

Seeking a Change of Heart

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Glendalough Monastery view from the river

Many people in Ireland get the opportunity to experience a religious retreat during their time at school, and retreats have long been an integral part of the spiritual lives of priests and religious. For lay people retreats are an oasis, helping them with disillusionment. Retreats expand the horizon, revealing a world ‘charged with the grandeur of God’. They are a valuable, nurturing resource in our relationship with God.

A case in point is Olivia, a teacher

in Galway. She goes on a retreat every summer, during her holidays. Her favourite place to go is Glendalough.

‘It has enabled me to find God’s healing light in my dark moments and a new appreciation of my God-given gifts.’

Glendalough’s beautiful setting, itself a love-letter from God, opens Olivia’s eyes to the natural beauty and splendour of the world that surrounds her, inspiring her with a new confidence and passion for life.

'I visit to quietly marvel at the never-ending wonder of a God who created such diversity in life, and this in turn has enabled me to observe the miracle that insight and awareness could create within me.'

It helps her to appreciate the words of Meister Eckhart: 'One must not always think so much about what one should do, but rather what one should be. Our works do not ennoble us; but we must ennoble our works.'

A retreat is an ideal opportunity for those like Olivia who sense the stirrings of a new beginning within them. She is drawn to the possibilities retreats offer for spiritual growth, for fresh visions and for prayer.

'It has brought hope and joy to me when I was bewildered and despondent and allowed me to be caught up in the wonder of the divine and be held in God's limitless embrace. It is a place of looking for and longing for God regularly, which is what our hearts most desire.'

This annual retreat has been Olivia's sanctuary. It illuminates her life: allowing her to see beauty, seek possibility, love life and experience belonging in a troubled world. It is a gentle gift of light on her journey through this earthly existence.

'The retreats have helped me to find harmony between my faith and my life and to spend time developing a personal and progressively deeper relationship with God in Jesus Christ.'

Another firm believer in the power of retreats is Andrew, who works in a bank in Waterford. He regularly goes on weekend retreats. He believes that they provide him with the opportunity to open his mind to enlightenment and a great conversion of

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heart. He feels that he is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in his heart.

'Going on retreat is part of my commitment to the spiritual life. To nourish my soul requires not just prayer but a stretching of my mind and heart. They help me to live in right relationships with myself, others and God.'

His retreats give him a greater awareness that Jesus does not expect him to save the whole world – that was and is Jesus' job – but his hope every day is to try and help one neighbour at a time. For Andrew, retreats are not about the conviction that everything will turn out well but the certainty that, however things turn out, something makes sense.

'I want less of "traditional" religion and more of God and find it in these gatherings of substance and spirit.'

Andrew finds that going on retreat helps him focus on what he considers is mission in his life.

'Never cease to cultivate this vine that has been entrusted to you. After that leave the rest to God to work wonders at the time God finds best.'