

ENJOY THE SILENCE

THE GIFT AND MINISTRY OF RETREAT

By Sue Carroll





The seaside location of Mercy by the Sea in Madison, Connecticut, offers a peaceful setting for retreat and serves as a reminder of the gift of God's creation.

Directors and staff at three Mercy spirituality centers—Our Lady of the Pines, Mercy by the Sea and Mercy Spirituality Center—offer their perspectives on spiritual direction, building retreat curriculum and finding God in the stillness.

The feeling of entering the sacred space of a retreat or spirituality center can be transformative. The blessing of making time for solitude, silence and prayer offers solace to a population seeking God, dealing with personal concerns and, at times, suffering from anxiety and fear. “There is a real spiritual hunger in our culture today,” says Sister Wanda Smith, retreat coordinator at Our Lady of the Pines Retreat Center in Fremont, Ohio. “People need time to step out of the craziness of their lives for a minute.”

The Right Place

The settings for this needed space are many and varied in the Mercy world. The long, tree-lined drive at Our Lady of the Pines is described by some as an entry to an oasis. “Someone told me, ‘as soon as I pull in the driveway, I feel the difference,’” says Wanda. “It’s as if the trees themselves welcome people.”

In contrast, a seaside setting for Mercy by the Sea in Madison, Connecticut, offers respite to guests with a soundtrack of waves crashing on rocks as the sun rises on Long Island Sound. The natural beauty serves as a constant reminder of the delicacy and bounty of God’s creation. Center staff consider careful stewardship of the lands around them to be a moral obligation, and eco-spirituality is being integrated into the prayer life they provide.

Such space to retreat, however, need not be remote. For the team at Mercy Spirituality Center, accessibility was a primary desire and driver behind locating the center in the heart of Rochester, New York, instead of its original site on Lake Ontario. Although based in a small city, visitors still attest to the peace they feel. “A lot of times they will walk through the door and sigh and say, ‘I’m home,’” says Sister Jody Kearney, program director.



Retreat locales are an oasis, but the program directors note that the practice of retreat is no escape. Joan Linley, program director of Mercy by the Sea, describes it as an affirmation to enter more deeply into life. “This is about giving one’s assent—one’s ‘yes’—to say that our relationship with everything is important enough to offer ourselves this time to get to know it more deeply,” she says. While retreats offer relative solitude, they invite connection to humanity and a deepening understanding that we are each responsible for the world around us.

No matter the location, these settings serve as a place to seek God, deepen a relationship with God and develop a nourishing prayer life.

The Right Time

Sites aside, programs are the foundation of a retreat experience. The programs offered by Mercy centers of spirituality evolve continually as the needs and interests of retreatants change. Manageable schedules, creative approaches, compelling speakers and topics, and catchy program names are all balanced to complement the mission of each site.

At Our Lady of the Pines, retreats with an artistic slant are growing in popularity. Programs like SoulCollage®—originally developed by psychotherapist Seena B.Frost—tap into the left brain to connect with God in new ways. The directed silent retreat invites participants to first craft a prayer journal by hand and then use it to do their journaling for the week. “Many people fear silent retreats until they realize what can happen to you in the silence,” says Wanda. The word is spreading—registration for next year’s session is already full. “Praying in Color,” another program inspired by art, is held two weekends per year and focuses on using images to create unique prayer cards.

In addition to the methods of retreat, the time of life for retreat can also serve as the impetus for program development. For older adults seeking retreat at Mercy by the Sea, the “School for the Second Half of Life” program connects directly to the questions arising in them as they become “elders” in society. In its third cohort, the three-semester

“In silence and quiet, the devout soul becomes familiar with God.”

—Catherine McAuley

commitment over nine months draws 18 to 24 participants each semester to discuss the spiritual invitations found in retirement years. Discussions depart from concerns of career and income, instead focusing on topics like love and death, how to be a mentor, and understanding what it means to be an “elder.” “People are taking being an elder seriously,” says Eileen Dooling, Mercy by the Sea’s executive director. “They are taking responsibility for it.” A sabbatical version will begin in January 2020.

