

Get Thee to a Nunnery

When the world threatens your serenity, retreat to a sacred place and rejuvenate.

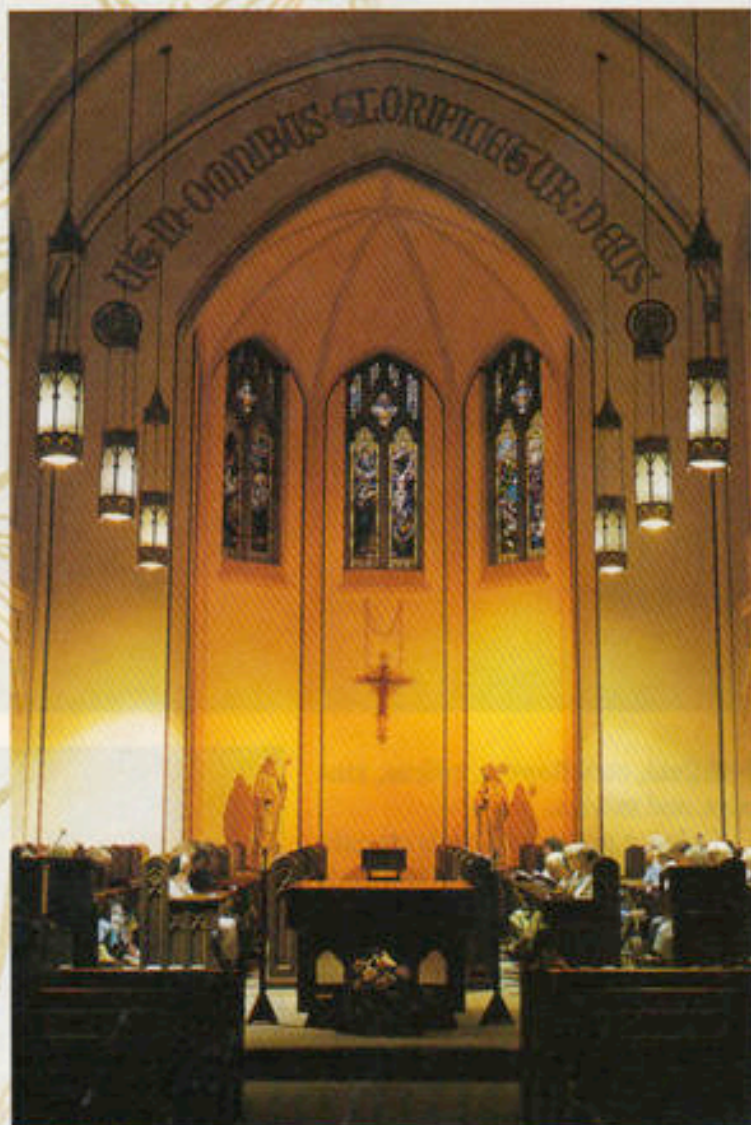
BY NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON
PHOTOGRAPHY ART MERIPOL



It's 7:25 p.m., and as usual, I'm rushing. I've got just five minutes to make it to the first session of the weekend retreat workshop at Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman, Alabama. I squeal through the gates, speed down the winding drive, whiz past the lush landscape, and run off to registration. I dash off an \$89 check, which includes room, board, and workshop fee. My mind still grumbling with childcare instructions, deadlines, phone calls, and traffic jams, I gallop into the room like a rumbling 747.

And crash smack-dab into a cushioning wall of gentle silence. About 30 women and 1 man sit in a candlelit room. Music wafts soothingly. A cough bellows like thunder.

"Some of the sisters are on a mission of mercy," says Sister Eleanor



Harrison as she opens the program. "At Wal-Mart," she deadpans. The room laughs, banishing preconceived images of black-robed, humorless nuns.

Retreats such as this abound for those seeking sanctuary from the harried, outside world. Religious orders have opened their modest accommodations to anyone (churched or unchurched) who craves an inexpensive, peaceful interlude amid naturally beautiful surroundings.

