

# Catherine

A Newsletter to Promote the Cause for Canonization  
of the Servant of God, Catherine de Pjeck Doherty

Issue Number 7 — Summer 2004



## Poustinia: 30 years later and on into the 21st century

■ From the Postulator's Desk

*Spiritual fruitfulness* is one of the signs the Church looks for in attempting to discern holiness.

In speaking about Catherine in these newsletters, I never mean to glorify *her* but the Lord, who is the source of her fruitfulness and whom she always wished to be glorified. We invite you to thank God with us for what he has done through her.

### Poustinia: 30 Years After

Catherine is probably best known, still today in the year 2004, for her book *Poustinia*. First published in 1975, it was the fruit of her mature life with God. It has inspired hundreds of thousands of people. The depth and power of the words in this book are a sign of God's grace at work in her.

Although we are approaching the 30th anniversary of the book's publication, the inspiration to introduce the Russian tradition of poustinia into North America came to Catherine sometime in 1961. Thus, even before the publication of the book, there was a 14-year period of the beginnings of the poustinia at Madonna House itself. I would like to share with you not so much the message of

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Catherine Doherty inside St. George's poustinia

*Poustinia* (I hope you have read it!) but something of its worldwide and growing influence.

The community has various opinions about whether Madonna House is a *movement*. (The word is usually applied to some of the larger ecclesial families who have thousands of people formally joined to them in some way.) Admittedly we are a relatively small community. However, I believe Catherine's spirituality is a world-wide movement, and that Madonna House can be spoken of

as a spiritual movement in the Church. Certainly poustinia is that. I believe that the extent of *Poustinia's* influence, briefly indicated here, justifies such an evaluation. (Since this Cause newsletter was put on the Internet in 2001 it has received tens of thousands of visits.)

### Beginnings at Madonna House

"Poustinia" is the Russian word for "desert," and it is used to designate a small cabin or room set aside for silence and prayer. After converting an old farm house into a poustinia, Madonna House built a number of small cabins in various places on the grounds of the community. Slowly, over the following years, both guests and members of the community would spend days there in prayer, fasting, and meditating on the scriptures. Several priests and laity began living a *poustinik* lifestyle: several days each week "in poustinia" and the other days with the community. At the present time (not counting a



Row of poustinias at Madonna House (Carmel Hill, winter 1986)

number of poustinia rooms) there are more than 20 poustinia cabins that form an integral part of the community life. I don't know of any other ecclesial community that gives such prominence to the reality of solitude in its communal structure.

Poustinia is now a significant part of our overall apostolate. Each of our houses outside Combermere has poustinia rooms, open to community members and guests. There is so much noise in our society that people can no longer hear the Word of God; we seek to foster a love for silence so people can hear this Word which is different from all other words.

### Appreciations of Poustinia Outside the Community

A number of years ago the Catholic University of America published a multi-volume work entitled *The Catholic Tradition*, an anthology of authors most representative of this tradition. The last two volumes are on spirituality. In the last—along with excerpts from

the writings of such saints as Francis de Sales, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross—there is a substantial excerpt from Catherine's *Poustinia*. My own understanding, awareness and appreciation of God's plan for Catherine in the life of the Church rose enormously when I saw this.

*Catherine deeply felt the efficacy of prayer in her poustinia movement—in terms of cosmic dimensions. Her ministry strove to open up contemplation's door to everyone, suggesting poustinia to all... she helped to make monastic solitude and silence accessible to everyone, and tried to make contemplation part of everyone's vocabulary.*

What struck me most of all was the spiritual stature of the people with whom Catherine was now being associated. This high opinion of her life and teaching continues.

