

Contemplation, a call to all

by [Nancy Sylvester](#)

Apr. 28, 2014 in

- [Contemplate This](#)



When I was a little girl I loved to say my prayers. The prayer books available to Catholics in the '50s were varied and lovely. Some had gold edges; others gave you ribbons to mark your favorite passages. Sitting in the gently enfolding darkness of the church with a hint of beeswax or incense in the air invited God's presence into your life. Novenas and special missions complemented the rosary, Stations of the Cross and Mass. The words, the images, the chant, the songs offered you everything you needed to live this life and the one after you died. I knew who God was; what "He" wanted; how to act toward "Him" and others; what to do to be saved. I loved God and felt secure and safe in "His" presence.

But this shift didn't happen overnight.

For a pious girl from the south side of Chicago, it was mind blowing. I was not only being stretched intellectually but also spiritually. We were taught how to pray, which included the tradition of Christian mysticism especially that of Teresa of Avila. I began reading Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton. Theology and spirituality were complemented by classes in philosophy and the social sciences. Everything was changing. The God I knew; the afterlife I took for granted; how I understood Scripture and Jesus; ethics that went beyond personal morality – everything changed.

During a private directed retreat after I had taken my first vows, I heard so clearly that I had the gift of faith but that I would have to give up the faith of my childhood so as to continue to encounter God in new ways throughout my life. That spiritual experience is a touchstone and continues to energize me today. It rooted me and gave me the courage to follow the desire to know God more deeply and in new ways.

Over the years as I served in congregational leadership and in the Presidency of the [Leadership Conference of Women Religious](#), my practice deepened. Having the great gift of a spiritual director who for 22 years invited me into a yearly, week-long "no rational thinking or reading" retreat, the experience of non-discursive prayer began to free me of my shoulds, musts, coulds and woulds. I became aware of my biases, assumptions, worldview and expectations. Contemplation was indeed not passive, but I did not control the results.

Contemplation invites you to take a long loving look at the real. That became very clear to me as I came to realize that many women religious and other laity were at an impasse with some in the hierarchical church. The ways we knew how to bring about change would not work. I spoke these words in my presidential address in 2000 to the LCWR Assembly and reflected that we had

to respond from the deepest part of our selves, that we needed to respond out of a contemplative place, communally. This realization led me to found the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue in 2002. Over these 14 years I have experienced the profound transformation that contemplative practice invites us to. It is a transformation not only for our church but for our world as well.

We are living at a critical time in our evolutionary journey, and I firmly believe that people of faith have an important contribution to make to the transformation that is so needed. Through a series of articles over time, I will continue to reflect on the practice of contemplation, on the experience of it personally and communally, on the power of it to transform our consciousness, on the invitation it is to us to be Christians in the 21st century. Experiencing the Divine presence is a gift we've all been given. We simply need to take a long loving look at what is already there.

[Nancy Sylvester, IHM, is founder and director of the [Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue](#). She served in leadership of her own religious community, the [Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary](#), Monroe, Mich., as well as in the presidency of the [Leadership Conference of Women Religious](#). Prior to that, she was national coordinator of [NETWORK](#), the national Catholic social justice lobby.]