



MASTER THESIS

To retreat is to change? Exploring
the process of transformative
learning amongst visitors to
monastic retreats

a multiple case study

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PREFACE

This thesis is written for my master's degree in Tourism, Society, and Environment for the chair group of Cultural Geography at Wageningen University. Writing this thesis gave me the opportunity to explore and emphasise the value of religious tourism and the monastery as a meaningful place for all of us that participate in the journey of life, whatever our worldview is. I also found it highly interesting to speak with various people about their perspectives on life and what it is that gives meaning to their lives. Doing my research also brought me the opportunity to retreat in the beautiful monasteries of Sint-Catherinadal, Oosterhout and Nieuw Sion, Diepeveen. I am very grateful for this wonderful and meaningful experience.

I could not have written this thesis without the assistance and support of some people whom I would like to thank. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Karolina Doughty for her enthusiasm for my research topic and for guiding me through the process of writing my thesis. I enjoyed our brainstorming sessions, which always helped me proceed with new ideas or strategies. Second, I would like to thank *de Levensboom* and the retreat coordinators of *Nieuw Sion*. They welcomed me with open arms. I am thankful that they shared the same enthusiasm for my research topic as I did. Furthermore, I am grateful for how they assisted and enabled me to perform my data collection. I also thank them for their hospitality by inviting me to be present at and participate in the Easter retreats. Thirdly, I would like to thank this study's participants considerably. Thank you for taking the time to complete all three phases of the research, and even more, thank you for sharing your inspiring and often very personal experiences with me. You made a significant contribution to this research. Meeting you and hearing your stories gave me insight into what a meaningful place a monastery is to all of you, what could be of meaning in life, and the process of perspective change. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for keeping me motivated to enjoy my thesis. Moreover, thank you for being a critical listener, sounding board, and true friend. I would like to conclude that I am truly grateful for everything I learnt within each facet of writing a thesis.

I hope you enjoy reading and maybe even get inspired to retreat once in your own life!

Naomi Maarseveen-van Wijk

Wageningen, 14 September 2022

'What has been experienced cannot become unexperienced, what has been seen cannot become unseen, what has been realized cannot become unrealized. The old man is dead, a new man is born. The world is seen through newly opened eyes.' (Gothóni, 1993, p. 113)

ABSTRACT

This thesis adopted an interpretive perspective to study transformative learning experiences within monastic retreats embedded in religious tourism. Transformative learning is understood as a reorganization of the beliefs or broader assumptions that one holds. These define how one perceives, understands, and attributes meaning to reality. Many studies in the field of tourism focus on the outcomes of transformative learning rather than exploring the process itself. Therefore, this study aimed to increase academic understanding of how transformative tourist experiences come about by applying Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. A multiple case study was performed, including two Easter retreats, respectively, at Sint-Catherinadal, Oosterhout, and Nieuw Sion, Diepeveen. To explore these cases, this study adopted a multi-methods and longitudinal approach comprising a pre-retreat motivation assignment, a post-retreat creative assignment, and an in-depth interview. Thereby, visitors provided their personal accounts of their transformative learning experiences. A unique characteristic of this study entails the researcher's presence and participation in both retreats, which enabled a great extent of contextual depth. Overall, the results of this study do show how monastic retreat visitors experienced transformative learning and how these experiences came about. The results indicate that transformative learning does not necessarily occur within the spatial and temporal boundaries of the tourist experience despite the initial expectation that it would do so. Rather, visitors appeared to be on their own transformative journey, during which transformative learning evolved in a very incremental way. This was because their transformative learning experience consisted of changes in points of view over time rather than an immediate and fundamental change in their perspective. Therefore, transformative learning extended into the realms of visitors' personal lives, and so visitors' personal context, such as circumstances, experiences, interests and motivations, shaped these experiences as highly personal and unique. Still, the monastic retreat did partly facilitate this journey and thereby functioned as a transformative learning experience. The physical and spiritual setting and various retreat activities triggered and facilitated individual reflection. Furthermore, it was found that visitors experienced transformative learning in a relational and emotional way. Hence, one may question the individualized and rational portrayal of transformative learning in Mezirow's work. Finally, the vulnerability of transformative learning was demonstrated, which was primarily experienced upon returning home. Therefore, the conversion of changes in beliefs into lasting behavioural changes is disputed. To conclude, by studying the coming about of transformative learning experiences rather than their outcomes, this study was able to reveal the occurrence of an incremental and subtle form of transformative learning, something that has been overlooked by, or been outside the scope of, other studies in the tourism field.

Keywords

- Transformative Learning Theory
- Transformative learning experiences
- Incremental transformation
- Monastic retreat
- Tourism research
- Interpretivism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Lately, an increasing number of people is turning to religious tourism in a search for meaning, and through transformative learning, they may find it. Religious tourism is one of the forms of travelling that holds transformative potential. Its setting, activities, encounters with people, cultures, lifestyles, and different environments may trigger, support, and/or facilitate transformative tourist experiences. Moreover, the sector constantly seems to successfully respond and adapt to the human need to understand life. This indicates that the religious and the spiritual are approached as sources of meaning and transformation by travellers. Travellers may engage in a certain experience or experiences that reveal and challenge their understanding of certain aspects of life, possibly resulting in a change of perspective or more specific beliefs. In the context of transformative tourist experiences, the physical travel becomes secondary to the inner journey, during which perspectives on life and, thus, the meaning of life are questioned.

Religious tourism finds its origins in what is referred to as the oldest form of tourism: pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is seen as the predecessor and the roots of travel and the tourism industry as we know it today (Ross, 2010). Thus, religious tourism is presumed to be the oldest form of planned travel, and to this day, it remains a tremendous industry (Seyer & Müller, 2011; Iliev, 2020). Religious tourism is one of the niche markets in tourism that is expanding quickly and is one of the biggest segments in the global tourism market (Griffin & Raj, 2017; Rashid, 2018; Ali & Cobanoglu, 2020; CBI Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Furthermore, religious tourism has an industry revenue of approximately US \$18 billion (El-Gohary et al., 2018). Moreover, religious tourism is increasingly popular amongst travellers. Munro (2020) estimated that 450 million international trips were taken for religious purposes, encompassing one-third of the international tourist arrivals in 2018. Moreover, it is thought that approximately 600 million national and international religious trips were made around the globe (Ali & Cobanoglu, 2020). From a global perspective, it is assumed that 25% of the travellers are interested in faith-based tourism (El-Gohary et al., 2018).

This popularity of religious tourism lies in multiple dynamics. First, religious tourism is well-institutionalised in the tourism market because it traces back far in human history (Griffin & Raj, 2017; Yanata, 2021). Secondly, improvements in tourism infrastructure have enabled access to religious sites (Rashid, 2018). Thirdly, commodification, commercialisation, marketing and developing of these sites and a wide diversity of religious tourism products led to a larger and more segmented market (Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014; CBI Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). The latter also makes that modern religious tourism, although still having clear religious connotations, is also occupied with serving personal, secular and spiritual needs nowadays. Therefore, religious tourism is capable of accommodating the quest for meaning that many postmodern European citizens pursue (Cohen, 2006; Norman, 2011; Mora et al., 2018; Rashid, 2018; Iliev, 2020; CBI Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020; Yanata, 2021).

According to Reisinger (2013), transformative learning can take place in every context, but some contexts may be more supportive because of the unfamiliarity present and the triggers to be mindful of perspectives. Although other religious tourism experiences also offer meaningful experiences, the structured, intentional, safe, and spiritually inspiring nature of monastic retreats seems to attract those who seek meaning. Monastic retreats offer a place of refuge, where retreatants temporally withdraw from or break with ordinary life: its social structures, social roles, habits, activities, and schedules (Ouellette et al., 2005; Schutte & Dreyer, 2006; Voigt et al., 2011; Heintzman, 2013; Gill et al., 2018b). Thereby, they may feel encouraged, enabled or challenged to pursue their personal projects and to think and learn about life, existence, themselves, and maybe even God (Norman, 2011; Heintzman, 2013; Gill et al., 2018b). They can do so by turning inwards or to God, seeking answers or revelations about the meaning of life, and their place in it (Schutte & Dreyer, 2006). And indeed, research finds

that those who have retreated report that they have acquired new insights, renewed perspectives, and/or intentions to make important decisions or changes in life (Schulte & Dryer, 2006; Gill et al., 2018ab). This provides empirical clues that retreatants may engage in transformative experiences or so-called transformative learning within monastic retreats. Willingness to be perceptive and reflective in a perhaps unfamiliar but highly meaningful atmosphere may initiate transformative meaning-making in a retreatant (Kirillova et al., 2017). The unfamiliar places, people, and activities that one encounters and participates in can be confrontational or eye-opening to one's perspective on and beliefs about life (Reisinger, 2013). A transformative experience cometh to pass. One alternates his perspective on oneself, one's roles and relationships, and the world. This perspective also informs our meaning-making, decisions, and behaviour. Therefore, how one construes, understands, and makes sense of what is encountered changes in line with this transformed perspective (Mezirow, 1978b). Thus, meaning is found.

To conclude, there are strong empirical clues that monastic retreats fall into the realm of settings that holds the potential to trigger, facilitate, and support visitors to learn in a transformative manner. Since little is known about the coming about of these transformative tourist experiences, the monastic setting is, therefore, thought of as a suitable setting to study these in. Therefore, this research studies transformative tourist experiences -the process- within monastic retreats through the lens of Transformative Learning Theory.

1.1 Thesis outline

This thesis presents an empirical study of transformative tourist experiences within monastic retreats. This chapter gave an introduction to the research. Chapter two discusses the societal and scientific relevance of this study. Furthermore, the research aim and research questions are presented. Chapter three outlines a review of literature on context relevant to transformative tourist experiences within monastic retreats. Chapter four discusses *Transformative Learning Theory* as a suitable theory for examining transformative tourist experiences. This chapter concludes with the presentation of the conceptual model, which functioned as a lens to look at the transformative process and outcomes of transformative tourist experiences. The model can be found in [section 4.4](#). Chapter five discusses the methodology, research design, data collection, and data analysis of this study. An interpretivist methodology was applied to a multiple case study, which included multiple methods, respectively a pre-retreat motivation assignment, a post-retreat creative assignment, and a post-retreat in-depth interview. Chapter six provides some background information about the two monasteries and the retreats included in this study. This is followed by a presentation of the findings in chapter 7. The most important results are discussed in light of the theory and existing literature in chapter 8. Furthermore, this chapter incorporates a reflection on the main strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical framework and methodology. A recommendation for future research is given as well. Finally, chapter 9 provides a conclusion. A reference list and appendices can be found at the end of the report.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

2.1 Societal relevance

Tourism is thought to act '*as a powerful vehicle for human transformation*', thus encouraging people to reinvent themselves: changing their seeing, thinking and behaving (Reisinger 2013, p. 30; Ateljevic & Tomljenovic, 2016). Apparently, there is a rising trend in intentionally seeking and experiencing or unexpectedly experiencing transformation through tourism (Pine & Gilmore, 2013). It has often been suggested that tourism's transformative potential lies in the encounter with the unknown, novelty, unfamiliarity, and otherness found while travelling. For instance, opportunities present themselves and are seized to move at a different pace, try out different roles, participate in unusual activities, participate in other routines, get to know another culture or other people, and try out other ways of living (Ross, 2010; Reisinger, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2016ab; Kirillova et al., 2017). These moments may be inspiring, disorienting, or confronting to how we view and expect the world, our place in it, our relationships with others, and ourselves to be (Reisinger, 2013).

