

Mt. Irenaeus

St. Bonaventure University's Recharging Station

This Franciscan mountaintop retreat prepares its guests to deepen their relationship with God.

TEXT BY BRIAN MORITZ ■ PHOTOS BY DAN HORAN





(Left) Father Dan Riley, O.F.M., guardian of the friar community at Mt. Irenaeus, calls to worship St. Bonaventure seniors a week before graduation in Holy Peace Chapel. (Above top) The House of Peace can be seen behind the welcome sign.

The gray morning brings the chapel to life. The sun, having burned off the fog, is back behind the clouds. A hint of early autumn frost remains on the treetops. In the distance, the rolling hills are still dressed in fall colors.

More than 40 people, half of them college students, are in the hillside chapel. They fill the three tiers of benches, forming a "U" around the altar. Some sit on cushions on the floor.

"I invite us all," Brother Joe Kotula, O.F.M., begins, "to make sure we are seated in a comfortable posture."

It's 9 a.m. on a Saturday morning—an hour most people are just opening their morning paper, an hour most college students never see.

"I invite us now to simply become aware of our breathing," Brother Joe says gently. The group responds.

"And we remember the words of the psalmist," Brother Joe continues. "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:11).

The wind cuts through the treetops. Fallen leaves rustle by the window. "Be still and know that I am..."

A child, no more than five, says something to her mother.

"Be still and know..."

More than 40 people—from toddlers to senior citizens—sit in meditative prayer. They came to this remote mountain not to withdraw from the world but to become more fully engaged in it.

"Be still..."

The quiet energy in the room could change the course of rivers.

"Be..."

And so begins another day at Mt. Irenaeus.

Map to the Heights

Tucked in the rolling hills of Allegany County in southwestern New York, Mt. Irenaeus is a Franciscan retreat center. (Visit online at www.mounti.com.) It is home to the Holy Peace Friary and four Franciscans (three priests and one brother) who lead a peaceful, contemplative life. It is a place built primarily for students of nearby St. Bonaventure University to escape the pressures of college life.

But to see it only as a style of friary or typical student-retreat center is to miss the true, quiet power of Mt. Irenaeus. It is a place where a small but dedicated community of men and women, students and adults, clergy and laypeople, come together to practice the Franciscan model of prayer and service. It is the epicenter of a way of life.

"In our Franciscan tradition, friars would preach in the marketplace in the city, and yet we have always sought places of solitude, places to rest and pray away from the city," says Father Dan Riley, O.F.M., guardian (minister to the friars) of Holy Peace Friary. "We've lived in rapport between that culture of commerce and the

eternal culture of quiet and solitude.

"As our students have said so often, we go to the mountain to go back to the valley," he adds.

Mountain Climbing

The journey to Mt. Irenaeus starts on Interstate 86 (the old Route 17), which cuts across southern New York State. A visitor leaves the highway at Exit 28 and passes through the village of Cuba. The drive along Route 305 meanders through the rural countryside. A brook runs alongside the road. After 10 minutes, it's a sharp left turn onto County Route 1.

After four miles down the winding road, past the old farms and dilapidated trailers, is a right turn. It's marked but easy to miss. A dirt road—hard-packed and well-maintained—twists around and up the hill. Just as guests begin to think they're lost, they come to a clearing and see the main house.

Mt. Irenaeus is a place not found by accident. "There's no spontaneity involved," says Thomas Fenn, a member of the Mt. Irenaeus board of trustees. "There's a sense of anticipation you get driving up the road...pilgrimage is an interesting choice of words."

The structural centerpiece is the House of Peace, an immaculate 62,000-square-foot wood-framed house. The main room is the dining area, centered by a 16-seat dining room. A stone fireplace sits on the south wall, framed by bookshelves. A large, modern kitchen is off to the left.

The room is lit primarily by huge bay windows looking east. The view is magnificent by any standards, stretching for miles and framed by the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains.

"People hear about this place, and they wonder if it's like camping," says Kara Blackall, a St. Bonaventure sophomore from Medford, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. "I try to explain to people that it's an actual house. It's like a ski lodge. It's all open and there are couches all over the place."

