



Maris Stella Turns 60

Maris Stella Retreat and Conference Center in Harvey Cedars has been providing a ministry of hospitality for 60 years. In 1959 Mother Ellen Marie McCauley purchased the property on both the bay and ocean sides from the estate sale of Mr. Frederick Small, the former CEO of American Express. Mother Ellen Marie was looking for a vacation spot for the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth. Most of the buildings are original and date back to 1926 when Mr. Small built his estate. There are eight buildings on eleven acres. The chapel was the original boat house and St. Vincent's dormitory style housing was the former garage! In the great storm of 1962, the two grand beach houses were washed out to sea, and from time to time their pilings are revealed at the water's edge.

After Vatican II, 1962-65, Maris Stella welcomed sisters of other congregations and their families to liturgy and vacation. In the early 2000s programs began to expand. Sunday mass was offered for vacationers on the island with an inspirational view of the bay. Originally, Maris Stella was closed from October to May, but a capital campaign provided for the building of a conference center, a renovated chapel, and heat and air conditioning in St. Vincent's. A grant from the Littoral Society allowed for part of Mr. Small's original gardens to be transformed into the Bayscape Butterfly Garden. Sister Patricia Dotzauer, Program Director, feels, "People are fed here spiritually, emotionally and physically. People who are going through extremely difficult times come to our offerings. Their burdens are evident when they arrive, and by the time they depart, their demeanor and body language have changed. People say over and over again that they find peace here."

Today Maris Stella is open all year long. Retreats once reserved for sisters are now open to lay women. Additional retreats for parish, high school, college and university groups abound. Stepping on to Maris Stella grounds, one may encounter AA meetings, women writers' workshops, or even, Celtic teas. Family Promise, conducted by St. Francis Church volunteers, has found a home at Maris Stella as well as Coastal Camps for young people in the summer. Sr. Mary Morley, Director of Maris Stella, maintains, "Mother Ellen Marie would be happy we're still here. The spirit of hospitality, which is inherent in the charism of the Sisters of Charity, is evident here. We are able to pray with everyone. Hospitality is our hallmark!"

The Sisters don't operate alone. Over Memorial Day weekend, 40-50 people come to clean up and get the place ready for the summer. Nearly 30 volunteers staff the complex during peak season. Sr. Mary estimates, "These volunteers are saving the Sisters thousands of dollars that can go instead into the mission of Maris Stella." The benefactors who attend summer masses are greatly appreciated. They have become a supportive community who help Maris Stella financially maintain its mission. The presiders who offer daily mass during the summer months complete this network of support.

Maris Stella is a sanctuary on and off season. There are solitary figures who come to pray at Our Lady's shrine by the bay. It could be the man with the backpack or the woman who periodically drives up, parks and goes into the chapel. She tells Sr. Mary she comes because "so many churches are locked now." She knows the chapel is generally open, and if it is off season, Sr. Mary, who sees all from her office window, will come out and open it for you. "Wonderful people of strong faith searching for God come here," says Sr. Mary. "They are such an inspiration. I am in awe of their desire to grow in God's love."

Plans for the future include increasing use during the week in the off season with programming and vacation rentals as well as utilizing the website to publicize rentals for pot-luck suppers, birthdays, anniversaries and receptions of all kinds. The expansive view of the bay from the conference center enhances any occasion.

Maris Stella "is a rich resource for study and reflection on the sacredness of creation" (Mission Statement). It has been offering respite and awe-filled moments for sixty years and counting. Sr. Mary says, "Maris Stella, or Star of the Sea, is one of Our Lady's titles. She has protected us here. After Hurricane Sandy, we did not have even one broken window. Those three Hail Mary's at the end of each mass asking for protection from storms has really worked."

By Margaret Roman