

A Time Apart



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Making a Personal Retreat at Assumption Abbey

INTRODUCTION

Coming to the monastery for a personal retreat provides an opportunity to nurture and deepen one's spiritual life by stepping out of one's ordinary routine into a quiet environment, where time and energy can be focused on God. Those who are new to making a retreat, as well as those accustomed to guided retreats, often have questions such as:

What am I supposed to do at the monastery?

What do I need to know before I begin?

How will I know where to go and what to expect?

This booklet has been prepared to help answer such questions and offer some suggestions for making the most of your time at Assumption Abbey. Enjoy the silence!

WHY MAKE A PERSONAL RETREAT

Given the opportunity to observe the Cistercian practices and values of the monks of Assumption Abbey, one discovers there is much about monastic spirituality that can be applied in one's daily life outside the monastery. Making a personal retreat will allow you to follow the monastic schedule with its emphasis on prayer, study, and reflection. At the conclusion of your retreat, we hope you will feel spiritually refreshed, taking with you a deeper understanding of the Christian monastic way and how it might enrich your life – both at home and “in the world.”

A LITTLE ABOUT ASSUMPTION ABBEY

Through the centuries, our Order has experienced three major “reforms.” The first came in 1098 when a new monastery, advocating stricter observance of the Rule of St. Benedict, was founded at Citeaux, France. The name “Cistercian” comes from “Citeaux.” A 17th-century reform at La Trappe gave us our other name – “Trappist.” Then, in response to Vatican II, our traditional focus on solitariness, silence, and asceticism was balanced with an added emphasis on community, contemplation, and joy.

Assumption Abbey, founded in 1950, was named in honor of Mary, the Mother of Jesus – a true contemplative who “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19) The first ten years we tried farming, orchards, and vineyards for financial support. In the 1960s, we began making concrete blocks, using sand and gravel from our land. This industry provided for both our community and charitable needs, as well as for the construction of our permanent monastery in 1970. In the mid-1980s, we began a new industry – a fruitcake bakery. We find that this suits our monastic rhythm well.

THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

Throughout this booklet, you will find references to the *Rule of Saint Benedict* (RB), a set of guidelines and principles for monastic life. Written by Saint Benedict in the 6th century, the *Rule of Saint Benedict* remains the basis for the lifestyle followed by Cistercian monks as well as their Benedictine counterparts.

Saint Benedict wrote his “little rule for beginners,” as he called it, at a time in history when life was barbaric and uncivilized. (Benedict, for instance, cautions his monks to remove their knives before going to bed lest they accidentally cut themselves during the night!) Nonetheless, much of the *Rule* is yet relevant

for those of us living in the 21st century. For Cistercians, the *Rule of Saint Benedict* has a status second only to Scripture. It is the primary focus of study for novices during their initial formation period. In fact, monks make their professions according to the *Rule*, hear regular readings from the *Rule*, and frequently refer to it for guidance in making decisions.

There is much in the *Rule* which speaks to non-monastic persons as well. No doubt this is because Benedict based his *Rule* on the teachings of Christ and the wisdom of the Scriptures. In the Prologue, for example, Benedict writes, “What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life. Clothed then with faith and performance of good works, let us set out on this way with the Gospel for our guide that we may deserve to see him who has called us to his kingdom.” (RB: Prologue: 19-21).

NOW THAT YOU ARE HERE

It is important to understand that while the monks at Assumption Abbey extend a centuries-old tradition of hospitality to guests and visitors, they are nevertheless a cloistered community. They have graciously made the Guesthouse and outside grounds open to the public. In turn, they depend on visitors, guests, and retreatants to respect their need for solitude by not entering cloistered areas. You will be able to identify these areas by observing the “monastic enclosure” signs posted in various places.

Sometimes the transition from a busy, hectic lifestyle to the peaceful serenity of the monastery can be quite an adjustment. We have grown accustomed to a backdrop of noisy clatter surrounding us at home and at work. So it is no wonder the absence of noise is one of the first things one notices about the monastery. Monks know silence as an entry point into prayer, which explains why their monasteries are quiet places – full of peace and tranquility. In such an environment, prayer seems to come more naturally.

