



# AN OASIS IN THE CITY

## A LENTEN RETREAT IN THE HEART OF HISTORIC ROME

BUSY DAY? WHY NOT GRAB A BREATHER AND GO ON A RETREAT RIGHT HERE IN THE HEART OF ROME? THE LAY CENTER'S DONNA ORSUTO TELLS ALL.

### DONNA ORSUTO

Today it is common for business leaders, administrators, and boards of directors to go away for a retreat. They wisely recognize that by leaving their ordinary environment and going some place apart, they can better focus on essential issues, do some creative thinking and strategic planning for the future. Though this business practice is relatively new, spiritual retreats have been part of Christianity in one way or another since earliest times. In the Christian tradition, a retreat means a literal 'withdrawal' from one's routine and environment so as to enter into a space dedicated to the sacred. The example of Jesus, who spent nights in prayer and withdrew into the desert, has been the model for women and men throughout the centuries.

### An Ancient Practice...

One early example of a retreat is that of the desert fathers and mothers in the second and third centuries AD who headed from the city to the desert to discover their deepest desires as they sought to open their hearts to God. Though they did not have cell phones, ipods and the constant barrage of background noise that we have today, they did have to face the challenge of confronting their own interior 'noise' in a silent space. Exterior silence can facilitate interior silence, but even so, it is not always easy to be still. For example, when Abba Agathon, a monk of the third century, spent time in his desert cell, he decided to keep a stone in his mouth as a way of trying to be quiet. He apparently continued this practice for three years. This may seem a drastic solution to his problem, but the image reminds us that the greatest challenges in the spiritual life are those that come from deep down within us.

Like the early desert dwellers, the women and men who developed the monastic tradition in the fourth century AD highlighted the importance of taking time periodically to focus on their search for God. Though the monastic life was considered a continual Lent, even so, a certain period of intensifying prayer, penance and fasting was encouraged particularly for the forty days leading up to Easter. In the Middle Ages another type of retreat was popular by which women and men journeyed, often on perilous paths, to the Holy Land or other Christian shrines as a concrete gesture of their desire for a deeper and more authentic spiritual life.

In the sixteenth century, St Ignatius of Loyola, in his Spiritual Exercises [see page XXX], probably had the greatest influence on shaping Christian retreats. He used the example of physical exercise to show why it is im-

portant to take time for a retreat. Just as we take time for walking, running, going to the gym to keep our bodies sano e saldo, so also we need space for the 'spiritual' exercises that keep us spiritually healthy.

### ... that Continues to Inspire

Each year during Lent, for the last 20 years, the Vincent Pallotti Institute at the Lay Centre has organized a retreat especially for lay people here in Rome. These retreats have drawn people from every age group and profession. From diplomats, teachers, business people, and retirees, to young couples and singles, these small gatherings have been opportunities to take time away from ordinary activities to discover the extraordinary work of God in one's life. Patricia Manson, a Catholic laywoman and a graduate of the VPI program of lay formation summed it up by saying that "in these moments retreatants, including Christian married couples, give testimony



to their simple and extraordinary efforts to witness their faith in their families and in their professional lives."

This year's retreat takes place from 22-24 February at a retreat house on the Celian Hill in Rome and is focused on the topic 'The Gift of Reconciliation: Receiving the Life-Giving Power of the Gospel'. Internationally renowned retreat director Rev. Anthony McSweeney SSS is leading the weekend retreat. Besides his conferences, there is time set apart for personal and communal prayer, daily liturgical celebrations. Above all, there is time to simply 'be', to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and enter into an interior landscape where one can discover God and one's true self. At the same time, meals together provide an opportunity to meet others who are on a similar journey. Participating in a retreat during the forty days of Lent is an occasion to prepare for Easter in a unique way.

### Previous retreatants

Past participants in the Vincent Pallotti Institute retreats commented how grateful they were for the opportunity of a weekend away from their normal routine, busy work and family schedules to pray and reflect on the Scriptures. The Honorable Tony Hall, former US Ambassador to the UN Agencies in Rome expressed his gratitude for "the chance to listen to Father Tony McSweeney's thoughtful and challenging presentations." Clare Broadbent, an Anglican laywoman who retired from NATO, expressed her appreciation for "the delicious meals, the comfortable accommodation, the gracious hospitality and the prayerful presence of the staff." Alfons and Anna Maria Kloss remarked, "we appreciated so much meeting people from all over the world, praying together and talking to each other in a meditative setting under the most inspiring spiritual guidance of Father Mc Sweeney – a unique experience which has opened our minds and hearts!"

A retreat can be like finding an oasis in the city. An oasis is defined as a fertile or green area in an arid region or even a place of refuge. Above all, it is a place of renewal and rest – something so important for busy people today. Please contact us if you would like to join us for this weekend of spiritual renewal in the heart of the Eternal City: [info@laycentre.org](mailto:info@laycentre.org)

*Author note: Donna Orsuto is the Director of the Lay Centre, an international resource for laity in Rome ([www.laycentre.org](http://www.laycentre.org)). She is also a Professor at the Gregorian University in Rome.*