It is claimed that those who are transformed encompass 'a new worldview of higher values and more responsible, meaningful lives' (Ateljevic & Tomljeovic p.26). That is to say, it is societally interesting to come to an understanding of why and how tourism is not only a product but also an agent of individual and societal change. Therefore, this research attempts to provide an understanding of the transformative dynamics of tourism by studying how individuals experience transformation within monastic retreats.

2.2 Scientific relevance

There is a plethora of research on transformative tourist experiences across various settings, such as Brown (2009;2013) on studying abroad, Nowaczek (2013) on ecotourism, Dillette et al. (2018) on yoga tourism, and Pope (2021) on adventure tourism. Yet, research into transformative tourist experiences within monastic retreats is scarce despite the many strong empirical clues about transformation as presented by various studies (Ouellette et al., 2005; Voigt et al., 2010; Heintz, 2013; Gill et al., 2018ab; Norman & Pokorny, 2017). In the field of tourism, only two studies were found that discussed transformation in relation to religious retreats. Yet, the theoretical underpinning and structuring of their work are mainly missing (Androit, 2008; Klimova, 2011). Still, the mere fact that monastic retreats seem to foster transformation does not come as a surprise. Rather, a monastic setting possibly provides many transformational cues that may trigger or support transformation because of the expected contrast between the monastic setting and one's personal life. Therefore, the monastic retreat setting was deemed suitable for studying the coming about of transformative tourist experiences. Moreover, by studying these experiences within monastic retreats, this study also addresses the need to better understand the transformative potential of retreat tourism.

Above all, there exists a knowledge gap in the field of tourism studies, especially with regard to the way transformative tourist experiences come about. Previous research thoroughly studied these experiences in terms of transformative outcomes. Yet, the nature and coming about of these experiences have either been largely overlooked by or have been outside the scope of these studies. Consequently, these experiences are also often studied in disconnection with their larger context (Snyder, 2008; Ross, 2010; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). Therefore, it is often not well understood how the tourism setting, one's social context, and one's personal background, e.g. circumstances, experiences, and motivations, facilitated or intervened with transformative learning.

To respond to this lack of theorizing about the nature of transformative experiences, one can turn to two theoretical strands on transformative tourist experiences. First, Existential Authenticity Theory understands transformation as coming closer to existential authenticity or one's true self (Wang, 1999;

Kirillova et al., 2016ab; Kirillova et al., 2017). However, the theoretical scope of what entails transformation is quite narrow since applying this theory could only help understand how one comes to reconsider beliefs about the self. Since we hold more views, beliefs, and ideas than those that define how we understand ourselves, this research preferred the application of the other theoretical strand, which is Mezirow's (1978ab, 1991, 2000) Transformative Learning Theory. This theory understands transformation as a result of a reorganization in one of the broader sets of assumptions or the more specific beliefs that derive from these. Compared to Existential Transformation Theory, Transformative Learning Theory includes a wider scope of perspectives and beliefs that may be transformed. One may also change perspectives and/or beliefs about society, morality, ethics, religion, philosophy, beauty, and knowledge. Besides, Mezirow's theory has proved to be robust and applicable in various disciplines. Within the field of tourism, it has been praised for connecting transformation and tourism and its ability to unravel the transformational potential of travelling (Reisinger, 2013; Fu et al., 2015; Robledo & Battle, 2017). Although many tourism studies refer to this theory, a rigorous and empirical application has remained absent until now and should be provided.

Hence, this thesis builds upon the essential concepts of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory whilst also including additional elements of personal context, retreat setting, and social context to contextualise and expand on the theory, to tap into the academic need for a more rigorous application of this theory, and even more to the need for a more thorough understanding of the process of transformative learning.

2.3 Research aim and research questions

To conclude, this study aims to contribute to the growing emergent literature on transformative tourist experiences by examining the coming about of transformative learning within monastic retreats through the lens of Transformative Learning Theory.

Therefore, the main research question guiding this research is formulated as follows:

How do visitors experience transformative learning within monastic retreats?

Three sub-questions support the exploration of this leading research question and contextualize these transformative tourist experiences. The first puts transformative learning beyond the context of the tourist experience into one's broader personal context. This is to see if and how pre-retreat circumstances, experiences, interests, activities, and behaviour build up to an intention to retreat and affect transformative learning, which is neglected by most studies (Ross, 2010). The second concerns studying what monastic retreat characteristics, practices, environmental factors, and activities may prompt, support, or influence experiencing transformative learning. The third subquestion examines whether and how the social context affects transformative learning.

What role does one's personal context play in experiencing transformative learning within monastic retreats?

What role does the retreat setting play in experiencing transformative learning within monastic retreats?

What role does the social context play in experiencing transformative learning within monastic retreats?

To answer these research questions, this study focused on individuals who were about to participate and correspondingly have participated in a monastic retreat. Transformative tourism is a relatively new phenomenon that has not yet received much attention in all its facets. The outcomes of this study will contribute to the knowledge about and understanding of transformative tourist experiences in regard

to transformative learning and, more specifically, how transformative learning takes place in monastic retreats.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Transformative Learning Theory and tourism

Human beings do not objectively perceive and understand reality. They constantly involve in meaning-making to understand this reality and do so through a certain personal lens, the so-called meaning perspective. This meaning perspective comprises multiple perspectives with underlying assumptions that contain what each person believes about society, morality and ethics, philosophy, aesthetics, knowledge, and the self. These assumptions form our 'specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgements' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). These sets of assumptions and more specific beliefs then shape our interpretation – and thus meaning-making- and our response to what we experience. This meaning perspective is constituted during childhood and influenced by one's parents, socialization processes, and the 'economic, political, social, religious, occupational, or educational systems' that one grows up in (Mezirow, 1978b, p. 104). A meaning perspective is not static, however. Throughout adult life, humans can change their assumptions or specific beliefs through a cognitive process called transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000).

Simply put, transformative learning may occur when one engages in a disorienting dilemma. This is an experience or a sequence of experiences that does not fit our meaning perspective and are, in that sense, disorienting. This disorientation may lead to reflection on the experience, how we responded to it, and the assumptions underlying this response. All of a sudden, we may become aware of the specific beliefs or assumptions we hold that usually operate outside our awareness. We may assess and question those. This might result in a transformation of these beliefs and/or assumptions. Since these beliefs and assumptions are meaning-providing structures, their alteration also leads to a change in meaning-making (Mezirow, 2000).

Being an educative theory, transformative learning is often studied in educational settings. Yet, transformative learning also takes place in tourism settings. If travel involves transformative learning, an outer and inner journey take place, during which the outer journey may trigger, stimulate, or support the inner journey to transformation (Heintzman, 2013; Reisinger, 2013; Soulard et al., 2021). Reisinger (2013; 2015) was the first to present an overview of transformative tourist experiences in *Transformational Tourism: Tourist Perspectives* and *Transformational Tourism: Host Perspectives*. Reisinger (2013) argues that transformational learning can occur in every context -although some hold more transformative potential because of the tangible and intangible aspects of this tourist setting. The transformational value of travel arises from observation and/or participation in the unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity encompasses places, people, cultures, environments, spheres, objects, and activities. These may inspire, disorient, confront, or create tension with one's taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs, thereby revealing those. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to perceive the tourist only as a passive recipient of educational and transformational cues. Rather, transformational learning requires cognitive efforts like critical thinking, reflection, interpretation, problem-solving, and so forth. Of course, the travel context may be supportive in these cognitive endeavours. Furthermore, travellers often embark upon alternative tourism, such as religious tourism, with certain motivations and purposes that may strengthen a willing attitude and commitment towards transformative learning. Intentions may even be more or less linked to transformation, which is evident in the increasing number of postmodern European citizens that turn to religious tourism in their quest for meaning (Shackley & Welton, 2008; Durán-Sánchez et al., 2018).

Thus, transformation does not necessarily strike unexpectedly or without prior intention. Instead, whether or not transformative tourist experiences occur seems to depend on the complex dynamics of intentions, travel setting, the choices one makes, the encounters one has, the activities one undertakes, cognitive efforts, willingness, commitment, and so forth. At least, the transformational and meaning-providing dimensions of travel have been clearly illustrated.

As for the meaning-providing dimensions of travel, some people pursue their personal quest for meaning through volunteer tourism, while others do so by turning to religious tourism (Willson et al., 2013). To further understand why there is an increase of tourists turning to religious tourism in their pursuit of meaning, it may be relevant to understand the impact of religion and culture on meaning-making.

3.2 The role of religion and neoliberalism in meaning-making

Transformative learning is the key to changes in one's meaning-making. Although meaning-making itself is an individual process, one's assumptions that guide this meaning-making are reflective of the systems and culture one grows up in. Furthermore, our beliefs are granted validation through human interaction (Mezirow, 2000). Religion may have greatly impacted our meaning perspective in premodern societies, while nowadays, neoliberal culture is predominant. This paragraph briefly explains the function of religion and neoliberalism in meaning-making.