As you settle into your room, you may want to give yourself time simply to relax, breathe in the silence, and feel deeply what it is like to be surrounded by peace and quiet.

Silence doesn't happen automatically when there are other people around. For that reason, it is important for you to do your part in maintaining a quiet environment. Refrain from talking in your room, hallway, library, and the area immediately around and inside the church. This is especially important in the evening after Compline when the monastic Great Silence begins. (Traditionally the monks do not speak to one another from the end of Compline until after morning Lauds.)

There are two dining rooms in the Guest House – one for those who wish to socialize with other guests and staff members during mealtimes, and one reserved for retreatants who choose to maintain silence during meals as the monks do.

SOLITUDE AND SILENCE

One of the advantages of a personal retreat at the monastery, in contrast to a directed or group retreat, is the greater opportunity for solitude and silence. The Gospels frequently mention times when Jesus went off by himself to pray. *“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”* (Mark 1:35) *“Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.”* (Luke 6:12) *“And after he dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.”* (Matthew 14:23) Despite his “busy schedule,” Jesus wasn't simply going off by himself in order to get away from the crowds and take a break. Jesus knew that solitude can lead to a deeper encounter with God. Throughout the ages, contemplative monks have sought to follow this same path.

Visitors to a Trappist monastery often wonder why the monks have chosen to live a lifestyle that places such value on being alone. The word “monk” actually comes from the Greek word

Monos, meaning “one alone.” Even in the midst of community, the monks devote themselves to inner prayer. Jesus taught us to pray this way: *“When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”* (Matthew 6:6) Jesus tells us that in times of solitude God, who sees in secret, comes to us, dwells in our hearts, and reveals Himself to us. Inner prayer helps us to quiet our minds and hearts in order to be attentive to the presence of God within us. Whether in the privacy of their rooms, in the church, walking in the woods, or any other place where they can be alone, the monks enter into their own inner stillness and pray from the quiet of their hearts.

Making a personal retreat at the monastery provides an opportunity for you, too, to become “one alone” in order to seek God in solitude. The solitude you experience during your personal retreat can be a special grace. It allows you to move beyond everyday realities and concerns, and journey into that deeper place within, where you are free to concentrate and reflect on God's presence in your life.

MONASTIC PRACTICES

Eucharist*

For monks, who have been reminded by Saint Benedict to “cherish Christ above all,” Mass is an essential part of each day. During the week, Mass is celebrated immediately after 6:30 a.m. Lauds. On Sundays, Mass is at 9:00 a.m.

* While all persons are welcome to participate in Mass, we are duty-bound to respect the position of the Catholic Church in limiting reception of Communion to Catholics.

The Divine Office

In his *Rule*, Saint Benedict, quoting Psalm 119:164, says: “Seven times a day have I praised you.” Accordingly, in Cistercian monasteries throughout the world, the Divine Office (also known

as the Liturgy of the Hours or the Daily Office) structures the monastic day. A typical day for the monks at Assumption Abbey is as follows:

3:15 a.m.	Rise
3:30 a.m.	Vigils / breakfast
6:30 a.m.	Lauds followed by Mass
9:00 a.m.	*Terce, then monastic work
11:45 a.m.	Sext
Noon	Main meal
2:00 p.m.	*None, then monastic work
5:45 p.m.	Vespers/Community Meditation
6:30 p.m.	Supper
7:40 p.m.	Compline

*Terce and None are prayed by the monks alone in the Cloister.
Vigils, Lauds & Mass, Sext, Vespers, and Compline are in the Church.

The Psalms, which were the prayers Jesus used throughout his life, form the centerpiece of the Divine Office. In fact, Jesus' last words come directly from the Psalms: "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Psalm 22:1) and "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*" (Psalm 31:5) When we let the Psalms become our prayers as well, we follow his example.

