

Alone with GOD

*Pacem in Terris is a place
to pray, to think, to wander*



The hermitages at Pacem in Terris are simple, one-room cabins with a bed, rocking chair, end table and altar. Gas lamps provide lighting. The food is simple: a basket of bread, cheese and fruit. The hermitages allow people such as Franciscan Brother Michael Gaworski to spend time alone in silence.



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By Chuck Haga - Staff Writer

Shirley Wanchena slogged through the deepening snow, through the red oaks and birches of her Pacem in Terris – Peace on Earth – guiding a pilgrim to the little cabin named for St. Anthony the Hermit.

The cabin was a dark brown made pastel by the falling snow, not much bigger than a big ice-fishing house.

“Go ahead,” she said, handing over the key. “You’re the hermit.”

So the pilgrim took the key, opened the door and stepped inside, carrying a basket of simple provisions for a night and a day and another night of solitude.

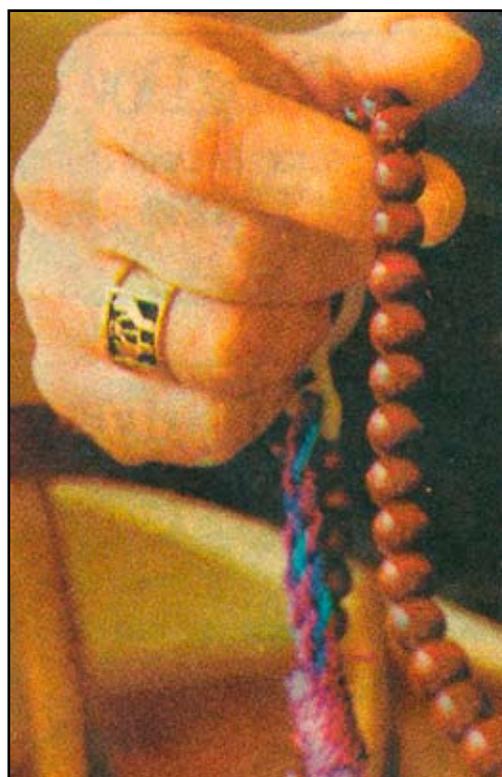
It took just a minute to inventory the place: a bed a rocking chair and hassock, a washstand and eight jugs of water, a cupboard stocked with coffee and candles and such, a Bible on a stand. A wooden cross hung on a wall, and beneath it two icons. Wrap-around windows faced the east, where the sun would rise above the oaks and a frozen lake. An outdoor privy was just down the path.

Wanchena explained the gas lantern and how to make coffee and promised to return in 24 hours to check the wooden flag on the box outside. Put the flag up and she knows

to look for a note: a request for more bread, perhaps, or more time.

The pilgrim had two neighbors, Franciscan brothers from Minneapolis, in nearly identical hermitages just visible through the woods.

“People can be afraid of silence,” said Brother Michael Gaworski, 32, superior of the Franciscan Brothers of Peace, before the three hermits went their separate, cloistered ways.



“I know that I was, once. You’re afraid of what you may see in yourself. You might have to face some things that you don’t want to face.”

He and Brother Anthony Sweere, 30, come to Pacem in Terris about once a month. They come to reflect, pray, recharge. Their order operates a home for men who are in the final stages of AIDS.

“What St. Francis did was to go among the lepers and care for them, then go back to his cave and pray for peace,” Sweere said.

“It’s so important to us to gain that inner peace, to reconnect with God and carry that back to the city. It’s difficult to find there the true, intense silence that we find here.”

Wanchena sold her Twin Cities home after her husband died in 1977 and eventually put most of what she had into Pacem in Terris, off Hwy. 47 about 20 miles north of Anoka.

She was 49 when her husband died, her six children grown. “I felt I had enough life left to make a difference,” she said.

The retreat is 180 acres, most of it woodland, but with seven acres of tall-grass prairie in the center. Trails meander through the grass and trees and to the edge of the lake.

"A relationship with God is like any other relationship in that it needs to be nurtured," Wanchena said. "It needs 'alone time' away from the world, its pressures and schedules."

The first three hermitages were ready in 1988. Wanchena hopes to add 15 more, a few at a time. There is no fixed fee, but Wanchena accepts donations and tells visitors it costs about \$35 a day to maintain a hermitage.

She lives with her son, his wife and their four children in the main house, where visiting hermits are welcome at the family supper table. Many begin their stay with supper, then go into the woods.

"One priest who comes for his regular retreat – we don't see him for eight days," she said. "It's important to have at least one unbroken day when you don't have to be aware of time."

She has welcomed 425 different hermits so far, about half of them Catholic. "We've had Baptist and Lutheran ministers, Jews, Quakers, and a few people who aren't sure they believe," she said.

"There are people who have lost their peace. There are people who are deeply wounded, usually from relationships. Some people come seeking vocations, direction; they have big decisions to make."

"And there are people who come just because they love to be alone with God."

Only two people have left early, bolting after just a few hours, she said. "One came for the weekend but said he couldn't handle it. It was too much quiet for him."

"But the standard response is, 'It just wasn't long enough.'"

Nearly everybody comes exhausted.

"We urge people to go ahead and sleep – sleep until they're not tired anymore. These big men and women are so tired, and they need someone to tell them it's OK to sleep."



In winter, deer leave dainty, wandering tracks for a walker to follow through the woods, through the frosted cattails and brambles of a swamp and out onto the lake. The only distractions are chickadees and jays and snow nudged from high branches by the breeze.

You step outside late at night, walk a trail lit by the moon and take a deep breath: trees, wood smoke, wet wool, and that sharp, clean smell of cold that brings images from winters long ago, of walks home from skating rinks or piano lessons after school. Sometimes you can hear muffled traffic from the highway, especially at rush hour, but usually there are no cars, no horns.

There are no telephones in the hermitages, no radios, no televisions, no music, except what you can remember. No popcorn makers, no automatic dishwashers, no VCRs. No talk of business, no news of war.

But Pacem is no vacation getaway. Reminders of purpose are everywhere: a tall cross in the meadow, a crucifix above each hermit's bed. "I wouldn't encourage anyone to come except within a faith context," Wanchena said. "It's not just a place to come for quiet time or to write your thesis. By and large, the people who come here are believers."

People who aren't sure of their faith are welcome, she said, and they won't be proselytized. "If evangelism means bringing people to God, then Pacem is extremely evangelical. But you aren't preached at here."



All staff Photos by Rita Reed

Brother Michael Gaworski walked along a path at the Pacem in Terris retreat, about 20 miles north of Anoka. The retreat, the name of which means Peace on Earth, covers 180 acres, seven of which are tall-grass prairie.



Burros also roam the grounds of Pacem in Terris. This one is the offspring of a pair that retreat founder Shirley Wanchena bought last year at an auction. Plans are for the animals to haul a cart to deliver supplies to the hermitages in the woodlands of the retreat.