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Paradise lost: Jesuits sell oldest retreat house, pristine forest to developers

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

With almost 80 percent of its population identifying as Catholic, Staten Island, N.Y., seems an unlikely setting for a showdown between concerned citizens and a Roman Catholic religious order.

Since late spring, Staten Islanders and the New York Province of the Society of Jesus have been struggling over the fate of Mount Manresa, a beloved Jesuit retreat house located less than a mile from the foot of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Established in 1911 and named after the town in Spain where St. Ignatius Loyola made his first retreat, Manresa is the first retreat house founded in United States for the laity.

While Manresa's retreat center is deeply significant to the countless individuals who were spiritually refreshed by its programs over the years, many believe the grounds on which it sits are even more sacred than the house itself.

The 15-acre property is considered an ecological gem, replete with hills created 20,000 years ago by a receding glacier. This terminal moraine is exceptional since most glacial hills in the area have been altered by farming, mining or building. Manresa's property is the rare site that has maintained its pre-European settlement terrain.

The grounds offer a unique opportunity to see what this part of New York City may have looked like to its Native American inhabitants, who used what is today the road to Manresa as a trail for fishing and hunting. Numerous indigenous artifacts have been found in and around the grounds.

Manresa is surrounded by a pristine, old-growth forest containing almost 100 native oak, tulip, and black

tupelo trees estimated to be at least 150 years old. Some trees are believed to be between 300 and 400 years old, dating back to the island's pre-Revolutionary War era.

The trees sit amid the Atlantic Flyway, providing a crucial food source to migrating birds on their long-distance journey south for the winter. Threatened birds, including the red-headed woodpecker and cerulean warbler, have been spotted refueling in the thick deciduous trees while various species of hawks and owls use the land for life-sustaining hunting through winter.

In addition to its natural wonders, the property hosts the oldest grotto in the city, built into the bottom of the glacial hill in the 1860s. The master masons were so skilled that they interlocked each stone in a beautiful pattern without the use of cement, creating a structure that still survives 150 years later.

Manresa's highest hills offer unparalleled views of New York Harbor, including the Statue of Liberty and the new One World Trade Center building.

With such stunning beauty and breathtaking vistas, there is little wonder that the New York Province of the Society of Jesus managed to sell all 15 acres for more than \$15 million cash to a Staten Island-based development company called Savo Brothers.

The sale took place secretly just months after Hurricane Sandy ravaged much of the coastline near Manresa. The Jesuits did not notify local residents or the community board of the purchase and only revealed the name of the buyer in May in a joint press release with Savo Brothers.

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Although the release speaks in vague terms about Savo Brothers' goal to "ensure the property is handled in the most respectful, sensitive, and sensible way," the firm remains tight-lipped about its plan for the site.

The potential fate of Mount Manresa

Neighbors are concerned because Manresa is located in an area zoned for high-density building, which would allow developers to build as many townhouses or apartment buildings as possible to gain maximum profit. When the land was first advertised in October 2012, Massey Knakal Realty Services marketed Manresa as a "trophy development site," listing the price at \$20 million.

Savo Brothers is one of Staten Island's largest builders, specializing in luxury townhome communities and strip malls.

Staten Islanders have good reasons to worry about the fate of their island. The least populated of the five boroughs of New York City, Staten Island was at one time most famous for its massive Fresh Kills Landfill. At the peak of its operation in the late 20th century, the garbage pit was the largest man-made structure in the world. Other parts of the island have been victim to mining and bulldozing, and numerous abandoned factory buildings have reduced some of the island's neighborhoods and coastlines to a post-industrial wasteland.

The island has lost cherished Catholic sites before. In 2001, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani ignored three years' worth of pleas to landmark the Staten Island bungalow where Dorothy Day spent much of the last decade of her life. Supporters watched helplessly as developer John Discala, who is said to be a close friend of the Savo Brothers, bulldozed Day's former home.

Days after the Jesuits revealed the Savo Brothers as their buyer, community members banded together to form the Committee to Save Mount Manresa, a grass-roots effort to permanently protect the land. The volunteer group spent the night stuffing mailboxes with fliers alerting neighbors to potentially harmful consequences of the sale.