People can find meaning in life in a range of domains stretching from personal life, community, ethnic groups, national identity, and religion (Eckersley, 2007). Religious systems are highly functional and unique systems for meaning-making because of their comprehensiveness, provision of significance through purpose, values, efficacy and self-worth, beliefs, and strong social components. (Newton & McIntosh, 2013; Baek et al., 2022). In pre-modern European societies, the religious teachings and practices of institutionalised religions met collective and individual needs for identity, worldview, coherence, security, order, stability, a sense of purpose, norms and values, behavioural guidance, and provided guidance for making decisions (Eckersley, 2007; Flood, 2011; Park et al., 2013; Newton & McIntosh, 2013). Even religious spirituality -living out one's relationship with God- was defined and determined by those institutions (Yanata, 2021). Nevertheless, during the mid-19th century, societal debates and events started that challenged the traditional, social, moral, and philosophical authority of the church in Europe (Inglehart & Norris, 2007; Davie, 2021). Eventually, this led to the gradual evolution of a discourse called secularization -entailing scientific rationalism, humanism, and liberal democratic ideas-. This process happened at different speeds and in various ways across the European continent (Davie, 2021). Yet, the outcome remained the same. Secularisation transformed societies from building upon religious values and religious institutions to non-religious values and secular institutions. This transition pushed religion from the socio-cultural space to the individual space, losing its grip on politics and economics as well (Fu et al., 2015; Dimitrovski, 2021). Although religion still has a place in the individual lives of Europeans, there also has been a loss of Christian religious practitioners in Southern, Western, and Northern Europe over the years (Inglehart & Norris, 2007; Davie, 2021).

Hence, the Christian religion no longer determines collective attitudes, beliefs, behaviour, and spirituality in Europe. And maybe even more importantly, it does not function as the collective system for meaning-making anymore. Yet religion has not disappeared but is nowadays presented in terms of individual choice, beliefs, personal orientation, and private states of mind. This offers people the freedom to explore, select, and combine those religious elements that suit them (Carrette & King, 2004). What is left of it is referred to as post-secular religiosity: *'a bricolage of faiths rather than one that strictly follows religious doxa or dogma'* (Nilsson & Tesdahoney, 2017, p. 168). To conclude, in a large part of Europe, Christian religious systems and thus their meaning-function have largely been put aside in socio-cultural life.

Furthermore, the neoliberal ideology that dominates western European societies emphasises deregulation, financialization, materialism, privatization, and individualism, promising ultimate freedom (Eckersley, 2007; Crockford, 2021). Neoliberalism is strongly intertwined with the development and promotion of free markets. It is advantageous to neoliberalism to keep religion in the individual sphere because its manifestation in the socio-cultural sphere could shape society, economy, and politics in a way that is inconsistent with neoliberal thinking. Because of the focus of

neoliberalism on the individual, it emphasises personal life as the most important source of meaning-making. In their personal life, people can find meaning in their jobs and the pursuit of personal interests and desires. However, personal life is also thought to be the most vulnerable provider of meaning because of its fragility and temporality, risking disappointment and failure (Eckersley, 2007). For instance, using one's career as the source of meaning may result in high amounts of stress, testing one's physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being (Gill et al., 2018ab; Gill et al., 2019). Thus, it may be that the neoliberal emphasis on the individual and personal makes people more vulnerable to the volatility of life. To have a more stable and balanced meaning in life, connectedness to social groups or religion is important. The latter is thought to be 'the only form of meaning that transcends people's personal circumstances, social situation, and the material world, and so can sustain them through the trouble and strife of mortal existence' (Eckersley, 2007, p. 54).

Hence, people are always in need of meaning to function well. As explained above, the resulting lack of collective meaning-orientation that may be embedded in religious and cultural shifts could explain why postmodern individuals are questing for meaning or significance (Baek, 2022). This quest revolves around the 'searching for the meaning of life, fulfilment, and questioning 'Who am I?'; 'What is the meaning of my very being?' (Yanata, 2021, p.5).

Since religion has always been highly functional in providing meaning, it is not surprising that people still turn to it. Yet, they do in another form than previously, more individual and less collective. They seek more personal encounters with 'the sacred,' which results in desperation to find and undergo genuine and original religious experiences outside the realm of institutionalised religions (Cohen, 2006; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Kujawa, 2017; Robledo & Batle, 2017). Religious tourism is increasingly responding to these needs and mainstream practices of self-help, self-development, self-transformation, mindfulness, and spirituality (Mora & Salen, 2018). It is within the realms of religious tourism that individuals seek and select places, settings, practices, or activities that are compatible with the search for meaning (Smith & Kelly, 2006). The answers that people find during this search may be transformative.

To conclude, the irony in it all is that while religion was forced to make room for neoliberal tendencies being dominant in socio-cultural meaning-making, it is exactly religious tourism people may turn to in their quest for meaning.

3.3 The adaptiveness of religion and religious tourism

Throughout history, stories have connected religion and specific sites, attracting people to come to these places (Seyer & Müller, 2011). Actually, religious tourism is presumed to be the oldest form of travelling, finding its foundation in pilgrimage (Ross, 2010). Of course, pilgrimage has its rich tradition in various religions. Yet, this research takes monastic retreats as an object of study and, therefore, discusses religious tourism mostly in terms of Christianity.

The concept of pilgrimages in Europe has evolved over time. Historically, pilgrimage seems to be mainly occupied with an expression of faith through both a physical and inner journey to devote one's heart or life to God (Berés, 2018). However, in Europe, the popularity of pilgrimage has had its ups and downs. Furthermore, the form of practice alternated over centuries. For instance, in the first centuries after Christ, a pilgrimage was mainly concerned with re-enacting the life of Christ. In the early Middle Ages, emphasis was put on salvation. Therefore, penance, indulgence, and spiritual cleansing became integral aspects of pilgrimage. During the Reformation, pilgrimage almost disappeared because undertaking a physical journey did not fit the idea that faith was only a matter of the heart (Harpur, 2016). To summarize, these examples clearly illustrate that pilgrimage adapted itself to societal ideas, conditions, and changing motivations.

This adaptive characteristic is reflected in the whole of Christian religious tourism. Whether it be pilgrimage trips, visiting sacred sites, voluntourism, church tourism, travel for worship, religious missions, camps, or retreats, a large extent of this market is responding to postmodern society. Postmodern people seldomly participate in religious tourism for solely religious motivations as the early pilgrims did, but still express a great interest in religious tourism for more personal reasons (Harpur, 2016; Baek et al., 2022). One might search for reinforcement of faith, reconciliation, and a place to worship or pray. But one might also seek a spiritual experience, self-improvement, healing, an escape, or a place to sort out life (Béres, 2018). Or one might simply be interested in the cultural, architectural, aesthetic, or historical values of religious sites (CBI Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Hence the motivations to participate in Christian religious tourism are multi-faceted. Yet, Harpur (2016) and Kujawa (2017) attribute the current interest in religious tourism to a desire for individual genuine religious experiences to find fulfilment, meaning, and transformation. Cohen (2006) adds to that by specifying that premodern Christian religious tourism was concerned with an expression of faith. However, this occupation no longer fits a society that has detached itself from the realms of religion. Therefore, modern and postmodern Christian religious tourism reacts to trends like the quest for meaning, significance and fulfilment. People hope 'to gain deeper and new understanding of the world and oneself' (Cohen, 2006, p. 80). Hence, the nature of Christian religious tourism has adapted to another Zeitgeist again.

3.4 Monasticism and retreats and their link to transformative learning

This thesis focuses on a specific form of religious tourism, monastic retreats. Monasticism has played an important role in the hospitality that is found in Christian religious tourism. St. Benedict, a monk in the sixth century, has been a key player in touching upon monasteries' obligations to hospitality. He wrote *Regula Benedicti*, providing guidelines on how to live close to God (O'Gorman, 2006). Within the 53rd chapter of his manuscript, Benedict was the first to write a 'rule' on the organisation of large-scale hospitality (Benedict & Fry, 1981). Inspired by the teachings of Jesus, as stated in the New Testament book Matthew 25: 35, '*I was a stranger and you invited me in*', Benedict wrote *De Hospitibus Suscipiendis*. This rule instructs how one ought to receive guests, namely '*All guests who arrive should be received as if they were Christ, for He himself is going to say: 'I came as a stranger, and you received me' and let due honour be shown to all, especially those who share our faith and those who are pilgrims.*' (New International Version, 1978, Matt. 25: 35 ; Benedict & Fry, 1981). Historically, hospitality was directed to pilgrims but has remained today to all kinds of people from all over the world (O'Gorman, 2006).

Hence, monasteries highly esteem the virtue of hospitality, which is still evident today in monastic communities taking in and caring for guests and offering retreats as one of the primary services (Schulte & Dreyer, 2006; Heintzman, 2013). Shackley (2003) defines a retreat as a '*catered accommodation, where quiet, peace, and spiritual input are facilitated*' (p.228). Although each monastic retreat may be unique in terms of organisation and program, they have in common that they offer a place of refuge to withdraw from or break with ordinary life temporarily: its social structures, social roles, habits, activities, and schedules to go on an inner journey or journey to God (Schutte & Dreyer, 2006; Gill et al., 2018ab). This concept of retreating is grounded in or associated with an early Christian spirituality called '*desert spirituality*.' The Bible is full of stories in which the desert served as a testing ground to which biblical figures temporarily retreated in solitude and silence to seek a change of heart or devotion to God (Tullio & Rossiter, 2009). Desert spirituality clearly incorporates notions of spiritual transformation.

Of course, nowadays, a monastic retreat welcomes both religiously and secularly motivated individuals or groups. Yet, a monastic retreat still provides a space to shut off, restore, and contemplate aspects of life. Studies find that visitors report restoration, revitalisation, calmness, transformation, healing,

renewal, and personal development as personal outcomes of participating in retreats (Ouellette et al., 2005; Heintz, 2013; Gill et al., 2018ab). Norman and Pokorny (2017) describe that guests mainly portrayed their retreat as challenging and changing. Once rested and with their heads cleared of cognitive clutter, visitors seem to learn about themselves, their lives, and the world (Gill et al., 2018ab). This may lead to new insights that might even lead to a renewed perspective. Meaning-making may change correspondingly with this learning process (Voigt et al., 2010; Gill et al., 2018ab). Although these studies do not specifically examine transformative learning or transformative tourist experiences within retreats, they do report or support the idea that retreats are 'symbols of transformation' (Heintz, 2013; Norman & Pokorny, 2017, p. 205; Gill et al., 2018ab).

Going on a retreat is an invitation to be in a place often atypical of one's everyday life, environment, and activities. Literature on retreats has related some retreat dimensions to support cognitive processes of thinking, reflecting, and even changing. For instance, Gill et al. (2018) report that some visitors said that the mental and/or physical break from routine life helped them reflect on life. Moreover, silence helps people to turn inwards as well. It is as stated in Norman & Pokorny (2017, p. 205): 'In the quiet, often ascetic context of retreat, removed from normal routines and obligations, there is little left to do but think and reflect.' Other essential elements are solitude, meditation, contemplation, *Lectio Divina*, rhythm, rituals, prayer, temporal detachment from information technology, spiritual guidance, and the retreat program (Schutte & Dreyer, 2006; Gill et al., 2019). All these elements prompt understanding and articulation of inner worlds, bringing retreatants closer to themselves or the presence of God. Visitors reflect on life or aspects of it and interpret those understandings again. They become '*quiet, alert, more perceptive and reflective*', and during the stay, '*certain issues become clearer, and reality become more recognizable and unambiguous*' (Schutte & Dreyer, 2006, p. 1456). This suggests that the retreat setting is a supporting context in accumulating greater or changed understanding about something in a very experiential way.

