

# Blessed Other

**A prophet without honor in the Catholic Church, Maureen Sweeney-Kyle is building her own religious empire on an 83-acre farm in Lorain County. And making a lot of money for Mary.**

By [Laura Putre](#)

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Jesus is expected at 3 p.m. About five hundred pilgrims, some of them arriving on tour buses from Chicago and Minneapolis, gather in an open field in Lorain County to hear His message. They pray the rosary and sing "Ave Maria." They bless themselves with well water and, Polaroid cameras aimed heavenward, scan the skies for signs — a golden door of sunlight, a swatch of glowing robe.

A grand procession, with hymns broadcast over a state-of-the-art sound system, heralds the Lord's arrival. After a solemn prayer, a delicate woman with trembling hands steps up to the microphone. Standing before a hill of sculpted dirt that looks like a miniature Mt. Sinai, she delivers a message that Jesus gave her yesterday, guiding the pen in her hand.

She is Maureen Sweeney-Kyle, a homemaker-cum-visionary with the near-translucent skin of angels and invalids. Some days she sees Jesus, and some days she sees the Virgin Mary. Short of the Second Coming, she is the closest the crowd will get today to the Word Made Flesh.

"I am here, your Jesus, born Incarnate," she reads, glancing skittishly at her audience. "My nostrils are filled with the sweet aroma of your surrender." The message warns of the evils of "the god of money" and the dubious health of the stock market.

Sweeney-Kyle sometimes adds observations of her own, quoting from Catholic thinkers and saints, and shakes a few hands. Then, before the teeming masses can close in, she is promptly whisked away by her husband, Don, a former police officer who often finishes her sentences for her. In her wake, attendants pass around collection baskets, answer questions, and mingle with the faithful — priests and nuns, people in wheelchairs, vacationing couples who have traveled thousands of miles to be here.

If they don't go home with a miracle today, at least they can leave with a souvenir. A photograph, a religious experience, or a glimpse of Sweeney-Kyle, 58, conscripted go-between of heaven and earth — and the celebrity face of Holy Love Ministries, a million-dollar business with a gift shop, a website, and a full line of sacred merchandise, from 25-cent holy cards to a \$1 million commemorative plaque.

Sweeney-Kyle's version of the Blessed Mother speaks softly and gives orders like the CEO of a major corporation, asking for cash and real estate — and handing out pink slips to believers who no longer fit in with her mission. Over the years, she has cast out devout

members of the ministry's inner circle in favor of converts who ask the fewest questions and bring in the most money. She has ordered hard-working people to drive themselves to exhaustion doing menial tasks in her name. She has helped wreck marriages and come between friends.

Also, in her name, Holy Love Ministries — a nonprofit organization run by Sweeney-Kyle, her husband, and a handful of low-profile financial backers — has brought in hundreds of thousands of dollars annually in direct public support.

Though not a sanctioned Catholic group, Holy Love uses Catholic images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the rosary, and the Blessed Mother to ask for money on the Internet and by direct mail. The fund-raising pitch is also prominent on signs and donation boxes posted throughout the group's sprawling, 83-acre farm.

The farm's attractions include the Stations of the Cross, a sacred spring, and a flower-filled gazebo, where visitors can place petitions asking God to save their marriage, cure their cancer, or watch over the family dog. The Lake of Tears, a man-made pond shaped like a teardrop, symbolically portrays Mary's sorrow over the state of the world. There is ample parking and shuttle buses to transport the old and disabled between sights.

"A lot of people who come here are more holy than me," says Sweeney-Kyle, who agreed to be interviewed — but only with her husband's consent, and only if he could stay by her side. "It's just that [Don and I] are the ones in front of everybody."

A homebody with few friends until she started seeing the Blessed Mother in 1985, Sweeney-Kyle's days are now filled with personal conversations with Mary, Jesus, and other apparitions; speaking engagements; and regular appearances at Holy Love's chapel.

"Everybody asks me to pray for them," she says.

Being in the public eye is a hardship for his wife, says Don Kyle, who has a varying reputation as faithful husband, protector, autocrat, and bumbling soldier for God. Maureen has chronic bronchitis and asthma, he says, and sometimes makes appearances hooked up to a breathing machine.

Sweeney-Kyle admits the calling has been a challenge, just as it was for Saint Bernadette, a poor shepherdess who was visited by the Blessed Mother in a garbage dump. But the life of a seer is often a lonely one, and in that grand tradition, Sweeney-Kyle has lost family and old friends.

"Once the Blessed Mother . . ." she begins faintly.

"What's more important?" demands Don, cutting in. "Which friends are more important?"

". . . starts appearing to you," she says, hesitating, "that's the focus."

"How much more special can that get?" Don wonders.

"Like my husband says . . ."

"Who's more important," says Don, interrupting again. "*Who's more important?* God or somebody else?"

To the faithful, Sweeney-Kyle is God's chosen, suffering servant, if not a saint in the making. "There's so many roadblocks in Maureen's way," says Shirley Kane, a supporter of Holy Love since its humble beginnings in a church meeting room. "But she still keeps plugging along."

