



Tribune photo by George Thompson

Sister Evelyn Jegen greets Tiny and Sal Alaniz of Aurora as they arrive for babysitting at the Cenacle Retreat House in Warrenville.

Getting away from it all

By Marya Smith

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Chris had two preschool-age boys at home and was in the midst of a major career decision when she went on her first retreat, a one-day visit to Cenacle Retreat House in the Lincoln Park neighborhood.

"I was totally burned out, and everything in my life was in flux," she recalls. "When I arrived, one of the Cenacle sisters met with me and asked, 'What's one thing you can do for you today that you can't do at home?' When I answered, 'Take a nap and a bath,' she said, 'Well, let's start there.'"

Now an eight-year retreat veteran, the 42-year-old accounting firm partner says, "I could have taken a nap and a bath at the Fairmont Hotel, but it wouldn't have been the same. The retreat house was a warm and restful sanctuary that let me leave everything else behind. I continue to go because it's the only place where I can touch deep down inside. I never leave empty."

Chris is one of increasing numbers of busy women who are finding strength and renewal in spiritual retreats. According to Rev. Tom Gedeon, director of Retreats International, in Notre Dame, Ind., there are a minimum of a million people a year making retreats,

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Retreats

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compared to some 750,000 five years ago. James Palm, general secretary of the North America Retreat Directors Association in New York, says, "The programs at most of our centers are not specifically designed for women, but women are the ones responding and in some cases reshaping the programs."

Barbara Brown, program director of the Adelynrood Retreat Center, in Byfield, Mass., reports a change, not in the numbers of women attending the center's nondenominational retreats, "but in the particular women who come. In the past we had more women of leisure. Now we have busy women who pay a heavy price to attend, just to arrange for a weekend away from their jobs and families. They arrive harried and hassled, and I watch them slide into a different way of being. I think women increasingly want to talk about their spiritual journeys."

The retreat is a time-honored tradition. The word itself often evokes an image of a lone monk pacing silently along a Gothic corridor. But men and women of all faiths are welcomed by hundreds of Christian monasteries and abbeys, Zen and Buddhist centers and non-religious spiritual retreat locations across the country.

"It used to be that the people who went on retreats were with church groups," says Marcia Kelly, co-author of two regional guidebooks on retreat centers. "But now individuals are saying the pace of life is so fast, they need a moment to step off and see the direction their life is going."

"People come for solitude and silence, and for some input," says Sister Evelyn Jegen, coordinator of ministry for the Chicago area's other Cenacle Retreat House, in Warrenville, which has 3,000 overnight visitors at year, about 60 percent of whom are Catholic.

"We provide a place away from pressures and clutter to give the soul some space. I think this happens in all retreat houses." "People's reasons for coming

Retreat directories

Here are sources of more information about retreats:

■ "Sanctuaries: the Northeast" (Crown Publishers, \$13) and "Sanctuaries: the West Coast and Southwest" (Crown Publishers, \$15), by Marcia and Jack Kelly, include detailed descriptions (with prices) of hundreds of lodgings in monasteries, abbeys and retreat centers.

■ "Directory of Retreat Ministry Centers," an annual listing of hundreds of Christian (primarily Catholic) retreat centers in the United States and Canada. Available for \$25 from Retreats International, Box 1067, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556; 219-631-5320.

vary, but most people's lives are out of control, and there is an intuitive yearning for peace," says Rev. Wendy Egyoku Nakao, a priest at the Zen Mountain Center in Mountain Center, Calif., where visitors represent a wide spectrum of faiths.

Many retreat houses and centers offer a range of programs, most often for a day, a weekend or a week. Formats vary and include silent private and group retreats, individual directed retreats (involving some time with a spiritual adviser) and retreats with a workshop/speaker format, most often on a selected theme. Nearly all retreats allow time alone for journalizing, reading and private reflection.

"I think women need both silent and group retreats," Brown says. "They need a place where their voices can be heard and validated and a place where they can shut out sounds and be quiet."

Jennifer Roberts, 40, a newspaper advertising manager, attends group retreats twice a year at the Center for Exceptional Living Retreat Center, in Elkhorn, Wis. "I've found that core things happen on retreats with women. We talk about many subjects relevant to women and do activities together, from dancing to kitchen chores. Retreats have

empowered me to do important things in my life."

■ NARDA Directory, an ecumenical listing, with brief descriptions, of more than two dozen Christian (primarily Protestant) retreat centers, published by the North American Retreat Directors Association. Send \$3 to NARDA, P.O. Box 465, Cornwall, N.Y. 12518.

■ Communities Directory, published by the Fellowship for Intentional Communities, includes information on communities that offer retreats. The 1994 edition is scheduled for December publication. Send \$19 to FIC Directory, c/o Twin Oaks, Route 4, Box 169, Louisa, Va. 23093; 703-894-5126.

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A businesswoman with young children makes one-day private retreats to Cenacle House in Chicago. "My retreats are total silence," she says, "except when I'm talking to my spiritual director. She helps me tap in to where I am today. I get so quiet, I'm able to let go. The answers you're seeking kind of percolate up when you take your foot off the pedal."

According to many retreat directors, the issue for women is finding time for themselves.

"There is a very practical reason why women can put aside baggage at a retreat," Brown says. "They're taken care of. Women tend to do most of the nurturing out there, and they are hungry to be nurtured themselves."

"A retreat is something every woman owes herself," says Sharon Muzio, 46, who heads a marketing and sales company in Chicago. "You listen to seminars, share spiritual growth with other people, with no meals or cleaning. I have a very stressful job, and I go to Cenacle House group retreats for myself, to get grounded."

"Women are looked to as people to provide spiritual substance in family, work and social venues,"

says Pat Enyko O'Hara, a professor at New York University, who attends retreats at the Zen Mountain Center. "We need to feed this [spiritual center] in ourselves to gather strength to go back and work in the world."

Most retreat centers are blessed with natural beauty, often acres of it, from secluded mountaintops to suburban sanctuaries.

As Jegen notes, "Beauty does feed the spirit."

However, retreat centers are not spas, and accommodations are frequently described as simple but comfortable. The relatively low cost—often under \$50 a day for three meals and a room—helps make the retreat experience an accessible one.

Yet making a first retreat is not always an easy step.

"People often come a little bit afraid; they don't know what they're getting into," says Sister Ann Goggin, coordinator of ministry for the Chicago Cenacle Retreat House. "A spiritual journey is always a countercultural search."

"I signed up for a retreat and canceled, and then signed up again," recalls a 50-year-old woman, the director of a social service agency in Chicago. "It took me a year to go because it sounded weird. I'm not religious, but when I finally went, I felt it was good for my soul, and now I've gone to half a dozen."

But not every retreat is heavenly. "I had one horrible retreat experience at a place a friend had recommended," she says. "When I got there, I found the rules were very strict, the food awful, and the whole thing recalled old guilt-producing experiences from my childhood. So I left. But there's no way to control for how people experience a certain place at a certain time."

"A retreat is a personal thing," says Gussie McShan, a Chicago public schoolteacher who attends various retreat programs. "What I get might not be what you get, but the end result is usually peace, the ability to go on."

"Retreats provide our culture with a place and a program and a setting not provided anywhere else," Gedeon says. "A retreat is a quiet place for the human spirit to renew itself."