

This Surprisingly Potent Strategy Can Revitalize Your Quiet Times

Do I need to take a silent retreat? “Well, my friend,” she says with a sly grin, “that depends.” I can almost hear your cry, “No! Just answer the question.”

For some, silence stands as the gold standard of a personal retreat. After all, that’s the tradition of those who walk closely with the Lord, right? Shouldn’t the absence of noise be something we strive for? It calms the soul and certainly contrasts the soundtrack of most of our day-to-day lives. But how essential is it? Must it be for everyone?

My first few personal retreats ended up on the silent side, not because I chose that option, but because no one was around to engage in conversation. On my first retreat, I arrived at breakfast and lunch to find my meal all set up, seemingly by angels, so I never exchanged a word with any of the servers.

I found it a fascinating experience not to say a word for many hours, not even a quiet, “Hi.” It seemed I was transported to a very different place after my initial check-in. I ran into no one. After many retreats, I can say that this doesn’t always happen, but it didn’t take long that first time to immerse into the lovely “sound of silence.”

One year I visited a new-to-me retreat center and joined a few other ladies at a lunch table. When I first sat down, I initiated chit-chat, as usual, and received some pretty pointed glares. I wondered why I was getting the silent treatment, until a nun quietly pointed out the sign over the table: “Please observe the courtesy of silence during all meals.” Oops!

Silence isn't just for personal retreats. I have also attended several group retreats that included large segments of personal silent time. During these retreats, meals were also talk-free, but one of the leaders read aloud from a spiritual classic while we dined so it really didn't feel awkward or rude not to converse with my table mates. Of course, asking for something to be passed without speaking led to a few silent chuckles. By the second meal, we managed just fine.

How would you respond to long stretches of silence? Do you think it would enhance your retreat experience? Or does the idea of not talking at all to anyone squeeze past your comfort zone? For an introvert gal like me, silence is energizing at many points in my day-to-day life. But for you extroverts, this could be a big step. Maybe you're already looking for a way to avoid those types of retreats.

Here is a new angle: Some retreatants make the distinction between absolute silence, no noise at all, and functional silence, no engaging in conversation but allowing music.

The absolutist camp believes God is best heard in the absence of any noise, including the noise of our thoughts. The retreatant is urged to eliminate external sounds and avoid internal chatter. Techniques of deep breathing, relaxation techniques and meditation are often mentioned as aids to engaging in silence.

Functional silence might be a better fit for you. You avoid intentional conversation but let your smartphone music set the tone in your room or on your walks. Functional silence could also include your own singing, playing instruments or other forms of worship. Attending an on-site service, listening to a message or someone reading aloud could also fit into functional silence.

How does that sound? (Excuse the pun.)

If you're still not sure about silence, experiment with

different models while you are on your retreat, including no silence at all. I can assure you, God will meet you if you show up. He is quite comfortable in any setting.

One topic to consider in the silence-or-not dilemma is contact with the home team. Do you want to check in at home or be reachable for anything other than an emergency? Is having a quick conversation with your spouse or children at the end of the day important to you? Do you want to receive texts or emails on your phone or laptop? How about contact from work?

With today's technology, most of us are on stand-by all the time for anyone who wants to reach us. This concept definitely competes for the focus a retreat invites as well as disrupting a sense of silence, whether absolute or functional. There are no rules for this, but it's a good idea to decide before you go if possible.

Consider your needs before you come. Have a conversation with those most likely to want to contact you and set some parameters. In other words, be intentional about who has access to you. Your retreat experience will be better for it.

So, no, you don't have to be silent, but you might want to try it out before you decide. {eoa}

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