Many community members say they feel betrayed by the Jesuits since the order announced in June 2012 that the retreat house would be closing within a year's time. When Manresa celebrated its centennial year in 2011, supporters say retreat administrators promised them the retreat house would continue to serve for the next 100 years. The centennial fundraising drive, called the Second Century campaign, gave further credence to their perception.

In a November 2011 article about Manresa's Centennial Year gala event, executive director Fred Herron told the *Staten Island Advance* newspaper, "For 100 years this has been a place the community has turned to during critical moments and I know that we will continue to do much of the same thing over the next century."

Gregg Fonti, chairman of Mount Manresa's Centennial Committee, was also quoted as saying he hoped Mount Manresa would spend the next 100 years "offering the community what it needs."

It was precisely that kind of rhetoric that led neighbors and donors to believe the Jesuits would remain committed to keeping Manresa's doors open.

Improper solicitation of donations?

Just seven months after the centennial celebration, a June 21, 2012, letter from New York Provincial Jesuit Fr. David Ciancimino announced that both Manresa and Inisfada, the Jesuit retreat house on Long Island, would be closing on June 1, 2013.

In the letter, Ciancimino describes the closure as an attempt to "bring the gift of Ignatian spirituality and formation to the greatest possible number of our contemporaries," especially young adults and Spanish-speaking Catholics.

"The first half of the twentieth century saw the rise of the weekend retreat movement and the creation of facilities to host retreats," Ciancimino wrote, explaining that this model has become outmoded.

In their vision of ministry, the Jesuits will partner "with parishes and other faith communities to extend opportunities for retreats and spiritual direction beyond traditional Jesuit apostolates."

"Making this vision a reality will demand that we become more flexible and agile in the ways we share the Exercises," the letter states. "The model of maintaining retreat houses is no longer financially viable or consistent with this new vision."

Ciancimino explained that the decision was the result of a two-year process of discernment and study of retreat houses by "directors and board members of retreat centers, province leaders and many others."

Members the Committee to Save Mount Manresa cried foul, arguing that Manresa continued to collect donations for its Second Century campaign even after announcing that the property would be sold.

In a joint statement released in August, Assemblywoman Nicole Malliotakis and state Sen. Diane Savino charged, "It is our belief that Mount Manresa has misrepresented itself for an extended period of time with regard to soliciting money from donors for improvement to the site.

"It appears that they have pursued a comprehensive and aggressive fundraising campaign throughout recent years, despite an intent and active marketing to sell the property," the statement continued.

In a complaint written to New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, Barbara Sanchez, Save Mount Manresa Committee secretary, requested an investigation into the Jesuits' solicitation of private donations for the maintenance and general improvement of Manresa despite its plan to close.

Sanchez's complaint garnered bipartisan support among Staten Island's elected officials, who helped convince Schneiderman to withdraw his nonobjection to the sale in early August.

Under New York not-for-profit corporate law, both the state Supreme Court and the attorney general must approve the sale of the Jesuits' property. Sanchez's petition and the support of Democratic and Republican representatives allow for the Supreme Court to hear complaints about the sale.

Responding to these charges in a videotaped interview with the *Advance* on Aug. 16, Jesuit Fr. Edward Quinnan, assistant for pastoral ministry for the New York province, and Manresa board chair Richard Nolan denied any wrongdoing and offered to refund any donations, an offer they also made to the attorney general on July 31.

Quinnan told the *Advance* that the Jesuits have earmarked between \$8 million and \$10 million from the \$15 million sale for a Manresa Fund to support the Jesuit Collaborative, a newly formed initiative to make Ignatian spirituality more accessible. In the Staten Island case, this would include setting up a Manresa Companions chapter at a local Jesuit parish.

Quinnan said though more than 40 nonprofit organizations on Staten Island sounded out the possibility of purchasing the property, only Savo Brothers made a bid.

"We were backed into the corner," he told the *Advance*.

"I don't see us changing the minds of people who are most interested in green space," Quinnan said. "Providing green space was not our mission. In some ways, weren't the neighbors taking advantage of an institution that was holding that green space without contributing to it?"

Arguments such as Quinnan's raise the ire of Manresa's neighbors, who argue that the Jesuits existed on the property tax-free for more than a century while supporters made countless charitable donations over the past 100 years and residents paid taxes to support roads, sewers and sanitation.

