

# Retreats Deserve a Health Warning: Eight Days in the New Mexico Desert

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I had been looking forward to this retreat for a long time – it was to be at the end of a sabbatical during the summer of 2010 and I hoped that I had kept the best till last. I was to spend eight days at the Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert in north western New Mexico, USA. It was founded in 1964 by Father Aelred Wall and two other monks from Mount Saviour Monastery in New York.

Why that place and not somewhere else?

In no particular order the answers are...

1. I had spent the past few years reading and writing about Thomas Merton. In my research I had read of how, in the final year of his life, he had been allowed to search for suitable places for a new hermitage. He visited Christ in the Desert twice in 1968, and fell in love with the geography, the silence and the vision of the founders:

“The desert setting of the Chama canyon is the site of a new monastic

foundation. The place was chosen with careful deliberation and it is admirable. Thirteen miles by dirt road from the nearest highway, the monastery rises at the point where the canyon narrows and the road vanishes into rock and bush. The monastic church designed by the Japanese architect, George Nakashima, fits perfectly into its setting. Stark, lonely, stately in its simplicity, it gazes out over the sparse fields into the widening valley. The tower like a watchman looking for something or someone of whom it does not speak ... the monastery is only in its beginning: it is a small seed, seeking to fix its roots firmly in the rock and sand of the canyon, like the hardy pinion pines around it. It does not have the monastic ambitions of the big institutions which have become famous. It seeks only to keep alive the simplicity of Benedictine monasticism: a communal life of prayer, study, work and praise in the silence of the desert where the word of God has always been best heard and most faithfully understood.<sup>1</sup>

With a recommendation like that, the monastery sounded irresistible.

2. I have grown to love the Desert Fathers; their wit, wisdom, compassion and honesty. I reckoned that such qualities could not be divorced from the setting. I wanted to be a Desert Father too.

3. I was enticed by the prospect of wall to wall silence – aridity – space – nothingness. I was tired of forever dipping my toe into silence – I

wanted to bathe, swim and submerge myself in it.

4. It had not been possible for me to go away for a retreat for a number of years, but now I was truly ready for extended exposure to God – for taking a long look at my life and its direction.

### What happened ?

Flying from London to Santa Fe, was straightforward – everything connected. The plan was then to pick up a pre-booked hire car from Santa Fe airport and drive to the monastery, getting there in time for the evening meal. After landing, I went to find my Alamo hire car but couldn't locate the help desk. No one seemed to know of its existence. I borrowed a mobile phone and got through to Alamo who assured me that I had a car waiting for me in Santa Fe ... Argentina! I have experienced few times of real panic in my life, but this was one of them. I was on my own – no friend or partner to turn to and confer with about what the best plan would be. Alamo and I agreed that the best thing to do was to try my luck elsewhere.

The other car hire firms at the airport though, turned me away. One firm, Avis, told me to check back every thirty minutes in case a car might return. After what seemed an age, pacing up and down, the Avis manager told me that a car had just arrived. I speedily signed forms and disclaimers and walked to the parking lot to

find that the car in question was a lavish, executive Lincoln saloon with leather seats and enough space in the boot to fit two family sized cars (I exaggerate – but only a bit!). I was not in a position to be picky, so I threw my bag into the back and drove off. After ninety minutes I realised a number of things.

The first was that I was in a wilderness. It was the sort of country you would see in old Western movies – cliffs and sand, interrupted by a solitary cactus. The second thing I realised was that I had no breakdown cover or car insurance. I had turned these down at the airport when my brain was scrambled and all I wanted to do was to get on the road. If the car were to develop a fault I could be waiting a long time for anyone to come to my aid; if I bumped the car, I could be faced with a very large bill. Not surprisingly, this realisation only increased my stress levels which were already pretty high – but not quite high enough as I was about to discover.

After several hours driving, I came to the turning for the monastery. I knew it was thirteen miles of dirt track but I hadn't quite appreciated that the road comprised a number of blind summits, hairpin bends and sheer drops into the canyon below. I bumped and bounced along in my lavish executive car – praying that I would not find another car coming in the opposite direction. When I eventually pulled

into the monastery car park I noticed it was populated, surprise, surprise, with small cars and 4x4s – ideally suited to the terrain – my Lincoln stood out more than a little.

