

THE RETREAT

Coming Soon to Your Television Screen

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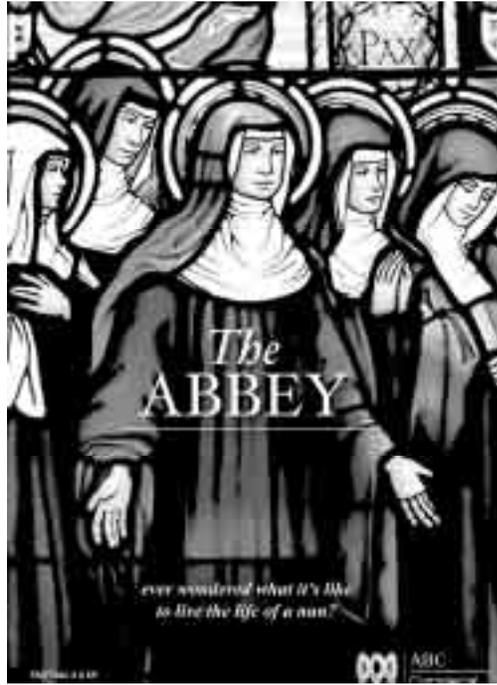
WHILE THERE HAVE BEEN ‘remarkable shifts’ in retreat-giving in recent decades,¹ I have always thought of retreats as something to be experienced in person rather than watched on television. My experience of retreat houses was of places where any dramas were primarily of an intrapsychic nature not a filmic one. With an outward appearance of quiet orderliness, I would have said that retreat houses had the potential to make utterly boring television. However, as I watched *The Abbey*, screened on Australian television over three Sunday nights in late 2007, these assumptions were challenged. I found that watching five women undertake an experience which was totally new to all of them encouraged me to reflect more deeply on the process of making a retreat, which can readily be taken for granted.

Similar series to *The Abbey* have been screened in the last couple of years in Britain and the United States. In 2005 British viewers were able to watch *The Monastery*, a series of three programmes chronicling the experiences of five very different men going to live in an English Benedictine abbey for forty days. One of the participants was involved in making porn movies; another was a painter and decorator who had spent time in jail during the troubles in Northern Ireland; a third was studying for a doctorate on Buddhism; a fourth was in legal publishing; and the last was a retired teacher and poet. None was Roman Catholic, and most had relatively little involvement in any form of organized religion,² but all were changed by the experience.³ An estimated three

¹ Joseph Tetlow, ‘The Remarkable Shifts of the Third Transition’, *The Way Supplement*, 95 (1999), 18–30.

² An introduction to the participants in *The Monastery* can be found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/04april/22/monastery.shtml>, accessed 18 May 2007.

³ Lengthy accounts written by two of the participants are available at <http://www.worthabbey.net/bbc/index.html>, accessed 18 May 2007.



million viewers watched the series, and in the following month the website at Worth Abbey, which had hosted the series, received 40,000 visitors⁴ and countless requests from individuals wanting to come on retreat. A US version, with a similarly disparate set of five men going to live at the Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert, went on air in 2006.⁵ Back in Britain, 2006 brought *The Convent*, in which four women spent forty days with the Poor Clare Nuns at Arundel.⁶

The religious communities which have hosted these programmes have generally found the experience positive. The programmes offered them an opportunity to form relationships with guests who were often very different from typical retreatants, and also to demonstrate the relevance of religious life specifically, and Christianity more generally, to considerable audiences. Although they were initially very reluctant to allow a film crew into their convent, the Poor Clare nuns involved with *The Convent* were persuaded to participate after seeing the positive outcomes generated by *The Monastery*:

Ultimately our reasons for doing the programme were focused on our desire to do something to spread the knowledge of the kingdom of God, and of God's overwhelming love for us all as individuals, whatever our walk of life. If nothing else comes through in the four programmes, we

⁴ Christopher Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2006), 2.

