

# Alone with God and nature: Franciscan sisters open hermitages as place of prayer and peace

By Jane Harriman  
Staff reporter

**ASTON, Pa.** — In the early 13th century, when St. Francis of Assisi entered the forest to listen to God and nature in solitude, his hermitage was a cave.

In the early 21st century, most Americans seeking contemplative solitude would be distracted, if not miserable, in such rough quarters. So when the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia built five hermitages for guests to enjoy peace and prayer, they equipped them with “conveniences” like refrigerators and showers but eliminated modern distractions like televisions and telephones.

The hermitages, set on 45 wooded acres on the grounds of the sisters’ complex in Delaware County, were built as part of the sisters’ celebration of their 150th anniversary (April 2005). The cottages — which are intended to accommodate only one person — received their first guests in September. Guests may stay in a hermitage for a day, a weekend, a week or a month, said Sister Christa Marie Thompson, director of the sisters’ Franciscan Spirituality Center, who oversaw the construction project. Each hermitage is one 17-square-foot room with a double bed, small kitchen, bathroom with shower, small table with two chairs, and a recliner.

Guests bring their own



**Sister Julie Keegan is staying for a week in Aston. Guests’ stays can vary from one day to as long as a month.**

food and prepare their own meals; the kitchen includes a small refrigerator, stove, microwave, toaster oven, automatic coffee pot, a few pans, utensils, supplies for dishwashing, and garbage disposal. The open porch has a lounge chair with ottoman.

Guests are encouraged to bring reading and prayer material, tapes or CDs, an alarm clock, and a flashlight. A folder placed in each cottage lists the schedules for liturgy and confession and directions to local churches.

The hermitages cost \$30 per night, \$20 for a day only; \$140 for a long weekend and \$300 for a week.

One of the first guests was Father Charles Faso, a Franciscan of the Order of Friars Minor who is an itinerant preacher based in Chicago and who preaches and leads retreats in the United States and abroad. A friend of Sister Christa’s family, Father Faso is on sabbatical until January and came to the area in late

September as he headed back to Chicago from a renewal program in Rome.

“I thought I’d come to the hermitage to slow down — and let God listen to me,” Father Faso joked at the beginning of his six-day stay. Seriously, he added, his time alone “will give me a chance to push everything aside and make room for God, to listen to him.”

Back in Chicago five days after his retreat, Father Faso said by phone that it took him a few days to settle down so he could hear the messages he needed to hear. During his stay the remnants of Hurricane Jeanne passed through the area. “I sat on the porch [of the cabin] and the rain came straight down, and I watched the woods showered by ‘Sister Rain.’”

As he prepared to resume his travels, the priest said, his thoughts went back to the hermitage and the peace and quiet of the woods. “It is very comforting, like a wrap around



*The Dialog/Don Blake*  
**Father Charles Faso of Chicago walks along a foot bridge on the grounds near the hermitages in Aston.**

you, holding you. I need to do it again, this time for two or three weeks.”

The hermitages are not completely isolated; they sit next to Clare House, the Franciscans’ retreat facility for small groups.

“It’s not rustic at all,” Sister Alberta Dougherty said recently of the cottage where she was about to spend the weekend. “That’s one reason I was enticed; I am a city girl, not into camping. I appreciate all the comforts.”

Sister Alberta, secretary to one of the congregation’s directors, said there is a great need for places like the hermitages. “So much is going on in our lives that it will be good to be in a quiet, beautiful place with the Lord. There are pathways through the woods and I am anxious to walk.” She was bringing spiritual books and reading materi-

al, including some that she hoped would prepare her to vote in the coming presidential election.

The Sisters of St. Francis consider the 45 acres on which the heritages sit as sacred space, and they are beginning to restore the environment God created; flora not native to Eastern Pennsylvania, for example, will be replaced by indigenous trees and plants, said Sister Christa.

### Preserve integrity

Hermitages were refuges for mystics in both the Old and New Testaments, and early Christians sought isolation to grow closer to God or to avoid persecution. In recent years, religious communities, primarily Catholic and Buddhist but Protestant and ecumenical groups as well, have built hermitages for individuals to seek deeper spiritual insight.

“Our mission always has been to provide an opportunity for spiritual growth and renewal through our ministry or our space,” Sister Christa said. The sisters’ environmental mission statement says in part, “We commit ourselves to reverence all that exists, to preserve the integrity of the land entrusted to our care, to dialogue and explore with others the implications of eco-spirituality, to promote positive environmental behaviors, and to celebrate our oneness with the



*The Dialog/Don Blake*

**Each of the hermitages is a one-room building with a small kitchen, bathroom and porch.**

universe.”

The hermitages were built to be compatible with the environment. For example, they do not have foundations but stand a few feet above ground on small pilings, Sister Christa said, “so they touch lightly on the earth.” The cottages sit along a ridge surrounded with trees and have southern exposures to take advantage of the sun’s light and warmth. Heat loss is minimized because the northern exposures do not have windows.

Each cottage has a Bible, of course, but also binoculars and a bird identification book so guests, in the tradition of St. Francis, can commune with the birds.

A few days into her retreat, Sister Julie Keegan had been watching not only the birds but deer as well. One evening, she said, a doe and two fawns emerged into the small clearing in front of her cottage. “They put on a show for me and stayed about an hour and a half.”

Sister Julie, data manager in the congregation’s formation office, commutes to Aston from St. Matthew’s convent in Wilmington. “I’ve definitely gotten a good rest,” she said during her retreat. “I’ve had a good spiritual director, Sister Julie McCole. Each day we meet and talk about what has happened, where the

### For more info

For further information on the hermitages or to sign up for a stay, write Franciscan Spiritual Experience, 609 S. Convent Road., Aston, Pa., 19014 or contact 610-558-5372 or [fsc@osfphila.org](mailto:fsc@osfphila.org).

Lord is leading me.”

Sister Julie said she makes retreats several times a year, and especially looks forward to those in Aston, where she was a postulant in 1964. “The grounds here are so good,” she said. “I love walking through the woods.”

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