

Have you thought of making a retreat?

What is a retreat?

A retreat is a planned time of spiritual refreshment, with the opportunity to rest, unwind and pray. It offers the chance to reflect in an unhurried way on your life, your relationships, and your experience of God; to ponder the meaning of what has happened to you, and to prepare for the future.

Retreats usually involve a good deal of silence, because many people have discovered through the centuries that it is in quiet that they can best reach into themselves and find the deep centre, the inner stillness where they are at peace with themselves and with the world around them. Each person has her or his own image of this inner stillness: for example, some may see it as a well from which they can draw fresh water, others as the truest part of their own being, others again as their experience of God within them.

But retreats need not necessarily be entirely silent: they may include daily conversation with others in a group, some kind of shared activity, or a meeting with a retreat guide.

Where would I go?

Most retreats are residential: you go and stay somewhere quiet and apart from your usual daily life, typically in a retreat house. Retreat houses provide a peaceful atmosphere and good accommodation at a modest price. Many are in the countryside, but there are some in towns too. Many people make a retreat each year: some enjoy the adventure of going somewhere different each time, while others return time and again to a house that has become comfortably familiar to them and a spiritual home.

Increasingly it is also possible to make a **'retreat in daily life'** in your own area. In this case the retreat is integrated into daily life and includes a time of prayer and a meeting with a retreat guide.

What would I do?

There are many different kinds of retreat, with more or less structure in the way they are organised.

- A traditional preached retreat is in silence, with daily talks from a leader and the rest of the time kept for prayer and reflection.
- On an individually-guided retreat you will have a daily meeting with a person who will listen to you non-judgementally and may suggest passages to read, perhaps from the scriptures, or exercises that might be

helpful. You will be free to follow these suggestions or set them aside. The retreat is usually silent, and a daily Eucharist is offered.

- On theme retreats you will be part of a group sharing a particular kind of creative activity, such as painting, clay work, walking or circle dancing, and bringing this activity and your own responses to it into your prayer.
- Interests related to the spiritual journey may be explored further in workshops, which will involve teaching and exercises. Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram are two popular typologies of personal temperament: they help people become more aware of themselves and their own priorities and motivations, in turn becoming more accepting of others. Other workshops explore different kinds of prayer, or related activities such as journalling.
- If you would simply like to spend time by yourself, you may make a private retreat. Retreat houses are glad to offer rooms when they are available, and may be able to offer a retreat guide as well. As a beginner, though, and especially if you are unused to extended periods of silence, it is usually better to try something with support and a focus.

How long would it be?

Many retreats occupy a weekend only; others last a week or so. Exceptionally, there are longer retreats such as the 30-day Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.

Would there be others there?

Many retreats involve a group of people, and even if you make a private retreat others may be staying at the retreat house at the same time. It is important to recognise, however, that during a silent retreat the people around you will not be talking with you, or only at set times. If what you seek is company and interaction, a silent retreat may feel quite lonely.

Do I have to be a Christian?

You do not have to be a Christian, but if you are staying in a retreat house with a Christian ethos you will need to feel at ease with this and with being surrounded by other people who are Christians. Some events are planned with a particular denomination in mind, and reflect that denomination's spiritual practices. Most events are open to all, however, and many are ecumenical in their planning.

How can I find out more?

In December each year the Retreat Association publishes *Retreats*, a magazine which includes addresses and contact details for around 200 retreat houses and in most cases their forthcoming programmes. You could find out the location of your nearest retreat house, and arrange to visit.

Before committing yourself to several days in silence, you may like to try out a shorter time. Many retreat houses offer drop-in days, often monthly, which are a good way to get to know a particular retreat house and to get some experience of what a retreat might be like. On these days you will be free to spend the morning and afternoon at the house, and people may come and go during the day. Usually drop-in days are quiet but there may be talks or a service, and often music is played during lunch.

Quiet days are similar, but in these participants begin and end together, and usually there is a leader who may give talks or suggest activities through the day, and perhaps guide a process of reflection afterwards.

The Retreat Association comprises these Christian retreat groups:

- Affiliates of the Retreat Association (AFF)
- Association for Promoting Retreats (APR, mainly Anglican)
- Baptist Union Retreat Group (BURG)
- Catholic Spirituality Network (CSN)
- Reflect – Methodists Supporting Spirituality and Retreats

The Retreat Association aims to foster the growth of the spiritual life by the practice of retreats. For information contact:

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