

05

Contemplative retreats

These can take place on a residential or day basis, in a convent or monastery, purpose-built retreat house, or any place that is reasonably quiet. Contemplative retreats are designed to enable people to be deeply still, silent, relaxed and attentive to the Word/Spirit/Life of God.

Each retreat leader will have his or her particular approach. Generally speaking, guidance would be given on such things as the theology of contemplation, posture in prayer, the art of relaxation and attention, the use of symbols and words, and the implications of the contemplative way of prayer and life.

However, the retreat leader's role is not to talk too much about contemplation, but to enable the participants to make their own discoveries, both as individual persons and as members of a group, by doing the work of contemplation.



A few definitions may help to convey the spirit of this type of retreat:

Contemplation is 'a wonderful joy of God's love'

(Richard Rolle)

Contemplation is the awareness of God known and loved at core of one's being'

(Clifton Wolters)

'Contemplation is nothing else but the perfection of love

(Thomas Merton)

In contemplation 'we try to hold ourselves open to the impact of the truth of Jesus'

(John V Taylor)

Contemplation is 'the struggle to become still enough to reflect the face of God'

(derived from Monica Furlong)

Because this type of retreat is concerned with direct experience of God's love, the participants are actively discouraged from discursive or intellectual meditation. As the anonymous author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' put it long ago: 'By love he (i.e. God) may be caught and held, by thinking never.'

Contemplative prayer can be demanding, searching, and even painful. The retreat leader is therefore bound to be personally caught up in the exploration of a contemplative way of prayer and life, and to have a strong pastoral sense towards those in his or her care.

In addition to leading the contemplative prayer exercises, the leader attempts to make him

or herself available and accessible for private talks about the understanding and practice of contemplation, or anything relating to attitudes, behaviour, relationships, and Christian living generally.

As might be expected, the contemplative monastic communities are increasingly given to enabling secular clergy and laity to discover a contemplative way, by sharing something of the richness of monastic knowledge and experience of God, and of what it means to be a contemplative people wholly submitted to and co-operating with the sovereign will of God.

Outside the contemplative monastic communities, contemplative retreats are promoted for example, by groups such as the international 'Fellowship of Contemplative Prayer' and the 'Julian Meetings'.



Is contemplation for everyone?

Over the last quarter of a century, in the western world, there has been an encouraging growth of interest in methods of meditation and contemplation.

This may indicate that there is a basic human

need to withdraw from life's general noisiness and busyness, in order to regain a sense of personal balance and integrity - a need which has increasingly been met, for example, by ways of meditation derived from Buddhist and Hindu traditions.

This trend has had the salutary effect of provoking the Christian Church to unlock its own rich and powerful meditative/contemplative tradition.

In Christian terms, there appears to be a growing conviction that every human being needs to find space and time 'to love God and to let God love us', to rediscover our own Godlike nature, to be set free to live wisely, lovingly and powerfully, and above all, to co-operate with the will of God.

The contemplative retreat with its strong emphasis on the creative use of silence, not only within the contemplative exercises but throughout the retreat, may be understood as a time of intensive training to encourage and support us in the immensely worthwhile practice of daily contemplation.