

## Sister Beverly and the Marymount Hermitage

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Back along a dirt road in Mesa near milepost 129 of Highway 95, Marymount Hermitage sits atop high desert rangeland. Desert sage, prairie flowers and 100-year-old bitterroot bushes adorn the 100 acres of very private, never cultivated land. "Everything is the way God made it," said Sister Beverly, sole nun in residence at the spiritual retreat hermitage.

Nearly 30 years ago, she and Sister Rebecca Mary began their desert hermit vocation. She had come from Illinois and attended high school at St. Mary of the Valley in Beaverton, Oregon. Inspired by her parents' church devotion and by her teachers, she entered the Sisters of Saint Mary of Oregon convent after high school. Then, the hermitage calling came.



I had been happy teaching, I am gregarious, not an introvert," she smiled. "It took a real act of faith for me to pursue hermitage. Like Abraham leaving his homeland, I didn't have answers to how we would support ourselves." It would take total faith and hard work. The two Sisters adopted the denim habit (dress) as a symbol of commitment.

The hermitage desert life commitment to austerity, solitude, labor and prayer has survived for centuries in the Catholic Church for monks and nuns. The movement started around 270 CE; the earliest monks became known as the Desert Fathers. Many developed a reputation for holiness and wisdom, especially Saint Benedict. In the year 500, Benedict became so upset by the immorality of society that he pursued worship and life in a cave. Generally Catholic hermitages live by the Rule of Saint Benedict, under the laws of the Catholic Church. Small communities forming around the Desert Fathers became the beginning of Christian monasticism.

Energized with their faith and honored heritage, the Sisters sought their desert refuge. Jim Ball and family donated the land. Rolling hills and mountain views dominate the landscape. It is the perfect location for a retreat of simplicity, beauty and solitude.

"We knew from the first day we would stay," she recalled. "People thought we wouldn't last." Edified by the hard work of families struggling to survive around them, they went to work laying pipes in their ditches and going up into the forests for their firewood. Their

cottage industry of hand made baby booties, rosaries, bookmarks and wildflower cards helped support them. People began to accept them, and to help them.

They scrambled their money and some inheritance to obtain a well and 5 small modular buildings—three tiny cottages, a small chapel/library, and a common house. The Marymount Hermitage was dedicated in 1984 as an independent entity under the Bishop of Idaho, responsible for its own upkeep. Each Sister lived in a cottage heated by a woodstove. Built in 1987, the bell tower houses a century old bell which came from the Mesa school house. Sister Beverly rings it morning, noon and night in prayer, in a cadence based on a meditation from St. Luke. The deep reverberation resonates across the hills. Later, with the support of benefactors, the sisters raised money to build a new chapel, and an improved residence to help maintain the needs of aging Sister Rebecca Mary.

A lone pine tree stands vigilant to the bell and chapel. Around it, birds sing, and deer trails crisscross the long pathways between the chapel and the older buildings. In front, a pair of vocal western kingbirds hovers protectively around their nest. Sister Beverly enjoys the variety of wildlife. "Better than television, watching all of the drama here," she laughed. Inside the chapel, two huge wooden beams run through the white ceiling, and tall curved windows illuminate the large stone floor tiles and wooden benches. One feels a soothing, peaceful reverence here. The chapel, named "Our Father's House" is always open; many people stop to pray for their journeys or leave prayer requests.

Due to increasing frailty from age and Parkinson's disease, Sister Rebecca Mary relocated last year back to St. Mary of the Valley of Oregon for assisted living. The transition into the noisy world of civilization was difficult, but she has accepted it with grace. She continues to make rosaries and bookmarks to help support Marymount.

Today, Sister Beverly's newsletter email list tops 2000 friends and benefactors who help maintain the humble hermitage. Over the Internet, and with monthly visits to parishes in Boise, she sells hand-made gifts, music CD's, photo books, and beautifully illustrated children's books authored by Sister Rebecca Mary. She also gives retreats, and travels to teach classes. But she believes that prayer is her most important contribution. She prays 3-5 hours a day, engages in serious study 1-3 hours a day and works 4-plus hours a day, depending on the season.



"There are huge varieties of prayers and prayer states for worship, study, meditation, and intercession," she explained. Contemplation, the highest form of prayer, is not of words and logic, but is rather a state of infused grace, love and spiritual insight given from God. One cannot will contemplation, but can only prepare for it. "I have lived a life of prayer to give witness that God exists," she said. Over the years she has become much more peaceful, and hopeful.

Retreats are available for singles and families for a small fee. She encourages visitors to unplug their electronics. "We want people to experience silence, solitude and prayer; there is so little opportunity for these things in this modern world," she explained. "Those who attend quiet retreats here leave with much more happiness and trust in God, and the courage to be alone." Visitors may share prayer time at the chapel.

She feels she is passing on great gifts she has been given. She hopes someday more women will seek hermitage at Marymount.

What will happen when she gets older? "As long as I keep my health I will live here," she promised. "I'm very grateful and content to be here by myself. I'm not really alone; I have faith and a community." Even as she spoke, a cheerful Michael Nourse showed up to repair her adding machine. Prior to his move to Boise last year, he had shared morning prayers at the chapel, as neighbors may do.

Information on retreats and gifts can be found at [www.marymount-hermitage.org](http://www.marymount-hermitage.org), or call [208-256-4354](tel:208-256-4354) to leave a message. "Very few places are as quiet in this world. It is a gift and a privilege to be here," she shared.