⁵ Details of the US version of *The Monastery* can be found at <http://tlc.discovery.com/fansites/monastery/monastery.html>, accessed 18 May 2007.

⁶ Details about *The Convent* can be found at <http://www.poorclaresarundel.org/Pages/CONVENTDefault.aspx>, accessed 18 May 2007.

would like to think that everyone who sees it will have some understanding of how much God loves everyone and that we in Arundel are here to be channels of that love in our world of today.⁷

Some would argue that it is not merely an option but an imperative for the Church to become involved in distributing the message of Christ using the whole range of available media. For example, Australian Jesuit Richard Leonard has proposed that:

Given the power of the media, becoming conversant with its mixed messages is an essential tool for Christian life. This involves the process of inculturation—discovering where Christ is already active within a given culture. Inculturation has traditionally been about uncovering Christian resonances in faraway places and exotic rituals. Yet the risen Christ sends us out to our media-saturated culture as well, and in it we labour with Christ to expose the signs of God's saving love already present there. We cannot speak to a culture we do not know or one we despise. And if we don't evangelize it, who else will? In St Ignatius' terms, we have to learn its language and discover how Christ has already gone ahead of us, inculturated in some of [the] media's values, stories and style.⁸

With this challenge in mind, and drawing on examples from *The Abbey*,⁹ my aim in this paper is to explore why it is worth readers of *The Way* engaging with such programmes, that place the world of the retreat house in the public domain.

Not Big Brother

From comments people around me make about *The Abbey*, I am reminded that most Australians have little more than superficial knowledge and understanding of the world of contemporary religious houses, whether retreat houses, monasteries, abbeys or convents. They are familiar, however, with the world of television. Hence, a disparate group of strangers living together for several weeks under the glare of television cameras inevitably invites comparisons with *Big Brother*, one

⁷ See <http://www.poorclaresarundel.org/Pages/CONVENTWhy.aspx>, accessed 18 May 2007.

⁸ Richard Leonard, *Movies that Matter: Reading Film through the Lens of Faith* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2006), xii.

⁹ Transcripts of *The Abbey* have been published by the producers at <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/index/compass2007.htm>. Since writing this paper, I have had the opportunity to watch the British series *The Monastery*. Many of my comments about *The Abbey* are also applicable to that series.

of the best known examples of so-called 'reality television'. Endemol, the Dutch production company which developed the *Big Brother* concept, franchised to production companies around the world, provides the following description on its website:

Twelve people, who have never met before, live together for approximately 100 days in a fenced-off compound. They are isolated from the outside world. No phones, newspapers, radios or televisions. No contact with loved ones. They are all alone ... except for the millions of viewers watching them!¹⁰

It is not just outsiders but participants themselves who make the connection with 'reality television' programmes. Struggling with not having a hair dryer, one participant in *The Abbey* comments 'It's a challenge I'm here. *Survivor* eat your heart out.'¹¹

Jamberoo Abbey, the Benedictine community which hosted *The Abbey*, is an enclosed monastic community, so the guests were invited to hand over their mobile phones and break contact with the outside world during their visit; but any perceived similarities with programmes such as *Big Brother* are merely superficial, and were soon outweighed by some stark differences. The abbey is not a house manufactured for a television programme, but a permanent community of over thirty women who welcomed five strangers to live with them for 33 days. The women participating in *The Abbey* were not engaged in a competition in which there would be winners and losers. All who entered had the right to stay the full number of days until the scheduled end with no threat of eviction, whereas for *Big Brother*:

On a regular basis, the participants are required to nominate two or more housemates. By voting, the viewers decide who will have to leave the house immediately. The last participant to leave the house is the winner.¹²

Participants in *The Abbey* (and also viewers) were hosted, not by 'Big Brother', but by the wise and affectionate Sister Hilda. While she

¹⁰ Endemol's description of *Big Brother* can be found at <http://www.bigbrother.com/Main%20business%20areas/default.aspx?flD=7103&prID=1>, accessed 18 May 2007.

