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Online Lenten retreats gather seekers for contemplation

by Heidi Schlumpf

Lent 2013

Fran Rossi Szpylczyn is a self-described "church nerd." You could say she is something of an Internet one, too.

A blogger for six years, she currently writes for three faith-related blogs -- one for her own parish, one for the parish where she works as the office manager and one for the *Times Union* newspaper in Albany, N.Y.

That's not counting her daily Facebook posts and tweets, all in the name of faith sharing and community building. Did I mention she's also working on a master's degree in theology?

So when Szpylczyn heard about a retreat called "Hurry Up and Slow Down" last fall, she knew it would be a balm to her frazzled spirit. But surprisingly, this reflective respite did not require a fast from technology. On the contrary: It required it.

Welcome to the next generation of spiritual sustenance: online retreats. No need to get away to a retreat center, eat cafeteria food or get up at the crack of dawn for morning prayer. Now guided prayers or reflections from famous retreat directors, community with other retreatants, and even personal communication with a spiritual director are just a keyboard (or touchscreen) away.

"Hurry Up and Slow Down" was the first online retreat offered by Jane Redmont, who has worked in campus, urban and parish ministries in Catholic and Episcopal communities. She also offered an online retreat in Advent and is hosting one on Thomas Merton for Lent this year. The six-week "Hurry Up and Slow Down" retreat, which will be repeated again this spring, featured readings, practices and spiritual exercises -- as well as a closed blog accessible only to fellow retreatants.

Szpylczyn found it spiritually nourishing and convenient.

"One thing that was a real plus was that it stretched out over several weeks, which an in-person retreat would not be," she said. "It gave me something to look forward to each week."

Providing a retreat-like experience for those who couldn't afford the time or expense of an actual getaway is motivating an increasing number of individuals and organizations to offer online options. But is the Internet really compatible with spiritual growth? Isn't social media something Catholics should be giving up for Lent?

"Well, at some point in order to connect with God you have to disconnect. You can't have your face stuck in your iPad all day," said Jesuit Fr. James Martin, whose new e-retreat, "Together on Retreat: Meeting Jesus in Prayer," explicitly directs participants at some points to put down their e-readers and pray.

The virtually directed retreat, published by HarperCollins for Kindle, Nook and other e-book formats, offers video reflections, guided prayers and text, with Martin possibly responding to questions on Facebook.

"Jesus used any and all media -- parables, stories and so on -- to spread the Good News," Martin said. "It would be close to a sin if we didn't use all the media available to us to spread the Gospel. Jesus said, 'Go out to the ends of the Earth,' and that includes the Web. Besides, that's where the people are."

An online retreat can be just as deep and meaningful as an on-the-ground one -- maybe even more so, said Christine Valters Paintner, a Benedictine oblate, author and the "online abbess" at the website "Abbey of the Arts," which offers e-courses, podcasts, an email newsletter and now e-retreats. Her first two online retreats were "Way of the Monk" and "Photography as a Contemplative Practice."

"I knew the experience would be different, but I was surprised and delighted by the depth of sharing offered in our online discussion forums," Paintner said. "Because my work draws many contemplatives and introverts, the freedom to come and participate according to their energy and schedule offers greater possibilities for engagement.

"Participants also gather from all over the world together in our virtual space, which gives the opportunity to dialogue with others across cultures," said Paintner, who currently lives in Ireland.

An online format is nothing if not flexible. It requires more responsibility on the part of the participants, but they have choices. Redmont says many clergy who have taken her online retreats choose the "stay quiet" option, perhaps because they have enough interaction with people and just want some spiritual nurture for themselves. She offers a brief personal "check-in" conversation via phone or Skype for those who would like it, and her Lent retreat allows those with church ministry responsibilities during Holy Week to complete the retreat the week after Easter.

Online communication has its own challenges, including the inability to read nonverbal cues and the tendency to react too quickly. "I was somewhat worried that I'd encounter some of the problems I have seen in online conversations -- hasty rejoinders or rapidly escalating verbal conflict -- but that hasn't happened for the most part," Redmont said.

To remind everyone to maintain a retreat-like attitude even while at the keyboard, she quotes Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who has paraphrased his own saying, "Breathe -- you are alive" for the digital

age: "Breathe -- you are online."

Online retreat options for Lent

"Thomas Merton, Companion on the Way" with Jane Redmont. Twice-weekly readings, spiritual practice exercises, conversations with others via a private blog. Cost: \$250, with scholarships available for those in financial difficulty.

"Creative Flourishing in the Heart of the Desert: A Lenten Online Retreat with St. Hildegard of Bingen" with Christine Valters Paintner of "Abbey of the Arts" website. Daily lectio divina readings and creative expression exercises, such as mandala drawing, an online forum, two mp3 recordings of guided meditation, plus weekly PDFs of written materials. Cost: \$95.

"Together on Retreat: Meeting Jesus in Prayer" with Jesuit Fr. James Martin. Enhanced e-book with text, video reflections, guided prayer with slide shows on Kindle, Nook, iTunes. Cost: \$7.99.

"The Way of Christ, and Journeying with Mary in Lent," sponsored by Assumption College with Adjunct Professor Virginia M. Kimball. Weekly readings and reflection, journaling exercises, plus "virtual chapel" with Christian music and art, place for prayer intentions. Cost: \$125, or \$100 for Assumption alumni and students.

"Spirituality of Soil: A Lenten Journey from Cosmic Dust to Easter Garden" with Holy Child Jesus Sr. Terri MacKenzie. Materials for groups or individuals include prayers, reflection, music/video suggestions and ritual. Cost: free.

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