

Group: Cormaria Women's prayer group, Sag Harbor, NY

Description: Forty women who meet regularly at Cormaria for prayer enthusiastically enter into concerned discussion about human trafficking that is taking place in their local area and think about what they can do to act.

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Core Values at Cormaria: A Community of Women Tackle a Big Global Humanitarian Crisis in their Own Backyards

For decades Cormaria, a retreat house and spiritual center run by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary (RHSM), has provided a haven and a tightly knit community for those seeking to find inspiration through prayer and communion through the many stages of their lives. This hidden treasure in the heart of Sag Harbor is a familiar meeting place to those who convene regularly to pray and meditate, alongside new and old friends. It's a place where many women in particular gather regularly to share stories, support each other, discuss meaningful topics, seek guidance, and celebrate the festive changes of the seasons. It is also a place where one can immerse oneself in meditative solitude, amidst the fragrant, lush grounds where majestic deer graze peacefully against the serene and timeless backdrop of Sag Harbor Bay. Throughout the summer months Cormaria opens its doors to the public, and hosts many group, couples, or individual guided retreats and lectures, accommodating visiting guests on its 18 acres. But from October to mid June this place truly comes alive, reclaimed by the familiar faces of its year-round devotees and supporters - girlfriends, sisters, mothers, and daughters, who have been gracing its grounds and chapel for years on end, every autumn, every winter, every budding spring.

What makes Cormaria truly special, besides the obvious lure of the beautifully situated retreat house, is Sister Ann Marino, who has lovingly presided as RSHM in residence since 1982, and is now celebrating her 30th year in service. Sister Ann, as she is known to everyone, is the voice and the soul of this waterside sanctuary, housed in the historical Captain Haven House. Marino is the primary reason why Cormaria has become so deeply rooted in the hearts of all who come and go, and those that find their way back again and again. It is in large part because of her unique guidance and vision that the center has drawn thousands of visitors over the years, including lay people, esteemed clergy and spiritual leaders, academics, and lecturers from all over the world. With Sister Ann at its helm, Cormaria prides itself on the spiritual and humanitarian aspects of its work, providing educational and pastoral services - highlighting humanitarian causes and a call to prayer, which extends from the local level outward to the global community. Assisted by her beloved sisters in residence, who like magic help with all the minute details of maintenance and organization of weekly, monthly, or yearly events, Sister Ann barely has a moment to catch her breath.

On the first Wednesday of every month, from October until June, the 'regular' women gather to pray and hear Sister Ann speak in the chapel overlooking the bay, following a delicious meal served by the lovely sisters in residence. Before saying goodbye for the summer season this year, Sister Ann invited all the local 'Wednesday women to attend a final breakfast and listen to a special presentation by Sister Kathleen Kanet, the founder

of *Network for Peace through Dialogue*. The topic would be on modern day slavery and sex trafficking – not the kind of subject one casually discusses after pastries and coffee. Usually the last gathering of the season ends on a rather meaningful if not nostalgic note - but I hadn't anticipated that it would turn out to be as memorable and poignant as it was. This rather unprecedented guest lecture sparked an incredible bond and sense of community amongst the women, bringing unity and a sense of responsibility to the forefront. Sister Kanet, who has been involved in peace education since 1974, and is celebrating her 49th year in service, began her speech with, 'Our conscience is our supreme guide for what we do.' As she began educating everyone on one of the biggest humanitarian epidemics of the 21st century - human slavery, particularly that of women and minors who are forced into prostitution - a sense of inspiration, concern, and a call to service suddenly arose in the room. Many misconceptions were put to rest, including that the women who end up exploited for sex do this of their own choosing. Sister Kanet stressed that women are being *prostituted* instead of being prostitutes. Women and minors are the victims of this horribly cruel and profitable business, which generates well over \$32 billion in annual income. This is something that could be well happening under our noses, and right in our community I thought. After all in a place like the Hamptons, which is a very affluent and service driven area, basically anything goes – even if it goes on behind the surface. Let's face it, where there is excess of wealth everything is more or less permissible and available. Not to mention that New York City is only a couple of hours away. As I mentioned this to my fellow listeners, the women started to shake their heads. The topic really hit close to home when one of the women in the room shared a story about a Russian girl who was hired as a maid, and was practically forced to work around the clock with no days off. Another shared how a place that posed as a local eatery for 'working men' in the landscaping and construction business was also an underground brothel, causing the place to be shut down by the authorities. What started out as an incredulous phenomenon to be happening 'right in our backyards' incited a real sense of community amongst everyone present. Women who had seen each other for years at Cormaria, but never properly introduced themselves to the other regular attendees, exchanged lively conversation and traded phone numbers and email addresses at the end. New friendships were forged, old friendships were solidified. What can WE do as a group? How can we make a difference? Where and how do we begin? It takes such inspirational figures like Sisters Kanet and Sister Marino and a meeting place like Cormaria, to bring us all together and impart a sense of responsibility, community, and service. The core values of Cormaria inspire us all to extend our efforts of good will beyond prayer, and reach out into the world to make a difference – to stand up tall and recognize that the power of one is strong, but the power of a community is stronger.

To learn more how you can support social causes and take a stand toward prosecuting sex traffickers log onto www.networkforpeace.com. For ongoing programs, events, and information on Cormaria, visit www.cormaria.org

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