

Open doors and open hearts in Combermere



The summer season is underway at the Madonna House Apostolate, in Combermere, where liturgical museums and boutiques have been delighting many generations of families. Photo by Sarah Vance

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The Madonna House Apostolate, a Catholic community in Combermere that runs several gift shops and boutique galleries on Hwy 517 along the Madawaska River, opened its doors for the summer season over the May long weekend. It is a must-stop for Renfrew Valley weekenders, who are drawn to the homesteading boutiques run by women, men and priests who live communally on the various properties of the devotional colony.

St Joseph's House, off Combermere Road, is the best known. There, repurposed goods and clothing are sold for about a toonie a bag, at thrift-store prices.

Further down Hwy 517, you'll find a bookstore, a contemporary artisans' gallery, and a museum, where items like liturgical statues and artwork, fine china, jewelry, hand-spun sheep's wool, knit-wear and re-purposed worship candles are sold. "The wool is made from the sheep on our farm and it is processed here," said Carolyn Densch, who manages the property with other community members.

Many of the items "from hand painted Ukrainian Pysanky (hollowed out, intricately painted farm eggs) to wooden sculptures and artisanal clay pottery" have been crafted on-site by guests and members of the community.

"We are already busy preparing for the Heritage Fest, where the skills of the community are shared within an historical focus," said Densch about the festival which occurs annually over Labour Day weekend. "Outdoor wood kilns and pottery, musicians, honey bee hives, wool spinning and musicians " you name it."

Devotional images of the Lady of Combermere watch over the properties. They include painted replicas of the original drawing (crafted by a Hungarian refugee, who was also an Orthodox nun) to the large carving in her image which was erected on a base of three thousand pounds of cement in 1960.

Combermere's Apostolate was established by Russian expat Catherine de Hueck Doherty, who came to Canada in the 1920s. In the early 1940s Doherty moved to the Renfrew Valley and began devoting herself to religious and social activism. She was joined by her husband Eddie Doherty, a reporter for the Chicago Tribune and the Liberty weekly, who was, for a period of time, referred to as America's highest paid journalist.

In Combermere, Doherty's lifestyle became devotional, and evolved into simple homesteading "a way of life that is without possessions and comprised of loving gestures which do not count the cost. Over the years, the Madonna House Apostolate has gone on to establish more than 18 field houses " several in Canada and the United States and others around the world, including Magadan in Russia's Far East and Krasnoyarsk, near Siberia.

Russian traditions continue on the premises, like the making of koolitch (Russian Easter bread) and paska (a Russian cottage cheese dish, which is a symbol of Christ).

Keeping up with the times, the community is launching a new website. "We have a guest staying with us who is a webmaster," said

Densch. ?He sprained his ankle at the beach and this is a type of work he can do while he is healing.?

Arts, culture, and spirituality are blended into this unique space, open every Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.