For example, there is a recent book, *The Language of Silence* (Darton, Longman and Todd), by the Camaldolese monk Peter-Damian Belisle in Big Sur, California, which is part of a well known series in England called *Traditions of Christian Spirituality*. He writes of many of the great

lovers of solitude, beginning with biblical figures and continuing on to St. Anthony of the Desert, the Carthusians, the Cistercians, Seraphim of Sarov, and many more. Then, in a section of contemporary lovers of silence, he discusses people such as Staretz Silouan of Mt. Athos, Jules Monchanin (the Benedictine in India), and Catherine de Hueck Doherty. He writes:

“Her Madonna House movement promoted *poustinia* for the benefit of the Church. Sounding like a desert *amma*, Catherine wrote that the poustinik fashions the desert into a garden. But the garden was meant to be seen by all. Catherine felt as though she were God's bird sent out to tell the good news to the entire universe. In her wisdom she echoed the ecclesiology of the eleventh-century hermit Peter Damian's *The Lord Be With You* by accenting how the entire Christian community was present to her,

and in her. Catherine deeply felt the efficacy of prayer in her poustinia movement—in terms of cosmic dimensions. Her ministry strove to open up contemplation's door to everyone, suggesting poustinia to all, and offering poustinia for all who might come to Madonna House. Catherine helped to make monastic solitude and silence accessible to everyone, and tried to make contemplation part of everyone's vocabulary. By the end of her life, she considered her entire existence an exercise in

poustinia, with her service and ministry being echoes of its solitude and silence.” (154-55)

And in a personal note to me Brother Peter wrote: “What a woman! And a saint.”

Let us together take a brief spiritual journey, based on personal stories about poustinia that we of the Madonna House community have heard over the years, and on my recent survey of the Internet. See with your mind’s eye the thou-

*“There is something about stepping out of everyday life that reminds you we are on this earth to serve God. Being in the world, people forget that. That’s why you spend time as a hermit. Even our Lord spent time alone in the desert.”*

sands of people who have been and are meditatively reading *Poustinia*, being drawn to make silence more a part of their lives. Look into homes and see the poustinia rooms or sections of rooms people have set aside for prayer. Be amazed at the poustinias people have built on their personal property, or on the grounds of religious houses. Walk through retreat centers and see rooms marked “poustinia” for a day of solitude.

I am not making up these examples as possibilities; I have seen poustinia rooms in basements, over garages, as rooms in the home, in the back of churches. I’ve seen—and blessed—poustinias built on people’s property. We of Madonna House have sold the books and heard the stories. A new depth of silence has settled upon the earth. Surely most of the book’s influence is hidden in human hearts; most graces and fruits flowing from *Poustinia* are “hidden with Christ in God.”

While the survey of the Internet that I am about to relate is neither

the most important nor largest part of the spiritual movement that poustinia has become, I was quite astounded to discover over 1,000 web sites dealing with poustinia—not to mention the sites which refer to Catherine herself.

### What Is On the Web?

As would be expected, a good number of sites tell you how to purchase the book. This in itself is highly significant: the book is still

very much in demand 30 years after its first publication. It is currently published by Madonna House Publications.

*Poustinia* is frequently called a “modern classic,” and we believe it is. In English it has been published in the United States, Canada, Britain and India. Translations have been published in French, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Czech,

Chinese, Korean, Flemish, Portuguese, Lithuanian, German, Russian, and Japanese, for a total of over 200,000 copies.

Quite a few sites advertise poustinia rooms or cabins available for retreats. (Recently I was thrilled at seeing “poustinia” marked on the door of a room in the Carmelite Centre in Glasgow.) One thing this says is that the word and reality of poustinia has become one of the common aspects of the Catholic and Christian prayer scene. Many involved in retreat houses and prayer apostolates would be familiar with poustinia, and now use the word without needing to explain it.

We know of several larger retreat centers where a number of poustinias are available, often for extended periods of time. In Belgium, not far from our house which is located near Namur, there is a center called the Hill of Penuel. A small community lives there, has poustinias available for

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Interior of a Madonna House poustinia (Carmel Hill, winter 1986)

# Testimonies

"I was deeply moved by the poustinia project. That is ideal. It is just right. It will be a wonderful contribution. It is the kind of thing that is most needed. And though it is certain that we must speak if and when we can, silence is always more important. The crises of the age are so enormous and the mystery of evil so unfathomable; the action of well-meaning men is so absurd and tends so much to contribute to the very evils it tries to overcome; all these things should show us that the real way is prayer, and penance, and closeness to God in poverty and solitude."