¹¹ *The Abbey*, episode 2, at <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s2072975.htm>.

¹² See <http://www.bigbrother.com/Main%20business%20areas/default.aspx?flD=7103&prID=1>, accessed 18 May 2007.

encouraged participants to move out of their comfort zones, she recognised that what she was asking was not easy, and there were no recriminations when the women were not able to meet some of the challenges, such as keeping silence. And when she did talk of God, it was in the language of love rather than of fear. Big Brother is an anonymous but commanding and ubiquitous voice who communicates frequently



Sister Hilda

either with the housemates as a group or with individuals, issuing instructions and demanding responses. Like his original in George Orwell's classic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,¹³ Big Brother demands respect and offers his version of wisdom to those living under his totalitarian regime, but could hardly be described as affectionate.

A further difference between *Big Brother* and *The Abbey* is that in the latter participants were invited to share in an authentic rather than artificial experience of community. The nuns at Jamberoo Abbey devised a programme for the five women's stay prior to meeting them:

We devised a 33-day crash course on monastic living. The five women have all signed up to live the life of an enclosed nun, but will they be up for the challenge? We're saying, come in, have a look. Get up at 4 o'clock the way we do. Here, we'll give you a job. You get yourself, too, into the silence of the place, into the work of the place. There'll be conferences so that you can get some information.¹⁴

While there was much encouragement to participate fully in this demanding programme, the women were not criticized if they failed to meet expectations. The *Big Brother* producers also require their participants to become involved in a programme of activities, but these

¹³ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954).

¹⁴ *The Abbey*, episode 1, at <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s2059606.htm>.

are designed to entertain the viewers rather than to benefit the participants. Furthermore, should *Big Brother* competitors choose not to engage in set tasks, they may risk punishments being inflicted not only on themselves, but also on others in the house.

Seekers

Given that retreats are rarely straightforward and often include difficult moments, it is difficult to imagine why somebody would agree to be filmed on retreat. Nevertheless, almost one thousand Australian women sought a place in *The Abbey*. Few, if any, of the women chosen to participate had other opportunities to go on retreat. Those of us who make retreats on a regular basis, or at least occasionally, are likely to have the benefit of local or even international networks of contacts to find a suitable place to go. But such knowledge is not widely available in the community at large, even though increasing numbers of retreat houses have their annual programmes posted on websites. None of the women entering *The Abbey* seemingly had any formal connections with the Church, so seeing an advertisement for participants in the programme gave them an opportunity which might not have been open to them otherwise. As one of them, Tusa, commented: 'When I first saw that ad for the Abbey I just knew that I needed to be a part of it'.¹⁵ She felt like this although, as viewers subsequently discovered, she had no concept of God in her life:

Sister Hilda: Just tell me, where's God fit in for you?

Tusa: At the moment or in my life?

Sister Hilda: Yeah.

Tusa: Nowhere. Honest truth.¹⁶

The remaining participants came to the experience with questions and issues which are common among retreatants. Those who had reached milestones in their lives, such as significant birthdays or major changes, were asking, 'What next?' Most, if not all, brought painful memories or disappointments. They were no different from many others who,

¹⁵ *The Abbey*, episode 1.

¹⁶ *The Abbey*, episode 2.

... make retreats because they are impelled by reasons of the heart to withdraw from 'the world' in search of the Mystery at the depth of human experience for the sake of a changed heart and a changed world.¹⁷

For example, Meg, a forty-year-old mother of three children, one of whom is profoundly disabled and for whom Meg is the main carer, came to *The Abbey* saying, 'I have some big questions of God. I'd like to have some discussions with God.'¹⁸ Later she explained:

There's been a lot of grief with Anastasia. Very early in her diagnosis when she was four months old I had that overwhelming grief that I would never, I didn't think I would ever laugh again. I didn't think I would ever smile. I didn't think life would ever go on. And one of the things that I'm going to try and look at is have I forgiven God in maybe mucking up my dreams. And maybe changing my life in a way that I didn't expect it to ... go.¹⁹

One of the things the participants in *The Abbey* discovered was that they were not the only seekers present at Jamberoo:

Tammy: And I just started to read all those things, like Eckhart Tollë, Mary Louise Hay, Wayne Dyer. And I got into astrology and Feng Shui, Buddhism. You search everywhere. Everywhere yeah. Cards, crystals, chakra points.

