



# On Retreat

by Jonathan Aitken

**N**OTHING IS SO LIKE GOD AS STILLNESS," wrote the 14th-century German mystic Meister Eckhart. But where can this elusive environment of godly silence be found amidst our intrusive 21st-century cacophony of cell phones, computer games, and other noises? One answer is to go on a retreat.

The noun *retreat* has many meanings. In the spiritual life a fair definition is the Oxford English Dictionary's "a period of complete seclusion devoted to religious exercises." Each word in this description is capable of varied interpretation. Perhaps the most renowned retreats in the Christian world are those that follow the spiritual exercises of Ignatius Loyola. These are forms of prayer, meditation, and contemplation carried out largely in silence under the guidance of a retreat leader who was traditionally a Jesuit—the religious order founded by Ignatius. But the rising popularity of the Ignatian exercises in the past 50 or so years has carried this form of retreat across many denominations and disciplines. It is estimated that in the United States alone there are at least 250,000 participants a year in Ignatian retreats, often directed by leaders who have undergone Jesuit training but are not themselves Catholics or ministers of any church.

These exercises are demanding and time-consuming. According to the most zealous keepers of the Ignatian flame, they should last for the full 30-day period devised by their founding father. However, for those with more feeble dispositions, like your High Spirits columnist, six-day or nine-day retreats are permitted. The nature of the effort required from a participant is shown at the climax or colloquy of the first exercise, when the retreatant is asked to contemplate Christ nailed to the Cross and then to ask three questions over and over again:

*What have I done for Christ?  
What am I doing for Christ?  
What ought I to do for Christ?*

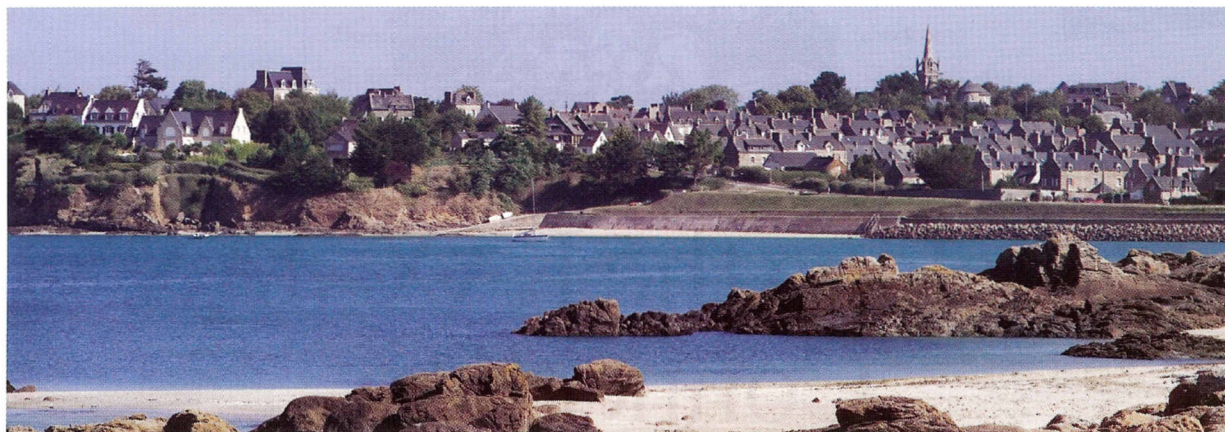
Inevitably this kind of in-depth contemplation does not suit every retreatant and is regarded by some as too rich in old-fashioned Catholic imagery. Nevertheless, Ignatian retreats do set a bar of high standards in terms of their requirement to withdraw in silence from the world, to concentrate intensively on prayer or meditation, and to be willing to change direction as a result of an inner call away from self-centeredness toward God-centeredness.

In my modest experience of retreats there are at least four ingredients that make a difference to the depth and direction of a participant's spiritual journey. One is the place where the retreat is being held—preferably a location of prayer-soaked walls, silent peacefulness, and physical beauty. Another is the spirituality of the retreat director, whose gentle leadings of the souls who have entrusted themselves to his care can be a transformative experience. A third is the companionship of one's fellow retreatants, who will probably come from a diversity of backgrounds but who collectively join together as a united body of brothers and sisters in Christ. Finally there is the all-important presence of God, moving among and changing the lives of those waiting on Him during the retreat.

**A**LL THESE FORCES WERE AT WORK during the last retreat I attended a few weeks ago. It was held at the Abbey of St. Jacut on the Brittany coast of northern France. Most of the participants were young American Rhodes Scholars on their Easter vacation from Oxford.

The Abbey of St. Jacut was founded in 465 AD. Today it is run by a small group of resident nuns, Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, who preserve part of the huge building's facilities for retreats. Its oratories (chapels) do indeed have prayer-soaked walls; the gardens are beautiful; the private dining and meeting rooms provide a peaceful atmosphere of silence and serenity.





But the outstanding feature of the abbey is its spectacular location. Perched on a narrow isthmus overlooking the English Channel, it is surrounded by its own network of sandy beaches, islands, crags, cliffs, rock formations, and spectacular ocean views. In this plenitude of beautiful spots it is easy to escape into solitude and a profound sense of the majesty of God's creation. This can come from the emerald-green sea with its surging tides and pounding surf. Or from the rich vegetation of oleanders, palms, figs, and mimosas, which flourish in the mild climate. Or from the wondrous panorama of the night sky, which for me evoked the opening lines of Psalm 19:

*The heavens declare the glory of God  
The skies proclaim the work of his hands....  
Night after night they reveal knowledge.*

Spiritual knowledge is found on many paths and at St. Jacut we were told to surrender to holy silence and to let God guide our footsteps. This advice came from our spiritual leader, the Rev. Lister Tonge, an ordained Anglican priest who specializes in leading retreats. He previously spent several years as a monk at the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, Yorkshire, where (and in South Africa) he was mentored by Father Trevor Huddleston, author of the apartheid-breaking classic *Naught for Your Comfort*.

As we were at the abbey for only four days, a full Ignatian exercises retreat was not on our agenda. But some of the same Ignatian influences were there, including contemplative readings, meditations, and much solitude. Silence was kept at all times. The only exceptions were at a daily communion service, a late evening meeting for corporate prayer, and a 40-minute one-on-one tutorial session of personal spiritual direction.

I can only write about my own experiences, but over the days at St. Jacut I found gratitude to God increasing, worldly anxieties receding, and trust deepening. Lister Tonge guided me to one or two passages of Scripture, but they may have been less important than the totality of the solitude and silence, which for me mysteriously opened up a new and deeper understanding of God's presence.

The companionship on our retreat was close yet complex. The young American Rhodes Scholars were about 45 years younger than me. All of them were brilliant in their intellectual achievements, most were vaulting in their youthful ambitions, and some were boisterous in their natural temperaments. So they were different on a chalk and cheese scale from me and my wife. Yet quietly we all settled down together, visibly going deeper in our different ways as we followed the disciplines and harkened to the whispers of God's call. When the retreat ended and we set off for a farewell drink at St. Jacut's one and only pub, my guestimate from fragments of conversation was that each and every one of us had traveled farther than we expected.

But the unexpected often happens in such spiritual circumstances. As one of the great retreat givers of the 20th century, Evelyn Underhill, put it. "The purpose of a retreat is to open our souls to drink in God. When that happens the results are often inspiring, occasionally shattering, and almost always transforming." ❁

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