Up a little farther, cut into the hillside, is the Holy Peace Chapel. It's a small, square structure, similar in design to the post-and-beam main house. There's little furniture. People sit

on individual cushions on benches. The altar is in front of massive bay windows overlooking that same mesmerizing east sky.

The architecture is simple, clean, open. Rather than being removed from the world, visitors are reminded that they are very much a part of it.

Mass is celebrated every Sunday at 11 a.m. and has a regular crowd. Visitors come daily, staying either overnight in one of six guest cabins or just for a few hours, walking the nearly six miles of trails that weave through the 304 wooded acres.

There are no TVs, no radios. Visitors are asked to leave their cell phones at home.

The emphasis is on conversation and contemplation. It's on nature and creation and enjoying the world in front of you.

"The atmosphere here enhances people's relationship with God," says Father Dan Hurley, O.F.M., one of the founders of Mt. Irenaeus. "When you go out and walk the trails, it's so quiet and peaceful, you can't help but marvel at the world God created. You don't see this kind of stuff in the city—and this is only one small part of God's creation."

Meeting of Minds

As perfect as the site feels, Mt. Irenaeus was a philosophy long before it was a place.

The idea sprang out of the tension and divisiveness of the late 1960s and early 1970s that hit college campuses around the country. This was the time of anti-war protests, civil-rights marches and a pervasive anti-establishment sentiment among young people.

At St. Bonaventure University, a small liberal arts college between Olean and Allegany, New York, an hour and a half south of Buffalo, the divisiveness manifested itself in clashes between students and the Franciscans who ran the school. The friars ran a regimented, structured life, while students chafed for freedom.

Following a series of on-campus demonstrations, Father Dan Riley and other friars held a series of off-campus retreats with student leaders. Not only



did the retreats ease tensions, the intimacy of the sessions reignited the faith of the students.

As the 1980s began, Father Dan Riley continued to foster the idea of a permanent off-campus place where students could go on retreat, to rest and relax. The Franciscan Mountain Retreat was incorporated as a nonprofit corporation in the summer of 1982, allowing the group to raise money and buy property.

In the summers of 1983 and 1984, Mt. Irenaeus opened. *Irenaeus* is derived from the Greek and means "peaceful." To St. Bonaventure alumni, it also evokes the memory of Father Irenaeus Herscher, O.F.M. (1902-1981), revered longtime librarian at St. Bonaventure.



(Clockwise from top left) St. Francis reminds those who walk the six miles of trails at Mt. Irenaeus that respect for creation is key to Franciscan spirituality.

Holy Peace Chapel was dedicated in 1989.

This dining table in the House of Peace has seen many gather to “break bread together” and share faith-based conversation.

A flower garden graces the east side of the House of Peace.

Six hermitages offer private space for inner contemplation.

Father Irenaeus is remembered not only in the naming of this mountain, but also in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Part Two, Chapter Two). Thomas Merton, whose early autobiography that work is, taught English at St. Bonaventure from 1939 to 1941 and became good friends with Father Irenaeus. In Merton's biography, he remembered him as joyful, helpful and holy.

Father Irenaeus and Thomas Merton

both graduated from Columbia University and shared a profound love of books. The night before Merton left St. Bonaventure to begin his life at Gethsemani Monastery, he gave a number of his books to Father Irenaeus for the library. Later, the college received several journals written during his teaching years to add to this collection, documents which detailed the spiritual quest recorded in *The Seven Storey*

Mountain. The collection is known to researchers as an important repository of Merton materials (www.sbu.edu/friedsam/mertonweb).

Initially, Mt. Irenaeus existed in Collins Hall, a building in Allegany owned by St. Bonaventure University. People stopped in from time to time to pray, relax, have a cup of coffee. But it was always just a temporary home.

All the while, Father Dan Riley and other members of the Retreat's board of trustees were searching for permanent sites. It was a long, frustrating process, trying to find the ideal site. A few times,



a deal to buy land fell through at the last minute.

In the summer of 1984, after reading a story about the Mountain program in the local paper, Al Ernst, a resident of nearby West Clarksville (with no connection to the university) contacted the searching friars about possibly selling his mountaintop property. Discouraged after visiting more than 50 sites, Father Riley drove up to Ernst's property on a warm, late August afternoon.

