

# A Godly Guffaw

By Sr. Suzanne Ryder, Western Province.



“*Stupid question...*” began my friend, as he lowered my suitcase from the attic. I attempted an assurance that there is no such thing as a stupid question, when he finished his query, “*...what’s a retreat?*”

I don’t believe I had ever asked that question before, taking an answer so much for granted, falling into the trap of presumption. A retreat was something we had in school, when some priest would talk to us every day, and we would be less noisy than usual, enjoying the suspension of regular class.

A retreat was something I did in community every year as a Religious Sister: someone preached every day, television dark, meals eaten in silence.

I remember the clay under the fingernails of the monk who celebrated Eucharist in the early morning in Mount Mellerary Abbey, the Cistercian Monastery in Waterford, when I went there for retreat one year. The words of another monk I visited for a daily chat still echo: “*when you come up the hill from the guesthouse,*” he said, “*it is impossible to arrive in one leap.*” I gave surface agreement, but with a heart, resistant to the truth, that I needed to take only one step at a time.

With the passage of years, retreats became more intentional, more creative in style. One on dreams, another exploring art, most touched by music, all graced by the gift of outdoor beauty. Some had a degree of direction (what’s direction?), and latterly, most involve silence...

Today, I am on the precipice of a 30-day retreat, my case still empty. Wavering between anxious trepidation and emerging hope, my friend's question resounds like a yawning void, anticipating an inevitable drop, while hoping for a hushed whisper of promise or a vague impression of a secret smile.

I could cancel it, couldn't I? Doesn't retreat mean to back off or retrace one's steps? Perhaps it could pass me by before catching me unawares, bringing me to a point of no return?

When birth begins there is no stopping it. Newness will emerge, be it stillbirth or a cry of new life. A risky business. Can I trust being carried by a passing updraft of warm, fresh air, a Godly guffaw, letting go hazardously into a freefall of previously unexplored emptiness?

I had one last swim in the pool this morning before venturing forth tomorrow. Only a few humans were enjoying the calm water so I didn't need to be concerned that my *still learning how to breathe* style swimming would be in anyone's way. Then, emerging from the pool, someone introduced herself, calling me by name. She has no idea how much that healed part of my self-doubt.

Next, I was welcomed into the sauna by some men I meet occasionally, in that steamy place of anonymity. Recklessly, I revealed my plans. A woman keeping silent for thirty days was the source of disbelieving laughter from one of them. A Godly guffaw! A sign! However, again, they will hardly know how I am touched by their words: they will miss me. The case is still to be packed, but that warm laughter has begun a hopeful tremor in my earth-quaking world.

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