Others, like the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, are skeptical. "Holy Love Ministries has no connection with or approval from the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland," reads a diocesan memo from May 1996. "We would caution anyone considering support of such a venture."

Still others dismiss Sweeney-Kyle as a charlatan. "For a while, there wasn't anything I could put my finger on and say, 'That really isn't true,'" says one former believer. "But if I said, 'I'm not sure that's right,' she would back off."

Though what appears in the sky might be golden, it's by no means black and white.

## **Divine Locutions**

Now she speaks volumes, but Mary was quiet when she first visited Sweeney-Kyle in 1985. She made her debut during a prayer service at St. Brendan's Catholic Church in North Olmsted, hovering luminously above the altar. Her gaze was steady and mournful, and a large rosary spilled from her slim white hands. Transfixed, Sweeney-Kyle watched as the iridescent beads caught the light and changed to the shapes of the fifty states. Then she was gone.

Sweeney-Kyle started chattering about what she had just seen. None of the other people at the prayer service knew what she was talking about.

"I thought, 'Well, that was one time,' and I tried not to think about it much," Sweeney-Kyle says. But then the Blessed Mother started appearing to her every day and making demands: Pray for the church. Pray for the souls of corrupt priests. And Maureen, please remember to take your medicine on time. When Mary started speaking of Jesus paying a visit, Sweeney-Kyle thought she had better let someone in on the secret.

She confided in Father Ferris Kleem, a visiting priest at St. Brendan's. Kleem was no ordinary diocesan priest — he belonged to the Marianist order, which professes special devotion to the Blessed Mother and isn't bound to the word of the local bishop. Kleem led charismatic retreats at St. Joseph's Christian Life Center on Lake Shore Boulevard, where Catholics who spoke in tongues and rolled on the floor weren't told to sit up and shush.

"I said, "These words just keep popping in my head, and I don't know where they come from," says Sweeney-Kyle. Those aren't words, replied Kleem, flush with excitement. Those are divine locutions. He urged her to write them down in her journal and asked Richard Dewitt, a NASA engineer and the head usher at St. Brendan's, to type them up to be read to the faithful in his prayer group.

Shy and undemonstrative in public, Sweeney-Kyle says she tried to maintain her anonymity for a while. "I told Jesus that he picked the wrong person."

But God had other plans. A member of her prayer group announced that, according to the Holy Spirit, someone in their midst was getting messages from heaven and not delivering them. Sweeney-Kyle ran from the room crying.

There was little in her background to prepare her for an encounter with the divine. Raised in a Catholic family in Fairview Park, Sweeney-Kyle earned a degree in art education from Bowling Green State University and married her first husband in 1965. They raised four children in North Ridgeville, where her biggest claim to fame was selling wooden figurines at local craft fairs.

Like many Catholic youngsters, Sweeney-Kyle grew up hearing the story of Mary's appearance to three children in Fatima, Portugal, where witnesses spoke of the sun turning red and crashing to earth.

"I was always devoted to the rosary," Sweeney-Kyle says. "I didn't always pray it."

Don, 53, who's known Sweeney-Kyle about twelve years, disagrees.

"Maureen prayed the rosary since she was a little girl," he insists.

Soon after the visions began, Mary began appearing to Sweeney-Kyle daily, offering personal advice on cooking, prayer, and shopping, along with messages to be shared with the prayer group. Suddenly, the woman who had rarely socialized, staying at home while her husband went alone to their couples social group, was in demand. Her phone rang nonstop with requests for heavenly advice and predictions concerning marriages, ailments, and money matters, as well as matters of faith. And Maureen, through the Blessed Mother, did her best to help.

A few people worried that Sweeney-Kyle might be confusing fantasy with reality to win friends. They suggested that she present the advice as her own — not as the Blessed Mother's — and they say that, on occasion, Sweeney-Kyle privately admitted she made up some of Mary's maxims.

"I said, "Why don't you just say this is your idea, and there will be room for discussion?" recalls one. "But once you start saying stuff and people believe you . . . and they see you as a leader, it gets harder and harder to stop."

Meanwhile, as promised, Jesus started appearing to Sweeney-Kyle. "I was in church one time, and I saw Him float forward from His crucifix," she says. "And I said out loud, "Oh Lord, you're gonna fall.'" Sweeney-Kyle also claimed to have visions of Satan in "beast form," speaking in "a very gruff voice." Later she would be visited by St. Theresa of the Little Flower; Padre Pio, an Italian priest with the stigmata who was recently beatified by Pope John Paul II; and St. Joseph.

## Orders From Above

Discouraged by their home church, where the pastor treated the visions as tall tales, Kleem and the little ministry left St. Brendan's and began meeting in private homes and, briefly, at Incarnate Word Academy in Parma. They adopted a name — Our Lady Protectress of the Faith — and began a crusade to win ecclesiastical approval from the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland.