Monks pray the Divine Office, the official prayer of the Church, on behalf of us all. Thomas Merton reminds us that the Psalms "are the songs of the whole Church, the very expression of her deepest inner life ... and there are no songs which better express her soul, her desires, her longing, her sorrows and her joys."

Retreatants are invited to join the monks in the Church for the Divine Office. The bell rings 15 minutes before Vigils, and five minutes before the remaining Offices. If this is your first time at Assumption Abbey, one of the monks will meet with you to show you where to find, and how to follow, the schedule of Psalms.

In order to experience and appreciate fully the rhythm and balance that come from organizing one's day around prayer, we invite you to participate in praying the entire Divine Office, beginning early in the morning with Vigils, and ending peacefully each evening with Compline.

Personal Prayer

Monks set aside personal time each day for private prayer and other spiritual disciplines such as the Rosary, Stations of the Cross, Centering Prayer, Contemplation, sitting meditation practices, etc.

A personal retreat allows you to renew familiar prayer practices as well as experiment with new forms of prayer to which you may find yourself drawn. Assumption Abbey's church is open to you at all hours of the day and night.

***Lectio Divina* / Sacred Reading**

The ancient monastic tradition of *Lectio Divina* (Sacred Reading) can be an important element in your personal retreat. This practice helps one become aware of the wisdom in a given passage of Scripture.

Whether skimming e-mail messages or riffling through the newspaper, we have become used to reading things quickly, and often superficially. *Lectio* is something entirely different. Its fruits are to be found by slowing down and concentrating on a specific Scriptural passage. By reading slowly and prayerfully, one is more open to what God's word is saying here and now.

A personal retreat is an ideal time for making *Lectio* part of the day's agenda – even if you've never tried it before. While there is no set formula for *Lectio Divina*, the following guidelines may be helpful.

- Select a short scriptural text on which to focus.
- Take a few minutes to quiet your mind. Then

begin with a simple prayer, asking to be open to God's word.

- Read the text slowly, several times, until you find yourself drawn to a particular word, phrase, or sentence. Take time to “ponder” those words, paying special attention to thoughts or feelings that arise.
- Explore the significance of that particular passage and possible connection to the events, relationships, circumstances, and choices going on in your life and in the world.
- Prayerfully ask yourself what kind of response you need to make to the Word of God as it is being revealed to you through this particular scriptural passage.

You may want to begin with a familiar passage of Scripture, or choose from the suggestions below, which fit with the theme “a time apart.”

Suggested *Lectio* Passages:

Wisdom 9, 6:17-20	1 Corinthians 2, 12:4-11
Isaiah 55:6-11	Isaiah 58:8-11
Lamentations 3:25-26	Matthew 6
Philippians 4:4-9	Ephesians 3:16-19

If you are accustomed to keeping a journal, you may want to jot down the thoughts, feelings, and insights that come to you during your *Lectio* period.

Other Spiritual Reading

Monks typically spend a fair amount of time reading and studying. Though retreatants do not have access to the monks' library, there is a small library available in the Guest House.

If you have brought along your own selection of books, you will find a personal retreat to be an opportune time for catching up on your spiritual reading.

“Manual Labor”

Living a life of prayer in the context of silence and solitude does not mean that monks escape having to work to “earn a living.” Since monastic communities have no outside source of funding, each monastery must find a way to support itself financially. At Assumption Abbey, the monks are bakers and rely on their fruitcake business.

Monks consider work an essential part of their spiritual discipline. In fact, St. Benedict devoted an entire chapter of his *Rule* to “Daily Manual Labor.” Those of us who live outside the monastery would do well to heed his advice to balance the time we spend working with the time we need to devote to other forms of spiritual growth.

Monks create that balance by structuring their days so that work is not allowed to take precedence over prayer. The monastic schedule includes two separate work periods – one in the morning and one in the afternoon, following Terce and None (see page 6). Monks believe that work can become a prayer in itself; yet, unlike many of us, they do not allow work to become the primary focus of their day.

