

***A Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Retreat:  
How to Prepare, What to Expect***

William C. Mills

Are you overworked? Do you constantly feel tired? Are you confused about where God is leading you right now? If you answered yes to these questions you probably need some time away from home, work, and family. You need to go on a spiritual retreat!

A retreat is not to be confused with a vacation, although retreats can very often feel like one, but without the worries of planning or financing. A retreat is time away, either for a day, a weekend, or a week, apart from the usual routines of life. A retreat is generally conducted at a monastery or retreat center and can either be directed or self-directed.

A directed retreat is one that is a focused discussion on a particular spiritual topic such as Scripture, marriage preparation, discerning ones' vocation, navigating the problems of grief and grieving, managing major life transitions such as a job change, new marriage, or a family issues.

A self-directed retreat is basically what the name says, a retreat that is lead by you! The retreat center will provide the food and space, what I call the creature comforts. Since you have full control over how you use your time you can choose to spend the retreat period in total silence, taking time to take long walks along nature trails or in a labyrinth if the retreat center or monastery has one. You might want to spend quiet time in the chapel for prayer and meditation or for reading short passages of Scripture. You might also want to devote quality time for writing in a spiritual journal. Most retreat centers provide a quiet area for reading and some centers and monasteries have libraries where you can sit and read during the daytime.

You can find retreats on a variety of topics. There are retreats offered for just men and others for women only and then others are co-ed. You can find retreats for newly

married couples as well as retreats for writers or artists; the list is endless. Sometimes the retreat center provides only the space and the food and the group arranges to have their own retreat leader lead the retreat. Other times the retreat center provides a leader for the group, usually a local pastor or monk or nun from the monastery.

When preparing for a retreat you are encouraged to leave your cares and worries behind you as begin your journey to the retreat center. A retreat is actually what the name says it is: time away, a retreat from the worries, cares, and problems of work and home. Worried about paying the bills? The bills will be on your desk when you return. Worried about planting those rose bushes before the summer months? What harm will come if those roses wait two or three more days in the garage? Anxious about your growing “to-do list?” The “to-do” list will be on your desk when you return home. Every day a million little thoughts, worries, cares, and concerns rush through our heads as we go through the normal routines of life. Our brains and bodies get overused and overworked; a retreat is for you to put them behind you.

Plan to use the retreat for quiet reflection, prayer, and most important of all: rest. Rest you say? Why should I spend two or three days resting, I am on retreat to do spiritual work! That is the problem! We tend to work, work, work which eventually wears us out. Working eight or nine hours a day, in addition to a long driving commute, combined with the regular routines of life: food shopping, waiting in carpool lines, cleaning the house, doing laundry; can put a toll on your body.

I remember the first time when I went on a self-directed retreat. I planned to go on a self-directed retreat at a monastery in upstate New York. I was in seminary at the time and was very busy with reading, studying, writing papers, and preparing for ordination to the ministry. I was anxious and worried about many things, especially my future parish assignment. Upon arrival at the monastery the abbess directed me to the guest room which was in a large white clapboard farm house that overlooked a meadow and a small pond. The monastery was isolated in the New York farm land, in the middle of

cow pastures and cornfields; the only noise that could be heard were the singing and the bull frogs, croaking all night long until daybreak. After unpacking my bags and finding my way around the house I decided to take a little catnap before Vespers, the evening prayer service at the monastery. What was planned to be a twenty-minute nap soon turned into two hours! I suddenly awoke, and realizing that I missed Vespers, quickly washed up, put on my shoes and walked over to the monastery refectory where the nuns were having supper. I walked into the refectory and planned a little speech why I was embarrassed to miss Church and so forth but before I said a word the abbess came over to me and said, "Bill, don't worry, everyone sleeps way too much when they go on retreat. Your body is telling you that you need the rest." She was right. I knew that I was tired but didn't realize that I really was exhausted. For the next two days I took many catnaps and didn't feel guilty about missing Church services either, I took her advice and rested.

So when you go on a retreat expect to take plenty of catnaps and even plan to go to bed earlier than usual. Most retreat centers do not have radios or televisions so there is no reason to stay up late to watch the 11 o' clock news or weather. When I lead retreats I usually go to bed at 9pm or thereabouts, much earlier than when I am at home. I enjoy sitting in a chair and collect my thoughts for my next talk, reflect on how the current day went, say a short prayer, and go to bed. A retreat is not vacation where you are constantly on the run. Take advantage of being away from husband, wife, children, work, and chores. Let each moment come and enjoy it. When was the last time you slept for eight or nine hours? Probably, not too often!

Likewise try to leave your laptop at home. There is no need to have a laptop while you are on retreat, otherwise you will spend time doing work and writing emails than you will spending time in quiet, prayer, or for rest. Take your cell phone but only use it for an emergency or to say hello to your family, otherwise leave it turned off or leave it in your car or guest room. You want your retreat to be distraction free. You might feel odd without your laptop or cell phone but you will quickly realize how freeing it can be knowing that you do

not have to rush to return an email message or phone call.

Most retreat centers and monasteries are located in very picturesque and remote areas, either nestled on the side of a mountain or in the middle of the woods or desert. A few years ago my wife and I were in Santa Fe, New Mexico for a conference that I was attending. While driving I saw a sign for Christ in the Desert Monastery, a Benedictine Monastery located just sixty miles north of Santa Fe. I had heard of this monastery from a friend of mine who said it was located in a very beautiful area. We agreed to visit if it was not too far off the road. Well, after getting the directions we decided not to go. After driving about one hour on a highway we then had to take several side roads and then drive several miles on a dirt road in the middle of the desert. I looked to my wife and we both said, “no, not this trip.” I guess the monastery doesn’t have much drive-by traffic! My advice is to bring good hiking boots or sneakers in case there are walking trails or some small hills or mountains nearby. There is nothing better than to spend time outdoors, breathing in the cool fresh air and experiencing God’s creation in all its beauty.

If you plan on participating in a directed retreat you will encounter participants from different parts of the country and from different Christian denominations. You might not agree with some of the statements made by the retreat leader or from the other retreat participants, but after all, who said that you always have to agree with someone? Very often a retreat will challenge you on some very deep levels. Also remember that loving your neighbor also means bearing with them even if for a short time. Try to be as cordial and friendly as possible. The other retreat participants are attending for the same reason, to take some quiet time alone for prayer, quiet, and reflection.

Retreats are like a little oasis in this dry spiritual desert called life. Everyday we are barraged and beaten down by so much information, thoughts, worries, and anxiety that we lose our direction, we get lost, we lose hope. Retreats are there to help us regroup and provide some spiritual food for the soul as we return back to our normal routines of work and family. Once you go on a retreat you will want to do this again and again! If you are

thinking about going on a retreat for the first time ask a friend or maybe your pastor for some advice or what you should expect. Call the retreat center or monastery for more information as well.

You can find retreat centers online. One clearing-house for retreat centers is appropriately called “Find the Divine” which you can find at [www.findthedivine.com](http://www.findthedivine.com). They have listings for retreat centers and retreat topics throughout North America. Likewise, the Benedictine Monastic Order has a list of Benedictine Retreat Centers in North America which you can find at [www.osb.org/retreats](http://www.osb.org/retreats). Both are great places to start your search. Finally, think of your retreat as a gift to yourself. The gift is priceless because it is time with God, and what gift can beat that?