As a rule, the Catholic Church prefers not to endorse visionary en-counters. About three hundred people around the world currently say they are seeing Mary, but only visions at Fatima, Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Knokke, Belgium, have received the church's blessing in this century — usually long after the visionary has died.

"Our basic line is, if it's helpful to you to hear it, fine," says Father Ralph Wiatrowski, chancellor of the Cleveland diocese. "If it isn't helpful, you're under no obligation."

When the diminutive woman arrived at his office with the fringe priest and the NASA engineer one day in 1986, Wiatrowski gave them his undivided attention. Sweeney-Kyle, he remembers, seemed shy but well-intentioned. Kleem and Dewitt did most of the talking. "We told them we'd rather not give approval," Wiatrowski says. "We don't feel comfortable doing that."

Wiatrowski was especially struck by two things: the third- or fourth-hand nature of the messages — which were edited, approved, and corrected by several people before they were released to the public — and their subtext, which at times seemed to question the church's authority. "Some of the locutions seemed to imply that, if the bishop did not give approval, there was something wrong with the bishop," he says.

While the church stayed silent, the messages from heaven were getting juicier — with the Blessed Mother making predictions and micromanagement decisions. One message had Mary proclaiming that Boris Yeltsin was the Antichrist. Another decreed that then-President George Bush would be reelected in 1992. When those "divine proclamations" turned out to be wrong, Sweeney-Kyle would try to smooth things over by saying that she had misinterpreted Mary's messages, chalking it up to the imperfections of a mere mortal.

"I don't know that I ever really, really believed," says one former member of the group. "I remember wondering why no one in the group went, 'This is really hokey.' And I think this is the piece that's like a cult. Rational, normal people convinced of irrational things."

Dewitt, who headed the ministry while Kleem held rank as spiritual adviser, says he was truly moved not by predictions, but by the spiritual content of the messages Sweeney-Kyle received. As he typed them, he marveled at their "simplicity and completeness." Using layman's language, the text illuminated church dogma for him.

"Those words were beyond Maureen," he insists. "They would give direction, encouraging people to grow in love, to grow in the two great commandments: love of God and fellow man."

But Dewitt was soon asked to step aside. The ministry was becoming more than simply a small group of people who met regularly to pray.

"Maureen wanted to do more public speaking," Dewitt recalls. "There were functions that had to be taken care of, organizations of prayer services, and fund-raising in a much greater magnitude." As a result, he says, his role naturally diminished, and he moved on.

Some former members say that Dewitt wasn't just asked to step aside — he was ordered to, by Mary, in a message from heaven. Dewitt, who is still very devoted to the Blessed Mother and supports the ministry from afar, denies this. "I reached a point where I thought the core group could handle things effectively," he says. "I wanted them to succeed, because those words were not of this earth."

Dewitt was challenging of Sweeney-Kyle, says one source. "If you have a lot of followers, you start to think you can do anything. He was increasingly becoming more of a thorn. He had good ideas and would voice them, and the more they criticized him and told him to shut up, the more he became a liability."

Like Moses in the desert, the group had a nomadic existence during Dewitt's tenure, holding prayer services anywhere people would let them: a church basement, a civic center, someone's spare bedroom. But in the late 1980s, Albert Rispo, a developer in Seven Hills who regularly bears witness to the miraculous powers of Mary, gave the ministry rent-free use of a two-story house he owned on Broadview Road.

The house, with marbled blue wall-to-wall carpeting and a generous kitchen, was built as a single-family home. According to the Seven Hills building department, Rispo lost a court battle to convert it to a two-family home before the ministry moved in.

But Mary didn't mind: "Untold graces are coming to earth at this site soon," She said, appearing to Sweeney-Kyle in one of Her favorite places, the northeast corner of the living room near the bay window. "Pilgrims are coming as numerous as raindrops in spring. The more who come in faith, the more grace will unfold."

## **Cop for Christ**

Dewitt was barely offstage when Thomas Todt, a Cleveland police officer and parishioner at St. Brendan's, was making an entrance. At Mass one Sunday, Todt was

handed the handwritten equivalent of an invitation from heaven — a note saying that the Virgin Mary requested his presence at the ministry's meetings. She had called him to be one of the Twelve, a member of Sweeney-Kyle's inner circle of believers.

A devout Catholic who was turned down for the diocese's deaconate program, Todt doesn't remember who gave him the note. He took over some of Dewitt's duties — leading the prayers and services, reading locutions received by Sweeney-Kyle, and planning an annual clambake. Steadfast and dependable, he was also asked to help lead a rosary crusade that was part prayer, part fund-raising. Unable to get approval from the diocese, the group had decided to look for national grass-roots support.

"Our Lady wanted us to spread out," recalls Todt, who helped lead the group from about 1989 to 1993. Each member of the ministry was assigned four states. In exchange for prayer and cash donations from Catholic prayer groups, Todt would send out Our Lady Protectress of the Faith literature, medals, rosaries, and inspirational tapes. The literature noted that the group was affiliated with an anonymous visionary from Seven Hills, Ohio, who was receiving messages from Mary.

