

Saint Francis of the Woods: Beginnings

By
Kay Adair

Preface

A new chapter in my life began when I met Robert Adair, Sr. We were married seven months later and I consented to work with him in his dedication to an unusual calling. What grew out of his original vision challenged and surprised me all along the way and has brought blessings I could not have imagined. Out of that vision grew Saint Francis of the Woods Spiritual Renewal Center. This is the story of the early years, 1980 to 1994, written primarily from how I experienced the beginnings. The decision to write this story was prompted by questions people ask us when they spend time on the grounds of the center. How did all of this come about? How did you choose the name? Are you part of some religious group? How are you financed? What is your vision?

Defining “the beginning” is somewhat elusive as our lives and our institutions always evolved out of what has gone before, but I shall try to answer these questions.

A Seed is Planted

The seed out of which Saint Francis of the Woods grew germinated during a solitary walk along the Atlantic ocean near Stuart, Florida, at a turning point in the life of Robert Adair. After serving as a parish priest in an Eastern Orthodox Catholic Mission Church for over twenty years, he was discouraged, deeply perplexed, and felt an inner urging to move on. Reflecting on readings from a recent gift, Catherine de Hueck Doherty’s book, *Poustinia*, during his walk along the ocean, there came a rush of tears—to him, a sure sign of the spirit’s presence and guidance. In time, his troubled spirit was renewed and energized by a vision of rededicating his life to God and personal ministry through the creation of a shelter for spiritual seekers, inspired by the model described in Mrs. Doherty’s book.

In Russian spiritual tradition, the Poustinia is a room or outbuilding set aside in or near one’s home, where travelers and pilgrims are welcomed and given simple shelter and provision to enable a time apart for prayer and inner reflection. Such a place is akin to the hospitality provided by persons who, in

times of trouble, transition, or intense spiritual search show up at ashrams in India and the monastic foundations and retreat houses in this country. Establishment of a Poustinia can come out of the personal dedication of any individual or group who knows the need in one's own life for such a time and place and who is willing to extend this form of hospitality to others.

Finding a Home

As Robert Adair traveled to locate a site, he searched for an environment that could provide access to water, woods, earth, and sky in pristine form. It was his belief that nature teaches much about the harmonious integration of elemental energies in creation and each human. The geographical search ended with a visit to 160 acres in rural Payne county and the discovery of land whose beauty and vigor evoked strong personal response. In 1976 the land was purchased and construction began on his home, dedicated also to providing shelter "for anyone God sends along". During the year long construction period, Robert and I met in 1977 and were married in 1978. As the retired priest now shared his home and vision with a wife, a new context of his vision was forming.

The Spiritual Climate

At this time Robert Adair was serving as a bishop in his church in Florida. His clerical ties had lessened considerably, but years of training and service in an American Orthodox Catholic parish had shaped his beliefs and liturgical orientation. There were other strong influences working within him. Extensive studies of Jewish Kabbalah, the works of C. G. Jung, and metaphysical traditions rooted in eastern spirituality formed a synergistic confluence of wisdom moving within his mind and heart.

Intuitive, sensitive, and ever curious, he was also aware of the New Age climate of the 1960s and 70s, with its many-faceted search for healing, renewal, spiritual experience, and empowerment, which showed up in books, music, changing lifestyles, and the establishment of centers for personal development. There was a movement on the part of many people, especially youth, away from religion as organized in traditional churches. A decline of faith in familiar doctrines left empty spaces in the hearts and psyches of multitudes of people. At the same time, the world was experiencing growing violence and disorder as well as stressful personal, family, social, workplace, and political environments. Many were searching for new sources of peace, freedom, integration, and a sense of meaning—basic gifts of the Spirit. This

larger spiritual environment was to greatly impact the early years of Saint Francis of the Woods' development.

Our Boundaries Widen

Within a couple of years property three miles south of our home came up for sale. It had been the site of a dairy farm. The abandoned land was beautiful despite the sad remains of the crumbling cement-brick barn and milk house and the small, thick-walled rock farmhouse whose interior was wrecked by neglect and vandalism. There were also a few deteriorating outbuildings, two ponds, and acres of pasture that were leased out and planted in wheat. The land came up for sale at a time when we sensed an expanding vision. More and more people were coming to our home. The new land could provide for those needing rest and renewal and, perhaps in time, also house an extensive collection of library books. (The books had been held in storage since a seminary connected with the church in Florida closed a few years earlier.) We talked also of a chapel open at all times for meditation.

