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Marylake Monastery and Shrine provide a welcoming retreat

By Mark?Pavilons

The more complicated life gets, the greater the need for the simplicity of contemplation. And a dose of spiritual enlightenment can soothe the soul.

When most people think of a monastery, thoughts turn to a cloistered group of reclusive religious devotees, removed from the harsh realities of everyday living.

But at Marylake Monastery and Our Lady of Grace Shrine, the veil of mystery has been removed. The gates are open for all to visit and enjoy the picturesque grounds and services provided in King's best kept secret. There's an unbelievably rich heritage of sanctity, scholarship and spiritual direction at Marylake that beckons to be explored and more fully utilized.

According to Joseph Gennaro, executive director of Marylake, daily masses are held at 8 a.m. each week day in the Shrine for all to witness. The beautiful, stained glass tower lights up the altar and while a product of the late 1960s, its architecture and appeal are magnificent still today. Weekend masses are held at 9 a.m. and hopes are there will be regular First Friday evening masses beginning in May or June.

Attached to the Shrine is the long-standing Augustinian Monastery, currently home to four brothers and six priests.

The Augustinian order dates back to 1244, following the teachings of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD), which promote the harmony of community. St. Augustine is one of the most quoted and his teachings are still highly regarded today.

Stemming from Saint Augustine's own life, his writings, and his teachings, Augustinian spirituality can largely be summed up as ?the act of journeying together in search of the truth that is God.? This journey, as Augustine's own life gives example, was not merely a communal and internal journey toward God, but rather a communal and outward journey.

Another important part of the monastery is the Retreat Centre, set aside for those wishing to quite simply, get away from it all, contemplate, pray and sit in on thoughtful discussions. The retreat, Gennaro noted, is full almost every weekend with Catholics and non-Catholics from all walks of life. The use of the facility and grounds, meals and services are all provided.

Gennaro said he hopes to expand this aspect of the monastery to include retreats aimed at elementary and high school students. It can serve to help prepare youngsters for certain sacraments such as Communion and Confirmation, or just expose them to some traditional practices.

It's been a matter of logistics and manpower but Gennaro hopes to relaunch this program.

Augustinians are known as great scholars and educators and while once a life of solitude and contemplative prayer, the friars today are active in their communities visiting people and offering services. They have a relationship with adjacent Villanova College, as well as local Catholic congregations.

Archbishop McGuigan hoped to establish a shrine to Mary to be a spiritual centre and place of pilgrimage for the Archdiocese of Toronto. On Aug. 25, 1942, negotiations were opened for the purchase of Marylake by the Augustinian Order. On Sept. 17 the first Augustinians arrived. The shrine to Mother Mary was established in the 1940s and was created to be the centre of Marian devotion in the GTA.

It was the former country estate of Sir Henry Pellatt (1859-1939), a devoted military officer, financier, philanthropist and builder. He was best known for building Casa Loma in Toronto.

Over a period of years he painstakingly acquired land acre by acre in the Township of King, which eventually grew to 860 acres, and included the 40-acre lake, named after his first wife Marie.

He sold the estate to a newly formed association, headed by Reverend M. J. Oliver, C.S.B., along with a group of lay and clergy assistants. In the spring of 1936 the group was incorporated and the Pellatt estate purchased. At this time, the name Lake Marie was changed to Marylake.

On June 7, 1964 his Eminence James Cardinal McGuigan laid the cornerstone Our Lady of Grace Shrine Church at Marylake.

Marylake and the surrounding area was formed 2.5 billion years ago by the Wisconsin glacier, and is part of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

The 400-seat Shrine echoes with sounds from the 1928 Aeolian Skinner organ, one of only three in the province. It's a melding of two famed instruments, one from the Eaton estate, the other from the Seagram estate.

Marylake continues to grow and evolve. The idea is for the facility to be a centre in the diocese for learning and attract people from far and wide for programs, conferences and pilgrimages.

Marylake already hosts the popular Portuguese Our Lady of Fatima Pilgrimage May 11-12 and St. Rita Pilgrimage May 19.

Gennaro pointed out many different organizations visit the Shrine at Marylake and use the facility for events and festivals. He's seen some amazing devotion in his time at Marylake, which included a rain-soaked outdoor service that involved literally a ?sea of 5,000 people.?

Marylake is also home to two orders of Augustinian nuns ? The Sisters of Good Counsel and the Sisters of?Consolation.

It's a close-knit group of friars and nuns who range in age from their 30s through their 80s.

The Augustinians own roughly 550 acres, while the Archdiocese of Toronto owns the remaining 200 acres of the large property that contains the lake, woodlands and fields.

Marylake was once home to one of the largest (per head)?producing dairy farms in?Ontario. It's also home to one of the largest standing brick barns in the country, which was abandoned when the dairy operation ceased in the 1980s. The barn has fallen into disrepair, but hopes are it can be restored and more fully utilized for various functions and events.

The land on the property is still fertile and Gennaro noted some of it is leased, but there is potential for a locally grown produce operation if partnerships can be created to make it happen.

There's also an old bell tower atop the Shrine, but it hasn't been used in years. The bell was cast in bronze in Troy, New York, weighs 2,500 pounds and sounds the musical tone ?E? above middle ?C,? and is activated automatically by a programmed time clock.

The sound system in the church was set up with the aid of an oscilloscope, assuring quality of voice without distortion. The acoustics in the church are superb, so much so that during the course of a year both professional and amateur groups of musicians use the church for rehearsals and performances.

Gennaro hopes to get the bell and mechanism restored, so the hills of King can once again resonate with the sound of bell music.

Gennaro said he'd also like to create a small museum open to the public. Outdoor concerts are a being considered as well.

The list of possibilities is truly endless. All that's needed is an influx of support and donations.

For Gennaro, his job is like ?going to the cottage every day.? His family has been involved at Marylake for three generations. The monastery embodies simple goals, ideals and a good wholesome approach to life.

The atmosphere at Marylake is ?not complicated. It's not a race to the finish line,??Gennaro stressed.

Getting off the proverbial treadmill, slowing down and taking a step back can all be accomplished by visiting Marylake. Be it a spiritual getaway, a family picnic, or a place of pilgrimage, Marylake offers solace for anyone who wishes to get away from it all, for a day, or longer.

Take an opportunity to visit this gem in King Township.

For more, visit www.augustinians.ca or contact Gennaro at joeg@augustinians.ca.