



Kings House at the
NATIONAL SHRINE of
OUR LADY of the SNOWS

For 25 years, Bishop Henry Althoff of Belleville, Illinois had a dream. He wanted to establish a retreat center in his diocese.

In 1946, Bishop Althoff called a meeting of religious and lay leaders to address the possibility of creating the retreat center. A year later his pastoral letter to the Catholics of the diocese announced that a diocesan retreat house, under the direction of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, would be established.

The first step of Bishop Althoff's dream had been taken. Unfortunately, one month after his pastoral letter was announced, Bishop Althoff passed away on July 3, 1947. But his dream continued.

In October of that year, his successor, Bishop Albert Zuroweste, launched the King's House Fund Raising Campaign at a general assembly of clergy and laity on the grounds of the Oblates' St. Henry's Seminary. Oliver Parks, founder of Parks Air College, was appointed general chairman. He and the committee set into motion the process of fundraising for the new retreat center.

A Speakers Bureau was organized to assist in the fundraising. The bureau consisted of 20 Jesuits from St. Louis University along with the Oblate fathers from St. Henry's Seminary. These men offered their time and talent to speak at meetings and preach at Sunday Masses to explain the importance of retreats.

Bishop Zuroweste explained his goal for the retreat house in the following way:

"Ever since 1934, when I became editor of *The Messenger* (diocesan newspaper), I felt that if anything was to save the world from the sorry plight into which it had fallen, it would be found in the spiritual regeneration of our Catholic laity. This spiritual regeneration cannot come simply from attendance at Sunday Mass; its source must be found in something deeper. Man must have time to know himself, to study his weaknesses, his faults, his sins; and in humility and contrition acknowledge these faults and by the grace of God be determined to improve and make himself a better man, a better Christian, a better soldier of Christ, to attain that goal to which he has been called."

In 1948, the Funding Committee announced the purchase of the Albert Hoeffken estate known as Five Hills Farm, a secluded and heavily wooded 40-acre tract. Plans were drawn and construction of the retreat center began with the groundbreaking ceremony on December 2, 1949. The general construction contract was given to Bauer Brothers Construction and Supply Company of Belleville.

During construction, the Funding Committee evolved into the Diocesan Laymen's Retreat League. This group then evolved into the "Captain's List." Members of this group are parish representatives who serve as recruiters and contacts between King's House and the individual parishes. These men and women are a vital component of the ministry at King's House.

On July 22, 1951, phase one of the King's House project was completed with the dedication of the new structure. Bishop Zuroweste's dedication address established an everlasting mission statement for King's House:



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“In our own little world, in our own little way, we must expose our hearts to the loving Christ... When groups of men come week after week to rebuild spirituality, the dynamo of their spiritual life, they will become the source of new spiritual light in a world of darkness. They will leave King’s House refreshed, revived not only in mind and body, which is secondary, but refreshed in soul. They will go forth and teach, by example, the value of the grandeur and nobler things of life. Each will become an apostle for virtue, for charity, for Christian living and for morality.”

The first retreat at King’s House was held the following weekend, July 26-30, 1951. The retreat followed the pattern used for retreats at the Jesuit Retreat Center (White House) in Missouri. The men on the retreat were those of the Executive Committee and the Advisory Board. The first retreat open to the various parishes began August 10 and used the three-day schedule that exists today.

“2,500 Attend the King’s House in First Year” was the headline in the October 2, 1952, edition of *The Messenger*. In the 50 weekends of retreats, 2,174 retreatants came from all part of southern Illinois, St. Louis and the Springfield Diocese. One 70-year-old retreatant remarked to a reporter: “This is my first retreat. I only wish I had made it when I was 17.”

Three midweek retreats for women began the summer of 1952. A total of 138 women attended—a sizable number since there were no women “captains” organized to recruit. Priests from the Belleville Diocese made use of King’s House as a gathering space for their retreats as well as eight monthly Days of Recollection.

Fr. Alphonse Simon, OMI was appointed Director of King’s House in 1951 and a year later Fr. Emile Helfrich, OMI became the Assistant Director. In August 1953, Fr. Arthur Sullivan, OMI was appointed the second Director, followed by Father Edward A. Killian, OMI, Director from 1956 to 1957. Father Helfrich then returned to King’s House to serve as the fourth Director beginning in 1957.

In 1957, King’s House held 39 men’s retreats, 16 women’s retreats, six high school boys’ and one high school girls’ retreats. There were also six retreats for Diocesan Clergy and one retreat for Religious Sisters. In 1960 attendance was listed at 3,396 retreatants—an average of almost 51 persons per retreat

In 1961 Fr. James Kohmetscher, OMI was appointed Director. Attendance grew to 3,496 retreatants, 40 men’s retreats, 16 women’s retreats, seven high school boys’ retreats, four high school girls’ retreats, and four clergy retreats were held during the year.

