

# WELCOMING SPACE

Why We Need Mercy Retreat  
Centers Now and Into Our Future

By Dawn Stringfield



Photo from Casa McAuley  
Centro de Formación y  
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A women's retreat at Mercy Center Auburn.

**N**ow more than ever, there is a need for ministries like Mercy Conference and Retreat Center (St. Louis, Missouri) and the other retreat centers of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

We live in a world that is divided: I am Republican or Democrat; Christian or Muslim; citizen, immigrant or refugee. We need places where one can say, “I am a part of the human family, a child of the Divine.”

We live in a world that is constantly inundating us from all sides with information (fake and real), often in the form of tweets and sound bites. We need places where one can stop, listen deeply and reflect clearly on what matters, with opportunities for silence and for sharing in more than hashtags and 140 characters.

We live in a world that focuses on accomplishment and requires constant human “doing” to achieve what, for some, are only the minimum standards of food, clothing and shelter. We need places where one can simply be a human “being” and where opportunities are not unavailable or limited simply because of one’s ability to afford them.

We live in a world where people who serve are constantly giving of themselves and never finding space for self-care; space to attend to peripheral or direct post-traumatic stress disorder; space to create any type of emotional or spiritual reserves or resilience. We need places where one can unplug, recharge and renew and then return to the world replenished for the work ahead.

I believe this state of the world in which we live impels us—as the Gospel and the example of Catherine McAuley impel us—to create a welcoming space. It must be a space that is sacred, healing

and transformative and in an environment that is filled with beauty and connection to Earth, where all obstacles that would prevent a person from being able to just be are removed. It would be a space where people experience hospitality and care: to sleep, if that is what is needed; to think and reflect on what is deeply meaningful, alone or with a trained staff member; to walk or pray, write or create—whatever is needed for that person.

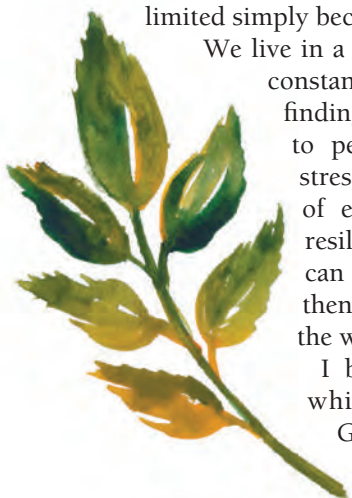
In making that space available to an individual or a group, we are part of bringing about the healing of our world. We are a part of creating the change we want to see.

## QUALITIES OF A MERCY RETREAT CENTER

What differentiates a Mercy retreat center is a commitment to excellence and attention to the whole person as a part of the whole of creation. In each encounter, we seek to be collaborative and empowering; we accept people where they are and offer the welcome and hospitality that Catherine would have offered. In our buildings and grounds as well, we create sacred space to hold the spirit and prayers of each one who comes through our doors.

What is essential:

- Welcoming each individual as he or she is, not as we might want him or her to be. It is being present, listening to and focusing on the whole person and how we can be most supportive. It is being thoughtful and creative in our response.
- It is creating a space for transformation where people can grow into their full potential as human beings cherished by God and recognizing that it is for God and them to discern what that is.
- We create the space; God does the transformation. For me, that means it is sometimes the smile, the kind word, the comfortable mattress or the right temperature



in the meeting room as much as any input or presentation we may offer that opens a way for the Spirit to be at work in a person's life. We can't control the outcome. What we can do is be Mercy in the moment and in collaboration with the Spirit.

And all of these characteristics apply to each and every Mercy ministry in the ways we are in relationship with and in service to humanity.

## SUSTAINING OUR WELCOMING SPACES

In order to sustain the ministry of our spiritual retreat centers, we need to be relevant, agile and adept at responding to the needs of people at this time. Structures can sometimes be helpful or hinder us in this regard. Histories as well can sometimes hold us back from what is possible. Language and how we describe who we are or what we do can sometimes invite and at other times exclude. Part of our role is to celebrate our heritage and not get stuck in it so that we can be present to what is now before us.

In order to be relevant in a rapidly changing world, we must no longer come from the place of "build it and they will come" or depend exclusively on the ways in which people have found us in the past. We may need to look at language like a space for respite, a place to unplug and recharge, instead of exclusively naming something a "retreat" or "day of reflection." We may need to be open to taking our retreats to guests who can no longer come to us because they are in nursing homes. We may need to repurpose talks to make them available through some form of podcast for people who may be working full-time or caring for children or aging parents and who don't have the time to come to us.

We want to be open to conversations with other nonprofit organizations and groups to not only learn what the needs for respite and renewal are but also to have a way to reach out to and connect with their clients, staff and boards. In strategic collaboration we grow in what we offer and whom we serve. We also create a possibility for financial support for programs that might not otherwise have been available.

And what about those millennials who don't consider themselves religious or even spiritual and yet have a passion for peace, nonviolence, social justice, care for Earth and making a difference in the world—all those things that we

associate with Mercy? How can we reach them and listen to their needs and create a space for them as they seek to do good in the world? I don't know about you, but I haven't been a 20-something for a very long time and may not know what would be the place of connection for them. It means not making assumptions, but instead educating ourselves, reaching out or inviting people in and asking, "What would be meaningful for you?"

## MERCY HOSPITALITY AND SPIRITUALITY INTO THE FUTURE

Even though we are in a very different world than when our ministries of spiritual retreat centers began, we are still living out of our roots in Mercy: offering hospitality in the spirit of Catherine McAuley so that anyone who comes through our doors knows that he or she is welcome, invited into our sacred space and grounds, held in prayer and tended to with care for whatever their purpose. And whether that space and grounds are physical, whether it is on a Mercy retreat campus or out in the world, the spirit of Mercy remains.

I feel humbled to be called and totally committed to lead a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy and continue this legacy.

I love this prayer from the Mercy Spirituality booklet published in 2011: "God of Mercy, we pray for courage to see the needs of the world in which we live; for prudence to know those needs which we can address and for wisdom to respond in ways that address the needs and maintain the dignity of all." And I believe that the God of Mercy is responding: "These ministries are mine ... here ... now ... trust in me, and I will show you the way that I need you to be Mercy now and in the future."

View a list of Mercy retreat and spirituality centers online at [www.sistersofmercy.org/spirituality/retreat-centers/](http://www.sistersofmercy.org/spirituality/retreat-centers/)



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