Despite the work necessary to renovate the old dairy site, the new property offered some appealing options: access to Oklahoma Highway 33, space for a chapel and library, and two small cottages in disrepair but suitable for small retreat houses if restored. The surrounding land resembled the pastures and woods of our home place. Walking the land revealed deeply sculptured wails and canyons where seasonal springs and streams provide nature's smorgasbord of healing influences.

Combining our personal resources with income from sale of church property in Florida, we purchased the land on Highway 33 with the intention of locating a spiritual renewal center on the grounds. We began building an endowment through gifts and donations to support the ongoing life of the center. The vision of Poustinia continued to define the purpose of the center while a larger context was evolving.

Weaving a Network of Support

In 1980 my husband's son and daughter-in-law, Robert Jr. and Diane, along with their two young sons, Andrew and Matthew, joined us. The recently purchased dairy farm with its crumbling structures and beautiful land challenged them with their own vision: the creation of a rural day school where children studying in a natural setting could develop academic skills while

exploring practical lessons in science and survival on the land. By August of 1981, the crumbling dairy barn had been rebuilt with three classrooms, a kitchen, and a full apartment on the second floor. An experienced teacher, Virginia Samuels, was found, and the Cimarron Learning Center officially opened in September. It continued to operate until June of 1988. During those years Robert, Jr. took on the task of coordinating and working with every aspect of construction in what eventually became Saint Francis of the Woods. Diane took the lead in organizing the programs and curriculum at Cimarron Learning Center.

People often ask, "Are you connected with some religious organization?" Saint Francis of the Woods was established as an independent religious corporation without direct connection to any denominational or ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Priests who have served in the chapel were ordained by and accountable to a bishop in the Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church of America, formerly located in Maitland, Florida, and now in Sanford, Florida. Though not directly linked to any denominational group, Saint Francis of the Woods is continually nurtured by the spiritual experiences and orientation of those who come out of the grounds, use the facilities, participate in programs, and/or work on the permanent staff and Board of Trustees.

In addition to our endowment we are supported by in-kind gifts and financial contributions from sources such as donations, sale of hay, and workshop fees.

Welcome to the Grounds

When you come to Saint Francis of the Woods today, you will enter on a gravel road running north off of State Highway 33, midway between the cities of Guthrie and Stillwater. On your left is a mixed woods of evergreens, sycamores, redbud and other trees and a southwestern-style stucco manse, home to the resident director and family. A short distance further on the right is a small stucco cottage known as the Sojourner's house, which has been occupied for many years by a resident teacher and steward, Dr. Shyam Kashyap. On the left is a large two-story building, formerly the school and now a study center with central dining area.

Directly ahead are two smaller structures, the Saint Francis House, a retreat cottage, and the laundry house, which also serves as a storm shelter. The driveway continues along a pasture spreading out on the east and north; to the west is the Memorial Arboretum, and intricately patterned planting of trees and

shrubs with colored gates on four sides. Just beyond is the library, reflective pond, and a rock walkway that leads to the entry of the chapel. Further still are the chicken house, home to forty to sixty laying hens at any given time, and two metal shop buildings housing maintenance and construction equipment and work areas. Located in relative isolation from the center of the retreat complex are Clare house and Bonaventure house. Three miles to the north, on the property originally used as our home site, there is now a staff home and a large house designated as the Saint John Chrysostom lodge, commemorating the saint whose name Robert Adair took at his ordination as an orthodox priest many years before. The lodge accommodates groups of up to ten or twelve. This, combined with the other overnight facilities, allows up to around thirty persons to be housed at Saint Francis of the Woods. Most come, however, as individuals or in much smaller groups.

At this writing these comprise the developed structures on the grounds. They are set into approximately 490 acres of pasture and woods, streams and small waterfalls, modest but beautiful canyons and hills carved into the terrain by centuries of natural forces. Simple trails have been cut through a portion of the woods to enable people to walk safely into and out of the woods. Diverse wildlife finds shelter on the grounds. It is not unusual to see one, two, or several deer grazing, resting, taking water from pods. Every shy, however, the deer bound gracefully off into the woods when humans are spotted.

The Chapel: Grounding our Spiritual Aspirations

*"You will never find your heart in the temple
until you find the temple in your heart."*

Shyam Kashyap

The real church is located in the hearts and spirits of individuals and communities of faith. Yes. But from the beginning we knew that a chapel would symbolize the spiritual root from which the tradition of Poustinia emerged. I understood because, while my husband served an orthodox parish in Florida, I had for twenty years been actively involved in a United Methodist church in Oklahoma City—in worship, study, and outreach.

