Opinion

News



Attendees at Benincasa's monthly prayer service discuss the day's Scriptures with one another. (Courtesy of Benincasa Community)



by Jamie Manson

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jmanson@ncronline.org
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Columnist's note

This is the first in a series that will profile young adult Catholics who are founding their own intentional Catholic communities. (An introduction to the series can be read in my recent column "Young progressive Catholics really do care about the church.") Below is a Part 2 of a two-part series on Benincasa Community in New York City. Part 1 can be read here.

After years of searching, Karen Gargamelli had finally found the home she was looking for: a former convent where she could found the lay Catholic intentional community she had been envisioning.

She also found two people to co-create the community with: Sean McCreight (whom she would later marry) and Jimmy Hannigan.

But she was still seeking a name to give the fledgling community.

Gargamelli had a deep connection with the Dominican Sisters, having previously discerned religious life with the order. And St. Catherine of Siena, the great church reformer and Dominican doctor of the church, had been a source of inspiration and strength throughout most of her spiritual life.

"Catherine's full name was Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa," says Gargamelli. "Her last name evokes the Italian words for 'good home.' It seemed like the perfect fit for what we were trying to bring to life."

And with that, Benincasa Community was christened.

But Benincasa would not be Dominican in name only. The community drew upon the congregation's charism to shape its mission and spirituality.

"The Dominicans live by four pillars: prayer, study, community and ministry," Gargamelli says. "So we adopted those as our guiding principles in all of our work."

They also found direction from their connections to the Catholic Worker.

"Like the Worker, we wanted house the homeless, be a family to the 'unattached,' welcome activists on the front lines of justice movements, and participate in acts of resistance against war, capitalism, racism, clerical abuse," says Karen.

In four years, Benincasa has opened its doors to dozens of activist and education groups that otherwise would not be able to pay the steep cost of lodging in Manhattan. They negotiate a fee based on what is feasible for both the organization and Benincasa.

Guests are housed in the convent's tiny cell bedrooms, which have shared bathrooms, and work in the Daniel Berrigan center, a meeting space with a kitchenette that Benincasa created on its first floor during its inaugural year.



Andy Hanson, Sean McCreight, Stephanie Quintana-Martinez, Karen Gargamelli and Jimmy Hannigan pose with a statue of Mary Magdalene created by a Benincasa Community member. The statue was used as part of an education program, procession and festival that Benincasa hosted to celebrate Mary Magdalene's feast day in late July 2019. (Courtesy of Benincasa Community)

"The Berrigan Center is our way of being allies," says Karen. "We have been blessed with this space and we want to share it. We are grateful to be able to offer them a clean place to stay and a healthy meal to eat."

Berrigan was still alive when the center was created. After his death in April 2016, the Jesuit's longtime friends and his family stayed at Benincasa and held his post-funeral gathering on the convent's large ground floor.

Following Peter Maurin's idea of having "Christ Rooms" in every house to offer hospitality to those most in need, Benincasa has always reserved two of the convent's bedrooms as temporary housing — up to one year — for guests who come to them in crisis. Residents have included refugees, homeless people, domestic violence survivors, and people facing job insecurity or who are receiving medical treatment.

Benincasa's third source of inspiration was their relationship with Berrigan's Thompson Street Jesuit community. For years they hosted the "Thompson Street Feast," a monthly Mass and dinner that gathered together lay people who were committed to social justice.

The community was closed by the Northeast Jesuit Province in 2014, and by 2015 all of the remaining Jesuits were too infirm to lead the Mass.

Rather than simply morn the decline of the Thompson Street Feast, Gargamelli saw an opportunity to model inclusive church leadership and ministry. So Benincasa began hosting a monthly prayer service and lunch on the first Sunday of the month.

The event has soared in popularity over the past year, particularly among 20- and 30-something Catholics, with an average of 50 people now packing into the community's small chapel.

The liturgy's success among of millennials is particularly remarkable since Benincasa has no social media presence. They remain in contact with their ever-widening

network of friends and supporters via a monthly emailed newsletter.

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"We are constantly bombarded by emails from people saying that they have been looking everywhere for something that we are offering. Most of them are young Catholics who love their faith but who struggle with the injustices perpetuated by the church, particularly in its exclusion of women and LGBTQ people," says Karen.

Many of the attendees at the monthly service are studying for advanced degrees in theology or have previously discerned religious life but cannot quite find a home in a parish, even among the vibrant, progressive Catholic communities that Manhattan has to offer.

"They are all desperately hungry for a church community that can really nurture them," McCreight says.

"Our community also runs deep with friends not in residence," Gargamelli adds. "There are many people here who also call Benincasa home," even if they don't live there as part of the core community.

Though the crowd skews mostly younger, there is a significant presence of "Vatican II"-generation Catholics each month. Marian Ronan, a research professor of Catholic Studies at New York Theological Seminary, is one of them.



The Daniel Berrigan Center at Benincasa Community is often used by social justice organizations. The portrait of Berrigan was created by community friend and artist Sarah E. Brook on the evening of Berrigan's death. It was used at his wake and funeral. (Courtesy of Benincasa Community)

"What inspires me to travel to Benincasa from the middle of Brooklyn is that it is a lay community with egalitarian leadership and warm inclusion of different kinds of members," she says. "It is, in many ways, a genuine expression of what Vatican II led me to hope for."

"I'm 72, and so many of the participants in the Catholic events I attend are older than I am, but at Benincasa, I am surrounded by glowing, enthusiastic younger women and men. It makes me happy to be with them," Ronan adds.

After the prayer service, attendees process downstairs for a group meal cooked by a community member. The socializing is loud and spirited and often lasts for hours. Many stay behind to wash dishes and restore the space back to order.