—Letter of Thomas Merton to Catherine, November 12, 1962, in response to her telling him about the poustinia at Madonna House.

"The arrival of the Cross of Christ to the Americas five hundred years ago is an historical event that Catholics should look

**"I was deeply moved by the poustinia project. That is ideal. It is just right. It will be a wonderful contribution. It is the kind of thing that is most needed." — Thomas Merton**

upon from a perspective of faith. [After listing many of the martyrs, missionaries and holy people of the Americas, the bishop continues:] "Not to mention a host of Gospel bearers, some of whom are in the process of beatification—Mary Elizabeth Lange, Henrietta Delille, Julia Walsh, Francis Clement Kelly, James G. Keller, Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, Frank Sheed, Fulton J. Sheen, Thomas Merton, William Howard Bishop, Joan Overboss, Catherine de Hueck Doherty."

—Bishop Daily, *Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y., Pastoral Letter, An Ephiphany of Faith. Pastoral Letter on the Occasion of the Fifth Centenary of the Evangelization of the Americas.*

"[This book contains] fascinating profiles of the most important spiritual leaders of the past one hundred years. The result of a nationwide survey of experts in leading universities and seminaries, as well as leading representatives of dozens of reli-

gious traditions and spiritual persuasions, this authoritative list of seventy-five includes martyrs and mystics, intellectuals and charismatics from East and West." Catherine is among them.

—*Spiritual Innovators: Seventy-Five Extraordinary People Who Changed the World in the Past Century.*

"To grow spiritually we must increase the silence in our lives. Catherine Doherty in her book *Poustinia* reminds us that spiritual growth happens only when silence and simplicity are tightly woven into our lives. She reminds us that we have forgotten that simply sitting in the silent presence of one who loves God is often enough to bring healing to the deepest of wounds.

—"A New Paradigm of Christian Ministry for the 21st Century," by Dick Rauscher.

"Thursday, May 15. Marge is packing up to go to West Virginia, but finding time to plant the garden in the little yard of one of the two small houses which we have named St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila. They are the nearest thing we have for our young volunteers to use as a poustinia, which Catherine de Hueck Doherty of Combermere, Canada, has introduced us to through her book by that name. Most of the winter I have lived in one and Marge Hughes in the other with her son John. But now the winter has come to an end, and I must go to the farm at Tivoli for a brief visit to Unity acres and Unity kitchen in Syracuse."

—Dorothy Day, 'On Pilgrimage,' *The Catholic Worker*, June, 1975.

"Yekaterina [Catherine], when she left all to follow Christ, remembered a common but very special kind of Russian believer—the poustinik. Every so often some peasant, or less frequently a wealthy per-

son in Russia like Pyotr, would get rid of his or her things and take to the *poustinia*, a word that means *desert*. The poustinik, however, did not go to a literal desert. He only put on rough linen clothing and went to live in the barest, simplest house in the village. There, with no lock on the door, he lived with nothing but the Bible, his daily bread, and his clothes."

—reflections of a Russian visitor to Madonna House in Combermere.

About *Poustinia*: "Of the many books on prayer that have been published in recent years this is simply the best."

—Richard K. Weber, *O.P.*

"I once saw a wonderful interview with Catherine de Hueck Doherty. She was already more than 80 years old and, reflecting on the struggles of her spiritual journey, said something to this effect: 'It's like there are three persons inside of me. The "Baroness" is spiritual. Another person whom I call "Catherine" enjoys this life and doesn't want renunciation or poverty. And finally, inside of me too there's a little girl. I think the "little girl" might be who I really am.' These words come from a spiritual giant, someone who attained both wholeness and sanctity after a long search and difficult struggle. Like Catherine, all of us have a number of persons inside of us."

—Ronald Rolheiser, in *The Catholic Herald*, Sept. 2003.

"I certainly hope the Canonization process will soon decide that Catherine Doherty will be declared a Saint in the Catholic Church."