Joan Linley, program director, implemented the idea. She characterizes the arc of the change experienced by participants as a movement from “me” to “we.” “One of the greatest capacities that we have in the second half of life is the capacity to be with what’s real,” she explains. “The gift that participants have and develop is the ability to be with those who are suffering, and without trying to change them, be a loving presence to them.”

Program directors also realize that known retreat formats need to be infused with new approaches over time. The team at Mercy Spirituality Center in Rochester focuses its mission on developing lay leadership. Their popular Ignatian “Retreat in Daily Life” takes place over 30 weeks instead of the typical 30 days to make it more accessible to participants. Throughout the course, participants meet for weekly 2.5-hour sessions for prayer and reflection based on the liturgical season. While the program is based on the imaginative structure of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, Jody notes that staff members have also designed the Exercises to be a more contemplative and wordless experience. The approach complements the Mercy spirituality of contemplation and action.



Labyrinths like this one at Our Lady of the Pines in Fremont, Ohio, provide a path for meditative and centering walks.

The Right Frame of Mind

Beyond retreats, Mercy retreat centers are sought after for spiritual direction resources. Jody believes that Sisters of Mercy are uniquely qualified to offer the enrichment. “A lot of people come when they are trying to figure things out,” says Wanda. “Their prayer isn’t feeding them, their churches aren’t feeding them.”

Eileen agrees. “We’re not trying to set up an alternate church, but there has to be something more for those who are seeking it,” she says.

Breaking down boundaries can be a needed first step. “I find myself asking people, ‘why won’t you let God love you?’” says Wanda. “God is laying abundant grace on you and you won’t let it happen. Sometimes we come into it fighting that love. We need to stop fighting.”

All agree that the role of the spiritual director is not to provide answers but to help people find the answers in themselves. As Joan remembers, her mentor, the late Sister Florence Trehan, put it this way: never take the joy of discovery away from another person.

Whether directees are dealing with a problem or working on developing their prayer life or relationship with God, directors and staff at the centers describe their work as an invitation to connect, to find God in the things they do each day. They make no rules about how anyone should relate to God or recognize God’s grace. Instead, they give permission to find God anywhere they find stillness—from meditating to gardening to walking dogs. “We have a lot of work to do in undoing the depiction of an angry judging God. We try to move people to a loving, compassionate view of God,” Jody says.

The intimacy of listening, she adds, is a gift. Some directees’ experiences mirror her own questions and struggles. She describes the frustration of dealing with a compromised memory after treatment for cancer several years ago. When sitting with and listening to others who are struggling with memory issues related to aging, she says she has to be careful to remain objective in her listening. “The beauty,” she says, “is that they are able to talk and be heard in their grief.”

The desire to hear, to listen, to build relationships and to connect is contagious. Programs to train in spiritual direction and in prayer are part of the curriculum at many centers. Mercy Spirituality Center trains prayer guides to help participants enhance their prayer lives. In many cases, they move on to training in spiritual direction.

For Joan, her work as a spiritual director has been an exercise in paying it forward. She met her own spiritual director, a Companion in Mercy, 18 years ago at Mercy by the Sea. Later, Joan joined the staff herself, compelled by a strong desire to share with others the gift she had received.

The gift she found was in noticing. She says: “When you notice, you are seeing with God’s eyes. There is something deeper in this world than what our society is alluring us to. It’s so much more important and satisfying. A life that is satisfying and full begins to unfold just from starting to notice.”



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FINDING RETREAT ON YOUR OWN



Begin a practice of noticing details and beauty in nature each day. Write them down.



Take time to be silent and still each day. Listen to what you hear in the silence.



Take a mindful walk each day.

FIND A RETREAT CENTER

A full list of retreat and spirituality centers sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy is available at bit.ly/mercyretreat.