

A beautiful natural setting in Madison along Long Island Sound has been welcoming guests for spiritual renewal to Mercy by the Sea Retreat and Conference Center for more than 50 years.

A Beckoning Embrace

Retreat center is a sacred space to renew the spirit.

Story by **KAREN A. AVITABILE** | Photos by **AARON JOSEPH**

Great white egrets flock the shoreline during low tide. A couple walk on the private beach as waves rush in. A boat sways across the water, breaking whitecaps that developed from breezy conditions. A beach-goer sits on a blanket, gazing over the water.

This serene setting, which graces Long Island Sound in Madison, is the seaside escape for Mercy by the Sea Retreat and Conference Center. For more than 50 years, the center has attracted thousands of guests who have sought spiritual renewal.

“The grounds are prayer-soaked by all the people who have been here before us,” says Sister Anne Curtis, a member of the Sisters of Mercy and executive director of Mercy by the Sea. “I begin each day with a walk.”

Situated on 33 acres, Mercy by the Sea is surrounded by water views and a beach, beautiful gardens, a rolling lawn, a gazebo, meditation benches, religious statues, a labyrinth and wildlife.

While visitors and passersby come to the site “to settle, be quiet and recenter,” Sister Anne says, Mercy by the Sea provides “the opportunity to step aside, take some time and draw people closer to their own heart and the heart of God.”



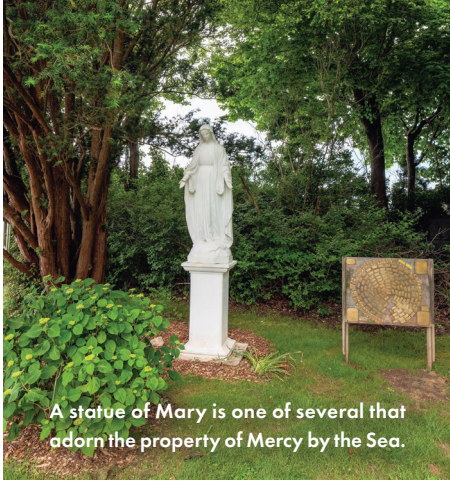
▲ Sister Anne Curtis, executive director.

Rooted in the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy, the retreat center welcomes individuals and groups of diverse faiths and backgrounds to a peaceful site adorned with natural beauty for personal, spiritual and professional renewal and growth.

Year-round programs and retreats offered are focused around a sense of spirituality. Last year, the center attracted some 3,200 people in person or in virtual settings.

The Sisters of Mercy have been a presence at Mercy by the Sea since 1949. Young women began their education here in the then-Our Lady of Mercy Novitiate and Diocesan Sisters College on the property.

Founded in Dublin in 1831, the Sisters of Mercy is an international religious community of Roman Catholic women who dedicate their lives to the Gospel of Jesus. They trace their origin to the inspiration of the life of Jesus and their



A statue of Mary is one of several that adorn the property of Mercy by the Sea.



The backside of Mercy by the Sea Retreat and Conference Center enjoys water views.

“THUS SAYS THE LORD: STAND BY THE EARLIEST ROADS, ASK THE PATHWAYS OF OLD, ‘WHICH IS THE WAY TO GOOD?’ AND WALK IT; THUS YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOURSELVES. BUT THEY SAID, ‘WE WILL NOT WALK IT.’”
— Jer 6:16

founder, Catherine McAuley, who lived her life centered around the teachings of God and served those in need throughout the world. On **Sept. 24**, the Sisters of Mercy annually celebrate their feast day.

Sister Barbara Giehl, director of mission, hospitality and volunteers, calls Mercy by the Sea a “sacred ground with amazing history from the people who came before us,” she says. “It’s a beautiful place to share. Part of the Sisters of Mercy charism is to welcome all people.”

Inside the center, several large rooms and nooks are available for group settings

or personal prayer. The Mary C. Daly Art Gallery offers rotating exhibits throughout the year from a variety of artists. Dedicated in 1956, the chapel with the Blessed Sacrament and stations of the cross is a place for worship and Masses during retreats. A bookstore and a dining hall opening to a patio are also available for visitors.

Some 35 guest rooms, many with balconies, offer water views and the opportunity to hear the waves crashing on the beach.

In everyday life, being quiet is not an ordinary practice for most people, Sister

Anne says. “I think there is a lot of stress and anxiety people live with and need to recenter,” she adds. “Everybody should have the opportunity in their year to step aside and take some time to draw closer to their own heart and the heart of God.”

+ **Mercy by the Sea is located at 167 Neck Road, Madison. Visitors can walk the grounds between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. For more information about retreats, programs and sabbaticals, call 203.245.0401 or visit mercybythesea.org.**



▲ Carolyn Byron, pictured, and her husband, John Roarty, of Southington were camping along Hammonasset Beach State Park and rode their bikes to Mercy by the Sea. On World Labyrinth Day, marked this past May 4, the retreat center reinaugurated its labyrinth after its refurbishment. The new brick work has been purposefully placed alongside the original stone, tracing the long lineage of guests who have walked the labyrinth over the years.



Young women who joined the Sisters of Mercy began their education at Mercy by the Sea, which in the past was Our Lady of Mercy Novitiate and Diocesan Sisters College. “The door is part of our history,” Sister Anne Curtis says.