

Silent Retreats

The concept of intentionally spending an extended period of time in silence and prayer is almost unimaginable to a loud and busy world, but silent retreats are, and always have been, an important part of Catholic prayer life.

What to Expect on a Silent Retreat

There are many variables to consider when selecting a silent retreat experience. It is best to examine your spiritual life and determine what type of silent retreat is best for you where you are at now spiritually. There are several general questions to examine:

- Should the retreat be short or long?
- Should it involve structure like scheduled talks, or should the days be left open for you to fill in as you see fit?
- Would you do best secluded in a hermitage, or should you rent a room in a retreat center?
- Should you meet with a spiritual director regularly while on the retreat?

Fortunately, the widespread availability of silent retreats will probably allow you to control many of these factors so that you can get the best experience for your current spiritual condition.

Length of Silent Retreats

Silent retreats differ in duration and structure. They may last a day or a full weekend, and it is not uncommon to find silent retreats that even last eight days or 30 days.

Before moving into the longer-duration silent retreats, though, many retreat centers strongly suggest experience with shorter silent retreats and regular times of prayer and silence in your everyday life. Even short periods of silence will involve spiritual peaks and valleys that can wear a person out, so it is best to practice a little every day (turn off background noise like the radio or tv, and pray) and to slowly build the periods of time that are spent in silence. Use this time in daily prayer to ask God for a good retreat experience before you go.

Structure of Silent Retreats

Many silent retreats are completely unstructured blocks of time set aside for quiet and prayer, though some silent retreats include meeting with a spiritual director each day. Some retreats may be preached, involving scheduled talks by different speakers throughout the clinic. Many silent retreats are also based on the [Spiritual Exercises](#) of St. Ignatius.

Where Silent Retreats Occur

Silent retreats may take place in a secluded hermitage, you might rent out a private room at a retreat center or monastery, or there may be a silent retreat week or weekend for a group offered at a retreat center as a regular part of their calendar of retreats.

How Silent is “Silent”

The definition of “silence” differs from one retreat to another. At some retreats the participants will be required to remain in complete silence for the duration. Other retreats only allow participants to speak during a daily meeting with a spiritual director. Still others will allow participants to talk to each other during meals.

The Role of Spiritual Directors at Silent Retreats

Meeting with a spiritual director each day during your retreat will help to guide you through this time of intense prayer. The spiritual director will examine your feelings, your mood, and the peaks and valleys you have been experiencing spiritually and then will help you to determine what best to contemplate and pray about. To get the most out of this spiritual direction it may help to keep a simple journal of how your prayer sessions are going, what you are praying about, and how you feel. This will help you to give as much information as possible to the spiritual director, who will then be able to guide you more fully.

How to Spend Your Time During a Silent Retreat

To get the most out of an unstructured silent retreat it is best to fight the instinct to accomplish a list of tasks, and rather to follow wherever the Holy Spirit leads you. Maybe you will pray the [Liturgy of the Hours](#) or the Rosary. You might reflect on scripture or spend time in Eucharistic Adoration or just go for a long walk. Some people like to write or draw. This will vary from person to person and from one retreat experience to another. Meeting with a spiritual director regularly during the retreat will help guide you to the activities that will be most fruitful for you.

How to Prepare for a Silent Retreat

To get the most out of a silent retreat, there are several things you need to do:

Commit

The most difficult part about making a silent retreat might be setting aside the time and committing to it. Make it happen. It might be for a single day, a weekend, a whole week, or more. Take vacation time if you have to, find somebody to watch the dog or babysit the kids or water your plants, and sign up for a silent retreat.

Turn Off All Forms of Communication

Emergencies that require our immediate attention rarely occur, but we feel like if we don't have our phones with us we might miss something critical. There won't be an emergency. Turn your phone off and leave it away from the retreat house. Give a friend or family member the number for the retreat center in case there really is an emergency and you must be found, but bringing your phone to the retreat will only ruin your silent retreat experience.

Get Rid of Distractions

It is really easy to feel like we need to accomplish something when we have a block of quiet time set aside, but you need to fight this urge. There may be a list of books you want to read, maybe even really great spiritual masterpieces, but sometimes a silent retreat requires stillness and patience. Don't try to fill your mind with books and information. Let a silent retreat be a time of prayer and openness to God, an opportunity to give your full attention to God and really listen to Him. Leave your books, your iPod, your phone, and your computer at home.