In keeping with the monastic approach of balancing work and prayer, we suggest that you consider incorporating “labor” of some sort into your personal retreat. This is not to encourage you to do school, office, or job related projects that are at the top of your priority list at home. Rather, consider doing simple, yet important, tasks that you may have been putting off – the personal letter you've been intending to write, the buttons needing to be sewn onto your jacket, the check you've been meaning to write and send to a favorite charity, etc.

YOUR RETREAT

If you are not used to making a personal, unstructured retreat, the suggested schedule on page 11 may be helpful. Whether your retreat is for a week or for several days, you can make it a valuable experience by familiarizing yourself with monastic practices and allowing your own prayer-life to develop.

You may find that it takes awhile to settle into the rhythm of the monastery and let the cares and worries of the world fade. As your body adjusts to the monastic schedule, you may feel unusually sleepy during the day. If so, take a short nap after the noon meal. (Monks often take a “meridian” [siesta] at this time.) It is important, however, not to let your retreat become simply a time for catching up on sleep, nor merely a time for escaping from the world. A successful retreat requires some effort on your part.

If during your retreat you feel the need to talk with someone about your spiritual life, contact the Guest Master. He will invite one of the monks, if available, to meet with you.

A personal retreat is not a time for “busyness,” but rather a time for reflection. It is a time for listening for and to the word of God. It is a time to come into contact with our deepest selves, honestly and openly, before God. Sometimes this can lead to a desire for confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God. If you would like to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, ask the Guest Master when a priest might be available

SUGGESTED SCHEDULE FOR YOUR PERSONAL RETREAT

3:30 a.m.	Vigils
4:30	Personal time for <i>Lectio</i> /reading, journaling, meditation/prayer/contemplation
6:30	Lauds
7:00	Mass (9:00 a.m. on Sundays)
7:45	Breakfast
8:00	Personal time
9:00*	Terce
9:15	Personal time for <i>Lectio</i> /reading, journaling, meditation/prayer, walking, “labor”
11:45	Sext
Noon	Main meal
1:00 p.m.	“Meridian” (monastic term for midday <i>siesta</i>)
2:00*	None
2:15	Personal time for <i>Lectio</i> /reading, journaling, meditation/prayer, walking, “labor”
5:45	Vespers and community meditation
6:30	Supper
7:00	Personal time
7:40	Compline

* Terce and None are prayed privately in preparation for the personal time which follows.

GOING HOME

When you are ready to leave, you might take a few minutes to sit quietly in the church and reflect on what your retreat has meant to you. Monks call this an *examen*, and it is a good practice at the end of a day. You might also ask yourself what impact this retreat will have on your life when you return home. On page 13 you will find other questions for reflection.

If you wish to introduce into your life some of the monastic values and practices you have experienced during your retreat, page 14 offers suggestions you may want to try when you get home. Please feel free to take this booklet with you.

We hope your time at Assumption Abbey is pleasant and fruitful.

God bless you.

Questions for Reflecting on Your Personal Retreat

1. What did you hope to receive from your retreat? Did you?
2. How have you experienced silence during this retreat?
What did you hear in the silence?
3. What has been the most challenging aspect of this retreat for you? Why?
4. What has been the most rewarding aspect of this retreat for you? Why?
5. What can you do on an ongoing basis to nurture your spiritual life?

Suggestions for Incorporating Monastic Practices at Home

RETREAT NOTES

1. Set aside regular time each day for personal prayer.
Consider praying a part of the Divine Office.
2. Continue the monastic practice of *Lectio Divina* as a way of listening for and hearing God's word.
3. Look for opportunities to introduce periods of silence into your day.
4. Keep up with your spiritual reading.
5. Pay attention to the things you do and say, taking care not to hurt others with your words or actions.
6. Be alert and sensitive to the needs of those around you, responding compassionately and unselfishly.

We thank New Mellereay, our Motherhouse, for permission to adapt and incorporate sections of their retreat booklet.