

CONTINUED...

Legacy

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1945. But the staff of the Freedom Houses felt betrayed because of the marriage, and ultimately forced the Dohertys out.

The couple settled in Combermere in 1947. Gradually, a community formed around them to work with the poor, and the Madonna House Apostolate was established. Today, the Madonna House movement numbers 23 field houses scattered across the world.

As the movement evolved, staff members made promises of poverty, celibacy and obedience, and the Dohertys voluntarily made those vows themselves. Eddie Doherty eventually received permission and was ordained a priest in 1969.

The baroness, meanwhile, began writing about the social gospel and Russian spirituality. Her 1974 book, *Poustinia*, inspired countless people to experiment with this Russian "desert" experience. A group at Rochester's Borromeo Prayer Center does so today (See story below).

The baroness remained active in the community until ill-health confined her to her cabin the last few years of her life. She died in 1985, and her cause for canonization began in 1990.

Duquin acknowledged that she was a "marginal Catholic" when she began working on the biography in 1988. Doherty, however, fascinated her.

"What interested me in her story was the human side of her," Duquin recalled.

Because of Doherty's failed marriage,

her life as a single parent and her struggles with her era's prejudices against women, "I thought there was something that would speak to women today," Duquin said.

But in the process, she discovered Doherty's spiritual side, and addressing that reality forced the biographer to examine her own faith.

"I think what drew me closer to God and to the church was stepping into Catherine's soul," declared Duquin.

Over the years, that "soul" has touched many people, acknowledged Father Robert Wild, a priest of the Madonna House community and the postulator of her cause.

"When I came to Madonna House ... I recognized she was what they would call in Russia a 'staretz,' a spiritual elder," Father Wild said. "She wasn't afraid to challenge people to live the Gospel. She was very much in love with God, and she wanted other people to be."

One person who was intimately involved with Doherty's spiritual growth was a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, Father John Callahan. Ordained in 1939, he served at Sacred Heart Cathedral and as chaplain at Our Lady of Mercy High School. He first visited Madonna House in 1950.

Jean Tracey, a Rochester resident and friend of Father Callahan, recalled that when the Doherty first met the priest, "B" thought he was a cold fish."

Despite this initial reaction, Father Callahan in 1952 became the first priest to join the Madonna House community. He became not only Madonna House's chaplain, but also Doherty's spiritual director, a role he filled until his death in 1984.

Tracey met Father Callahan when she was a parishioner at Sacred Heart in the 1940s. When he moved to Combermere, the Traceys began making trips to visit him and to deliver donated goods the Madonna House staff could distribute to the poor.

In 1952, Tracey's husband, Colin, converted to Catholicism — and Doherty served as his godmother.

"Each time you saw her, it was like there was a different facet," Tracey said of Doherty. "I don't think she was sure herself what she was."

"We were there for one visit, and there were people from all over the world," Tracey added. "How many people do you know who would draw people that way?"

Elizabeth Lamendola, who coordinates the poustinia group at the Borromeo Prayer Center, likewise discovered Madonna House through Father Callahan. Several people who knew the priest spoke to Lamendola about the community, and, in 1953, she drove to Combermere with a load of donated clothes and thus met Doherty.

"She was a welcoming person," Lamendola said. But at the same time, "She was strong. She had strength of character."

That strength of character proved a problem for some people, however, acknowledged Father Emile Briere, a Madonna House priest who for many years worked closely with Doherty and Father Callahan.

"She had the vision," Father Briere said. "She saw with the eyes of God what was happening in the world."

All too often, what she saw was mediocrity among Christians, and even among some priests, Father Briere explained.

"When you have a vision," he continued, "it's easy to get irritated with those who don't. She used to say, 'For Pete's sake, it's so simple. Why don't you see?'"

In addition, she was troubled when people paid too much attention to her.

