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Cheryl Anderson column: Monte Alverno marks 75 years of serving as sacred space

AUGUST 29, 2009

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As a newspaper writer, interviews sometimes are done by [phone](#). But there's one place for me that takes exception. It's Monte Alverno Retreat & Spirituality Center in Appleton, where for 75 years, people like me have visited simply to enjoy the quiet.



Tatyana Shereshevsky, MD

I truly believe that women's health, beginning from childhood and followed by reproductive age, motherhood, and menopause, can establish a healthy society.

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"It's the quiet place in the Valley," agreed the Rev Keith Clark, director of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph ministry, which he calls a spiritual resource. "We've got this property in this [gorgeous](#) location, beautiful building and what's it good for? Well, it's good for people who want to get away by themselves, be with God or just be quiet."

Monte Alverno will hold an experiential open house from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday to share the center with those who never have visited the grounds as well celebrate the 75th anniversary with loyal retreatants and supporters.

The open house will include tours, a brief breathing meditation, massages and instruction on the benefits of a labyrinth. Friars also will be on hand to answer questions on the efforts to canonize the Venerable Solanus Casey, who for a time was stationed at St. Joseph Parish in Appleton.

If it weren't for the Knights of Columbus of Appleton who asked Capuchin Friars to provide a retreat experience, there might not be a Monte Alverno. The friars came through in 1923 by sponsoring a Men's Retreat League weekend retreat at Marathon's St. Anthony Friary, which at the time was the capuchin's theology seminary.

The Knights were impressed and made known the value of a retreat. But retreats only could be held at St. Anthony's during summer months when theology [students](#) weren't in class. It soon became obvious there had to be another solution.

The Rev. Gilbert Heuel, a capuchin priest at the friary, suggested a separate retreat house be built on the grounds of Marathon, but the timing was bad. The depression had hit the country hard.

A few years later, Mary Merkel, a friend of the capuchins, wanted to donate the land along the Fox River in Appleton to build a retirement home for secular Franciscans. Merkel instead donated the land to build Monte Alverno, which in 1935 became the first retreat center in Wisconsin after breaking ground on it in 1934.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: 75th anniversary experiential open house

WHEN: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Monte Alverno Retreat & Spirituality Center, 1000 N. Ballard Road, Appleton

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The site received its name in honor of the mountain where St. Francis of Assisi received the stigmata, bodily marks, sores or sensations of pain in locations corresponding to the crucifixion wounds of Christ.

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Monte Alverno is now one of eight retreat centers in the Diocese of Green Bay. Although all talks and presentations are from the Catholic perspective, Monte Alverno is open to people of all faiths.

The Rev. Vicki Fink, an Evangelical Lutheran Church of America pastor in the East Central Synod of Wisconsin, started going to a weekly Bible study at Monte Alverno after giving birth to a colicky baby.

"I was invited to go by a friend who advised me that my best parenting strategy was to get out of the house regularly," the Neenah woman said. "That was the beginning of my exposure to the wonder of quiet. It is a treasure of health and wholeness to which Monte Alverno's staff extends an open invitation."

Over the years, losses and joys all have been punctuated by times apart taken for quiet and reflection at Monte Alverno, said Fink, who with husband Dave and a variety of pastors leads On the Way Retreats at Monte Alverno in partnership with ECSW.

"Our attitude here is it's the place that's the resource," Clark said. "We do offer programs, but we'd like other people to use it as a resource."

Added Fink: "Now I only need to make the turn in the road that leads toward Monte Alverno and the untangling of whatever it is that has me in a knot begins. Maybe there is such a thing as sacred space."

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