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## The Retreat

by Lesley Dawson

“Going on a silent retreat?” laughed my housemate.

“For a whole weekend?” I nodded, wondering what I had let myself in for.

“You can’t even keep quiet in meetings where you know that to lift your head above the parapet will involve you in more work.”

I was reminded of being at a physiotherapy educators meeting in London with my boss, Pete. He had entreated me not to volunteer for anything. “If you do, it will involve me. It always does.”

We were seated at the rear of the room. In fact, on the back row. Pete had advised me to keep my head down so that nobody could catch my eye and assume I was making an offer. This posture lasted until, almost at the end, a most outrageous statement was made that I couldn’t possibly agree with.

“Don’t rise to the bait”, Pete growled “They are only trying to provoke you.”

Too late, my head rose as did my anger and I spoke courageously on whatever subject it was. Too late, I realized that I had been volunteered to be part of the task force being set up.

Hence, everyone’s ridicule about my intention to go on a silent retreat at the Lutheran Brothers of Jesus guest house built on the ruins of a Crusader castle.

That first semester in Bethlehem had been chaotic with everything new, language, colleagues, students and, most of all, the rules at the university. My body was exhausted, my mind crammed with new sensations and my spirit overloaded with concerns about adapting to a different culture.

My colleague, Sue, had suggested the retreat. She went to it regularly to regain a sense of peace and the ability to focus on what was important in her life and work.

“We arrive for dinner on Friday evening, during which time we can speak to each other and after that we are all silent until Sunday lunch time.” This prospect did not fill me with joy.

“Don’t worry; we are not left completely alone. There are a few gatherings at which we can sing and listen to encouraging talks from Brother Elia that give you topics to think and pray about later.”

This news raised my expectations a little and I began to look forward to the weekend.

I found that mealtimes were the most difficult. One had to sit with other guests and share food from tureens on the table, without uttering a word. It was suggested that one way to achieve this without losing your cool was to try to anticipate what your fellow diners wanted or needed. This seemed to work with most people, but completely confused one German man who was present. We could see his face getting redder and redder as we all passed dishes to him that he didn’t want. In the end, he could bear it no longer and spluttered “I want the butter.”

Not to have to explain myself in slower than normal English to second language English speakers or remember the equivalent words and phrases in American English was a definite plus. I gloried in the inner silence, while appreciating the sounds from the farm down in the valley, birds singing in the trees and the far away traffic on the highway to Tel Aviv.

Sunday lunchtime came far too soon and it was strange to have to talk to people again. Voices seemed louder than I remembered, in contrast to the silence before.

On our drive back to Bethlehem, where confusion and chaos awaited me, I wistfully looked back on my weekend at Latrun.

“Silence isn’t always empty, is it? It is not the absence of noise any more than peace is just the absence of war.”