The donations, says Todt, went toward incidentals: postage, paper, and fees for other visionaries to come in and speak to the group. In 1990, according to the group's first tax return, it raised \$10,370. By the end of 1992, revenues had risen to \$38,070.

Another former member says that core believers often reached into their own pockets to pay for expenses, including plane tickets for Sweeney-Kyle to give talks in Florida. "From the very beginning, money was changing hands," the former member recalls. "From day one, there was that sense of 'You're being called to donate.'"

"I said, 'What do you do?'" recalls one observer. "'Well, we pray, we hear messages, we do the rosary.' But you've gotta do something more than pray. They don't do anything. They sell things."

In 1993, Todt took a short leave from the group to be with his mother, who was in the hospital. He hadn't been gone two weeks when he received a phone call: Our Lady Protectress of the Faith, now called Project Mercy, no longer needed his services. The caller's name was Robert Kessler, a businessman with professional fund-raising experience who led a rosary ministry in Dayton. Todt didn't know him past a handshake.

"I felt real bad about it," recalls Todt, whose mother went into a coma and died during his leave. "I was with the core group from the outset, and here's this guy that comes in from some other place and kind of takes over."

After replacing Todt with a better-connected outsider, the ministry shifted into high gear. Kessler, who declined to be interviewed for this story, helped lead the group from 1993 to '94. During that time, its annual revenue leapt from \$41,726 to \$112,688.

And Kessler wasn't the only one waiting in the wings — or in Donald Kyle's case, parked outside Sweeney-Kyle's home. Kyle met Maureen in Fort Myers, Florida, where she was speaking to his prayer group. A former Middleburg Heights policeman who retired in his thirties because of a work-related disability, he moved back to Cleveland to live with his mother and became Maureen's unofficial chauffeur. Early in the morning, he would pull up to her North Ridgeville home, sit in his car, and wait while Maureen's then-husband, Paul, left for work.

"Why was he driving her around?" wonders one former associate. "She knew how to drive. Why didn't she drive herself?"

Because she was frail and sickly, says Shirley Kane, who was a member of the inner circle early on, but left for health reasons of her own. "She needed someone with her," Kane says, calling Sweeney-Kyle a "victim soul."

Kane recalls that Sweeney-Kyle would be in the middle of a "nice conversation" when she would be gripped by a seizure and have to be carried upstairs, by Kyle and a few other men. When she was receiving a message, Maureen would often collapse in front of the group. Her attendants would apply ice packs to her neck, and the ice would reportedly melt faster than normal.

Not everyone thought Sweeney-Kyle's illnesses were legitimate. "She went through a period where she pretended to have epilepsy," says one source. "She loves to talk about medicine, loves to take medicine. But once the divorce [from her first husband] took place, the epilepsy went away."

Kane finds Sweeney-Kyle's ailments anything but suspicious. "So many of the visionaries are ill," she says. "They're not healthy, robust people."

Kyle's fawning attentions also bothered some observers. "Maureen thought he was very attractive, talked about him all the time," says one source. "Don would have to carry her everywhere. She was infatuated with him — *this is a messenger of the Blessed Mother* — and she was married."

"[Kyle] was there to be her protector from anybody outside of the circle," another observer recalls.

Paul, Maureen's husband of 25 years and an active parishioner at St. Brendan's, was skeptical of the ministry from the beginning. He attended a few of the group's early meetings, but though he was a devout Catholic, he had no interest in becoming more involved. Once Kyle took up vigil in the car outside their home, Paul told Maureen that he didn't want Kyle ever coming in the house.

Donald Kyle took a roundabout road from police officer to visionary handler, with a short detour as a self-appointed pro golfer named Brandon Kyle. Born and raised in Brooklyn and a graduate of St. Ignatius High School, he and his first wife, Mary Lou, married and

divorced twice in the 1960s and '70s. According to court records, the second divorce was especially messy — Kyle admitted to having an affair with Debra Nolan, a woman he had met on duty at a traffic accident. His first wife filed a restraining order, charging that Kyle was abusive. But Kyle apparently took a few hits himself.

"I think she whopped him more than he whopped her," says one former colleague. "One time I saw her whack him in the back of the head with her high heel."

Kyle, who also married and divorced Nolan, retired from the Middleburg Heights police in 1985 and moved to Florida. He had a clean record as a cop and an unusual work-related injury: He'd shot himself in the foot on a domestic violence call.

"Nobody missed him when he left," notes one former police colleague. "He'd gotten so strange."

Though he tended to lecture criminals, Kyle was an otherwise model cop from the time he joined the force in 1973 until about 1981. Then he started going to Mass while on duty, taking lengthy coffee breaks at church, and proselytizing to his co-workers. Kyle told colleagues that his two-year-old son spoke in tongues and knew several different languages. At one point he started calling himself Brandon Kyle ("It sounded cooler," recalls one cop) and passed out business cards that read "Golf Lessons: Brandon Kyle." He told co-workers that he was leaving for Florida to make money on the pro circuit.