But Quinnan says donations were not enough to maintain Manresa and the Jesuits would have had to spend a minimum of \$2 million for deferred maintenance on the aging facility.

Nolan said during one especially lean period, he used his credit card to ensure Manresa could make payroll.

As to why the Jesuits continued to solicit funds for their Second Century campaign up until early August 2013, Quinnan said, "The reason ... was since we've been sort of working things down we just hadn't gotten around to eliminating the website materials."

The Jesuits' fundraising efforts are now centered on supporting the Jesuit Collaborative.

"I fully intend to give as much as I possibly can to having that ministry continue on Staten Island for a hundred more years," Quinnan told the *Advance*. "Mount Manresa can continue, the ministry can continue, I don't need 239 Fingerboard Rd. [Manresa's address] to do it on."

A 'beacon to the community'

Manresa's history in the community seems to be a testimony to both the ministerial and sacramental power of a building.

Manresa's first retreat was held Sept. 8, 1911. Described as a "beacon to the community," it offered programs for laypersons and for counseling soldiers returning from World War I.

One of the retreat house's most significant contributions would come just days after its 90th anniversary, the day New York City's sense of peace and safety was forever shattered by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, which was visible from Manresa's hills.

"It was Mount Manresa where many [Staten Islanders] ran to pray when they learned of news of the attacks," the Committee to Save Mount Manresa writes on its website. "While Staten Island was shut to incoming traffic and news of the full scope of the attacks were still being uncovered, many came to Mount Manresa for comfort."

"[The] trees and quiet found in the Shrine of the Sacred Heart [the grotto] and the Chapel of the Sacred Heart were a source of peace from all the chaos happening throughout the area as we waited to learn the full story of the events unfolding on that horrific day," the website states.

Manresa didn't only provide spiritual comfort; it offered lodging to many first responders who came from all over the world as well as to displaced tourists. It also housed the Red Cross Service Center for Staten Island and a DNA collection and counseling center for victims' relatives. Manresa's staff counseled first responders at the Fresh Kills Landfill as they sorted through the rubble of the Twin Towers.

Manresa's hospitality was extended over the years to those suffering with HIV, AIDS and addiction. Children who were rescued from disasters like the earthquakes in Haiti and Pakistan, the tsunami in Indonesia, and the war in Iraq stayed at Manresa through The Global Medical Relief Fund.

In October 2012, Manresa offered what would be its final outreach to the suffering and vulnerable when it housed dozens of Staten Islanders left homeless after Hurricane Sandy. Some displaced families lived in the retreat house for many months after the disaster.

While critics of the sale understand the Jesuits could no longer afford to maintain the retreat house, they say they felt deceived by the society's ongoing reassurances that they would never close Manresa, let alone sell it to developers. Committee members say their sense of security led them to put off the idea of having Manresa's zoning changed.

"The Community Board thought about trying to downzone the property a few years ago, but were told by the Jesuits that there was no need to do so because they were going to be here for a long time," Jack Bolembach, president of the Committee to Save Mount Manresa, told *NCR* in an email. "The thought of Mount Manresa being dissolved and sold after being here for a hundred years seemed like an impossibility to local residents."

In 2010, Republican Assemblyman James Oddo attempted to pre-emptively rezone Manresa's property but was told a neighborhood cannot be selectively zoned.

"If you can't rezone it," Oddo told the *Advance*, "the key becomes talking to two different universes of people," the religious order who owns it and the buyers. "On the way out the door, [the Jesuits] have the obligation to do right by the borough."

But since the property was placed on the market, leaders in the New York province have been clear they would not put anything in the sales agreement that would prevent the new owners from demolishing the property.

"Right now, we're testing the market," Jesuit Fr. Vincent Cooke, assistant for strategic planning for Maryland, New England and New York provinces, told the *Advance* in October 2012. "What [we're] trying to do is to see who is actually interested in the property and to find out what is realistic here. Our preference is to get a new owner who wants to preserve the property, but you never know what people will do."

