

# Mystique is a Mistake

## A spirituality centre in transition

*Peggy Tully*

**S** IENA SPIRITUALITY CENTER AT VILLA MARIA is located in a turn-of-the-century mansion on fifteen waterfront acres in Water Mill, Southampton, NY. The Amityville Dominican Sisters purchased this property in 1931. Plans for the previously envisioned Catholic college for women were changed, and Villa Maria was opened as a boarding school for girls aspiring to enter religious life. The Juniorate, as it was then called, continued until 1953, and the Villa then became an infirmary and house of retirement for senior sisters until a modern facility was opened at the Motherhouse in Amityville. In 1985 the Dominican Education Program was initiated and courses were offered in scripture, theology, church history and liturgy as well as retreats, workshops and days of prayer and reflection. In 1990 a decision was made to create Siena Spirituality Center with a broader scope than a retreat house and with greater involvement in the local community.

The newly revised Mission Statement of Siena Spirituality Center states:

**Siena Spirituality Center** at Villa Maria, Water Mill, New York is a ministry of the Amityville Dominican Sisters on Eastern Long Island. It is committed to the Christian mission of providing welcome and support to people of all backgrounds in the development of faith, spirituality, wholistic living, inner integrity, and sacred union with God, with each other, and with nature in an atmosphere of peace.

**We commit** ourselves, as Dominican sisters, to the vision of St Catherine of Siena who believed that goodness and love of neighbor are inseparable, as are the life of contemplation and active participation in society and in nature.

**We provide** programs and an environment which foster the growth of the whole person – body, mind and spirit.

**We invite** those seeking intimacy with God, self and others to experience, in the words of St Catherine of Siena that: *Just as the fish is in the sea, and the sea in the fish, so is the soul in God and God in the soul.*

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**We offer** hospitality, as a community of persons dedicated to prayer, study and mission.

### *At the Center*

Presently, three-month full-time and part-time sabbatical experiences in the Dominican tradition are offered to members of religious congregations, clergy and laity from all over the world. During the sabbatical time, presentations include: 'The way of Dominic', 'Creative visualization', 'Multicultural appreciation', 'Enneagram', 'Preaching', 'Celebrating the Sabbath that leads to Jubilee', 'Images of Jesus', 'Dreams and symbols', 'Creation spirituality', and the 'Dominican charism and the emerging world order'. The participants are also exposed to water-colouring, ceramics, weaving and massage therapy. The Hampton Jitney and Long Island Railroad are accessible to take our guests into Manhattan for tours, museums and theatre.

Siena Spirituality Center hosts some groups, as well as running our own programmes. People may also come to the Center for their own private guided or directed retreat. One of the features of Siena Spirituality Center is the resident community of four Dominican Sisters who pray morning and evening prayer daily and invite retreatants and guests to join us.

Enhanced by the unique culture of the East End Long Island area, an Elderhostel Program is sponsored each spring. The sessions include 'Long Island's writers', 'T'ai Chi Chih' (Joy through movement) and 'Journalling'. The requirement for attending is that a person be fifty-five years of age. If a partner/friend/spouse comes, that person may be younger. The staff really enjoys the Elderhostel week. Participants are seekers, learners and well-rounded individuals. Some of them have attended twenty or thirty Elderhostels all over the world. Many have never met religious sisters before and marvel how normal we are! During the week, people have opportunities to tour the East End of Long Island, and visit museums and galleries. An Art/Conference Center has been constructed on the property and is named Hakamé, the Native American Shinnecock word for 'House of welcome'. Siena Spirituality Center's facilities are used weekly for an Open AA Meeting on the Meditation Step and monthly by the Long Island Association for AIDS Care.

Our lovely art studio means we have been able to increase the number of art offerings each year. This summer we will have a full week in August to delve into 'Creative exploration'. The book *The*

*artist's way*, a spiritual path to higher creativity by Julia Cameron, will be used during the week. Two well-known artists will facilitate the week with sessions during the morning and time to explore the beauty of the East End for the rest of the day. Siena Spirituality Center has a private art studio for Sr Maureen Carey OP who is just completing her sabbatical here and will continue to pursue her painting in the future. The appreciation of art has always been a constitutive part of Dominican spirituality, and the residency of a Dominican sister who is an artist will enhance all of our art programmes.

In looking at the offerings at other retreat centres, one of the members of the Program Development Committee noticed that very few events were offered for men. Out of this lack developed a monthly meeting for men and they have been meeting for the last three years. The group is led by a radio host and two psychologists. Every spring they also have an overnight retreat. It is wonderful to see the bonding that goes on with the group and the acceptance of the diversity in their religious traditions.

A 'Circle of women' group meets every six weeks with either a book discussion or a presentation. This group has met consistently over the last three years and enjoys the socialization as well as the stimulation from the various presentations. One book that is particularly popular is *Women who run with the wolves*. A staff member leads a chapter at a time and then we discuss the personal implications. After the session ends at nine o'clock we invite the participants to come to the portico and do some howling as a wolf. It is a release, and the neighbours across Mecox Bay sometimes put on their lights to find out what is happening at Siena Center. The staff often thinks that the neighbours wish the retired sisters would return for more quiet! We now offer the option of staying overnight so that women can stay and enjoy the solitude the next day, just to be.

