

Individually guided retreats

Making a residential individually guided retreat

An individually guided retreat is an opportunity to grow in relationship with God. As an aspect of that developing relationship, retreatants often come to understand more about prayer, about themselves, and about how to discern the will of God in their lives.

On a residential retreat, retreatants maintain silence for most of the time. A short retreat is usually of 8 days, for example Saturday to Saturday, with 6 full days in silence. (A 6-day retreat would have 4 full days' silence.) Each day there are several periods of prayer and a meeting for half an hour or so with a retreat guide. Usually there is a daily Eucharist which all are welcome to attend.

For the rest of the time, retreatants are invited simply to be - to be inwardly quiet, to be open to what happens, and to attend to thoughts, emotions and moods; and perhaps to keep some kind of record of this in a simple journal (for their own eyes only). Meals are taken together but without conversation; usually music is played. Being attentive and aware does not necessarily require physical stillness, and indeed many people find that inward stillness is promoted by some gentle physical activity, such as walking, gardening, knitting or painting. It is not advisable to read, however, or to listen to the radio. At some points time may seem to go slowly; at others it may rush past.

A companion on the journey: the role of the spiritual guide

The retreat journey is not made alone. Each day an experienced retreat guide is available to help the retreatant explore past and present experiences of God, different styles of prayer and ways of responding to Scripture, the relationship between faith and daily living, and other aspects of the spiritual life. There is no coercion in this: the guide will listen with respect and without judgement, and offer suggestions, which the retreatant is free to follow or set aside.

We meet God in our hopes and fears, our feelings, thoughts and desires. And so it is during a retreat: we may have new insights, experience a range of emotions, recall joyful and painful memories, have significant dreams. It is good to have a companion with whom to share these, someone who can help us reflect on them and discern the Spirit at work in them.

Retreat guides are drawn from different denominations, and may be lay, ordained, or members of religious communities. They are chosen because of their ability to listen to others, and are trained in supporting retreatants as they seek to listen to God. Skilled guides try always to respond to what is shared by each retreatant - although they are sometimes called 'directors', this does not mean that they tell the retreatant what to do! They try always to be sensitive to the language, images and experience of retreatants, and to discern in them the leadings of God. In proposing readings from Scripture or other activities, guides will wish not to control the retreat but to be

responsive to what is already happening, and to co-operate with the action of the Spirit.

Ignatian retreats

The Spiritual Exercises compiled by St Ignatius were a distillation of his own experiences of prayerful meditation while convalescing. He assembled them in order to share with his companions his own way of reflecting on and responding to the Scriptures. Taken as a whole they are the basis of a 30-day retreat, and traditionally such a retreat has been part of the spiritual development of, for example, many priests and members of religious orders.

In recent years, however, attempts have been made to share the wisdom of the Exercises much more widely, and to recognise that few are free to spend the time or money involved in a month-long residential retreat. Many people have benefited from reading books such as *God of Surprises*, by Gerard W. Hughes SJ (Darton, Longman & Todd); and many have made shorter retreats based on the Exercises but lasting only a week or so. Short retreats do not offer the full Exercises in miniature, but draw from the Exercises aspects that seem relevant to the individual retreatant at that time. Most such retreats are made while resident in a retreat house, but they can also be made in the course of daily life, a method proposed by Ignatius himself as an alternative way of making the full Exercises.

The full Spiritual Exercises are usually made as a 30-day residential retreat.

Although the Exercises are recorded in a book Ignatius was concerned to respond to an inner dynamic, not to force an outward pattern. For this reason, the Exercises are slightly different for each person, and people making the retreat together will not all be inwardly at the same place at the same time. Nevertheless, it can feel supportive in the prolonged silence to be surrounded by others making the same journey, and to meet with them daily for the Eucharist. Usually retreatants spend about three days beforehand preparing for the 30-day retreat, and about three days afterwards reflecting on the experience.

Retreats in daily life

Retreats in daily life entail a daily commitment to a period of prayer and a meeting with a guide, but these are dovetailed in with normal daily commitments. Whereas with a residential retreat the retreatant is away from ordinary life and has time and space to be and to reflect, in a daily-life retreat everything else carries on as usual! A great strength of this is that there is little adjustment to make at the end of the retreat: anything that has proved fruitful in the retreat is already integrated into daily living.

Retreats in daily life are arranged locally, where they are needed. Although individuals can make such retreats, more often they involve a local group. Many are ecumenical, adapted to the members of different Christian traditions and bringing people together in a shared journey of prayerful exploration. Usually the retreat lasts for a week, with all involved gathering together at the beginning and at the end.

The Spiritual Exercises in daily life ('19th-annotation' retreats)

The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius can be made over a long period, with a commitment to regular meetings, perhaps weekly or fortnightly, with a guide (who may live at some distance). This arrangement is often called a 19th-annotation retreat, in reference to Ignatius' note about this way of making the Exercises. The retreat may be spread over nine months or a year, or even longer. As with other Ignatian retreats, this form entails a commitment to daily personal prayer and to keeping a journal, which aids reflection and which can be reviewed before meetings with the guide.

A 19th-annotation retreat is a considerable undertaking, so it is important to have experience of Ignatian spirituality and of ongoing spiritual accompaniment before embarking upon it. It may be possible to arrange an exploratory period of such guidance before commitment to the Exercises as a whole.

Information from the Retreat Association

A great many retreat houses offer individually guided retreats: their names, addresses and programmes are listed in *Retreats*, the magazine published by the Retreat Association each December. If you are looking for a spiritual guide with whom to make a 19th annotation retreat, the Retreat Association can help by providing a contact in your area who will be able to introduce you to possible guides. The Association also publishes other leaflets which may be of interest, including:

- Choosing a spiritual guide
- The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius
- Contemplative prayer
- Weeks of accompanied prayer



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