Sister Gertrud: Yeah, I've done all that as well.

Tammy: Reiki.

Sister Gertrud: I liked astrology.

Tammy: Me too, I still do.

Sister Gertrud: I'm not supposed to but I do.

Tammy: I'm an Aries dragon.

Sister Gertrud: Oh dragon as in Chinese? I'm a Cancer targo.²⁰

Although Sister Gertrud's revelations may seem somewhat unexpected from a Benedictine nun, what this exchange highlights is that those

¹⁷ James Neafsey, 'Why Make a Retreat?' *The Way Supplement*, 95 (1999), 11–17, here 11.

¹⁸ *The Abbey*, episode 1.

¹⁹ *The Abbey*, episode 2.

²⁰ *The Abbey*, episode 2.

who come on retreats often have a hybrid spiritual life which reflects a variety of experiences, rather than having been formed solely in one religious tradition, not necessarily even within Christianity. By whatever path they come, however, retreatants are invariably seekers, and at least somewhat open to whatever new insights the retreat process may bring.

The Retreat Process

One thing which was apparent to viewers of *The Abbey* was that the participants came to Jamberoo Abbey with relatively little idea as to what was awaiting them, and particularly about how the quiet and solitude of a retreat provides opportunities for difficult issues to emerge. As Sister Hilda told the viewers in the first episode:

They're not prepared for the fact that there's no way they can leave the world behind, and they're not prepared for the fact that being without mobile phone, television and all like that is going to rip them apart. It's a distraction that they're not going to have, and it's going to focus them on the internal journey, on the interior journey. It's going to kill them.²¹

While an experienced spiritual director might be well aware of this possibility, it can be somewhat of a surprise, if not a shock, to an inexperienced retreatant—as this conversation from *The Abbey* demonstrates:

Sister Veronica: So stuff's coming out.

Robyn: Oh yeah.

Sister Veronica: Like memories.

Robyn: Yes. Is that normal?

Sister Veronica: That stuff does come up. You know like when you quieten down that the purpose of it partly is that it allows things to emerge that you can then place in the presence of God and ask God to know, to heal or be present in that memory.²²

²¹ *The Abbey*, episode 1.

²² *The Abbey*, episode 2.



The promise of quiet and freedom from everyday demands is what attracts many retreatants, particularly those with busy lifestyles. Yet, though they come seeking calm, it may in fact be difficult to find. The following description could readily apply to many contemporary retreatants:

[She] decides to make a weekend retreat to get away from the stresses of work and family and find some rest and peace in a beautiful setting. Yet her heart has other plans. The retreat turns out to be far from a quiet weekend away. Troubling needs, desires and feelings of un-lived life that this woman has buried beneath her busyness for years surface powerfully on the retreat. The woman leaves the weekend shaken and full of questions²³

In the final episode of *The Abbey*, one of the women talked about how difficult she found it to go to the church several times each day; this was far more difficult than she might have anticipated:

Lyn: I so resent this, I so resent this, I so resent this. I don't want to do this. Why am I here? You stagger down the stairs and you just sort of drag yourself, and it's hell.

²³ Neafsey, 'Why Make a Retreat?' 11-12.

Sister Hilda: Yes it is.

Lyn: Going to church is not hell, sorry.

Sister Hilda: Listen I've been doing it for nearly twenty years. Yes it is, go on.