"We hope this weekend will be a deep rest in God," says workshop facilitator Sister Mary McGehee. "Prayer should be as gentle as a feather falling on cotton. Sometimes we go after it like it's a sword."

I nod eagerly at her words. Then she delivers a crushing blow: "We'll ask you to keep silent to help you quieten down," she says. Egads! Silent the entire 48 hours? Words are my life—when I'm not talking, I'm writing. (I worry needlessly. The sisters smile kindly when we break our promise of silence.)

I find my room, furnished with twin beds, a second-hand desk and lamp, a much-used bureau, and a plastic chair. I grab a quick shower down the hall and crawl into the bed that I make with the nuns' linens.

The sisters encourage guests to join them for their simple, hearty meals, so the next morning I trundle off for a big breakfast. Afterward, visitors and nuns alike place dishware in plastic buckets labeled "bowls," "plates," and "utensils." It makes me think of summer camp—minus the food fights.

At the Saturday morning session, we receive instruction, then sit in meditation for 20 minutes, trying to get in touch with the divine. After a short break, we prepare for another 20 minute go-round by bowing our heads and circling the room in tiny baby steps. As we shuffle, I barely repress an urge to break into, "Here Comes the Bride." I sigh in frustration at my juvenile mind games—when am I going to get this?

We're invited to sit side by side

with the nuns during morning and evening prayers in their awe-inspiring Gothic Revival chapel. The singing invocations of the sisters' blended soprano is a sweet, fulfilling tonic for the soul, like milk and honey poured down a parched throat.

Later, I find Sister Mary in the basement just across from a room labeled "Yoga," a sure sign this convent differs from the one in *The Sound of Music*. A professional massage chair figures prominently in the decor.

Why are spiritual retreats so popular? I ask aloud. (Why can't I get this? I question silently.) "The hunger is out there," replies Sister Mary. "Our society is so full of noise and movement and stress. People are seeking a safe place, a sacred place—one that provides silence and stillness.

"This is a place where the details are cared about, a place of beauty, a place where we gather at sunrise and sunset everyday and sing God's praises and remember who we are," she adds. "After 100 years of that here, I think there's something different about this [200 acres of] earth."

Why can't we do that in our day-to-day life? I ask. "In ordinary life, we're in control. On a retreat, we let go of our props," she answers.

I nod sagely and hope she hasn't spied me unloading my car. In my room, I have a large suitcase, a hanging bag, a sack full of books, a camera, a cellular phone, a travel coffeemaker, a laptop computer, tapes, a tape transcriber, work files, day-care notes, a luggage carrier, and two tape recorders (in case one breaks). Yeah, I understand "props."

She studies my tense posture, my intent face, then perceptively answers the question I haven't asked

aloud: "You're getting this intellectually, but your body isn't." She gives me an assignment: "Go sit under a tree. Think of how deep the roots are. Imagine yourself rooting, the earth's nutrients feeding you."

Okay, so it's not a directive to "climb every mountain." Nonetheless, I comply. Well, sort of. I lug along a portable chair and a battery-operated fan. Hey, props comfort

even on a spiritual quest. I meander past the sunlit pond, troop down by the leafy vineyards, pass the manicured fields, and follow the walkway beside the cemetery, where rows of white crosses stand as mute testimony to faithfully followed lives.

I settle myself in my chair, plant my feet, and give my chosen tree a once-over from its roots to towering boughs. The tree and I commune. I contemplate, I ruminate.

I meditate. I experience, if not an epiphany, at least a revelation: I used to love to climb a tree, perch, and just be. Somewhere in my forgotten past, long before I tangled my life with faxes, car phones, and computers, I embraced peace—perhaps even God—in the limbs of a sturdy childhood tree.

On this day, I sit for hours, leaning way, way back to see the tree's branches brushing heaven, remembering the child who communed quite naturally with God. I think I get it now.

