

# Travel & Summer Recreation Individuals, families try 'vacations with God'

By Lee Strong  
Associate editor

When Trisha Koomen was a young girl in Canada, her family took her to visit a monastery.

"I remember being very impressed by the faith, the obvious faith of those people," recalled Koomen, a resident of Avon who is a parishioner of Rochester's Corpus Christi Church. "I was just very impressed by their obvious sense of dedication and love for what they were doing."

"I remembered that experience," she added, "and I wanted the kids to experience that."

Thus this summer she and her husband Hans will take their four children — ages 10 to 16 — to Mount Saviour Monastery west of Elmira for six days. They spent six days at the monastery last summer, as well, and have brought the children there for numerous shorter stays over the years.

"When we first did it, I was worried that the kids would be bored," she said, noting that the place on the monastery's grounds where families can stay has no radios, television or outside telephones.

But those worries proved unnecessary, Koomen found. The children thrived on playing in the monastery's fields and forests, helped tend the sheep the monks raise, took part in some of the community's prayers, and in the case of her 16-year-old son, Peter, ate with the Benedictine monks. "They love it," she said. "They want to go back."

For many families and individuals, summer vacation is a time for trips and resorts. But some people — like the Koomens — use the time to get away from the world, heading to monasteries, retreat centers and spiritually-oriented family camps.

"People definitely use company vacation time for vacation to do retreats," acknowledged Sister Mary Louise Heffernan, SSJ, director of the Sisters of St. Joseph Spirituality Center in Rochester. "I think it fulfills a great need in their lives. They want to be apart, to be with God in a way they can't be in their hectic lives."

"One of the things we call our retreats is 'a vacation with God,'" observed Sister Mary Leah Krauth, OSF, part of the retreat team at the St. Columban Center in Derby, N.Y.

She pointed out that a number of people set aside time during the summer — and the rest of the year — for retreats.

"It's a time to be very much attentive to God, to be with God," she said. "People come out better for the experience: freer and much more at peace."

The facilities offer a wide range of programs. Some programs focus on specific themes. Some involve working with spiritual directors. Some feature speakers. Some last a day — with no overnight stays — a weekend, or a week. Some allow people to set their own programs and schedules, or simply to spend time alone. Costs vary de-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer  
Carol Vallese, left, and Sister Therese Richardson, RSM, chat on the grounds of the Mercy Prayer Center May 7.

pending on the program and the facility.

Marilyn Edwards of Syracuse is one of those people who set aside time to be with God each summer. She spends one week of vacation time at the Mercy Prayer Center in Rochester.

"It just helps me to have an entirely different focus in my life," noted Edwards, who also visits the center for programs and weekend retreats during the rest of the year. "It slows me down and gets me in touch with what's really important."

Judy Vaeth, the Mercy Prayer Center's business manager, also makes regular retreats — with her husband.

"It just enables us to be present to one another," she observed. They try to plan a weekend retreat a month — though not at

the center for fear she'd get caught up with business, she observed. Thus they travel to such places as the Stella Maris Retreat Center in Skaneateles, N.Y.

"It allows us to have quiet time to get in touch with nature," she noted. "That's the way I refresh myself."

Linda and David Siclari of Orchard Park have also gone on couples retreats. In 1997, they took advantage of a Valentine's Day program at the St. Columban Center. That's when the parents of three — ages 14, 16 and 23 — learned about a family weekend the center would be offering last August. Not only did they go on the family retreat, they and their two teens helped to staff it, though not without some initial grumbling on the part of the teens.

"With all the teens the first night, it was, 'Our parents made us come.'" Linda recalled. "By the end of the weekend, it was, 'See you next year.'"

The activities included skits, talks, prayers — and time to play games and swim in nearby Lake Erie.

The Siclaris hope to return for this year's weekend, in addition to taking a more traditional vacation.

"You have to live your faith and going on retreat helps kids see that your faith can also be fun," she said. "Mom and dad don't just drag you to church every Sunday. They actually believe the faith they are trying to live."

