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Those who haven't been on a retreat in 20 years or so might be surprised by the way retreats are conducted today.

"The retreats we used to go to were very structured," recalled Mary Jane Pellingra, who, with her husband Sal, runs the Burrwood Farms Prayer and Retreat Center near Romulus. "You didn't set the theme."

Retreats offer time for spiritual pause

In the 1970s, retreats typically were conducted either exclusively for men or exclusively for women, and generally consisted of talks by a priest, periods for reflection, confession and liturgies.

In those days, participants could complete an entire weekend retreat without needing to offer anything more than their presence.

While modified versions of such general retreats are still available — and popular — Pellingra noted that many of today's retreats cater more to the desires and needs of retreatants.

"I see now more individual searching for specific things people feel they are lacking in their religious lives," Pellingra remarked.

And even at general retreats, "There's more interaction, more sharing, more dialogue, more input from the group," noted Father Timothy Keating, CSSR, rector of Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua.

In fact, the variety of retreats available today might seem bewildering to someone used to the more traditional retreats.

In addition to the general men's and women's retreats, the current menu features retreats for: couples, families and mixed-sex groups; directed, individual and silent programs; and such specialized programs as 30-Day Ignatian exercises, centering prayer, 12-step and charismatic retreats.

"The church in many ways is growing, and our whole understanding of spiritual growth is growing," observed Brother

Patrick Flanagan, SJ, a staff member at Christ the King Retreat House in Syracuse.

"I think what has happened is the focus has been more on spirituality and less on religion," observed Judith Vaeth, business administrator of Rochester's Mercy Prayer Center. "People are looking for a spiritual awakening rather than a religious awakening."

At the same time, however, "I think sometimes people don't really have a good perception of what a retreat is of any kind," Vaeth added.

Yet regardless of their many current formats, retreats today serve many of the same purposes they always have.

"(People) feel a need to have their faith nourished," Father Keating said. "You hear that from them again and again."

"They are looking for a stronger sense of faith, a stronger sense of patience," remarked Sister Ellen Frawley, re, a staff member at Rochester's Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal. "They have a need to reinstate values."

Part of this need is simply to get away from the hectic pace of contemporary life, Father Keating pointed out.

"In some sense or another, American culture is finding itself as kind of fren-

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