Lyn: And it's horrible because I'm not feeling very peaceful or accepting at 25 past 4 in the morning.

Sister Hilda: Precisely.

Lyn: And I hate it.

Sister Hilda: Yes. But you go.²⁴

Quietness can be deeply unsettling, and at a time when one is trying to make one's relationship with God a priority, it can make one's shortcomings most apparent. One shortcoming which can readily emerge is a lack of tolerance of others, and apparently murderous thoughts about other retreatants or about retreat directors are not unheard of.²⁵ While there is no evidence that the participants in *The Abbey* developed that degree of animosity, there were nevertheless tensions between them at various points, and to some degree this is a normal part of the retreat process.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of *The Abbey* experience for the five participants was the expectation that a significant amount of each day, including meals and working hours, should be spent in silence. The women at Jamberoo did have substantial periods each day when conversation was permitted—as they would not have done on an Ignatian silent retreat. Their first experience of silence was at a meal in the community's refectory:

Sister Hilda: Every day the community comes together to share our main meal, in silence. We have a reader who provides food for thought, but she's the only person who speaks. ...

Tusa: That is not how I'm used to eating. ...

Sister Hilda: The deal is that again that silence thing is really really important. To be aware what I'm putting into my mouth.

²⁴ *The Abbey*, episode 3, at <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s2081482.htm>.

²⁵ Michael Barnes, 'Editorial', *The Way Supplement*, 95 (1999), 8–9, here 8.

Meg: But the clanking of the knives and forks was very loud. They're very noisy.

Tusa: Because I'm used to talking over the top of it. So you don't hear it, so I'm sitting there going, these knives and forks are driving me mad.²⁶

There were several occasions during the series when the reasons for silence and its benefits were reiterated. In one of her early discussions with the participants, Sister Hilda tells them:

If you need to talk to one another it's done softly and if any talking can be left, leave it. It's silence for a purpose. It's silence to get on with the real job of being in monastic life. The real job of being in monastic life is that thing of standing in the place of everybody else and taking it to God.²⁷

Another aspect of the retreat process which, like many new retreatants, the participants in *The Abbey* did not understand at first was what is involved in spiritual direction itself. As Sister Hilda explained to one of the women:

This is about finding God. The counselling and the therapy are a different school of, different mode of operation. Here we're not deeply into the psychological, we're deeply into 'where has God been in your pain?'²⁸

Irrespective of whether participants had come to Jamberoo with any concept of God in her life, in discussions with their spiritual mentors God was invariably part of the conversation, as might be expected in spiritual direction:

Any relationship of spiritual guidance or accompaniment is based on the ... trustworthy presence of God This presence is there for both the one who accompanies and the one accompanied. Each shares the dignity of complete access to God; each is fundamentally equal. The one who accompanies makes a basic assent to God's active presence. This does not need to be referred to explicitly, and

²⁶ *The Abbey*, episode 1.

²⁷ *The Abbey*, episode 1.

²⁸ *The Abbey*, episode 1.

it leaves us free to offer the whole of our attention to the one being accompanied.²⁹

A good spiritual director listens not only to what is said, but also to what is not said:

... if the encounter is meant to be one where two people seek to clarify the affective response rather than by their intellectual analysis of it, then the incarnate context is going to be important. I know that as a spiritual director I listen with my eyes. I hear what a person is saying but I also watch the signs given with the body.³⁰

At one point in *The Abbey*, Sister Hilda makes a very similar point to the viewing audience: 'I have found myself listening to these women, listening intently. Not only to what they have said but to what they haven't said as well.'³¹

Why Benedictine?

From time to time I have found myself wondering whether a series such as *The Abbey* could have worked if it had been set in an Ignatian retreat house rather than a Benedictine community. While films such as *Into Great Silence*, which follows the almost silent existence of a community of French Carthusian monks,³² have attracted some interest amongst patrons of arthouse cinemas, one might suspect that television programmers would consider a series about people voluntarily entering into a period of silence to be of very limited appeal to mainstream viewers.