Although police sources characterize Kyle as more loopy than temperamental, later acquaintances at the Seven Hills ministry characterize him as a red-faced control freak. "My sense is that he's got a problem with controlling his temper," says one observer. "I've never seen him throw stuff or anything like that. But he's very bristly if anyone says something critical."

"Anything would set him off," says another former follower. "If you disagreed with him, he'd start pounding his fists." One ex-member remembers an angry Kyle pinning an office volunteer against a door at the Seven Hills house, pounding and yelling.

By the early 1990s, Sweeney-Kyle was spending less time with her husband and a lot more time with Donald Kyle. Once, she asked Paul to accompany her to a speaking engagement in Florida. Kyle made the trip with them. In Florida, Maureen and Don were inseparable, leading prayer services together in the host couple's living room, while Paul was left wondering what had possessed him to come.

Soon after the fated trip to Florida, in the summer of 1993, Maureen moved out of the house and filed for separation. Several months later, Paul filed for a divorce, which was granted in May 1995.

Maureen then began trying to persuade a reluctant Don to marry her, says one insider. "[Don] was infatuated by the ministry and loved the power she had," says the source. "He wasn't the one talking marriage."

Past and present members of the group believe that the Blessed Mother, and the ensuing ministry, came between Maureen and Paul. Some regard the divorce as the inevitable end to a visionary's former, more ordinary life. "You're never a prophet in your own home," says Kane.

Others found it more tragic.

"If you're getting these messages, and they're real, why don't they tell you to spend some time taking care of your marriage?" asks one observer. "You'd think that someone who was Catholic would have told her, 'It's important for you to stay married.'"

Don and Maureen were married in February 1997. It was Don's fourth marriage (his previous ones had been annulled). Father Frank Kenney, the ministry's fourth spiritual adviser, officiated.

## Heavenly Fashion

A 77-year-old Marianist priest from Dayton, Father Kenney chuckles as he remembers his formal introduction to Sweeney-Kyle.

"The first time I saw her, she collapsed on the floor for about twenty minutes," he says. "When she got up, she asked me, 'What's a soothsayer?' She didn't know what a soothsayer was!"

A former teacher at Cathedral Latin High School in Cleveland, Kenney says that, up until 1992, he had been the adviser to about twelve other visionaries, but none as major as Sweeney-Kyle. Like others before him, Kenney's instructions came from above, via Sweeney-Kyle.

"I received a call from Maureen — the Blessed Mother had told her to tell me to be her spiritual director," he says. "Never in my wildest dreams would I think I would be a spiritual director for a visionary like Maureen Sweeney. It's been a wonderful experience for me, a blessing from heaven."

Kenney says he's always had a special relationship with the Blessed Mother. "Every night I kiss Mary goodnight," he says. "I have a picture of Her on the back of my door." He told Sweeney-Kyle to ask Mary if that was all right with Her. "And Mary said, 'I am your mother. You can kiss your mother whenever you want.'"

"Maureen tells me at Masses she sees this golden glow around me," he continues. "I'm not trying to brag about this, but these things are reported to me."

Kenney, who says the Blessed Mother recently healed him of heart palpitations, approves the wording of all messages that Sweeney-Kyle receives from Mary. Fax machines and audio equipment have made things a bit more technical than in the days of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes: After each divine visitation, Kyle holds up a tape recorder, and

Sweeney-Kyle dictates the message. A transcript is faxed to Kenney, who corrects spelling and grammar, fine-tunes Sweeney-Kyle's descriptions, and checks for any potential blasphemy against the church or the Catholic faith. (Kenney has withheld approval on only two messages, one of which criticized priests for taking too many liberties at Mass.)

The approved messages are read to the core members of the ministry, publicly distributed, and eventually compiled in book form. The latest book, *Heaven's Last Call to Humanity*, was published in 1996 and sells for \$14.95. Some messages chastise priests: "Dear children, these days when you suffer much, I tell you it is for My pain that you suffer. It is for priests who betray their vocation" (October 5, 1994). Most include a brief description of what the Blessed Mother is wearing: "Our Lady came and was dressed in gray and a cream color and had a rose pinned to Her robe slightly under Her neckline" (July 15, 1993).

The Blessed Mother is so fashion-conscious, according to Kenney, that She helps Sweeney-Kyle find bargains. "Mary told her where to go to get me a scarf, a green scarf," he enthuses. But Sweeney-Kyle procrastinated. "Finally, Mary [re-]appeared and said, "That scarf is buried down in a special sales group, and if you don't get it now, it'll be gone."

According to Kenney, Mary also helps with household chores. He fondly recalls the time that She appeared to Sweeney-Kyle when she had a pot of soup boiling on the stove. Mary wanted her to go outside and pray the Stations of the Cross.