To conclude, monasteries have invited people to retreat from normal life for centuries. Apparently, the highly restorative and meaningful atmosphere of monasteries and the activities one undertakes during their stay are supportive of deep thinking about life. Thus, by temporarily immersing oneself in the subdued monastic lifestyle, one may perhaps purposefully or unexpectedly experience transformative learning.

3.5 Stance on religion and spirituality

Since transformative learning is studied within monastic retreats, it may be appropriate to shortly reflect on this research's stance in the debate about religion and spirituality

Many attempts by both scholars and within the public discourse have been made separate, define, and conceptualise 'religious' and 'spiritual,' setting them apart (Tart, 1975; Zinnbauer, 1999; Schlehofer et al., 2008; van Niekerk, 2018). Those who attempt to dichotomise the two associate religion with external and authoritarian doctrines, being uncool and static, and associate spirituality with a trendy and dynamic 'free search for truth, meaning, and authenticity' (Zinnbauer, 1999; Garces-Foley, 2006, p. 117).

Yet, the lines between religion and spirituality are still blurred, vague, and contested and seem more intertwined than separated from each other (Kujawa, 2017). Therefore, this thesis acknowledges their mutual relationship and follows an evenly embraced academic attitude that sees spirituality as a discursive shift from religion, building upon religious elements. This shift is proposed to be reflective of broader social, cultural, and political dynamics that were elaborated upon in the previous sections.

To continue, the term spirituality might even be inherited from world religions. For instance, within Christianity, the concept of spirituality refers to how the religious practitioner lives out the relationship with God in a personal and authentic way through the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Although

secularisation and neoliberalism restricted the significance of religion, an array of religious beliefs and practices is increasingly available, allowing for spiritual exploration and experimentation in a highly individual way. A religious or spiritual marketplace has evolved and is evolving, supplying what seekers do not solely find in institutionalised religions or everyday life, namely the quest for authenticity and meaning.

And that's how religion and spirituality are intertwined. Spirituality incorporates elements of institutionalised beliefs, movements, and rituals from old religious institutions (Kujawa, 2017). Simultaneously, religion also tries to respond to spiritual seeking. For instance, some churches successfully integrated spirituality with traditional religious beliefs. These try to accommodate a more personal and authentic religious life by 'creating new institutional forms and worship styles' or by taking a position independent of established denominations (Garces-Foley, 2006, p.128-129).

Therefore, this thesis sees religion and spirituality as conceptually inseparable, without denying that individual accounts can, of course, claim the contrary. For the convenience of writing and reading this thesis, 'religion' and 'religious tourism' are used as key terms. Note that these terms are meant to incorporate spirituality as well.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Transformative Learning Theory by Jack Mezirow

The concept of transformative learning was first introduced in the empirical research of Jack Mezirow (1978a). He studied the factors that facilitated or hindered women's learning process of women who returned to education or a workplace after a lengthy time-out of this educational setting or workforce. In his conclusion, Mezirow argued that women had personally transformed through the re-entry program. He also identified ten phases they could possibly have experienced (Mezirow, 1978b; Table 1). Based on his empirical findings, he started to develop what would become the *Transformational Learning Theory*. According to Mezirow (2000), we are constantly involved in meaning-making to understand ourselves, our relationships, the world, and our experiences. Thus, we are constantly engaged in understanding life. Yet the mechanisms behind meaning-making are not static. Occasionally, a certain experience and the insight(s) drawn from it result in a realisation or feeling that it does not fit our understanding. Consequently, humans may attempt to question and change their meaning-making (Fleming, 2018). Mezirow (1978) refers to this process as transformative learning. In the original theory and subsequent revised versions of it, transformative learning is depicted as 'the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective, so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7-8; Reisinger, 2013).

Table 1: Mezirow's (1978a; 1991) ten phases of transformative learning and his added eleventh phase quoted from Mezirow (2000).

Phase	Explanation
Phase 1	A disorienting dilemma
Phase 2	Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
Phase 3	A critical assessment of assumptions
Phase 4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6	Planning of a course of action
Phase 7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
Phase 8	Provisional trying of new roles
Phase 9	Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Phase 10	A reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's perspective
Phase 11	Altering present relationships and forging new relationships

Transformative Learning Theory is clearly embedded in a constructivist approach towards social reality. A constructivist research paradigm or ontology claims that existence and reality are not the same. The world, objects, human beings, and phenomena exist beyond us. Since we cannot objectively access this material reality, human beings feel an urgency to make sense of it through interpretation and attributing meaning to our experiences of it. Consequently, multiple personal or collective constructed realities exist (Hurd, 2008). Mezirow (2000) argues that people make meaning about reality internally by unconsciously relying on their meaning perspective, which is also called the personal frame of reference. This meaning perspective comprises broad orienting assumptions and more specific beliefs about life which both function as meaning-providing structures.

Meaning-making is an individual and internal process but has a social-cultural foundation. For a start, our adult assumptions and specific beliefs are strongly shaped in childhood. Therefore, they are reflective of socialization processes, input from primary caregivers, and the socio-cultural systems one grows up in (Mezirow, 1978b). Furthermore, human interaction and discourse play a crucial role in stabilising and validating these assumptions, beliefs, and personal meanings. Although one's frame of understanding is shaped by childhood and by others, one is able to expand or reorganize these assumptions and specific beliefs. Hence, one develops one's meaning perspective further during adulthood (Mezirow 1978b; Mezirow, 2000).

Thus, Mezirow believes that an underlying meaning perspective defines, shapes, and delimits an individual's habitual perception, expectations, and understanding of the world (Mezirow, 1978b, Mezirow, 2000, Reichenbach, 2015). A meaning perspective is 'the structure of cultural and psychological assumptions within which our past experience assimilates and transforms new experiences' (Mezirow, 1985, p. 21). In that sense, a meaning perspective functions as a filter, determining how we sense, imagine and understand things. A meaning perspective thus provides context for making meaning about what is encountered and/or experienced (Mezirow, 2000). This meaning perspective comprises habits of mind and points of view (Kitchenham, 2008). Habits of mind are sets of broad and generalized underlying assumptions that orient our perspectives on the world. Mezirow (2000) identified six of them: perspectives on socio-linguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, philosophical, psychological, and aesthetical topics. Each of these are expressed and communicated by points of view. Points of view are comprised of clusters of meaning schemes. A meaning scheme is a constellation of immediate specific knowledge, ideas, beliefs, expectations, values, feelings, and judgement that one adopts to interpret what is sensed or imagined and thus informs our meaning-making about specific experiences (Mezirow, 2000; Reichenbach, 2015; Figure 1, p.20). These habits of mind and points of view also inform our responses: action, decision-making, choices, and behaviour (Mezirow, 2000; Reisinger, 2013, Reichenbach, 2015). In other words, how we perceive, think, interpret, make meaning, and respond reflects our points of view which are structured and informed by broader underlying perspectives on life.

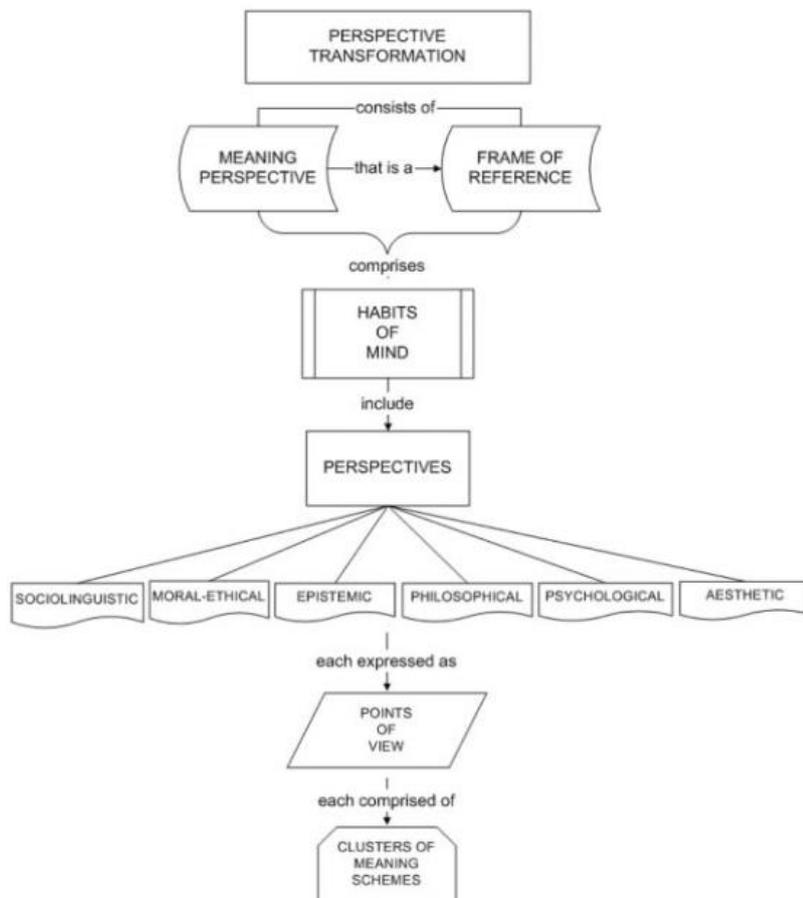


Figure 1: Schematic overview of important concepts used in Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory. Retrieved from Kitchenham (2008, p.119)