At first our family and a few friends held weekly services wherever we could gather—first in the family living room, or in the greenhouse off the living room. When the school was constructed in the early 1980's, a more formal liturgy was

possible in the apartment above the school. The Orthodox liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom was used from the beginning. Although it has been a standard order of worship in Eastern Orthodoxy for fifteen hundred years, it can seem very unorthodox to those unfamiliar with its succession of litanies, portions from psalms, the beatitudes, the hymns leading into the consecration of the communion elements, and the final thanksgiving—almost entirely vocalized through the chanting of the priest and the sung responses of the congregation. One of our first visitors to services in the greenhouse, an outspoken intellectual and good friend who came in response to our invitation, wryly commented on the discomfort he felt in such an unfamiliar order of worship, “It’s like chanting the Oklahoma drivers manual in its entirety.” But for those who are raised in the tradition or are naturally drawn into the mystical dimension of this ancient liturgy, the lengthy and repetitive service can be a source of deep spiritual connection and soul nurture.

The apartment atop the learning center was used for worship from July 1981 until the first service in the newly completed chapel on September 2, 1984. The apartment had become known informally by two names: the Upper Room, recalling the place noted in Mark 14:15 where Jesus shared a last meal with his disciples before the crucifixion and also the Holy Grail Chapel, reflecting the universal theme of humanity’s search for God, symbolized in the Arthurian grail stories.

Discussing the form our worship services would take, my husband said on several occasions that there are countless rituals and spontaneous approaches through which people can connect with God and worship authentically. However, his training and years of service as a priest had molded him into the Eastern Orthodox order of worship and we agreed to use the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom with occasional modifications. To ease the role of visitors participating in the choral responses, we adopted a musical setting that was harmonic and easily mastered. We added a hymn setting of the familiar prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...” and closed with Jill Jackson’s composition, “Let There Be Peace on Earth.”

During periods when an ordained priest has not been available, our services have been led by a deacon or lay person. In recent years we have used other orders of worship based in Protestant tradition, eastern meditation, and Quaker silence. While rooted in earliest Christian tradition, Saint Francis of the Woods is open to all seekers on a genuine spiritual path. Chapel services have

been weighted toward the eastern Christian liturgical order but openness continues to be honored and explored through a broader range of spiritual traditions.

The Name: Manifesting Spirit

We knew the importance of naming places and the power of a name to attract spiritual qualities. We also knew that over the years those spiritual qualities would further manifest in their lives. When the time came to name “the field of dreams” evolving in our midst, and to print stationary, draw up a structure of incorporation, and place a sign at the entry to the highway, several events had already begun to guide us toward a single choice.

One of the first gifts given to the center was a large statue of Francis of Assisi, given by Osma Khoury, a friend and teacher in Oklahoma City who encouraged us on many occasions. Pages from a chapel journal I recorded during the early years describe a process that continued to imprint Saint Francis into our consciousness.

“Friday, September 14, 1984

Eight hundred years after the birth of Francesco Bernardone (who later became Saint Francis of Assisi), the world was remembering and celebrating in various ways, the life of Christendom’s best beloved figure following Jesus himself. In the United States the Postal service issued a commemorative stamp.

St. Francis was brought to our attention from several seemingly unrelated directions during the years the chapel was in the planning stage. The Franciscan influence of father Dismas Markle, the bishop who succeeded Robert Adair in the Florida church, had for years been an inspiration to us. Father Dismas’ gifts of books and a relic given to him by a friend from his years at the monastery started our search for a better understanding of Francis. A visit to Santa Fe in March of 1981 introduced us to (1) the mystery of sensing a unique spirit hovering over the city and surrounding area, and (2) Shyam and Sandra Kashyap, who became a source of deep healing and witnesses for the loving, reconciling, universal spirit represented by Francis.

Then came other touchstones. Father Dismas shared with us two dreams that linked our center here with the spirit of Saint Francis. Allen Parleir came to visit in 1982 after taking a group of young people to Europe. He related in depth

his experiences in Assisi and gave us a print of the church there. While in Santa Fe ("The city of the holy faith of Saint Francis of Assisi"), we bought an icon of Francis and Clare. There was also a gift from Jessie Ruth Schooler of a book (The Little Flowers of Saint Francis, which belonged to her husband, Don Schooler) and her recollections of their visit to Assisi so many years ago.

Little by little the desire, conviction, and will emerged from within us to dedicate the Center to Saint Francis and petition God to allow the qualities of Franciscan devotion to God to permeate the area. We obtained a tile portrait of Francis for the entry area of the new chapel, and placed a copy of one of the sensitive old illustrations out of Don Schooler's book upon the library brochure.

