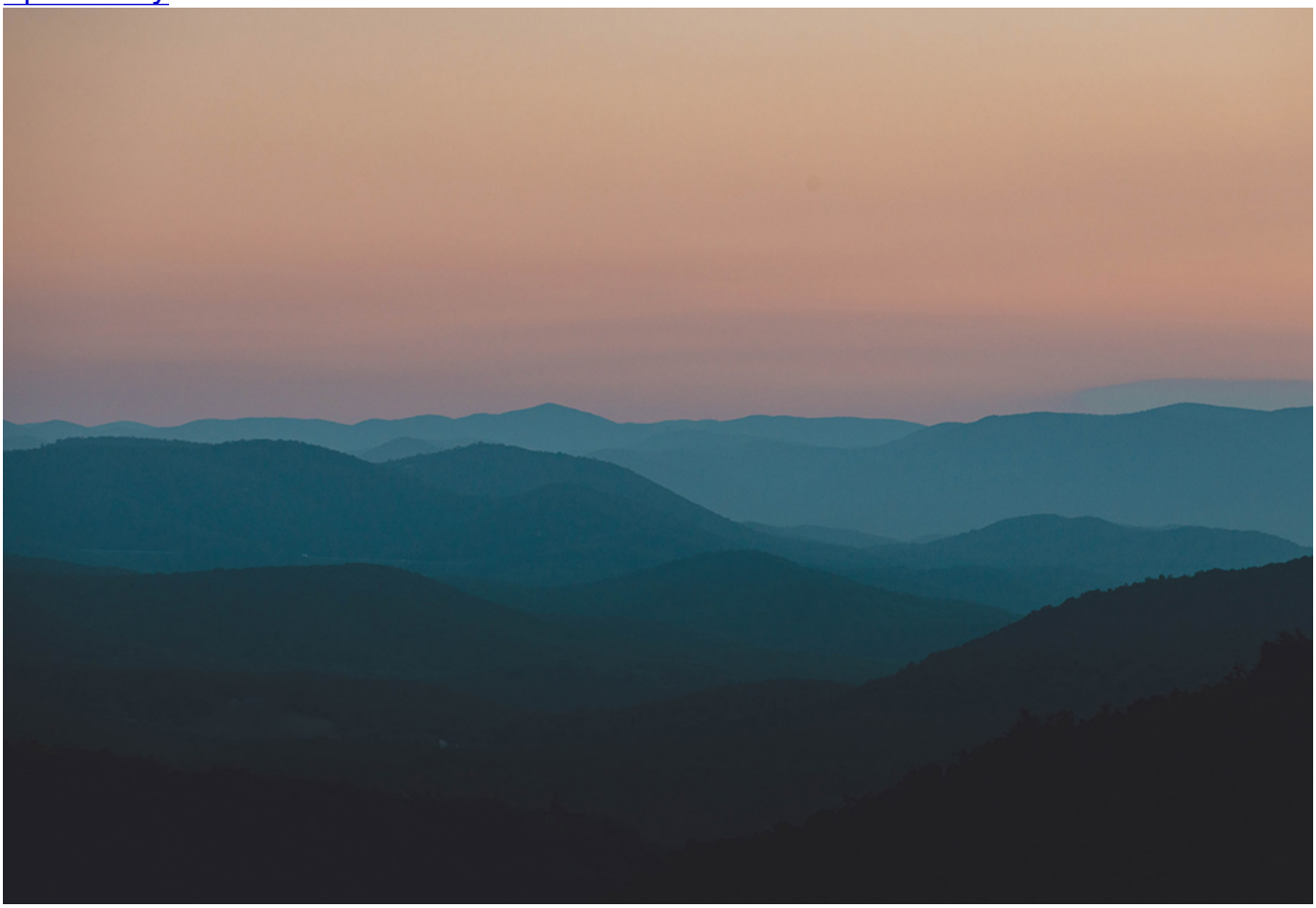
Columns
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Dave Herring)



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Each year as sisters we have the opportunity and the privilege of making a retreat. My retreats in the past several years have been at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia — and these retreats have made a profound difference in my life. Perhaps sharing my retreat experiences at Holy Cross might interest others to venture forth also on this "road less traveled" retreat at a monastery.