Human beings are learning their whole life. Every time they encounter something new, they learn. Nevertheless, learning is not synonymous with transformation. According to Mezirow (2000), learning can take place in four ways. The first considers an elaboration of the existing meaning perspective. This is the most common type of learning, in which one keeps working with present points of view by expanding on, complementing, and revising these. Then there is adding new points of view, but those are compatible with already present points of view (Kitchenham, 2008). These types of learning are not transformational. Transformation only occurs when meaning-providing structures are reformulated over time because of a restructuring of dominant assumptions and beliefs (Mezirow, 2000). Transformative learning only happens when one becomes critically aware of how and why points of view and habits of mind mediate the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world and considers a reorganization of those beliefs after a reflective insight that follows from a mindful transformative learning experience. This happens when one runs into an experience that indicates an incongruence in these underlying assumptions and specific beliefs. If one critically reflects and attempts to reorganize habits of mind and/or points of view, then one is involved in transformational learning. The experience(s) that initiate this transformative learning process is called a 'disorienting dilemma.' A disorienting dilemma is an essential building block in the process. One's perspective is unable to function in meaning-making about the dilemma, and thus the experience cannot be assimilated into current understanding. One may become consciously and critically aware of underlying assumptions and specific beliefs and assess their functioning. Consequently, one may reorganize broader assumptions on life and therefore participate in the third type of learning which considers a transformation of habits of mind. This is called epochal or fundamental transformation, coming from a 'sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21). It is also possible for

smaller changes to occur. One may alternate specific ideas, beliefs, expectations, values, feelings, and judgements and thereby engage in a transformation in related points of view. Over time, multiple of these straightforward transformations in points of view may culminate in a transformation of a habit of mind as well. Therefore, this pathway of transformative learning is called incremental transformation (Mezirow, 2000; Kitchenham, 2008; Reichenbach: 2005, Figure 2)

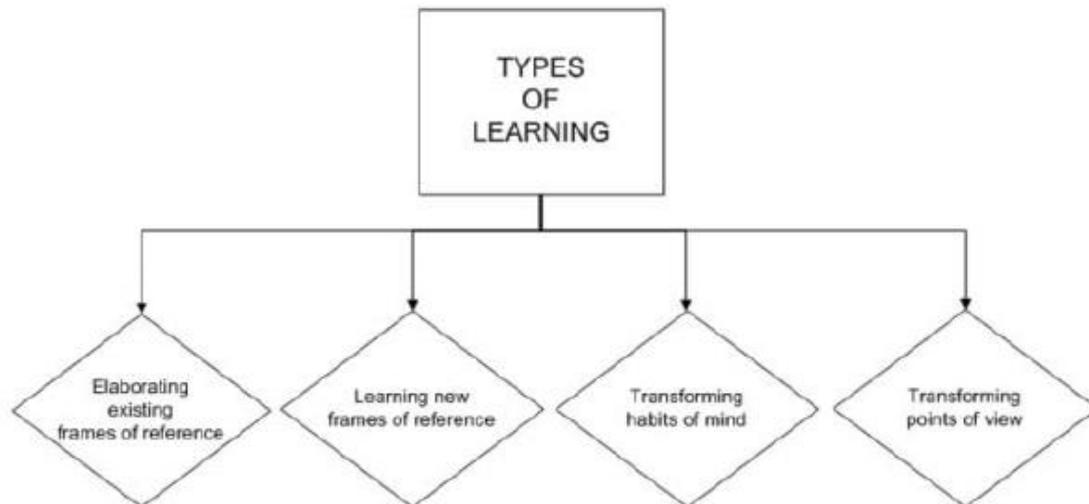


Figure 2: Visual representation of the four types of learning as identified by Mezirow (2000). Retrieved from Kitchenham (2008, p. 120)

Mezirow (2000) presented critical reflection as the crux of transformative learning. It is all about questioning one's dominant assumptions and beliefs about something and coming to the conclusion that these are incongruent and insufficiently functioning in providing meaning (Mezirow, 2000). Eventually, one might decide to reorganise underlying assumptions –epochal transformation- or reorganize or adopt new points of view -incremental transformation- that may lead to incremental perspective change over time-. This involves recognising the difference between the old and new perspectives and evaluating why the new perspective is granted more value than the former one. This also implies that one's options within that reality are redefined (Mezirow, 1978b). Transformation is thus depicted as a very cognitive process.

Finally, Mezirow (2000) argues that transformative learning is about reorganizing or alternating the meaning perspective. If one succeeds, habitual expectations are evolved that will guide one's perception, understanding, and feeling about the world in a more 'inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective, so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (p. 7-8). As it is thought that transformed perspectives are better than the previous state, human beings become more socially responsible and clear-thinking throughout life. In the end, *'We all require the meaning perspective prescribed by our culture, but we have the potentiality to becoming critically aware of our perspectives and changing them'* (Mezirow, 1978b, p.108). What is more to that is that 'perspective transformation represents not only a total change in life perception but an actualization of that perspective. In other words, one does not only see life from a changed perspective, but one also lives in line with that perspective (Paprock, 1992). Perspective transformation comes to its absolute right if one finally makes choices and acts in accordance with these new understandings (Reichenbach, 2015). This last part of transformative learning is likely very challenging to commit to for several reasons. Emotional struggles, habitual forces, and a lack of social support and validation may delay, obstruct, or prevent the transformation from finding ground (Mezirow, 1978b; Mezirow, 2000; Kirillova et al., 2017).

4.2 Criticisms of Transformative Learning Theory

Although Transformative Learning Theory presents a sophisticated conceptualisation of transformation of one's held assumptions and beliefs about various aspects of life, it is not exempt from criticism.

First, the theory has been criticised for not taking the personal, social, cultural, political, and historical context into account (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 2000). According to Mishler (1979), context is part of meaning-making. Nevertheless, both in his original and revised theory, Mezirow (1978b; 2000) acknowledges that one's meaning perspective is a result of childhood and, thus, the systems in which we grow up. However, this acknowledgement did not result in studying how context and culture influence transformative learning. This research agrees with Mishler's point of view that context is a crucial part of meaning-making. Therefore, one's personal context, e.g., personal circumstances, experiences, interests, and motivations, is integrated as one of the concepts in the conceptual model adopted in this study ([section 4.4](#)). Socio-cultural context has not been included in this model. Still, the literature review briefly explained the cultural, political, and historical context of meaning-making, thereby putting transformative tourist experiences in a broader context ([sections 3.2](#) and [3.3](#)).

Secondly, the theory has been criticised for emphasising critical reflection as the crux of transformation, largely forgetting and/or neglecting that affective learning through emotions and feelings might play a role in transformative learning as well (Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 2000; DeSapio, 2007). Mezirow has been open and responsive to his critique since, in his later writings and revised theory, he acknowledged the role of emotions in transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). He stated that one's reconsideration of orienting assumptions and points of view is often accompanied by strong feelings that may even limit one from transforming. However, he did not include these affective aspects as central concepts in his model, and thereby he maintained the rational tone of the theory. Therefore, Taylor (2000) and Illeris (2014) argue that Mezirow still neglects to study the interrelationship between affective and cognitive learning. The researcher is aware that this might also be a deficiency in this research.

Thirdly, the initial theory was also criticized for overemphasising transformative learning as an individual process, separating it from social factors (Collard & Law, 1989). Mezirow counterargued that his theory was misunderstood and that he does understand transformative learning as having individual and social dimensions (Fleming, 2018). Mezirow (1978b) granted social factors a greater role in his theory by including the eleventh step of transformative learning: altering present relationships and forging new relationships (Table 1, p. 18). However, Mezirow (1978b; 2000) seemed to mainly bound the power of the social dimension to the stabilisation and validation of transformed perspectives, arguing that personal meanings that one attributes to reality are 'acquired and validated through human interaction' (Mezirow, 1978b, p. XIV). However, this study expects that the impact of human interaction and one's social context extends beyond a validating function. Therefore, social context is included as one of the concepts in the conceptual framework of this research ([section 4.4](#)).

Finally, Transformative Learning Theory is criticized for suggesting positive outcomes of transformation. Mezirow (2000) claims that the expansion or alternation of habits of mind and points of view results in the accumulation of new and better meanings (Fleming, 2018). It allows us to see and act in a better, more open, more aware, more insightful, and more inclusive way (Mezirow, 2000). This statement is somewhat problematic. First, it cannot be objectively defined what is better and more inclusive. These are normative socio-culturally embedded ideas. Secondly, looking at history, one may question the foregone conclusion that transformative learning always leads to positive outcomes. Naughton and Schied (2010) suggest that the negotiating of one's assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and opinions about certain aspects of life can also lie outside 'what is right, good, and

beautiful' (p. 338). According to them, history proves that propaganda and a compelling, charismatic leader may incentivize transformative learning in individuals that does not lead them to have more open, respectful, and inclusive assumptions and points of view.

4.3 Difficulty of capturing transformative tourist experiences

Furthermore, it is very complex to capture transformative tourist experiences. First, transformative learning is a process that mostly happens internally and individually. Therefore, transformative learning experiences are neither immediately accessible nor immediately visible to the researcher (Coghan & Weiler, 2018). Dialogue, then, is the only way to explore how transformative learning comes about. Yet according to Mezirow (1978b), transformative learning is definite when it is staged. Therefore, meaningful behavioural change is reflective of this actualization. Whether these changes already occur within the tourist experience is debated. Some studies report changes or important decisions directly after perspective transformation, and others say that changed perspectives have not yet been converted into decisive and behavioural adjustments (Kirillova et al., 2016ab, Kirillova et al., 2017; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018; Pope, 2021). Furthermore, most tourism studies warn of a fade-out effect in the post-travel phase, during which the transformational effects of the tourist experience diminish over time (Brown, 2009; Kirillova & Letho, 2015; Robledo & Batle, 2017; Gill, 2018b, Pope, 2021). This warning would be in line with what Mezirow (1978b) himself reasoned, namely that many people do not fully endure and complete the transformation process. Thus, the definite status of transformative learning through travelling remains questionable (Reisinger, 2013).

To conclude, Transformative Learning Theory has its limitations. It is good to be aware of them. Therefore, this research builds upon the essential concepts of the theory whilst also including additional elements of personal context, retreat setting, and social context to contextualise and expand on the model and also tackle some of the identified limitations. This resulted in the conceptual model presented in the next paragraph.

4.4 Proposal conceptual model

Taking Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory as a starting point, this thesis presents a conceptual model to study transformative learning within monastic retreats, see Figure 3. Nevertheless, some parts of the model deviate slightly from Mezirow's understanding of transformative learning based on previously discussed critique and the researcher's questioning of the theory.