Sacred Heart Monastery: Benedictine Spirituality and Conference Center, P.O. Box 488, 916 Convent Road, Cullman, AL 35056; (205) 734-8302. **Prices:** \$35 for room and \$15 for three meals per day per person. Workshop fees vary. For a listing of additional retreat centers around the South, see page 33. ◇

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Sister Mary McGehee, O.S.B.

Seeking Sanctuary

Want a break from it all? How about a spiritual vacation? "Get Thee to a Nunnery," page 94, spotlights a peaceful weekend at Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman, Alabama. Here are other Southern sites that offer a sweet retreat from an all-too-lively lifestyle.

Alabama: St. Bernard's Abbey, 1600 St. Bernard Drive SE., Cullman 35055; (205) 734-3946.

Florida: St. Leo Abbey, c/o Donna Cooper, P.O. Box 2350, St. Leo 33574; (352) 588-2009. Cost: Suggested donation of \$32 daily.

Kentucky: Abbey of Gethsemani, 3642 Monks Road, New Haven 40051; (502) 549-4133. Cost: Donations accepted.

Louisiana: St. Joseph Abbey, Christian Life Center, River Road, St. Benedict 70457; (504) 892-3473. Cost: \$85 for a weekend.

Tennessee: St. Mary's Retreat and Conference Center, P.O. Box 188, Sewanee 37375; (931) 598-5342. Cost: \$46-\$63 daily.

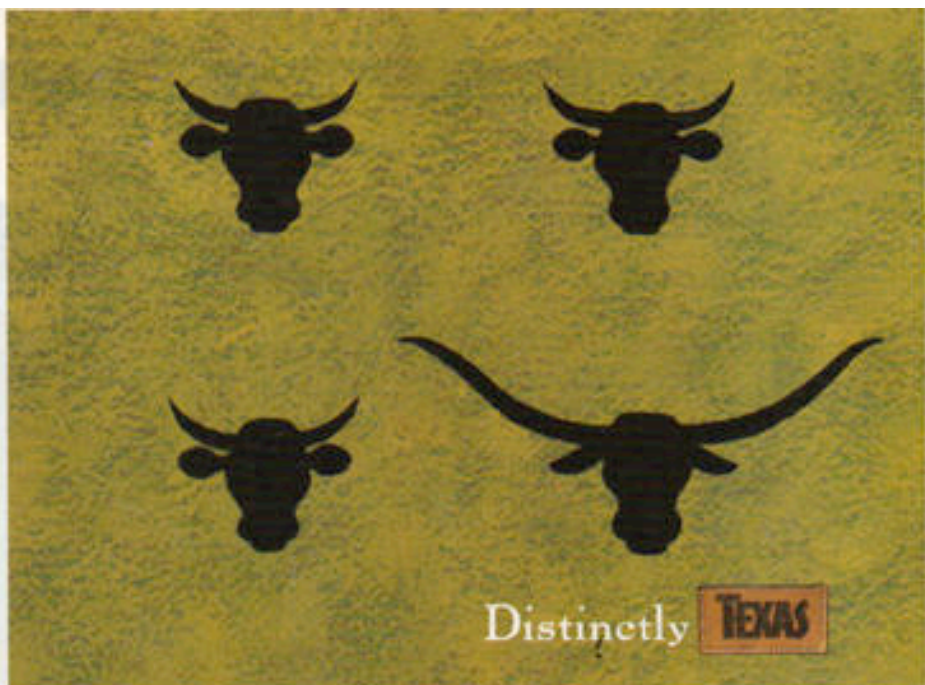
Texas: Benedictine Retreat Center, HC 2, Box 6300, Sandia 78383; (512) 547-9797. Cost: \$35 daily per person.

Virginia: Holy Cross Abbey, Route 2, Box 3870, Berryville 22611; (540) 955-3124. Cost: \$75 to \$100 suggested for a weekend.

For more information: Retreats International, Tom Gedeon, P.O. Box 1067, Notre Dame, IN 46556; (219) 631-5320. ◇



St. Bernard's Abbey, Cullman, AL



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