Additional gifts came, after we made known our intention to dedicate the Center to Saint Francis. Panthea Freeman and Sam Bowman brought the stained-glass window that hangs by the library entry. Bob Rossiter at the Jesus House made a sign, "Saint Francis of the Woods", from a piece of wood and rusted nails, a symbolic statement that expresses the mysterious stigmata which came into Francis' hands, duplicating the experience of nails driven into the wooden cross upon which Jesus was crucified.

We have a long way to go to replicate in even a small way the quality of spiritual commitment and realization of Francis of Assisi. But his image is before us, to inspire and encourage us or to illuminate our darker side. Like the life of the Lord he loved so dearly and completely, Francis' life becomes a testimony that is to draw us toward a saving relationship to God, rather than condemn us. This is the quality of love, His love, God's love."

To make his life specific to this place and time, Saint Francis of the Woods Spiritual Renewal Center names our desire to honor Saint Francis, identify the site, and express our purpose to be more than simply a place of retreat. Instead, we pray that Saint Francis of the Woods may be a place where people find safe and sheltered silence in the hospitality of the cottages, access to nature, freedom to encounter and dialogue with people of differing backgrounds and perspectives, and to whatever extent they feel drawn, to utilize the resources of the library, chapel, and programs in the learning center. Again and again, my husband affirmed that people must find ways to get in touch with their innermost center—which then gives access to God, to guidance, to healing, and spiritual growth.

Journeying Alone and Together: A Crossroad of Heart, Mind, and Spirit

Saint Francis of the Woods has always been a place where people from diverse backgrounds come. In honoring the original commitment to provide shelter and hospitality to “anyone God sends,” the heart of Poustinia—we have witnessed a threefold need: (1) quiet space with access to natural environment for rest and reflection; (2) a safe place to express concerns and questions not always welcomed or allowed in traditional social and church settings; and (3) the opportunity to explore widely ranging spiritual traditions that have emerged in different areas of the world over the broader time span of human history. This desire to explore and learn seems to reflect a universal need of people around the world as the twentieth century moves into the twenty-first.

During the 1980s and 90s we met many persons, fragmented by life events, who were on unique and serious spiritual quests. Many possessed leadership skills and teaching experience. As we began to explore how to offer workshops, we utilized the resources of some of these persons. Early on we learned that many people are drawn to the center for rest were also interested in the reawakening experiences the workshops provided. Spiritual journaling, processing grief through a psycho/spiritual approach, forms of meditation, Native American Spirit pathways, art and music therapies, are a few of the many ways our workshops offered, and continue to offer, old and new healing modalities.

Crossing the Threshold

Saint Francis of the Woods has developed an undefined but very real capacity to “hold the tension” between “old” and “new” and seemingly opposite views and approaches, allowing individuals to let their questions and answers simmer and season in an open atmosphere of inquiry and sharing.

I am deeply indebted to Sandra Cronk, a Quaker spiritual director and teacher who introduced me to the term “liminal” (1. *Of or relating to a sensory threshold*; 2. *Barely perceptible*. From Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary, 10th ed.) As she described “liminal persons”—those who stand outside the mainstream and status quo, as if on a threshold into the future, and who introduce ideas, perspectives, visions which contain seeds of what is to come—I knew the description fit Robert Adair, Sr. in many ways. Since his death in April of 1992, I have recognized a common thread running through the lives of many

people who come to Saint Francis of the Woods, especially those who sojourn with us for extended periods. They too are moving across their own personal threshold onto an intentional path of change and renewal, although at times the way seems to be “barely perceptible.”

Invitation

We continue to welcome persons who are searching for a place in which they can connect with inner stillness, find refreshment in nature’s resources, dialogue with other seekers, and utilize what is offered in our library, workshops, community meals, and worship services. Many people volunteer hours working in the gardens or cleaning, writing book reviews or articles for the newsletter—ways of giving and receiving gifts. All are invited to visit, walk the grounds, and to call for information concerning workshops, worship services and overnight accommodations.

MAY WE ALL SHARE SEEDS
OF BLESSING:
PEACE, LOVE, AND HARMONY

Kay Adair, December 11, 1999

As this booklet comes to completion I want to acknowledge the encouragement to “Write it!” provided by Paula Sullivan, a dear friend and creative writing teacher, and the loving support and technical assistance of Jean Bloomquist. The spiritual biographies and writing of both of these women have for years inspired and guided me.

Without the day by day, year after year support of our skilled and committed staff, Eugene White, Diane Lamecker, Gary and Susan Doolin, Allen Jobes, Steward Shyam Kashyap and Director Mary Steele, there could be no ongoing invitation and welcome.

I am deeply grateful to all who have made possible the grounding of Bob’s vision of Poustinia, and the ongoing pilgrimage of human hearts who, knowing their need for God, sojourn here on the grounds of Saint Francis of the Woods.