The property was 40 minutes from campus—close enough to be convenient, far enough to be truly away.

Stepping out of the car, the friar could smell the wildflowers. He saw the rolling hills, the trails, the variety of trees—including the front eight acres, once a Christmas-tree farm.

"The land almost sang to me," he remembers.

Mt. Irenaeus had found its mountain.

Ever-emerging Ministries

Since that day, the development of the mountain has been in constant evolution. Ernst's original house was expanded. Cabins popped up around the property. Trails were cut. A pond was dug nearby.

In 1989, Holy Peace Chapel was dedicated on the hillside. Six years after that, House of Peace opened.

Four friars live in community on the mountain. For years, the two Father Dans commuted from campus before

making the move. Brother Joe was the first friar to take full-time residence on the site in 1989. Holy Peace Friary was officially established in 1990. Father Louis McCormick, O.F.M., who taught math at Bishop Timon High School in Buffalo for 25 years, moved in a year later.

Joining the friars in community are the Students for the Mountain, a group of St. Bonaventure students who help organize and run retreats.

"It's ministry, because it opens your heart to other people," says Renee Wiley, a St. Bonaventure senior and member of the student group. "You grow in your relationship with other people and with God."

Students for the Mountain make a large investment, not just in time but also in emotion. Weekly meetings consist of Scripture reading and faith sharing, and most students lead overnight weekend retreats—when their friends are out socializing.

"We're in our late teens and early 20s," says Kevin Purdy, a 2004 St. Bonaventure graduate and former intern at the mountain. "We're supposed to drink, we're supposed to socialize and go to parties. That's the lifestyle that's considered normal by society. But to sit down and have a deep conversation with someone else about spiritual matters is not normal, you know. Guys don't talk about girls in real positive terms, but we do here."

For all the talk of contemplation and solitude, neither the friars nor the stu-

dents are hermits. All the students are fully engaged in campus life. Many are involved in other campus ministry programs. Father Riley's day planner is always filled with meetings and events.

"We are called," Father Louis McCormick says in a homily, "to be people that lean into life."

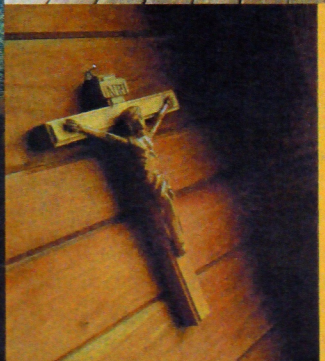
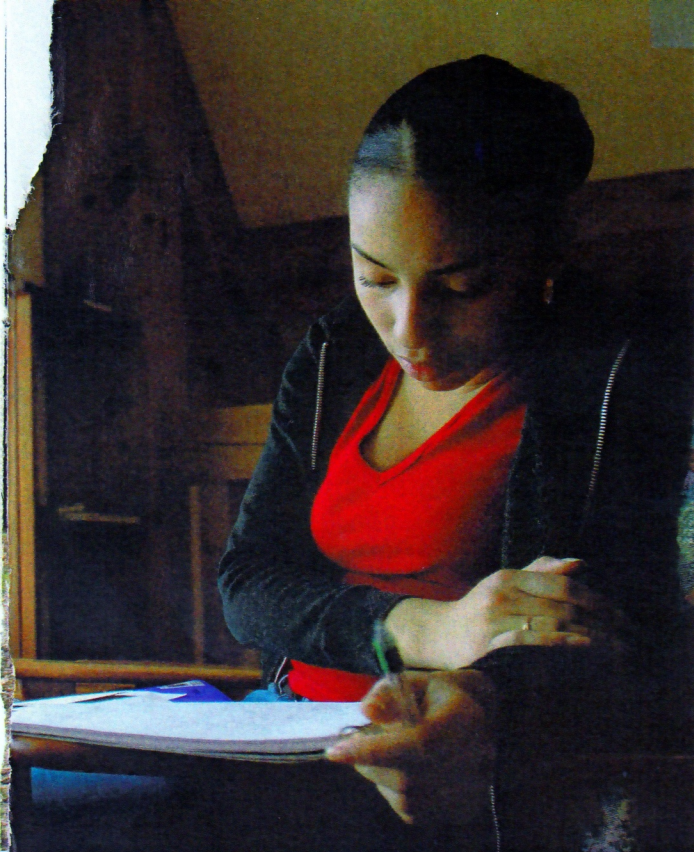
Maybe the strength of Mt. Irenaeus lies not in what it is, but rather in what it isn't.