The fight for preservation

So far, the courts have ruled in the committee's favor. A few weeks ago, Acting Supreme Court Justice Charles Troia continued to uphold a temporary restraining order against any sale or demolition of Manresa. The attorney general's office told the court they will not object to the sale if the Jesuits put the \$212,000 they raised for the Second Century campaign into escrow.

The plaintiffs in the case are seeking a permanent injunction on the sale, arguing that the intended redevelopment of the site will cause irreparable harm. Manresa is the only open green space in its neighborhood and is adjacent to the Staten Island Expressway, one of the two major entry points for trucks into New York City. Manresa's forest protects residents from the ensuing air and noise pollution.

"What will be the impact over several years to the health of these citizens if the trees at Mount Manresa are bulldozed and destroyed for more dense housing, and thus more traffic congestion, without any natural buffer? The very young and elderly will be affected," Bolembach said. "Respiratory health issues for local residents will only increase. Staten Island already has one of the highest cancer rates in the country."

Adding 150 new homes to the area will create even more congestion to this already congested area and will place an even greater burden on city services like water, sanitation, electric, schools and police, the committee argues. If the committee can permanently block the sale, they hope to get the area zoned as a designated natural area or included as a protected site under the Hillside Preservation Act.

"We have strong community support to Save Mount Manresa," Bolembach said, "including two petitions with over 9,000 signatures." They've also found support from the community board, more than a dozen local politicians, the New York state governor's representative for Staten Island, the Sierra Club and other preservation organizations, as well as, the committee says, the vast majority of Staten Islanders.

Even with their lawsuit pending, the committee and elected officials have pursued multiple avenues for protecting the land. Environmentalists believe Manresa's large collection of old-growth trees merits protection by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which can designate a tree an official city landmark if it "has a special character, and special historical and aesthetic interest and value, as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City," according to the *Advance*.

The forest's population of endangered birds can also thwart a construction project if the Department of Environmental Conservation decides that Manresa's trees are home to rare species.

With their multifaceted approach, the committee has already proven more successful than a similar group of advocates who fought the sale of the Jesuit retreat house in Manhasset, N.Y. Known as Inisfada (the Gaelic word for Long Island), the majestic 87-room mansion set on 33 acres of land sold for \$36 million to a Hong Kong-based developer this summer.

Widely considered one of the grandest Gold Coast mansions, Inisfada was donated to the Jesuits in 1937 by Genevieve Brady, the devout Catholic wife of industrialist Nicholas Brady, according to *The New York Times*. Manhasset civic leaders say developers are planning to build a gated community of luxury homes on the site.

Ultimately, Staten Islanders see their struggle over Manresa as a fight for justice, protecting the health and well-being of its neighbors, and ensuring the safety and stewardship of forests and wildlife. More than one Catholic has found irony in the fact that they are grappling with a religious order known for promoting social justice values through its universities, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and various other ministries.

In an email exchange with *NCR*, leaders at the New York province declined to comment on whether the sale conflicts with the Jesuit commitment to social justice, citing the "pending court case involving the sale of the property."

A committed Catholic and Fordham University alumna, Barbara Sanchez is especially pained by the way the actions of the New York Society of Jesus contradict the teachings of another Jesuit: Pope Francis.

At his inaugural Mass, the new pope said he chose his name to honor St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of environmental protection, and described the church's mission as "respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live." Francis' condemnations of capitalism and his belief that an attachment to money destroys people and relationships have also become a central theme of his papacy.

Pope Francis' teachings and his knack for responding personally to some letters have inspired Sanchez to write the pontiff twice, pleading with him to stop the sale.

Citing Francis' recent teaching that "politics is one of the highest forms of charity because it seeks the common good," Sanchez told the pope, "I can't stop until I have done everything I can humanly do to bring attention to Mount Manresa."

"I believe with all my heart that this beautiful land, which has healed so many, is not something that should be left to be carelessly destroyed," she wrote in her most recent letter.

If those who wish to preserve Manresa are victorious, the property will be rezoned, the building will be used to provide services to senior citizens or the developmentally disabled, and the grounds will become permanent parkland for the community. For now, the committee will continue their weekly protests, support the legal battle, and pray for papal intervention.

Of course, the possibility also exists that the Jesuits could have a change of heart. It was their founder, St. Ignatius, who developed the spiritual practice of the examination of conscience, after all.

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