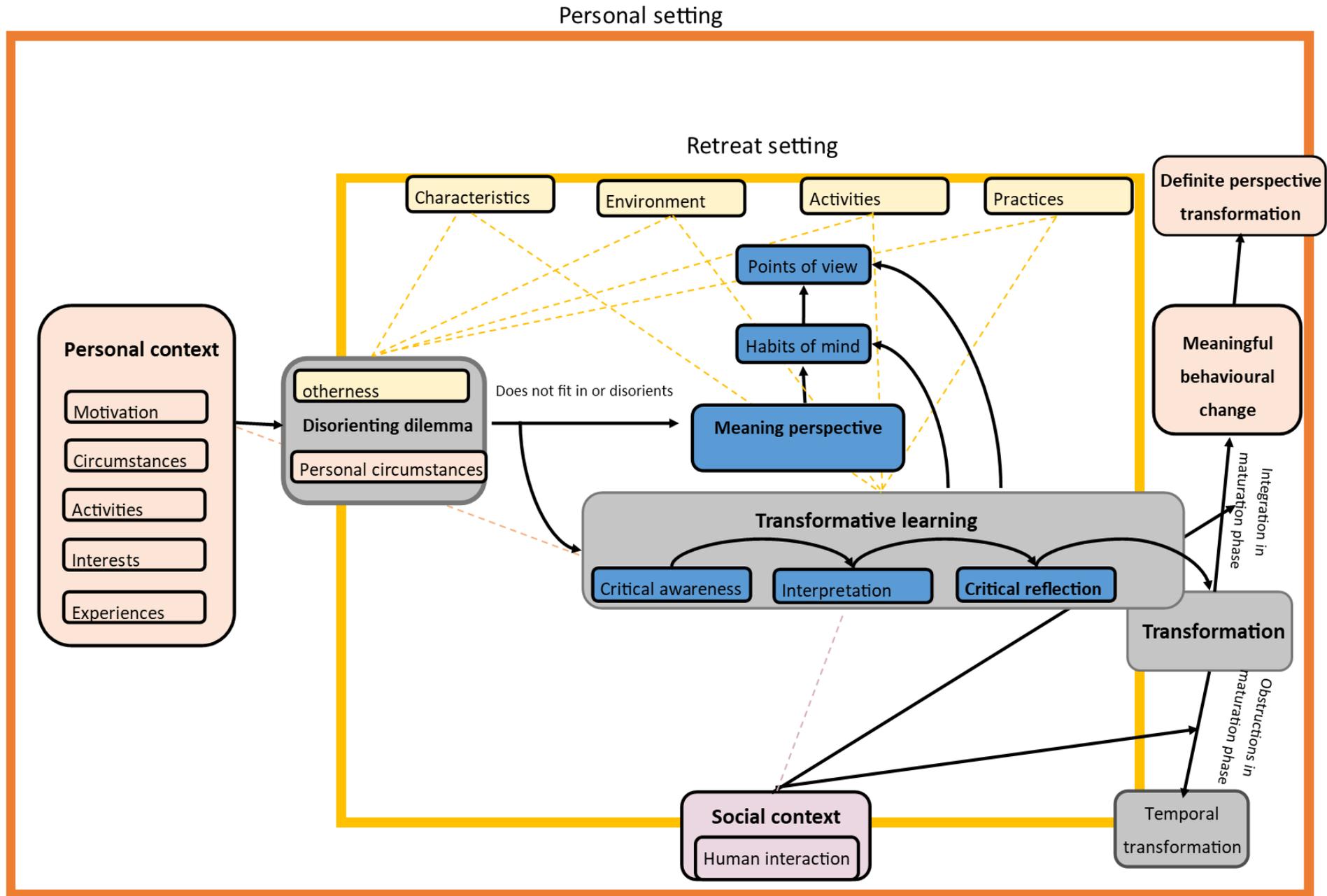


Figure 3: Conceptual Model adopted in this study, largely based on Transformative Learning Theory by Jack Mezirow

4.4.1. Personal context

Although not particularly articulated by Mezirow himself, various studies argue that both intentionality and accidentality are pathways to transformative learning (Snyder, 2008; Reisinger, 2013; Tomljenović & Ducić, 2017). Kirillova et al. (2017) argue that transformation comes as a surprise and is not anticipated upon. On the other hand, Fu et al. (2015) and Ross (2010) claim the opposite. They find that most travellers intend, desire, or anticipate meaningful changes to experience one. Tomljenović and Dukić (2017) and Sheldon (2020) find a compromise by arguing that transformation can be both intentionally embarked upon or an unexpected outcome of travel.

Because people are expected not to retreat out of the blue, this research assumes that intentions and motivations build up to transformative learning. Furthermore, personal circumstances, activities, interests, and experiences may also affect transformative learning. Since Transformative Learning Theory has been criticised for not taking the personal context into account, and since the relationship between transformative tourist experiences and the personal context has not been studied in depth yet, the concept of personal context is included to contextualise transformative learning experiences in one's life journey.

4.4.2 Monastic retreat setting

Briefly, context matters. Any tourism experience could hold transformational value and power (Pope, 2021). The tourist setting, with its tangible and intangible elements, definitely plays a role in transformative tourist experiences (Snyder, 2008; Reisinger, 2013; Smith & Kelly, 2016). Therefore, knowledge about whether and how one's personal context plays a role in transformative learning should be complemented with an understanding of how the retreat setting triggers and/or supports this process. Although some studies have already suggested that certain dimensions of such retreats seem to support learning and change, these did not have transformative tourist experiences as their specific research topic (Schutte & Dreyer, 2006; Kelly, 2012; Gill et al., 2018ab; Gill et al., 2019). Accordingly, the role of the retreat setting in transformative learning has not been explored so far. With this in mind, an effort will be made to see what monastic retreat characteristics, practices, and activities are indicated by visitors as supportive of their learning process.

Therefore, the concept of monastic retreat setting is included. The concept refers to those characteristics, practices, environmental aspects, and activities of the monastic retreat with a transformational value.

4.4.3 Social context

One is expected to depend on friends, family, teachers, therapists, religious communities, a political party, colleagues, movements, and other communities for support and reinforcement of transformative learning. Therefore, human interaction is included as a central concept to contextualise transformative learning experiences in the social context. Human interaction is understood as the involvement of someone in one's transformative learning experience, whether by being present, spending time together, or communicating.

4.4.4 Transformative learning

The process of transformative learning is mainly initiated and facilitated by the occurrence of a disorienting dilemma (4.4.5), critical reflection (4.4.10), and perspective transformation (4.4.11), as will be discussed in the following sections (Mezirow, 2000; Reichenbach, 2015). Transformative learning involves revealing and realizing how underlying meaning structures guide one in perceiving, interpreting, and attributing meaning to the self, relationships, the world, life, and experiences. It also involves an attempt to change these structures. According to Mezirow (2000, p.21), this can happen in two ways. The first pathway is epochal: 'a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight.' The second pathway is incremental: 'progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a

transformation in a habit of mind' over time. Transformative learning happens when one draws a transformative insight after being triggered by a certain experience(s) that cannot be placed in one's frame of reference or meaning perspective. Therefore, one may reflect on the meaning structures that constitute this frame of reference and possibly attempt to make structural changes to these. If so, transformative learning results in a structural change in one's thinking, feeling, and understanding, and eventually, is also converted into aligned actions, decisions, choices, and behaviour (Mezirow, 1978b).

Simply put, the concept of transformative learning refers to a learning process during which one alternates ways of thinking, feeling, understanding, and living because of a reorganization in underlying meaning structures. Transformative learning can occur in a more epochal or incremental way.

4.4.5 Disorienting dilemma

One of the essential elements of transformative learning is the occurrence of a 'disorienting dilemma.' A disorienting dilemma shakes things up and reveals and confronts the incongruence or deficiency of held habits of mind or points of view. Mezirow originally defined a disorienting dilemma as a singular moment, often an acute and personal life crisis such as the sudden loss of a loved one or graduation from high school (Mezirow, 1978b). Clark (1993) extended this conceptualisation by adding that 'integrating circumstances' may also trigger transformation. These are 'indefinite periods in which the persons consciously or unconsciously search for something which is missing in their life; when they find this missing piece, the transformation process is catalysed' (Clark, 1993, p. 117-118). These integrating circumstances are subtle and cumulative rather than dramatically disruptive (Taylor, 2000). This thesis takes a stance that a disorienting dilemma could be a disruptive singular experience, a search for a missing piece in life, or a more cumulative process of various experiences happening at various points in time.

Therefore, a disorienting dilemma does not necessarily present itself during the retreat. It may present itself earlier and function as a springboard in opting for a retreat. It could then be part of the motivation to retreat. For example, one might experience a specific life crisis and temporarily withdraw from everyday life to deal with it. Or one might have experienced a certain emptiness in life for much longer and use a retreat to explore the missing piece and reflect upon it (Taylor, 2000; Ouellette et al., 2005; Pung et al., 2020). It could also be that the disorienting dilemma presents itself in the unfamiliarity, otherness, and novelty that the monastic setting presents. Therefore, the disorienting dilemma could be part of the personal context or the monastic setting.

To conclude, it is acknowledged that a disorienting dilemma can take many forms. Still, the concept largely refers to an experience or multiple experiences that do not fit or disorient the underlying assumptions and specific beliefs one holds. Therefore, it acts as an indispensable catalyst for transformative learning. Acknowledging that a disorienting dilemma can happen pre-retreat and in-situ, and the many forms it may take, might reveal how one's personal context and the monastic retreat setting play out in transformative learning.

4.4.6. Critical awareness

The concept of critical awareness refers to the state in which an individual realises and knows that the disorienting dilemma does not fit within underlying assumptions or the more specific constellation of ideas, knowledge, beliefs, judgements, and feelings. In that sense, the normally veiled assumptions or points of view become explicit to the person concerned. One comes to the insight that one's meaning-making about something is no longer completely functional or logical.

4.4.7. Meaning perspective

A meaning perspective is the 'structure of cultural and psychological assumptions within which our past experience assimilates and transforms new experiences.' (Mezirow, 1985, p. 21). Every time our senses or imagination directs information to our brain, this meaning perspective arranges and

mediates our perception, interpretation, and understanding of that reality. One’s meaning perspective thus provides an essential context for meaning-making (Mezirow, 2000). This meaning perspective is comprised of habits of mind and corresponding points of view (Kitchenham, 2008, Figure 2, p.21).

As previously explained in [section 4.1.](#) on p.18, perspectives are profoundly shaped and stabilised by socialization processes during childhood (Mezirow 2000; Kitchenham, 2008). Although an adult’s meaning perspective is thus partly predetermined, human beings have the potency to develop further and reorganize their lens (Mezirow, 1978b).

Thus, the concept of meaning perspective refers to the whole of broad underlying assumptions -habits of mind- and more specific ideas, knowledge, beliefs, judgements, and feelings -points of view- that mediate our perception, interpretation, feeling, and understanding of what is encountered or experienced.

4.4.8 Habits of mind

As stated in the previous section, one’s meaning perspective consists of habits of mind and points of view.

The concept of habits of mind refers to the underlying broad and generalized perspectives or assumptions that act as tendencies in how we see and interpret life itself. These may include unintentionally and intentionally learnt socio-linguistic, moral-ethical, philosophical, aesthetical, psychological, and epistemic orientations. These perspectives are expressed and communicated by so-called points of view. Table 2 describes the various habits of mind.