### *. . . and beyond*

Not having a huge capacity to accommodate people, we have to be selective in reserving space for groups. Because we believe that we are the stewards of these lovely fifteen acres overlooking Mecox Bay, we welcome the presence of the Group for the South Fork, an advocate group for the open land, clean water and air on the East End of Long Island. Developers have constructed huge homes and golf courses which tax the water supply for the area. The landscapers sometimes use toxic substances to maintain the manicured lawns of the Hamptons' Estates. This toxic influence has a detrimental effect on the water. Long

Island has the highest percentage of breast cancer in the country, and the East End of Long Island has a greater number of cancer patients than western Long Island. When the Group for the South Fork asked Siena Spirituality Center to use our property for their Annual Benefit in the year 2000, we immediately answered positively. The Group for the South Fork is the watchdog for preserving the environment of Long Island and especially the South Fork, which some would say is the international playground for lifestyles of the rich and famous! This not-for-profit organization needs all the help that they can get to spread the word about preserving the earth. As was written in *The universe story* by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, 'The human and the natural world must go into the future as a single community, or we will both perish in the desert'. We gave ecological programmes at Siena Center because the public needs to be informed about these important issues. One of the presenters, Sr Miriam Therese MacGillis, lives at Genesis Farm in Blairstown, New Jersey, a special site where the 'media is the message' and every aspect of the farm teaches an ecological goodwill message.

'Siena on the road' is a concept that we copy from the great fourteenth-century mystic, St Catherine of Siena. Catherine stated that we have to walk on two feet: contemplation and action. She challenged popes and politicians, visited prisoners and took care of the victims of the Black Plague. Our staff welcomes opportunities to go to parishes, groups, jails and other places to bring the spirit of Catherine of Siena to those who cannot come to Water Mill. During the Advent and Lenten seasons I conduct scriptural services at the nearby Riverhead Jail. Certificates are given out at the end of each series and the inmates are thrilled to receive this acknowledgement of their participation in 'breaking open the Word'. This is an important part of reaching out to the poor and the marginalized who need a spiritual grounding as much as those who can afford the fees to come to Siena Spirituality Center.

### ***Solidarity and support***

One of the important ministries among retreat administrators is to minister to one another. When I came to Siena Spirituality Center in 1994 there was no group to share ideas with and to assist newcomers. After consulting with an experienced retreat-house administrator, we decided to invite all of the local directors to a meeting. This gathering has been very helpful in putting brochures together, talking about comparable fees, computer programs, how to deal with cooks who are leaving, etc. The positions of Program Director and Administrator have

terms of office at Siena Spirituality Center. The Executive Board of the Amityville Dominicans are appointed for a term of three years and can be reappointed for another three years. I believe that a six-year period is good for the people involved, as well as the Center, because it allows a person to share gifts and then move on. I have been encouraging the Leadership Team of my congregation to invite sisters to think about this ministry and to affirm their gifts for it. Not only theology and spirituality are needed but also the gift of hospitality, and an ability to talk to many different people about the need for continual funding of the Center. Many people think that this property is supported by the Vatican or the diocese and are amazed that Amityville Dominicans receive no support from the hierarchy of the Church.

Fundraising to help the finances of retreat-spirituality centres is a necessity. We cannot depend on the income from sabbaticals, retreats and workshops. We were approached three years ago to have an opera on the lawn. In 1997 the Opera of the Hamptons performed *La Bohème*, in 1998 *Madama Butterfly* and in 1999 we look forward to *La Traviata*. Other fundraisers have included a salon with artists and musicians, a cocktail party, a local university's Music Department having their music majors perform *pro bono* and proceeds going to Siena Center. These fundraising events have become friendraisers as well. We have an annual membership drive entitled Friends of Villa Maria which helps to decrease the subsidy that we receive from the Motherhouse each year.

As Program Director it is important that I invite competent people to join me as staff and we collaborate with each other. A Program Development Committee of the Board of Directors has been very helpful researching possible programs and inviting presenters who have the capacity to draw others to Siena Center. Patrons and benefactors need to be invited to 'come and see' to encourage them to donate to the maintenance of the fifteen acres and the renovations that continue to be made each year on all pre-existing buildings. A recent article in the local Southampton Press called Siena Spirituality Center an 'oasis of calm'. The serenity of the centre and its setting allows people to experience 'a real sense of aesthetic gratitude'.

### ***Future prospects***

What is the future of Siena Spirituality Center? We have only just begun. Anyone who studies church history knows that nine years is like the blink of an eye. There are two other retreat centres nearby, Cor Maria in Sag Harbor and St Gabriel's on Shelter Island. It will take

years for us to build up our reputation and acquire a population that is loyal to the Mission Statement of the Center. The part-time sabbatical seems to be the way to go to complement the three-month sabbatical in the Dominican tradition. Some people do not have the time or the finances to take one hundred days off from their ministry, but they could take a week or two, or a month or two. Flexibility is the key to the signs of the times and to responding to those needs as Catherine of Siena did in her time. I believe that this ministry is sorely needed, and with future grants and development we will be alive and well for the third millennium and beyond.

Recently, we had an 'open house' for the public to walk through the Villa, two guesthouses and Hakamé, and to hear stories from our sisters who attended school here and artists who teach watercolouring. More than seven hundred people attended and enjoyed an art exhibition, a concert and guided tours. Many people still thought that the retired sisters lived here or stated that they had passed this place for fifty years and always wondered what it was all about. The staff of Siena Spirituality Center were delighted at the turnout and believe that this open house did much to engender goodwill among the public.

It is true that to have mystique is a mistake because there should be no fear of approaching a spirituality centre or retreat house to find out about programmes, spiritual direction, retreats, etc. May all the staff members know the Mission Statement so that we incarnate what appears on the wall and in our brochures. The world is hungering for a gracious, friendly voice and face to show that 'the glory of God is a person fully alive'. May God's grace be with us as we meet the transitions in the twenty-first century.

**Peggy Tully** is an Amityville Dominican who has been Director of Siena Spirituality Center since 1994. Her ministries have included teaching in school and college, Vocation Director for her congregation, and preacher for parish and directed retreats.