While it is a Catholic retreat in the Franciscan tradition, it is not a strict atmosphere. Evenings and weekends always have defined programs, but they are not programmed. There's no strict schedule.

People of all faiths, all denominations are welcome. The quiet, natural setting and contemplative atmosphere encourage everyone to develop a personal relationship with God, whatever that may be.

Mass is informal, relaxed. The horse-shoe seating of the chapel ensures everyone can see everybody else. After the celebrant speaks, he opens the floor for reflections from worshipers.

It's a practice that dates back to the Church's early days. At St. Bonaventure, it dates back to Masses



(From the left) Brother Joe Kotula, O.F.M., gets help with the organic garden from Patrick McCarthy, who is discerning his vocation.

Elba Rosario, a St. Bonaventure sophomore, studies during the University's Reading Day, a day reserved for exam preparation.

Sunrise is the name of one of the hermitages, which are spartan but always have a crucifix.

with the students in the 1970s, after the tension-filled demonstrations.

"We're not preaching from the pulpit, we're talking with the people," Father Dan Hurley says. "Sometimes, when we're preaching up on a pulpit, I get the feeling that we're talking at people and that's not the way it's supposed to be. We're all worshiping together."

After Sunday Mass, the entire group is invited to the main house for a dish-to-pass brunch. This is another critical part of life at Mt. Irenaeus. All meals are served family-style. Everybody helps prepare, serve or clean up. Friars, faculty and students work together, serving one another.

Why Climb This Mountain?

For all its simplicity, Mt. Irenaeus is not a place that's easily described.

Ask 10 people what Mt. Irenaeus means to them, what makes the place special, and you will get 10 very different answers. Words like *peaceful*, *quiet*, *home* get tossed around. But there are a lot of places in the world that are peaceful, quiet and feel like home. There are a lot of places one can go to get away from the stress of everyday life.

What makes this mountain different?

It's hard to say.

And that's the point.

"We live in an age where we're bombarded by the impulse to measure and quantify life," Father Dan Riley says. "There's the idea that, if one can't put something into words, it doesn't exist. We live in a religious tradition where God is in the experience, not necessarily the words."

Fenn adds, "I consider it a kind of evangelicalism. It's got to be a situation where you know the person and you can say, 'Trust me, you will like this place and thank me later.'"

Mt. Irenaeus is a beautiful rural retreat, a place to escape the day-to-day stress of work or school, and slow down. Eat a wonderful meal. Walk along some beautiful trails. Spend time in quiet prayer.

But to think of it as a getaway is to miss the point.

"It's not just a facility, it's a way of life," Purdy says.

It's a church that is, ironically, steeped in the most ancient and basic traditions of the Catholic Church, one of radical service to each other, one of

being both in the world and able to step away from it, one of serving God by serving others. It is a tradition at home in both the solitude of the hills and the bustle of the marketplace.

It's telling that the main windows of both the chapel and the main house face the same direction as the winding road heading back to town. When you are praying or resting at the mountain, your eyes always return to the world.

"Everything we do here—the solitude, the prayer, the service—you can do at home," Father Dan Riley says. "Our intention wasn't to establish a monastic place of a strict program, but rather a place for renewal and prayer, so we can go back into the world again."

Mt. Irenaeus is not a destination, but a recharging station. One goes to the mountain to go back to the valley. **A**

Brian Moritz is closely linked to St. Bonaventure University. He earned his B.A. in journalism there in 1999. As a sportswriter and columnist for *The Times Herald* in Olean, New York, he has covered St. Bonaventure's basketball team (Bonnies) through thick and thin, winning second place for his sports column in the Associated Press Association's 2002 state competition.