"Maureen said, "Who's going to watch the soup?" says Kenney. "And Mary said, "I'll watch the soup.' Well, somewhere out around the fifth station, Mary appeared to her. And Maureen asked, "Who's watching the soup?' And Mary answered, "The angels are."

Diocesan Chancellor Wiatrowski says he's concerned that such talk trivializes the notion of extraordinary experience, from Fatima to moments of enlightenment people have every day: "It would seem the Blessed Mother would have a better way to spend Her time," he says.

Wiatrowski calls Kenney "a very kind and elderly gentleman who's devoted his life to the church. But just the fact that he's so enthusiastic about these things is a cause for concern." Wiatrowski finds it troubling that the ministry would choose an adviser who lives so far away and can only guide it by occasional visits and long-distance phone calls. By contrast, the group has never sought local diocesan guidance or deferred to the bishop in matters of faith.

Kenney, however, believes that time is more important than distance. "There are many people who say they will not believe in a private revelation not approved by the church," he says, noting that Joan of Arc wasn't canonized until 1920. "Well, they'll be dead waiting for that."

## **The Faithful in Exile**

The ministry flourished at the Seven Hills house, where the Blessed Mother appeared and told Sweeney-Kyle to dig a well in the backyard. There, said Mary, the inner circle would find healing waters. But they mustn't be selfish and keep it a secret. Now was the time to broadcast their message to the world. The "spring" would be called Marantha, Mary declared, Aramaic for "Come, Lord Jesus."

"Dear children, tonight I come to invite all nations to Marantha, wellspring of grace," Mary said in May 1994, when believers put shovel to soil. "You do not comprehend what heaven has ordained today, for Marantha is the threshold of holy love and the gateway to the new Jerusalem." The holy spring took shape as a red-handled pump on a far corner of the property, where pilgrims could come and fill up milk jugs with water.

Another popular attraction was the "Blessing Point" — a carpeted corner of the living room where Sweeney-Kyle often had her visions. "Allow the people to venerate it by kissing it," Mary told Sweeney-Kyle. "I promise many favors will be granted by this means." Believers would place their rings and other holy objects on the Blessing Point for the Virgin Mother to bless. Baskets of flowers were placed about the house, and Mary was said to announce Her arrival and departure by fragrance — the fragrance of roses.

The new developments were a hit — with the public, if not the city of Seven Hills. In June 1994, about a thousand of the faithful and the curious tried to cram in the yard one Saturday, spilling onto neighbors' lawns. Traffic, blocked by several tour buses, piled up on Broadview Road, a no-parking street.

Four days later, the city of Seven Hills obtained a temporary restraining order against the ministry. In August, Common Pleas Judge Judith Kilbane-Koch ruled that, as of December, the group could no longer use the house as a meeting place. For less-determined zealots, such a decision might have meant their demise.

But for Sweeney-Kyle's group, rechristened Holy Love, it was just the beginning.

## **The Power of Love**

No matter how it appeared to outsiders, Holy Love exerted a powerful attraction on true believers. Mary Ann Augustine first heard of the group about the time the Seven Hills spring was dug. Her husband Robert, a psychiatrist, had picked up one of Holy Love's pamphlets at St. Mary's Church, their parish in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Mary Ann and Robert were lapsed Catholics who were both on their second marriages. Mary Ann, a registered nurse who had been soul-searching for several years, wanted to visit the Seven Hills shrine right away. Though he shared her basic beliefs, her husband didn't want to go near the place.

On her first visit, Mary Ann listened to one of Sweeney-Kyle's helpers read the monthly locutions. "We were told that the Blessed Mother would arrive during the rosary, and that She would walk around the room among us," she says. "That's a rare thing."

The visit made a lasting impression. Mary Ann took a bottle of Marantha Spring water home and placed it on her kitchen sink. The next morning, she made plans to start praying more. But when she approached the sink to bless herself with the water, a deep depression came over her, and she felt a stabbing pain in her heart.

And then, she heard a voice: "I have given you the greatest gift I could give my children," it said. "The gift of my Son in the Holy Eucharist. And you, through your own fault and your own sins, have lost that gift."

"It caused the greatest sadness in me," she recalls. "I walked to the living room couch, clutching my heart because I was in pain. And I started crying. I cried and cried for like an hour and a half. I couldn't stop."

Augustine made repeated visits to the shrine and told her husband they needed to get their first marriages annulled, so they could become full members of the church. He agreed, but called Holy Love a cult and refused her pleas to give up their 73-acre estate and worldly goods, and move to Ohio to serve the ministry. He begged her to reconsider. She would not, and left with only the clothes on her back, moving into a small apartment in Lorain County. In 1998, the couple divorced.

"I had such a strong conviction in my heart," says Augustine. "I would just look at him and smile and say, "Robert, I can't change what's happening in my heart.""

Once she left, she says, she had a fleeting moment of doubt.

"It was like . . . "Oh my gosh, Mary Ann, what have you done?" she recalls. "But I had a strong feeling I was supposed to be here, and I kept feeling Jesus inside saying, "Trust me, everything's going to be OK.""