Table 2: Explanation of the six habits of mind, identified by Mezirow (2000). Retrieved from Mezirow (2000) and Reisinger (2013).

Habits of mind	Explanation
Socio-linguistic	<p>Perspective on society, amongst other things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs about society and the way it is organised • Beliefs about cultural systems • Beliefs about race, class, and politics • Beliefs about what language is • Beliefs about how language is used • Beliefs about the power of language <p>(Mezirow, 2000; Reisinger, 2013).</p>
Moral-ethical	<p>Perspective on morality and ethics, amongst other things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs about norms and values • Beliefs about what is ethical decision-making <p>(Mezirow, 2000; Reisinger, 2013)</p>
Philosophical	<p>Perspective on philosophy, amongst other things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs about existence • Beliefs about reality • Beliefs about religion <p>(Mezirow, 2000)</p>
Aesthetics	<p>Perspective on aesthetics, amongst other things</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs about beauty • Beliefs about authenticity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Values, tastes, attitudes, standards, and judgements about beauty and the insight and authenticity of aesthetic expressions” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 17) <p>(Mezirow, 2000)</p>
Psychological	<p>Perspective on the self, amongst other things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs about one’s personality • Beliefs about one’s role in reality, society, and relationships • Beliefs about the things one can do • Beliefs about what one should and could be • Informing our attitudes • Informing our tendencies <p>(Mezirow, 2000)</p>
Epistemic	<p>Perspective on knowledge, amongst other things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs about what knowledge is • Beliefs about how knowledge is made • Beliefs about how knowledge can be used • This results in learning style preferences and a preference for studying the concrete or the abstract <p>(Reisinger, 2013; Mezirow, 2000).</p>

Thus, the concept of habits of mind refers to broad underlying assumptions that orient our perspective on socio-linguistics, morality and ethics, philosophy, aesthetics, psychological beliefs, and epistemic beliefs. These create habitude tendencies in what we see, what we think, what we feel, and how we understand it.

4.4.9 Points of view

Each habit of mind is expressed and communicated by one’s points of view. The concept of points of view is defined as: *‘sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgements, that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality’* (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18).

4.4.10 Critical reflection

One of the essential components of transformative learning considers critical reflection. The term reflection refers to ‘the activity of exploring an issue of concern and considering it in relation to personal experiences’ (Lundgren & Poell, 2016, p.4). There are different levels of reflection, which follow a hierarchical order. Critical reflection is often depicted as the highest category in this range. In his early work, Mezirow (1978b) defined critical reflection as exploring and considering our deeply-held assumptions and beliefs in how we see ourselves, our relationships, and the world. Yet, in 1991 he revised this terminology by stating that ‘reflection is the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience (p. 104). First, content reflection considers the ‘what’-questions. One thinks about the experience itself and what happened. Secondly, process reflection considers the ‘how’-questions. One thinks about how one can deal with or act upon the experience and the factors that affected this experience. These two types of reflection involve transformative learning regarding points of view. This may result in straightforward

A progression of straightforward transformations may eventually lead to an incremental change in perspective. Thirdly, there is premise reflection. Premise reflection is concerned with the ‘why’-questions. Through asking why-questions, one may come to see the bigger picture of deeply-held assumptions about the self, relationships, and the world. This type of reflection involves transformative learning regarding a habit of mind (Mezirow, 1991; Reisinger, 2013; Reichenbach, 2015; Lundgren & Poell, 2016). This learning experience occurs less common but may lead to fundamental transformation

Furthermore, a distinction between different kinds of reflection has been made and elaborated upon in Table 3.

Table 3: Explanation of different kinds of critical reflection. Retrieved from (Mezirow, 1978b; Mezirow, 2000; Reisinger, 2013; Kitchenham, 2008)

Kind of reflection	Explanation
Narrative	Critical reflection on assumptions communicated to you
Action	Critical reflection on one’s own or others’ assumptions in task-orientation
Systemic	Critical reflection on assumptions about economic, cultural, political, educational, communal, or other systems
Organizational	Critical reflection on assumptions about the workplace or other organizations
Moral-ethical	Critical reflection on assumptions about what encompasses ethical decision-making
Therapeutic	Critical reflection on feelings and relationships
Epistemic	Critical reflection on one’s knowledge, including causes and consequences of one’s meaning perspective.

Thus, the concept of critical reflection refers to the conscious effort of exploring and considering experience(s) at the level of content, process, or premises to interpret and give meaning to this experience. Through this cognitive undertaking, normally implicit and uncritically accepted habits of mind and points of view become assessed (Brookfield, 2000). One reflects on these meaning structures’ functionality, validity, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness. Critical reflection possibly leads to incremental or fundamental perspective transformation.

4.4.11 Perspective transformation

According to Mezirow (2000, p. 7-8), the process of transformative learning can eventually result in a structural change of ‘our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets [red. points of view]) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action’ if culture permits. A reformulation of criteria follows a reorganization of a habit of mind or points of view for perceiving, interpreting, and making meaning. One thinks, feels, and understands past and new experiences differently. The maturation of such a perspective transformation is accompanied by meaningful behavioural changes since the criteria for taking decisions and actions are also reorganized. Significant behavioural changes are the visible evidence that indicates full maturation of perspective transformation, so to speak (Mezirow 1978b).

Mezirow (2000) believes that only a change in a habit of mind is worth mentioning a perspective transformation. As explained in [section 4.1](#) on transformative learning on p. 20-21, a habit of mind can be reorganized in a direct and abrupt way, but it may also change by consecutive changes in points of view. The latter takes more time. For this reason, the nature of transformative learning affects the time it takes for perspective transformation to happen. And then, the question remains whether a perspective transformation will fully mature and become definite, as explained in the following section.

Thus, the concept of perspective transformation refers to either an abrupt or incremental reorganization of a habit of mind to make it better functioning, more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative.

4.4.12 Meaningful behavioural change

A meaning perspective sets our talking, decision-making, acting, and behaviour in motion. Therefore, perspective transformation does not only impact ways of thinking, feeling, and understanding but also the way of living. Decision-making and behaviour are the visible functions of (changed) perspectives. Therefore, one has to decide and act in accordance with the transformation for it to be called definite (Mezirow 1978b, Mezirow 2000).

Thus, the concept of meaningful behaviour change refers to choices, decisions, actions, and behaviours that mirror a change in perspective and could indicate the maturing stage of a transformed perspective. Yet, reaching this stage is difficult.

Temporal transformative learning

Transformative learning might be temporal because the maturing of a changed point of view or habit of mind gets obstructed. Mezirow identified various threats to transformative learning. First, emotions may successfully defend a previous meaning perspective (Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 2009). Secondly, one might be inclined towards the comfortable and not feel an immediate need to integrate what was learnt. This is called habitus (Snyder, 2008). Thirdly, certain habitual forces interfere with maturation (Pung et al., 2020; Mezirow, 2000). Moreover, there might be little social support for one's renewed perspective, resulting in a lack of validation. (Mezirow, 1978b; Kitchenham, 2008). The latter highlights human interdependency and the importance of social interaction in the maturing of a transformed perspective (Mezirow, 2000).

Maturing transformative learning

However, a transformed perspective can also mature. According to Mezirow (2000), it can even reach a definite status. Transformation is completed when one reaches the stage of total commitment, self-confidence, and competence regarding the changed perspective. Since behaviour is aligned with our meaning perspectives, meaningful behaviour change indicates this maturation point of transformative learning. According to Mezirow (1978b), a definite transformation is irreversible. We cannot return to those perspectives held in the past. He also assumes that each time we engage in transformative learning, it brings us closer to the 'potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible, and autonomous learners' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 30). Mezirow suggests that the older we get, the wiser we get, and the 'better' our habits of mind and points of view function.

5. METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology and corresponding methods that underpin this research. The methodology to be used in this research is majorly embedded in an interpretive research paradigm and is further elaborated upon in [section 5.1](#). In [section 5.2](#), the research design is outlined, of which a multiple case study, longitudinal design elements, and the researcher's presence and participation in monastic retreats are important aspects. The latter facilitated access to the study setting and population and established intimacy, a crucial foundation for research participants to open up and speak heart-to-heart about such personal experiences. [Section 5.3](#) discusses the study population. Corresponding methods can be found in [section 5.4](#). Motivation assignments, creative methods, and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect empirical data ([5.5](#)). [Section 5.6](#) gives an account of the researcher's positionality. Finally, data analysis ([5.7](#)) and ethical considerations ([5.8](#)) are discussed at the end of this chapter.

5.1 Methodology

The world is different to different people because each human being perceives, experiences, and understands the world in a unique way (Gemma, 2018). Human beings construe perspectives, beliefs, opinions, expectations, meanings, and values upon the objective reality that exists beyond them (Ablett & Dyer, 2009). Thus, this research understands human beings as individuals that are constantly making sense of what they perceive and experience. This meaning-making is highly personal. Yet the coming about of one's personal lens is influenced by historical and socio-cultural context and human interaction (Gemma, 2018).

Since one cannot observe, measure, and know reality for what it really is, this study did not attempt to find a universal and generalized truth about transformative learning (Nelson et al., 2014). Rather, an interpretative inquiry was adopted to access, capture, and build upon human beings' subjective and unique contextualised accounts of transformative learning in relation to monastic retreats. By having done so, this research has come to an improved, yet incomplete and imperfect, understanding of this phenomenon (Gorton, 2010).

Furthermore, the strong links between the constructivist standpoints of Transformative Learning Theory and an interpretivist research paradigm led to a choice for interpretivism. First, the theory argues that human beings perceive and understand what they sense and imagine through the so-called meaning perspective, comprising perspectives and corresponding beliefs about life. This is in line with interpretive ontology, which claims that human beings cannot objectively access and understand reality but rather generate and attribute meaning to it in a personally and socially constructed way. Secondly, working towards an understanding of the process of change or transformations in one's meaning-making structures, requires a methodology through which the researcher is able to grasp how another experiences this transformation and how this results in different meaning-making. Interpretivist methodology respects and focuses on such subjective processes and experiences. Therefore, an interpretivist inquiry ought to be the best way to improve understanding of the complex process and occurrence of transformative learning.