Arguably, the 33 days of *The Abbey* provided greater opportunity for filming than a contemporary 30-day retreat in the Ignatian tradition. Each day was highly structured and the women were constantly being exposed to new experiences outside their normal existence. As well as the seven church services a day, which involved walking in the dark and rain to prayers at 4.30 a.m., there were conferences on monastic life

²⁹ Tom McGuinness, 'The Way of Accompaniment', *The Way Supplement*, 104 (2002), 96–107, here 105.

³⁰ Gemma Simmonds, 'Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Spiritual Direction in Cyberspace', *The Way*, 40/3 (July 2000), 263–271, here 267.

³¹ *The Abbey*, episode 2.

³² For details of *Into Great Silence* see <http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/film.php?directoryname=intogreatsilence>.

and Benedictine spirituality; meetings with spiritual directors (known as sister-mentors); participation in craft-work, gardening and farming; as well as communal meals and events, at some of which talking was permitted. This contrasts starkly with a typical Ignatian retreat, in which the daily conversation with one's director is likely to be the only conversation that one has.

Apart from the many activities which the participants could be filmed experiencing, there were features of the setting at Jamberoo Abbey which made good, if somewhat clichéd, visuals. In a community whose members wear habits, the viewer need never have to remember who are the members of the community and who are the visitors. Similarly, filming the walls regularly reinforces the notion of an enclosed monastic community, most of whose space is normally closed to visitors. While retreat houses in other traditions may be scenic, paradoxically, in a world where foreign travel is ever more common, the enclosed, enigmatic monastic community has become exotic in the twenty-first century.

***The enclosed,
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Reflection

Series such as *The Abbey* stimulate a wide range of responses from viewers, and I recognise that other people may well identify quite different issues emerging from it, which are equally valid and equally demand appropriate responses. While it was fascinating to watch how each of a disparate group of individuals responded to the retreat setting, I am glad to be able to make retreats without undergoing the selection process that *The Abbey* required. If all candidates for retreats were selected on the basis of entertainment value, I doubt that I, or many people I know, would be able to go. Such selection, however, would be no more restrictive than the situation, only a few decades ago, when people like myself, who are not clergy, or professed religious, or employees of a church organisation, would have had no opportunity to go on retreat.

In an era of the 'democratization'³³ of retreat houses, when more and more visitors have no prior experience of this setting, careful consideration is needed as to how best to assist retreatants in benefiting

³³ See Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Malden, Ma: Blackwell, 2007), 200–202.

from their experiences. Many workplaces have some form of induction for new employees, and perhaps something similar needs to be available for new retreatants. At the simplest level this could involve providing some basic information about the structure of the retreat and how to prepare for it, in a paragraph or two in the information sent out prior to the commencement of a retreat. More fundamentally, a change of attitude is necessary among retreat organizers, who should not make assumptions as to what new retreatants understand about the process. Many years later I still have memories of being scalded by a spiritual director, on my first silent retreat, for spending part of my day reading—although I had been given no instruction not to read, and no suggestion as to how I should spend my day when not praying. It is perhaps unsurprising that I have never returned to this particular retreat house, which made me feel so unwelcome as a newcomer.

Finally, for me, programmes such as *The Abbey* have demonstrated that the mass media can engage sensitively with issues pertaining to Christian spirituality. It should be noted, however, that *The Abbey*'s producer had been a friend of the community at Jamberoo Abbey for more than a decade, and that this relationship was critical in gaining approval for filming. It undoubtedly ensured the final product was sympathetic and sensitive to the world it was portraying.³⁴ While I enjoyed this rare opportunity to view the world of the retreat house on my television, I suspect I would still cringe with apprehension if I were to discover that a soap-opera character was going on retreat.

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³⁴ 'The Making of *The Abbey*', at <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/theabbey/makingof.htm>, accessed 21 December 2007.