"Clean up time is often one of most fun and most spiritual moments of the entire day," says Karen. "Like Teresa of Avila said, 'God walks among the pots and pans.' "

Radical welcome

One of the monthly liturgy's regulars, Andy Hanson, was among the first to help scrape and paint the convent walls back in 2015. At the time, he was six years into his formation with the Jesuits. He later made the painful decision to leave, a change that was eased by Benincasa's "radical welcome."

"As I transitioned out of religious life, the Benincasa community helped me find my footing and purpose as a lay leader, committed to moving the church to reflect the hospitality that this community holds as its core mission," he says.

Last fall, Hanson, 32, was part of cohort of 16 Catholics who joined Benincasa's inaugural lay formation program, called Through Every Age (or TEA for short). It is a year-long intensive study of church history, theology and spiritual practice, with requirements that include four weekend retreats, daily meditation and weekly readings about Scripture, social justice teaching and ethical thought, including sexual ethics, anti-racism and environmental justice.

"We wanted to develop an innovative program to empower lay Catholics, especially young adults, who are given very few resources once they are out of school," says Gargamelli.

She developed the curriculum with McCreight and Hannigan and lots of input from women religious who have been walking with the community.

Two of those women, Dominican Sr. Margaret Galiardi and Good Shepherd Sr. Clare Nolan, have co-led the program's quarterly retreats.

Nolan says she collaborates with Benincasa because it offers hope that some of the promise of Vatican II will be realized.

"They're a sign that the church can transform into a community of lay persons who are mature in faith and responsible in Gospel living," says Nolan.

For Galiardi, the community is a witness to the true meaning of prophetic life.

"Scripture scholars say that the prophetic looks back to recover the radicality of the pristine teaching," she said. "That’s what Benincasa has been about — uncovering and also incarnating the radicality of the Gospel ethic before it was co-opted by mainstream culture in church and society."

While Nolan and Galiardi have been devoted to the community from its beginnings, Benincasa has struggled to secure sustained support from other religious communities, other than a few small grants from several congregations of women religious. Though they have made many efforts to be in dialogue with sisters from a variety of orders, they have not managed to capture their imaginations in the way the Nuns and Nones collaboration has.

"We are not here to have an experience of religious life, the way the Nones and Nuns are," says Gargamelli. "We really want to make a longterm commitment, give our whole lives to ministry, and live out religious life the ways the sisters have for centuries, though in a new form."

"I just don't think that most women religious know what to do with us," she says.



Benincasa Community members and friends enjoy a summer barbecue on the roof of the former convent. (Courtesy of Benincasa Community)

A time of uncertainty

In summer 2020, Benincasa will reach the end of their five-year lease of the convent. They do not expect the parish to renew their agreement.

"The parish has always made a profit out of our arrangement, and we are not a financial burden," says Gargamelli. But parish officials have signaled that they plan to sell the building and have already brought potential buyers over to view the space.

For what may be its final year in the convent, Benincasa will be shifting away from its practice of offering hospitality to groups.

"Like Catholic Workers and many vowed religious, the core community does not earn a salary for our work, and we do not charge a fee for our programming," says Karen.

"We rely, instead, on the generosity of those impacted and inspired by our work."

But with a daunting monthly $7,000 rent now in effect, the community discerned that the time was right to shift to a more sustainable model for the moment. Earlier summer they began renting the convent's small rooms to individuals who are preparing for ministry or active in service to the church.

One of those residents is Allison Connelly, 25, a third-year student at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Like many Catholic women, she is called to the priesthood. She is discerning whether to answer her call in the United Church of Church.

"As a queer Catholic woman pursuing ordination, I have come to expect questioning and distrust from Catholic spaces," Connelly says. "At Benincasa, however, all of my identities were immediately welcomed and entirely celebrated."

"It leaves me feeling more Catholic than I have felt in a long time," she added.

Connelly lives at Benincasa with her girlfriend, Brooklyn Vedder, who is an assistant director with the St. Joseph Worker program.



The chapel used by Benincasa Community for its monthly prayer services (Courtesy of Benincasa Community)

Even with the changes to community life, Benincasa's practice of offering meals and a prayer ritual will continue to be central, Gargamelli says. "Like we did with our visiting groups, we will offer dinner to everyone in the house five nights a week."

Each the meal ends with a time for group silence, prayer and brief examination of conscience.

The community is trying to embrace this time of uncertainty with faith and hope that God will lead them wherever they are meant to go. But they are vigorously pursuing every possible lead, including options that would take them outside of the city — though not too far out.

"We've spent time working on farms run by women religious and [on] secular farms studying and training to be on the land," says McCreight. "So ideally we're looking for a place close to New York City that allows us to grow food and continue the work we do while also living in right relationship with the land."

The community sees Genesis Farm, founded by Dominican Sr. Miriam MacGillis, as a model for the kind of eco-spirituality and justice work that they would like to pursue.

How they will find land just outside of New York City, which is surrounded by some of priciest and most overdeveloped suburbs in the country, remains something they will continue to put in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

Whether they end up somewhere else in the city or at a farm or retreat house in the country, the Benincasa community insists that their core values and purpose will not change.

"The rhythm of our lives is very much a response to a culture that wants to isolate people and make it difficult to live our Catholic faith simply, ethically and interdependently," says McCreight.

"People sometimes ask us, 'What do you do all day?' We think the better question is, 'How do you want to live?' "

[Jamie L. Manson is NCR books editor and an award-winning columnist at the National Catholic Reporter. Follow her on Twitter: @jamielmanson.]

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