I found my room in what looked like a ranch house and then walked to the chapel where Compline was due to start. On entering the church I settled into the back seat – the refuge of a good Anglican – and waited.

I love Compline, it is such a gentle service; the spiritual equivalent of Horlicks – warm and comforting. After a day of extreme stress I was ready for prayerful detox. The monks entered and began to sing – in Latin. My heart sank.

I hadn't thought to enquire. I had just assumed that the worship would be in English. What had I come to? Could I cope with a week of prayer in the ancient tongue of Rome? I found the guestmaster who asked hopefully if I had eaten – I had had breakfast at 6am and it was now 8pm, almost his bedtime. I was beyond hunger however and retired to my cell to unpack and climb into bed only to sleep fitfully, still hard wired to anxiety. I didn't need an alarm call for the first office of the day at 4am – I was wide awake. To my relief I discovered that the Latin was an exception. The monks treated themselves to it once a week – English prevailed for the rest of the time.

But it wasn't long before I came to another realisation which was that I was homesick. I couldn't be-

lieve it – I had been looking forward to this retreat and yet my stomach was churning and I was longing for my family. I despaired of myself and the week ahead seemed to stretch out a long way.

In response, I did three things: I worked. Guests could join with the monks in manual work in the morning after the third office. I knew I had to focus on something other than my anxiety and it would give me the opportunity to talk to others – silence in the guest accommodation and the monastery was the backdrop to everything. I came to enjoy my time with Brother Francis, harvesting herbs, listening to jazz, talking about art and California. Later in the week I oiled doors with an equally delightful fixture of the monastery, Paul, who came during vacations from a college where he taught. He enjoyed letting off steam about Tea Party Republicans and conservative religion.

I kept a journal and wrote down everything that was going through my mind. It had a raving character to it – but I knew I had to take what was inside my mind and place it outside of myself.

I asked to see a priest. The community didn't offer spiritual direction – guests were simply invited to share their life and make use of the silence and prayer – but I thought it would be good to talk to another human being about what was happening to me. Several days later an appointment was made. I began by

telling the priest about myself, family, work, home and my homesickness – but I didn't get far before my eyes filled up and I began weeping. I didn't stop for a long time. I felt sorry for the priest. I could see he was bewildered – what to make of this man who had travelled for miles and miles for a retreat only to dissolve into a puddle of tears? I could say very little, some squeaking noises came from my mouth. The priest nodded and listened and I began to understand why I was so homesick. I had experienced a recent bereavement which I thought I had come to terms with, but in the silence and space of the desert, grief had returned in the form of homesickness, asking for my time and attention. The priest also assured me that if I had paid for the hire car with my credit card (which I had) that I would be covered for insurance. The rest of the week passed as I had imagined a retreat would – I was able to walk, work, sleep and enjoy the people and prayer.

On my final night though, a cloud came over the valley. There had been a pattern all week of sun and warmth in the morning, showers in the afternoon, before warmth returned again in the evening. I had learned that it was the rainy season – but it hadn't arrived – yet. Rain began to fall and a monsoon swaddled the valley in grey sheets of rain. Lightning flashed on alternate sides of the canyon. I watched in dismay. This could not be good

news for the next day's car journey along the dirt track. I was surrounded by guests who told me I had no chance of getting out in time to catch my planned flight to Los Angeles where I was to meet my wife and children. I couldn't sleep that night – I listened to the rain and thought about my family already flying their way over the Atlantic, expecting me to greet them at the airport.

The next morning I knew I had to try to get out. I asked Paul, who had more experience than I of driving along the road, what to do. He told me to keep in the ruts. It's counter intuitive as you naturally want to put your car on what looks like fresh ground. But the ruts are where the firm ground is and what looks like fresh ground is usually fresh mud which can slip away, taking the car with it. If I slid, I mustn't panic, but reverse and try again. So I set off, slipping and sliding my way through mud until eventually the road became more firm and I could slowly make my way out of the Chama Valley. Towards the end of the track I could see a 4x4 looming up in my rear view mirror. I slowed to let it past. Its window wound down and one of the monks leant out, grinning, the sun gleaming on his reflective, black sunglasses. 'Floor it brother' he said before flooring his own accelerator pedal and disappearing in dust. I was more than happy to get to the end of the dirt track in one piece and relieved when I pulled up out-

side Santa Fe airport with a muddy but unscathed car. I found out later that my credit card provided no sort of insurance for car hire.