—Sargent Shriver (President John F. Kennedy's brother-in-law)

A Sudanese priest living in Canada said to one of our community: "You know, when I was still in Egypt, an Irish woman gave me a book that she thought I might enjoy. It was about Madonna House and how you pray, and about your foundress. It was called *Poustinia*. What do you think about that!" ■

# Favours Received

I believe that I received a favor through Catherine's intercession. For the past three weeks I had been experiencing mild depression. My daughter was currently visiting Madonna House in Combermere and she called me. She said that she had visited Catherine's grave that day, put her hand on the cross above her grave, and prayed for me. It wasn't until a few hours later on in the afternoon that I realized that I was feeling better, like this depression had lifted. I have to say that I had been praying as well, but I feel sure that Catherine had a lot to do with it.

—Anonymous

I was diagnosed with breast cancer around May, 1998, at the age of 76. Before I had surgery in September I started praying to Catherine, asking for her help. I had the surgery in September and since then I have had good reports. Thanks to Our Lady and Catherine.

—UB, Combermere, ON



Catherine outside St. George's poustinia

A friend had a massive heart attack. I laid a relic of Catherine on his arm and was rewarded with a big smile. But then for three weeks afterwards he was in a coma. The doctors recommended that the family should think about taking him off the ventilator. They asked me what to do, and I said I couldn't make a suggestion or decision. I prayed again with Catherine's relic that God would either bring him back to full health, or take him before the family had to make a decision. The following day we received a call: "Miracle! Miracle! Dad became alert enough to understand what was going on and the doctor was able to ask him if he wanted the tube out and to try just breathing with the help of oxygen. He said he did. The doctor also asked if he wanted it back in if he couldn't breathe, and he said yes to that too. The decision became his and no one else had to fret or feel guilty that they were pulling the plug on their beloved. We are so grateful! God love Catherine!

—MB, Windsor, Ontario

My husband and my son went three years without talking with each other or seeing each other. Every Monday, in the house of a friend, we prayed the rosary and, as I have a relic of Catherine, we begged her intercession. It was through these prayers that one day my husband decided to open his heart and go to the house of our son. Until then our son had not wanted to receive him. The two conversed and today they are good friends. It is hard to imagine the power of the intercession of a Servant of God! May the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the intercession of Catherine pour blessings over all of you.

—SFQ, São Carlos, Brazil

(Note from Fr. Wild: Maybe some day the Congregation for the Saints will figure out a way of accepting *moral miracles* for Causes as well as physical ones.)

We were praying for my husband and me to conceive. We just received our Christmas miracle and we know that it was through the intercession of the

Servant of God Catherine Doherty. I wanted to thank you all and let you know that Catherine is truly a servant of God. We know that we are truly blessed with this little bundle of joy who is definitely a Christmas miracle.

—MT

I believe my brother was healed of prostate cancer as a result of Catherine's intercession. I firmly believe the healing was done by Catherine's help. I felt enlightened; my worries disappeared right after asking for this favour.

—MM, Alexandria, ON ■

If you believe you have received favours through Catherine's intercession, we would be pleased to hear from you. Please write to the Postulator at the address found on the last page. ■

## Prayer Asking for Favours Through the Intercession of the Servant of God Catherine Doherty

All loving Father, through your beloved Son, Jesus, we have been taught to ask for what we need. And through his spouse, our Mother the Church, we have been instructed to pray for one another, and to ask the intercession of your servants, who have fallen asleep in Christ. Therefore, through the intercession of your servant, Catherine Doherty, we ask (*here mention your petition.*)

We ask this for your honour and glory, and in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son Our Lord. Amen.

*Imprimatur:* † J. R. Windle, Bishop of Pembroke, May 1, 1993. For private use.

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various lengths of time, and announces: “Welcome to the Hill of Penuel, a place of silence. You can have access to a prolonged period of prayer, face to face with God. A time of poustinia (desert in Russian), a haven of peace, to discover what is essential.”

Among the many personal witness stories about significant graces people have received through their poustinia experience, we give the following examples:

Fr. Ed Wade, a member of the new Companions of the Cross community in Ottawa, was being interviewed about his decision to join that community.