The Siclaris and the Koomens are not alone in seeking ways to share their faith and retreat experiences with their children. Sister Krauth reported that the number of families at the St. Columban Center family weekend doubled from 1996 — the first year the family weekend was offered — to 1997, and that the center had already begun to receive inquiries about this year's weekend even before publicizing it. She speculated that the center may have to offer more than one weekend a summer in the future.

Koomen pointed out more families are apparently discovering Mt. Saviour, as she has found it necessary to book space earlier and earlier.

Meanwhile, in response to people's requests, the Sisters of St. Joseph Spirituality Center July 29 will offer a mother/daughter day, and is considering developing a father/son day as well.

Edwards noted that she has a number of friends who also go on retreats — and she encourages others.

"I bring friends with me who've never experienced this, and they love it," she said.

**EDITORS' NOTE:** To find information about retreat opportunities, consult the Directory of the Diocese of Rochester for retreat centers located in the diocese, or telephone directories available at public libraries. A number of centers advertise in the Catholic Courier and the diocesan directory, and also regularly promote upcoming programs in the Courier's calendar. In addition, retreat centers are listed in the Catholic Almanac, which can be found in many public libraries.

## Vatican Web site readies for year 2000 pilgrims

(CNS) — With the click of a mouse, a traveler in cyberspace may soon be able to reserve a place at a papal ceremony and buy tickets to the Vatican Museums.

Vatican officials are trying to ensure that arrangements to attend some of the church's year 2000 commemorations can be made via the Internet, where one already can shop for clothes, book hotel rooms and get access to countless other services.

Archbishop Crescenio Sepe, the offi-

cial in charge of the Vatican's office for coordinating year 2000 celebrations, told journalists April 28 that the Vatican is creating a special millennial Web site and linking its electronic resources with dioceses in 130 countries.

He said the linkage would also help determine how many pilgrims would be heading for Rome during the year 2000 — a question that engrosses local media and civic planners, resulting in estimates as high as 30 million visitors during that year.

Predicting that the site would be on line "in June, July — September, at the latest," the archbishop said part of the service would be dedicated to "a system of reservations" to prevent overflow crowds at papal ceremonies and impossibly long lines at the Vatican Museums.

Because young people in particular show an aptitude for and interest in the Internet, Archbishop Sepe said, at least one page of the new Web site would be dedicated to them.

### Bed & Breakfast Guide

**1865 White Birch Bed & Breakfast**  
Experience it all at the White Birch.  
Kathy Donahue  
69 East First Street • Coming  
(607) 962-6355

**A Waterfront Bed & Breakfast at Bonnie Castle Farm**  
Call for our free brochure  
Eric Peridleton



**Merritt Hill Manor Bed & Breakfast**  
A Country Estate with panoramic views of both Keuka & Seneca Lakes  
Susan M. Hyser  
2756 Coates Road • Penn Yan  
(315) 536-7682

**Oliver Phelps Country Inn Bed & Breakfast**  
Noted for fresh, home baked breads & pastries  
John & Joanne Sciaratta

### CHRIST THE KING RETREAT AND CONFERENCE CENTER Summer Activities

#### RETREATS FOR SISTERS:

- July 5-11 **PREACHED RETREAT**  
Rev. Michael Carmola  
7:00 p.m. Sun. - 11:00 a.m. Saturday • \$225
- July 5-11: **DIRECTED RETREAT**  
Team of Directors  
7:00 p.m. Sun. - 11:00 a.m. Saturday • \$225
- July 26-Aug. 1 **SCRIPTURE GUIDED RETREAT**  
Rev. Aeden McKeon, OP  
7:00 p.m. Sun. - 11:00 a.m. Saturday • \$225
- August 4 **PICNIC FOR SENIOR CITIZENS**  
11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m., Offering: \$10
- Sept. 21-25 **RETREAT FOR PRIESTS**  
Rev. Dan Lanahan, OFM  
10:00 a.m. Mon. - 11:00 a.m. Fri. • \$200