Augustine, who is paid a small salary, is the first person many pilgrims see when they visit the shrine. She greets them at the entrance, helps set up hotel rooms for them at the Super 8 nearby, and changes the transparencies on the overhead projector at prayer services. Like everyone else, she watches as Don and Maureen arrive to give a message, then disappear into a closed room or out a side door.

## **God's Nest Egg**

It was during the Seven Hills fiasco that the Blessed Mother started making flat-out requests for money and land. She wanted a 1-900 number and sought major financial backers. "Dear children, the hour has come when you need to pool your resources just as the apostles did, all for the greater glory of God," reads a letter mailed to potential donors. "Search your hearts, find your assets, and contribute generously."

And, as at the biblical wedding at Cana, Mary asked Her son to intervene, though the plea was not as simple as changing water into wine: "Jesus has requested three to five acres with options on surrounding land," explained a December 5, 1994, fund-raising letter.

Meanwhile, Donald Kyle was reportedly knocking on farmers' doors in Lorain County, asking if they had any land to sell. Without a home, the ministry was holding services in parks and rented rooms. No farmers were willing to sell their property, but a young land speculator from Rocky River named James F. Kelly was. Kelly had recently purchased an 83-acre plot of fallow farm land in Eaton Township near Elyria, with vague plans to develop it someday when land values in Lorain County rose.

In January 1995, Kelly bought the land for \$107,500 from the Kate E. Castle Memorial Foundation, a private Cleveland endowment fund for wildlife preservation. Eight months later, he turned around and sold it to Holy Love for \$350,000.

The Virgin Mary had found a new home. But She didn't want to arrive there empty-handed. From the old shrine in Seven Hills, She brought the spring, ordering Her believers to dig a new one at the far end of the Eaton Township property in the middle of winter 1995. She also told them to cut out a circle of carpeting from the suburban living room where She used to appear and bring it to the new location, to make the connection complete.

Soiled and worn from many hours of kneeling and veneration, the forlorn carpet remnant, or "Blessing Point," is mounted on a wooden stand in a new chapel on the Eaton Township property. Believers lean over and kiss the feet of Jesus on a chipped gold crucifix in its center.

In May 1996, the Lorain County Health Department determined that the new Marantha Spring water was unsafe for drinking. But that did nothing to slow the growth of Holy Love, which flourished in its new home. In 1995 donations from the public nearly tripled to \$306,139 and peaked in 1996 at \$506,724. Single-day attendance hit an all-time high on May 5, 1996, when 6,000 people turned out for a scheduled appearance by the Blessed Mother. In 1997, the ministry built "a humble pole barn" on its property — a combination chapel and retail store that cost \$247,200.

Declared a tax-exempt religious organization starting in 1996, the ministry was bringing in about twice as much as it spent. By 1997, the latest year for which their tax returns are available, Holy Love was sitting on net assets of \$620,899.

New pilgrims who visit the chapel are not told of the nest egg. Instead, they are greeted by framed "wish lists" posted at the entrance, asking for donations for new carpeting for the chapel and to help defray Holy Love's \$4,000 monthly mortgage payments.

Pilgrims are also not told that some of their money is going to a completely separate organization. In 1997, Kelly cut a private deal for Malachi House, a nonprofit Cleveland hospice loosely connected with the diocese, to receive the mortgage money.

Dan Cotter, chairman of Malachi House, reluctantly confirmed that arrangement, but angrily denied any involvement in it. "I take zero responsibility for this," he says. "We don't know what Holy Love Ministries is or where it's at."

However, the director of Malachi House, Josie Gaughan, knows of Holy Love. In fact, she calls it one of Malachi House's single major contributors.

"They are very faithful donors," she says. "They've given a very substantial amount of money toward our endowment." Gaughan referred all further financial questions to Cotter, who would not give any specific numbers.

Cotter also refused to comment on Kelly's connection to Malachi House. Insiders say that Kelly, who did not respond to requests for an interview, has been a volunteer and an ongoing donor to the charity.

Kelly isn't the only one who's elusive. As Holy Love's assets have risen, its leadership and financial backing have become more distant and harder to track. Dayton fund-raiser Robert Kessler was asked to leave the group in late 1994, insiders say. Don and Maureen say that Bill Reynolds, a retired New England engineering contractor, and Frank Lyons, a fund-raiser and millionaire from Philadelphia, are their top contributors.

"There were a couple big contributors," confirms a former insider who recently left the group. "It's nothing for them to set down \$150,000 or \$300,000. A lot of people are donating a lot of money, and 99 percent are Roman Catholics going through changes."

A donation message currently posted on Holy Love's website indicates even loftier financial aspirations. "Commemorative gifts afford the faithful the opportunity to forever link their own family name with Our Lady's Prayer Center — or to honor and perpetuate the name of a loved one, living or deceased," it reads. "Ranging in price from \$50 to more than \$1 million, these commemoratives provide the donor an individualized certificate of recognition and, in some cases, a beautiful plaque of recognition at [the Holy Love chapel]."