At Holy Cross Abbey, after discerning in prayer and reflecting on God speaking to me in the silence, I have made some crucial decisions about the direction of my life and where I would minister. Now, just having retired this June from full-time ministry and transitioning to being able to do volunteer ministry, I looked forward to this time apart. I knew my retreat — always a soul-searching experience and taking time to listen to the Lord — would be a time to reflect on this time in my life.

I have often reflected on the following words from Jeremiah 29:11: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." So as I came for retreat, I felt that I was again at another crossroad in my life, and needed to see the path to which God was directing me.

I can feel the difference from the beginning of my journey. Driving into the Shenandoah Valley, I turn off the major highway Va. Route 7, onto a narrow country road that leads me to the entrance sign for Holy Cross Abbey. Our Lady of the Holy Cross Abbey is located in the Shenandoah Valley, bordered by the Shenandoah River, in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains — truly a place of beauty and peace.

As I drive down the long winding road to the monastery, almost immediately a feeling of peace and tranquility engulfs me. It is as if I have left the world behind and can feel the presence of God in a tangible way. As I enter into a time of silence and leave the concerns of a stress-filled life behind, I find that I have time to reflect on what is most important in my life and what really matters. It is the time to really look at my life and listen to God speaking to my heart in this atmosphere of peace, quiet and holiness as I slow down and discern where God is leading me now.



A Trappist priest mixes the consecrated bread and wine during Mass in a May 2006 file photo at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia. (CNS/Bob Roller)

One of the most important differences about making a retreat at a monastery is joining the monks or the nuns for the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours) and the celebration of Mass. Everything at a monastery is at a much slower pace then I am used to experiencing — especially in the way they pray. Retreatants are invited to lauds, midday prayer, vespers and compline (and vigils at 3:30 a.m.!) with the monks.

Over a two-week time all 150 Psalms are chanted by the monks as they join in prayer. The Benedictus, the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis, and the Hail Holy Queen are also sung. It is so noticeable how the Our Father is prayed — very slowly and reverently. Listening to the monks praying, I really take time to think of the words. I find it hard when I come home and go to Mass because I miss the slower and more prayerful pace from the monastery. Even the meals at the retreat house are in silence and I gradually slow down and take my time eating as well.

Being able to meet with one of the monks for the sacrament of reconciliation or spiritual direction gives me the opportunity to share my life with him; many times this can give me a whole new perspective on my life. Perhaps it is because the monks live their lives centered in prayer and their whole life is lived in the presence of God that they possess a deeper wisdom and insight. This sharing with the retreatant certainly helps me to reflect more deeply about my life as well.

Keeping a journal during the retreat is invaluable in helping me grow spiritually. I have several journals in which I recorded the retreats that I made at the monastery, and in reading them over I can see how the hand of God has been directing my life.

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So this time I spent a week at Holy Cross Abbey and joined the monks for the Divine Office, each day as well as celebrating Mass with them each day. I even joined them for vigils at 3:30 a.m. one day. I was able to speak with one of the monks and share my concerns about my life and listen to his reflection on what I was discerning about my future.

What is so important about making a retreat — especially at a monastery — is that I can take that peace and presence of the Lord that I experienced there with me to my world. When I pray, I take the time to think about the peace and quiet that I felt at the monastery and how I experienced the presence of the Lord, and try to experience that again. One way I can experience again the prayer at Holy Cross Abbey is to go to their website and click on "Take Part." I can join the monks on line for lauds and Mass, Sunday Mass, vespers and compline.

The Sunday homilies are also posted on the website. I join the monks several times a week for compline — a very calming and peaceful way to end my day. It helps me to experience again the presence of the Lord which I felt at the monastery.

So, if you can relate to my experience of a retreat at a monastery and have a desire to experience that feeling of finding God in the silence, the quiet and the peace that a monastery retreat provides, I encourage you to venture forth on that "road less traveled" — and like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, experience the presence of the Lord in a very tangible way.