In 1963, Bro. Vic Capek, OMI arrived at King’s House. Except for a brief time of study in St. Paul, Minnesota, he would minister at King’s House the rest of his life. His quiet presence, welcoming and joyful smile graced the halls of King’s House for nearly 50 years.



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Retreat numbers continued to grow. Father Floyd Boeckman, OMI, Director in 1965, reported an attendance of 4,551 retreatants. Many of the retreats were completely filled with men or women from one parish. There were 25 student groups making retreats at King's House.

The first expansion of King's House occurred in 1968 with the construction of the large conference center. Construction was necessary to accommodate the increasing numbers of men and women making retreats. The covered walkway connecting the dining room, chapel and the sleeping area was also enclosed. In the early 80's a new chapel was constructed and the old chapel was converted into office space, gift shop, and an additional small conference room.

Father James Lantsberger, OMI, succeeded Fr. Boeckman as Director in 1969. Fr. Pat Carroll, OMI, followed. Then Fr. Helfrich returned for his second appointment as Director. He was followed by Fr. Tom Hayes, OMI, Fr. Jim Taylor, OMI, Br. Bill Johnson, OMI, Br. Pat McGee, OMI, Deacon Doug Boyer, and Currently Fr. Salvador Gonzalez, OMI serves as the Director of King's House.

From the early 70s to early 80s the number of retreats dropped nationwide. King's House saw a small drop in attendance but was able to keep operating by expanding programs in order to better meet the needs of a more diverse retreatant population.

The staff of King's House continued to offer Quiet Weekend Retreats for men and women, Days of Prayer for the elderly, Seasonal Days of Prayer, Spiritual Direction (Companioning), and several specialized program such as women's spirituality, an ecumenical program designed for and by women to discuss their particular approach to spirituality. Taize Prayer gatherings were also included at King's House.

During the summers the retreat house offered Directed Retreats and Retreats for Religious Women. Priests from the Belleville and Springfield dioceses make their annual retreats at King's House. Numerous elementary and high schools were regular guests for days of prayer and other four-day retreats. Diocesan and Parish office personnel come for Staff Days. King's House also became home to a growing number of ecumenical groups which make use of quiet days of reflection. Engaged Encounters began conducting yearly weekends at King's House. A variety of 12-Step groups hold weekly meetings were also started.

Father James E. Taylor, Director from 1988 to 1992, wrote: "Retreats had been at a low ebb during the 80's. Quite a few retreat houses in the area were struggling and would eventually close their doors. King's House experienced the downside but was still quite viable. During my tenure as Director emphasis was placed on restoring the buildings, beautifying the grounds, recovering youth retreats, opening the retreat facilities to outside groups, especially 12-Step programs, offering counseling, providing opportunities for lay ministry, establishing an Endowment Fund and encouraging more realistic offerings for services rendered. A generous staff and dedicated retreat masters provided retreatants with spiritual consolation from a variety of perspectives. The retreat movement was clearly on the rise, and King's House was prepared to accept the challenge."



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During the 1990s and 2000s, King's House continued to offer a variety of retreats and programs for an ever-changing demographic. While the programs remained popular, upkeep on the buildings were becoming prohibitive. In 2022, the Missionary Oblates decided to close King's House at its location on 66th Street in Belleville and move the ministry a few miles away to the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows.

"Our financial situation simply did not allow us to invest the huge sums of money required to make the repairs and renovations necessary to keep the facility open, and the shortage of Oblate personnel made it almost impossible to continue at the present location," said Fr. Salvador Gonzalez, current King's House Director.

When the current Kings House closes in the spring of 2023, it will reopen at the Shrine, taking advantage of the former Shrine Hotel to provide lodging for retreatants and use of the Shrine's numerous conference rooms and devotional sites. The move to the Shrine will allow the Oblates to continue to offer this valuable retreat ministry while giving retreatants a wonderful new location where they can discover new aspects of their faith.

The current staff of King's House is grateful for the foundation that has been laid for more than 70 years in giving retreatants a path to improve their spiritual life. The closing prayer from the 1951 Dedication Ceremony is just as relevant today as it was on the first day of King's House:

"King's House is now open. It welcomes all who feel drawn by the grace of God to embrace a life of penance and reparation. In the words of the Psalmists: 'Oh Lord give victory to the King and hear us in the day we call upon You.'" (Psalm 19:10)

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