“Q. Was there any one factor that helped with your decision?”

“Fr. Ed: I went on a poustinia. The Lord let me know that I needed to make a choice without knowing the far-reaching answers. Getting into poustinia has been a great thing for me: seeing what God is doing in my own heart. I don’t have to have all the answers. The Lord is the answer. That quieted me down.”

From Joseph de Louw, a Crosier Brother: “In all the years I lived in Nebraska, I would spend a day in the

poustinia. I must confess I enjoyed it. I was with the Lord, to do a little fasting and penance. There is something about stepping out of everyday life that reminds you we are on this earth to serve God. Being in the world, people forget that. That’s why you spend time as a hermit. Even our Lord spent time alone in the desert.”

I’ll stop here. I just wanted to emphasize that I’ve found much valuable material on the web about poustinia, nearly 30 years after publication of the first edition of the book.

Father Robert Wild,  
Postulator for the Cause ■

#### ■ A Final Word from Catherine

Well, we have arrived at the end of this book on the poustinia. I myself have always been attracted to the silence and solitude of God. When it became obvious that my vocation was not to be physical silence and solitude, when I was thrown into the noisiest marketplaces in the world, God showed me how to live out the poustinia ideal. The heart of it is that the poustinia is not a place at all—and yet it is. It is a state, a vocation, belonging to all Christians by bap-

tism. *It is the vocation to be a contemplative.*

The essence of the poustinia is that it is a place within oneself, a result of baptism, where each of us contemplates the Trinity. Within my heart, within me, I am constantly in the presence of God. The poustinia is this inner solitude, this inner immersion in the silence of God.

This is the poustinia I have been trying to talk about. This is the poustinia I so passionately want to give to everyone. I know that in the poustinia lies the answer that the world is seeking today. If we lived in the poustinia of our hearts then love would enter the world through us. We could speak God’s word to the world. It is the poustinia of the heart that I believe is the answer for the modern world.

—excerpted from *Poustinia*,  
ch. XV: *The Poustinia of the Heart*

### The Little Mandate

*Catherine Doherty considered the words of “The Little Mandate” to be the very heart and essence of her vocation:*

Arise—go! Sell all you possess. Give it directly, personally to the poor. Take up My cross (their cross) and follow Me, going to the poor, being poor, being one with them, one with Me.

Little—be always little! Simple, poor, childlike.

Preach the Gospel with your life—*without compromise!* Listen to the Spirit. He will lead you.

Do little things exceedingly well for love of Me.

Love, love, love, never counting the cost.

Go into the marketplace and stay with Me. Pray, fast, pray always, fast.

Be hidden. Be a light to your neighbour’s feet. Go without fear into the depth of men’s hearts. I shall be with you.

Pray always. *I will be your rest.*



Catherine Doherty on the steps of Marian Meadows, our first poustinia (1961)



William Kurelek, and his painting of the first poustinia with Madonna House in the background, entitled *The Hope of the World*.

#### ■ The Hope of the World

A painting of the first poustinia in North America by William Kurelek, famous Canadian painter. The following is an excerpt about the painting from a biography of him:

“On the occasion of his first visit to Madonna House, Bill was received by Fr. Briere, who already knew something of his reputation as a man with a message, a man of faith. Madonna House had recently opened their first *poustinia*, or hermitage, a small, unpainted farmhouse whose interior was dominated by a large, bare cross and a picture of the scourged Christ. Fr. Briere never forgot the scene. In front of the picture of Christ, Bill fell to his knees, sobbing uncontrollably. He remained there for some time as if in a trance, saying nothing.

“This was the poustinia which Bill painted in the foreground of a panoramic view of the community’s central buildings beside the

Madawaska River. Titled Madonna House, Combermere, *The Hope of the World* (1965), the painting was the last in *Glory to Man in the Highest* (1966), a series of socio-religious satirical paintings which Bill described as a sweeping look

*“Bill alternated scenes depicting problems with ones suggesting solutions. The Madonna House Apostolate was his ‘all embracing solution’ for the world’s woes, a place where the atmosphere of joy and brotherly love was immediately felt.”*

at some of the world’s major ills.