As I looked back on the retreat, a number of things struck me.

Life was vivid. I wasn't distracted. As I experienced difficulties, so my senses sharpened and my attention was heightened. I can still smell the herbs I picked and taste the drinking water that was purified of everything bad except its pungent, smoky taste. I can still hear the sound of coyotes calling in the night, the Abbot's ring banging on a chair at the beginning of prayers, humming birds – buzzing like large bees hovering around the flowers. I can see the yellow, red and white rock layered one on top of the other, making a mountain that looked as if it were made out of nougat.

I learned the virtue of self reliance. That might sound a little trite – the priest who listened to me in the midst of my homesickness suggested this might be what God was teaching me. I did not appreciate the sentiment at the time but I have come to feel that he was right. It just wasn't comfortable. I had got used to consulting, negotiating and compromising – all of which are necessary in any relationship, but my ability to stand on my own and take responsibility had been reduced or had gone to sleep. It received a serious wake up call and the experience has served to make me aware of how easily I pass the



buck, and seek refuge in what might appear to be shared responsibility.

I came to see that monastic worship is an expression of the life of the community and that a community's life is an expression of their worship. No one left the chapel saying, 'That was a nice service.' There was no need to perform or impress anyone – prayer was just what they did. It was not casual, sloppy, spectacular or showy – it was simply part of their life, no more or less remarkable than picking herbs in the garden or dodging rattlesnakes on a walk. It is probably impossible to transfer this approach wholly into the life of a parish church to which people belong for any number of reasons and in any variety of ways – but at times the expectation to entertain and replenish the regulars – to engage the visitors and enquirers – can obscure the question of what our worship and prayer expresses about this particular community and how it can be a reflection of the life and depth of those people.

I felt foolish at my 'spiritual heroism'; who did I think I was, going into the wilderness, aspiring to be a hermit? I thought I could handle silence. I never seemed to get enough of it normally – but this time I was faced with my own inner poverty and need. The silence and space opened my mind to the sadness and sorrow that had been squeezed into a corner of my life. The desire to make a retreat, dip-

ping into the life of a hermit can simply be a case of fleeing from our problems. Silence however simply allows the elephant in the room to come out from 'hiding' and sit on us!

I later came across the story of a desert monk who had withdrawn from the others saying, 'I am an anchorite.' 'The old men made him go round all the brethren's cells bowing before them and saying: 'Forgive me, for I am not an anchorite. I am a beginner.'<sup>2</sup> I had forgotten that the way of Christ is for beginners. Like that novice, the desert reminded me that I am not a hermit, nor a desert father. I am a beginner.

Before I left home my children asked with a mixture of puzzlement and pity, why I would be spending eight days in the middle of nowhere with a handful of old men. The reality is that the community has no problem attracting members and there is a healthy spread of ages. The community has expanded from three members when Merton made his visits in 1968 to over forty members, with ages ranging from twenty to over ninety years old. They have no shortage of visitors either – from curious tourists to retreatants like myself. This is partly due to the beautiful, austere and extreme landscape.

I also suspect that this desert community flourishes because the desert has always been and continues to be, a place of spiritual discovery. 'Go into the desert not in

order to flee men,' wrote Merton, 'but in order to find them in God.'<sup>3</sup>

I had gone into the desert for a number of reasons – not all of them were realistic or likely to be realised and yet I did not return empty handed. I was in part attempting to flee from the world and its demands but in the silence and space I found my unresolved grief, and its healing; I was brought into the glorious, vivid, present moment; I learned how self-reliance is more than an out-dated Victorian value; I glimpsed what it might mean for life and worship to be brought together; I rediscovered love and compassion for myself, my family and those who had wounded me. I found that the desert continues to draw, to disappoint, to be the

means through which falsehood is revealed, and where God gives us not necessarily what we want but what we need.

### Notes

1. From an article written on Pentecost 1968 and found in a brief introduction to the Monastery of Christ in Desert.
2. Benedicta Ward trans, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers, III*, (Oxford: SLG, 1975 ).
3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Directions Books, 1962) p.53.

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