Activity at the farm contradicts such wealth. Volunteers are at the chapel after work nearly every night, stuffing envelopes and making copies, while their leaders leave early. One former volunteer says that, besides devoting "many hours every single day to the ministry," he and his wife had been donating \$100 a month to the group. During the winter his wife would refuse to put the heater on in her car, so she could save money to send to Holy Love and other Blessed Mother visionary groups.

"If you think you're on a spiritual journey, the hours don't mean anything," he says. "You'll keep doing it for the good of the people. But you get burned out."

One devotee says he quit the group against the wishes of his wife, because "I have trouble believing the Blessed Mother's appearing to three hundred some odd people [around the

world]. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes up now is saying, "The Blessed Mother is appearing to me.'

"A whole lotta people go overboard with this. We went overboard. Every vacation we've had is around the Blessed Mother. So I told my wife, "This year, let's go somewhere where the Blessed Mother isn't appearing."

Though skeptical of the group's intentions, he doesn't believe that Sweeney-Kyle is "out-and-out lying. I believe she hears voices and sees things that aren't really there. But the Lord has no favorites. Why should His mother?"

Slavko Pavlovic, the owner of a small Cleveland excavating company called Positive Grounds, has more reason to doubt the group's sincerity. He finds it difficult to understand why a group bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars couldn't fork over the \$26,000 it owed him.

Pavlovic and his lawyer, Daniel Jamieson, had met with Kyle and former Holy Love trustee Richard Graven in early 1996 to iron out an agreement for a landscaping and excavating project at the shrine. They drew up a structured contract, and the Holy Love leaders gave their legally binding consent in front of attorneys. Kyle said they needed Pavlovic to start on the project immediately and promised to fax a signed copy of the contract the next morning.

Pavlovic reluctantly agreed, showing up with rented machinery and twelve workers the next day. But the signed contract never arrived.

"My lawyer calls me up [later that day] and says, "I don't know what's wrong with these people, but they want to work on a handshake," Pavlovic recalls. "I'm not gonna be working on God's handshake on a quarter-million-dollar project. I'm too small of a company to absorb a loss like that."

Pavlovic charged Holy Love \$26,000 for a day of labor and equipment fees. They refused to pay it, so his attorney filed suit. The ministry settled in fall 1998 with a check for \$13,000, signed by out-of-town angel Bill Reynolds, according to Pavlovic.

"Because they were a religious group, I figured it would be all right to work with them," he says. "But basically, all they were was a bunch of fund-raisers."

## **The Holy Hair**

Through rain, sleet, and litigation, the Virgin Mary continues to appear to Sweeney-Kyle, giving her private messages for the world. But since December 1998, there's been a step up the spiritual hierarchy — Jesus is bringing monthly messages for the big crowds.

"Jesus is appearing now?" says one former member, snorting back laughter. "I didn't know that! Oh God, they'll come from Russia now."

Recently, the Blessed Mother gave Sweeney-Kyle a strand of Her hair, which is kept in a glass case in a small prayer room off the Holy Love chapel. The faithful file in, kneel, and "kiss" the hair, wiping their lip prints off the glass with Kleenex from a box on a nearby nightstand.

The day she found the hair, Sweeney-Kyle was looking at her blouse, thinking, "Oh, I did a pretty decent job of ironing." She noticed the long strand, picked it off, and threw it on the floor.

"And I was told [by Jesus], 'You shouldn't have done that. That was Our Lady's hair.' So I had to get down on the floor and find it."

Donald Kyle leans forward: "Jesus told Maureen to have it put in a little relic," he says. "And if people would venerate that strand of hair, untold graces would be theirs."

Wiatrowski is doubtful about the hair. "As far as I know, Mary's been assumed into heaven and didn't leave anything behind," he says.

Blessed are those who don't see, yet believe, say the gospels. But what about those who see, yet don't believe? According to the gospel of Don and Maureen, only prayer, time, and cash will prove them wrong.

- **Walter Novak**



**St. Theresa watches over the faithful in the \$250,000 chapel (above); Don, Maureen, and Mary (inset). Sister Monica Okeke peruses Holy Love merchandise (above); Minneapolis tour director Jane Duffy (right) points out a heavenly apparition (or is it lens flare?); the faithful pray in the chapel. Pilgrims place precious items on the holy carpet remnant, a memento Mary ordered taken from the Seven Hills shrine. The faithful prepare for a message from heaven (above); Mary Ann Augustine (right) gave up everything to join Holy Love.**

- **Walter Novak**



**St. Theresa watches over the faithful in the \$250,000 chapel.**



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**Don, Maureen, and Mary.**



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**Sister Monica Okeke peruses Holy Love merchandise.**



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**Minneapolis tour director Jane Duffy points out a heavenly apparition (or is it lens flare?).**



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**The faithful pray in the chapel.**



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**Pilgrims place precious items on the holy carpet remnant, a memento Mary ordered taken from the Seven Hills shrine.**



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