“To avoid being merely negative, Bill alternated scenes depicting problems with ones suggesting solutions. The Madonna House Apostolate was his ‘all embracing solution’ for the world’s woes, a place where the atmosphere of joy and brotherly love was immediately felt. He praised their frugality, noting that it had pained him (after witnessing starvation in Mexico) to see crusts of bread thrown away in his own house. He praised their practicality, their trades and crafts, and their spirituality, including traditions of fasting

and poustinia. In one of his paintings he had shown himself (as he notes in a letter) praying in front of the large black cross: ‘I have painted the sky a cold overcast color as of a premature fall because it gives the mood of foreboding. Men will

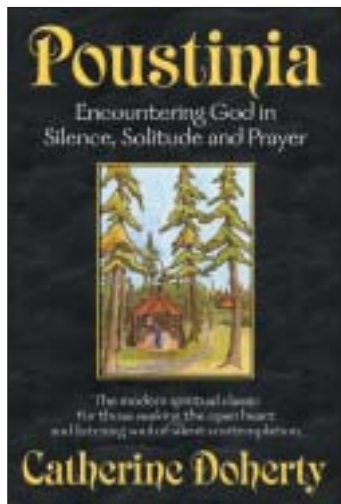
not read the signs of the times and are courting disaster. The planes in the sky are delivering a nuclear bomb load.’

“Catherine’s vision was both similar and different. Unlike the artist, she does not threaten, nor do her writings ever suggest contempt for this world. Had Catherine lacked that prophetic vision, Bill would probably not have found in her community ‘the hope of the world.’”

— from *Kurelek* by Patricia Morley (pp. 168-69)

■ Catherine in print and media

Catherine Doherty's life was the subject of many books, and she herself was a prolific speaker and writer with dozens of published works. We hope to introduce you to some of these popular and important works, considered by many to be modern spiritual classics.



"Of the many books on prayer that have been published in recent years, this is simply the best." *Richard K. Weber OP*

"Classics are rarer than precious gems, so it is a delight to discover a new one." *Christian Century*

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## Poustinia

### *Encountering God in Silence, Solitude and Prayer*

The modern spiritual classic for those seeking the open heart and listening soul of a silent contemplation.

*Poustinia*, a Russian word, means "desert," a place to meet Christ in silence, solitude and prayer. Catherine Doherty combines her insights into the great spiritual traditions of the Russian Church with her very personal experience of life with Christ. Men and women who desire communion with God can discover how the poustinia powerfully fulfills their yearning.

Readers are invited to leave the noise and harried pace of daily life to enter a place of silence and solitude. Catherine writes from her own experience with refreshing and startling Christian authenticity and a strong personal sense of spiritual authority.

Catherine emphasizes 'poustinia of the heart,' an interiorized poustinia, a silent chamber carried always and everywhere in which to contemplate God within. Learn how our desert can be in the marketplace, in the midst of countless conferences, traffic jams, bus trips—or a hospital. Written by one who knows by experience, *Poustinia* brings consolation with its vision of a personal desert that can bloom in simple prayer.

## *Word from Poustinia Book II*

Father Robert Wild, postulator for Catherine's cause and poustinik of 30 years, shares some of the mana with which the Lord fed him.



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More information about Catherine Doherty and the progress of her Cause—as well as printable copies of this and previous newsletters—can be found on the Internet at:

[www.catherinedoherty.org](http://www.catherinedoherty.org)

### How to Contact Us

If you believe you have received favours through Catherine's intercession, we would be pleased to hear from you. We are also in need of financial donations to help cover the expenses of her Cause. If you would like to contact us, please write to us at:

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2888 Dafoe Rd  
Combermere ON K0J 1L0  
Canada

Fax: (613) 756-3832

E-mail: [cause@catherinedoherty.org](mailto:cause@catherinedoherty.org)

If you didn't receive this newsletter in your mail, but you would like to, please write to us with your address. There is no charge, but donations are accepted and appreciated.

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