy, God’s Spirit was just kind of moving within me in a freedom and a deep passion to be about the ministry of Hesychia. I could just feel it in my heart.”

For Sister Anita, a two-month stay following her mother’s death to give her the space to grieve helped her realize the power of Hesychia.

“It provided me exactly what Sister Lisa and Sister Louise

have been talking about – time, space, solitude, grounds to walk and be in nature in a way that I had never been, which was healing,” Sister Anita said. “And actually ended up leading me to my own discernment about being here.”

The Hesychia House of Prayer was closed for four months after the pandemic spread in March 2020. The sisters received grants for improvements, and fundraising helped pay for a new tractor to keep up the property and 52 head of cattle.

The hermitages are open to those of any faith or lifestyle. “We don’t judge, we welcome all,” Sister Lisa said.

Each person wishing to make a reservation at a hermitage must be vaccinated and submit a vaccination card as proof.

Sister Lisa said she hopes visitors to Hesychia can experience Jesus in a new way.

“I’ve known about Jesus, I’ve heard about Jesus, I look for Jesus, I found Jesus, but Jesus found me in a different way” at Hesychia, she said. “And I was at a place where I could meet Jesus within myself, in a way that I’ve never experienced before.”

More information about Hesychia House of Prayer can be [found online here](#).

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