"She was a very tender woman," Father Briere said. "People sensed that and they were very drawn to her and she would push them away. She wanted them not to come to her, but to God."

At the same time, Duquin noted, Doherty suffered from deep loneliness. Over the years, she said, she realized all people have lonely spots within them, and many of them try to fill it with work, drugs or sex.

"Catherine filled it with God," she said.

Doherty's loneliness sometimes came across when the baroness spoke, recalled Kathy McVady, a staff member at Madonna House since the 1960s.

One time, McVady wrote to Doherty about loneliness, and Doherty wrote back.

"She said all of us will be lonely until we die," McVady recalled. "No person, no vocation will take away that loneliness because it is a hunger for God. When we accept it in ourselves, then we can reach out to others in their loneliness and ease the burden that they carry."

Father Wild noted that reaching out to others lies at the heart of Madonna House's ministry, which is why the main community and many of the field houses distribute food, clothing and other material goods. Some field houses, at the direction of their local bishops, simply serve as centers for prayer and a place where the poor can come for hospitality and conversation.

Doherty defined the Madonna House mission in the "Little Mandate," a collection of words and phrases she amassed over the years, Father Wild explained.

"It's kind of the heart of how we understand how the Lord calls us to live the Gospel," Father Wild said. "I think we could see the 'Little Mandate' as the essence, the kernel of our way of life."

But is Doherty's lifelong effort to live the Gospel enough to warrant canonization?

Father Wild said he submitted preliminary documents to the Bishop of Pembroke in April. The cause is now in the bishop's hands, but the priest is confident.

"From my experience of her, I believe she lived a heroic Christian life, and that's what the church looks for," the priest said.

After writing the biography, Duquin, too, believes the cause has merit.

"There are a lot of people who say, 'No way,'" Duquin acknowledged. "I think the bottom line here has got to be, 'By their fruits you shall know them.' Madonna House is still there and getting 10 to 12 vocations a year. To me, it says God worked through her."

Local group seeks nourishment via 'poustinia'

Elizabeth Lamendola had been visiting and delivering donations to Madonna House (See story, Page 1) since the early 1950s, but she had never read Madonna House founder Catherine Doherty's most popular book, *Poustinia*.

That situation changed some five years ago when the St. Charles Borromeo parishioner finally read a copy someone had given to her.

"The whole thing made so much sense," Lamendola said. "It was just the thing that I wanted. It was what I was looking for."

Lamendola was so inspired that she began practicing the form of meditative prayer described in the book and launched a poustinia group at the Borromeo Prayer Center.

The group meets the second Friday of every month to discuss a chapter of the book. Participants then return Saturday

morning for Mass and to experience poustinia.

"The word itself means 'desert,'" Lamendola explained. "The way Catherine Doherty described it, you go into the desert to be with God."

As practiced at the prayer center, the desert experience involves spending time alone with a little bread, tea and a copy of the Bible, using the time to pray and meditate. Participants meet at the end of the morning to share experiences.

But one does not have to be part of the group to experience poustinia, nor does it have to take place at the prayer center, Lamendola said. Some people find their deserts in cottages or even in rooms of their own homes.

As Doherty explained in the book, the concept of poustinia grew out of an ancient Russian spiritual practice. The poustiniks went to isolated places ("pous-

tinias") to fast — except for tea and bread — pray and meditate. But unlike hermits, poustiniks welcomed visitors and readily left their poustinias to help people.

At Madonna House, a poustinia usually lasts a day — although some people live in poustinia for longer periods.

"When you spend this time in contemplation, it gives you the nourishment to go out and be of service," Lamendola said. "It overflows into a life of service."

Lamendola said Doherty's advice that the practice should occur in some type of community setting encouraged her to form her group at the prayer center.

"Knowing that there's a group of people praying with you gives you a kind of support," she said.

EDITORS' NOTE: To learn more about poustinia or the poustinia group, call the Borromeo Prayer Center at 716/633-5856.

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