



Molly Zimmerman poses with the Gator utility vehicle she uses to work on the St. Joseph Preserve property in Paynesville Township, Minn., July 22, 2025. Zimmerman and her husband, Randy, purchased and dedicated 340 acres of land in Paynesville Township to create the preserve, a rustic retreat for Catholic renewal, where she hopes people will find peace. (OSV News/The Central Minnesota Catholic/Dianne Towalski)

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Molly Zimmerman understands that pumping porta-potties, grooming trails and coordinating hundreds of volunteers isn't how everyone is called to cultivate their God-given gifts, but it's how she has been called — hesitantly and full of worry, at times — to cultivate hers.

Zimmerman and her husband, Randy, purchased and dedicated 340 acres of land in Paynesville Township to create the St. Joseph Preserve, a rustic retreat for Catholic renewal, where she hopes people will find peace.

"I'm an intense person, and I think that's part of why God could move in me in this way. But if you have a gentler, more recollected calling, it isn't any less valuable. Those souls are powerful — those often-hidden souls," Zimmerman said. "That's (just like) St. Joseph."

As you walk the preserve, passing the Stations of the Cross and a chapel housing holy art and relics, it can be easy to assume a life of faithful stewardship came easily to Zimmerman.

She recalls being "the last to arrive and the first to leave" Mass throughout her childhood and shares that, until she was 24, she had not been introduced to the rosary or Eucharistic adoration, both of which are now parts of her prayer routine.

Her faith progressed over time, and while her three children were young, Zimmerman would regularly attend daily Mass and make time for weekly adoration to help her feel "more sane" so she could be a better wife and mother.

Still, she held onto a lot of anger which hardened her heart.

"I don't think God could really get in there. I used to hear all these lovely hymns about God's love, and I thought 'What love?' she told The Central Minnesota Catholic, magazine of the Diocese of St. Cloud.

She attempted to manage her feelings through long-distance running, participating in Nordic ski events, triathlons and other endurance activities.

Zimmerman almost laughs when she recalls how a foot surgery put an end to that and how spiritual direction steered her another way, leading to personal conversion.

"You can only run so many miles, swim so many miles and ski so many miles to get away from the pain in your soul. Then, you just have to hand it over to Jesus and to let him fix it," she said.

"Now, I welcome God into my soul all the time," she continued. "He's fixing things in there, so I can do his work out (in the preserve.)"

It wasn't until after people who visited their home mentioned how peaceful it was and after the Boy Scouts had used the land for camping that Zimmerman gave thought to using their land for a bigger purpose.

After a silent retreat at Broom Tree in Yankton County, South Dakota, a retreat center owned and operated by the Diocese of Sioux Falls, Zimmerman heard how others had tried to register for retreats there but would have to sit on a waiting list for months to attend.

This got her thinking.

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In 2018, 280 acres adjacent to their property became available for purchase from Jennie-O Corporation.

Zimmerman sent a letter to the president of Jennie-O to share their hopes of creating a retreat center along with an offer \$50,000 below market value.

Zimmerman's real estate contact said land like this was never purchased below market value, so she knew God had opened a door when the offer was accepted.

She didn't jump into the work without doubt or fears and remembers praying late at night feeling so much pain and worry in her heart that she decided to immediately make the trip to the National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion in Champion, Wisconsin, to visit Mary and pray.

After driving all night, she chose to sit in the back of the church for Mass just in case she happened to fall asleep. There, she met a Carmelite sister who offered consolation and inspired the name for their newly purchased land.

"We spent the day together and I told her my worries and how we had just acquired 280 acres of land, we were in debt because of it, and I just didn't know what to do or how to do it," Zimmerman said.

"She told me that whatever you do, it's for St. Joseph."

To help with the debt, her husband, Randy, a physician in the Paynesville area, worked lots of extra hours.

They also put \$2,000 into an investment.

"We prayed and said, 'Ok, Mary, this is your investment. If you want this retreat center. Help us out. Just go crazy, Mary,'" Zimmerman said.

Mary did. The investment grew from its original \$2,000 to \$98,000.

For all gifts she has received, she gives credit to God. For the gifts she has given through her work and hopes the preserve will give, that's God's work, too.

"I may be a role model, but it's not by my own grace," she said.

Now Zimmerman works alongside her husband and a board of seven additional volunteers under the motto, "Pray, work and grow in holiness because happiness in heaven begins here."

Their hope is to welcome people of all faith backgrounds to the preserve and invite them to seek stillness of body by letting go of the distractions of daily life and opening up to God's loving presence.

Because of her experience working through a hardened heart, Zimmerman hopes the land will especially call those who feel unworthy or have been struggling with the Catholic Church.

"If they come, it's because God is calling them. He wants to meet them where they're sitting, give them confidence that he cares about them and will fix (any brokenness)."

At the preserve, visitors can experience camping, praying in a chapel, walking the Stations of the Cross prayer trail and finding God in nature.

The preserve continues to move forward slowly, starting with things they can do "small and cheap."

In the future, there is hope for hosting silent retreats, creating a community shelter with a commercial kitchen, meeting spaces, bathrooms and showers and building additional infrastructure to make the space more accessible.

Zimmerman doesn't know exactly how the future will unfold for the preserve and knows a lot of details need to be ironed out.

She does know she has been called to be a steward of the gifts God provides.

"I'm kind of floored by it all, really," she said. "God continues to weigh in around us and keeps bringing gifts forward. That's why it's clear it's not my work. It's God's."