5.2 Research design

This research adopted an instrumental multiple case study design to generate a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of the complex phenomenon of transformative learning in a real-life context. An in-depth and comprehensive theoretical understanding of the process of transformative learning was still lacking within tourism studies (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018; Pung & Del Chiappa, 2020). Therefore the illustrative nature of case studies seemed appropriate and in line with the larger theoretically-oriented questions underpinning this study (Gustafsson, 2017). Hence, a case study's nature corresponded to the aim to come at an interpretive rendering of transformative learning

(Kumar, 2014). Two cases were studied: an Easter retreat at Sint-Catherinadal, Oosterhout, and an Easter retreat at Nieuw Sion, Diepenveen. Through a multiple case study, it was possible to explore and understand how transformative learning is experienced and works differently for different people. Finally, a multiple case study created a better theoretical understanding of transformative learning because more theoretical insights could be derived from empirical evidence. Thus, the selection of two cases allowed for a wider exploration of research questions and theoretical development.

Yet, it may be difficult and, according to some, even impossible to generalise findings and conclusions of case studies (Gustafsson, 2017). Indeed, the findings of this study are less likely to be generalised as they relate to unique and personal accounts and are bound to a specific context of place and time (Alharahsheh & Pius 2020). Yet, it is not the aim of this study to generalize truths. Rather, this study aimed to deliver a thick description of the process of transformative learning, from which theoretical insights about transformative learning could be representative and therefore transferable to other cases, contexts and studies (Gasson, 2003; Brown, 2009; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Readers are thus invited to see which theoretical insights and conclusions apply to similar or other contexts.

5.2.1 Case selection

It was not easy to access monastic retreats and the intended study population. Various monasteries were contacted. Most of them shared quite some concerns, doubts, and reasons for not granting access, which were fully understood and respected. Eventually, both priory Sint-Catherinadal and monastery Nieuw Sion expressed their interest. After a pleasant acquaintance, they permitted the researcher access and offered their assistance in approaching potential research participants. Consequently, two cases were selected for this research. First, an Easter retreat at Sint-Catherinadal, Oosterhout, which took place from the 13th to the 17th of April. An external organisation called *de Levensboom*, which is regularly involved with the monastery, hosted and coordinated this retreat. Furthermore, an Easter retreat at Nieuw Sion, Diepenveen, which took place from the 14th till the 18th of April, was also selected. Here, the retreat was organised by volunteers who were frequently involved with the monastery or lived in the residential community that sustains the original monastic life.

It was chosen to incorporate both monasteries to safeguard an adequate number of research participants and some diversity in gender and age. It was expected beforehand that group sizes would be quite small and that not everyone approached would be willing to participate. Indeed, this was anticipated correctly. Of course, the retreat programs and monasteries were unique, but both centred around Holy Week and Easter thematic. Thus, the choice to select these two retreats as cases was deemed appropriate due to their overlapping theme and time frame. Refer to [Chapter 6](#) for some background information and visual impressions of these two monasteries and their Easter retreat program.

5.2.2. Multiple methods

Furthermore, multiple methods were deployed in this study, which is a common aspect of a case study research design (Gustafsson, 2017). Multiple qualitative methods led to a thorough, detailed, and holistic exploration of the subjective and contextualised accounts of transformative learning within monastic retreats. Furthermore, the choice of using a multi-methods approach in the current research was deemed appropriate for several reasons. First, multiple methods offered a way to find answers to all the research questions adopted in this study. Secondly, the implementation of multiple methods conformed to the complexity of the studied phenomenon. Thirdly, it enabled triangulation of methods, enhancing the presented findings' accuracy (Kumar, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Finally, adopting multiple methods allowed for the integration of longitudinal design elements into this study. This enabled to place transformative learning in a slightly larger timeframe of pre-retreat, retreat, and post-retreat. In that sense, this research contributed to a methodological gap by responding to the need for longitudinal orientation on transformative learning that has been expressed in other research (Snyder,

2008). Nonetheless, the main threat of adopting multi-methods was the possibility of the drop-out effect since the methods were applied to the same study population (Kumar, 2014). Indeed, one research participant dropped out during the research. For this person, the reason for dropping out was related to health issues.

5.2.3 The researcher's participation in the retreats.

The researcher found it important to pursue a certain level of contextual depth. Therefore she placed herself at the same level as the research participants by participating and being present at both retreats. This was done for several reasons. First, to learn more about monastic retreats and transformative learning, not only from a distance but also from an insider perspective. Secondly, to access the study population. It was expected that it would be essential for potential research participants to get acquainted with the researcher and trust her with their personal stories. Finally, it was thought that the previously mentioned insider perspective would help to ask the right questions and improve probing during the semi-structured interviews, increasing the quality of the interviews and credibility of the findings. Importantly to note is that this research design element did neither include participant observation nor autoethnography. Participant observation did not strike with the ethical considerations of the researcher to prevent and limit disturbance of anyone's retreat experience. Secondly, the intention was to approach research participants low-key rather than scare them off with the idea of being observed and studied. Hence, it was decided in consultation with the retreat coordinators that it would be better if the researcher participated as a participant rather than a researcher, and so it happened. Yet, all retreatants were updated about the researcher's presence in advance and were ensured that none of the parts of the study would be performed in situ. Furthermore, some may confuse this methodological decision with autoethnography. Yet, the researcher's experience has not been analysed to describe and interpret transformative learning in any way (Adams et al., 2017). The findings of this study are purely based on the analysis of data generated by the methods deployed in this study: a motivation statement, a creative assignment, and a semi-structured interview, and are thus solely related to the experiences of research participants.

Unfortunately, attending the complete program at both monasteries was impossible due to overlapping dates, so the researcher participated in both retreats partly. The researcher was present at Sint-Catherinadal from the 13th and went to Nieuw Sion on the 16th of April.

For a methodological reflection on the role of the researcher, also related to this specific element, a discussion of its value, strengths, and methodological consequences can be found in [section 8.3.1](#).

5.3 Study population

This study's research population comprised all retreat participants who signed up and joined the Easter retreat at Sint-Catherinadal or Nieuw Sion in 2021 and 2022. It was decided upon to include a few people from the previous year to place the transformative learning process in a larger time-span, assuming that this would give some insights into the longer-term impacts of retreating. This also complemented the longitudinal orientation of this research. Unfortunately, contact details of previous years were no longer available for Nieuw Sion. Consequently, it was only possible to contact 2021 participants from Sint-Catherinadal for this study. Important to note is that the Easter retreat program of Sint-Catherinadal was the same for 2021 and 2022.

The study participants were selected on the basis of whether they wanted and were practically able to take part in this study. For this purpose, the researcher reached out to the coordinators of the retreat programs. They were asked for assistance with the recruitment of research participants. The coordinators of the retreat program informed retreatants that this research would take place and that there was looking for participants for this study.

5.4 Methods

This research adopted various qualitative research instruments to unravel the complexity and multi-faceted character of transformative learning in relation to monastic retreats. To pursue an interpretivist inquiry, one has to submerge oneself into a naturally occurring context, shadow people, and access and grasp their experiences (Gemma, 2018). To do so, context study and dialogue are essential. This was achieved by the researcher's participation and presence at both retreats and the three methods that were applied longitudinally. Prior to the retreat, research participants received and completed a motivation assignment. During the retreat, research participants received a creative assignment, which they completed after coming home. One to four weeks after the retreat experience, they completed an in-depth semi-structured interview.

5.4.1 Pre-retreat motivation assignment

To capture research participants' motivation to retreat, they were invited to perform a motivation exercise. This assignment encouraged the research participants to reflect upon reasons for retreating and corresponding expectations, wishes, hopes, and aims. The research participant was asked to write these down and hand in the assignment per e-mail. This methodological approach aimed to capture retreat motivations while limiting bias as much as possible. For instance, there was no interaction between the researcher and the participant. The exercise deliberately took place beforehand to prevent memory errors, recall bias, and interference of the retreat experience from influencing the stating of these motivations. For the complete motivation assignment and its guidelines, refer to [Appendix 1](#).

5.4.3 Post-retreat creative assignment

The choice to use drawing as a tool for data production was based on the complexity of the topic of transformative learning. As discussed in [section 4.3](#), it is challenging to capture experiences of transformative learning. The process is largely processed internally and does not always reach a visible stage. By using drawing as a research method, an attempt was made to access the research participants' inner worlds (Schratz & Walker, 1995, p. 77). The method had an elicitation function, serving as a projective technique. These 'facilitate the articulation of otherwise repressed or withheld thoughts by allowing research participants to 'project' their thoughts onto someone or something other than themselves.' (Boddy 2005, p. 204). Thereby, control is granted to the research participants to decide which parts of their retreat experience are worth emphasising. A drawing assignment may function as a reflection tool as well (Khau, 2011). In the creative assignment, research participants were prompted to draw something which symbolised an impact or the impacts of the retreat. The drawing assignment was accompanied by clarifying guidelines that facilitated and structured the drawing process. For instance, it was communicated to the research participants that the quality of the drawing did not matter. Rather, the focus was on retrieving the message that participants projected on paper (Soulard et al., 2021). Since it was expected that not all research participants would be confident about their drawing skills, this message was repeated to them several times to reassure them that the focus of this study was on the content of their drawing and not on their creative skills (Mitchell et al., 2011). The creative assignment can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

Drawing methods do not only involve the activity of drawing. It is about drawing and talking. Research participants were asked to collaborate in the process of analysing the drawing during the in-depth interview. After all, it is hard to understand the meaning embedded in a drawing without the drawer's explanation. Drawing and talking were expected to inform a co-created understanding about one's experience of transformative learning (Khau, 2011). That is to say, this research acknowledges the research participants as knowledge producers and experts regarding the drawing. Yet, for this study, drawings were not analysed in their own right but rather had a supporting role and were used to illustrate some findings.

5.4.5 Post-experience semi-structured interviews

Because it was expected that the complex process of transformative learning would extend beyond the travel experience, the post-retreat phase was chosen as a suitable time for interviewing. Furthermore, a post-experience interview would not disturb one's retreat experience or transformative learning process in-situ.

Thus, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in the weeks after the Easter retreats. From an interpretive perspective, this dialogue was necessary because one only then gets a deeper understanding of subjective experiences. Semi-structured interviews are flexible in nature. This allowed for coverage of topics that needed to be discussed but also left flexibility for participants to tell their stories and emphasise what was important to them. In that sense, interviewing allowed perceptions and experiences to be tackled in-depth. Open-ended questions were asked. Hence, research participants could express themselves freely and articulate their experiences consistent with their own meaning-making. Furthermore, the researcher was enabled to document these experiences in a qualitatively rich manner. Thus, semi-structured interviews were extremely useful in exploring transformative learning intensively and extensively. Although the data quality depends on the interaction quality, the interviews provided varied and in-depth information that was suitable to identify and document the diversity and variety, and thus the unique experience of transformative learning (Kumar, 2014).

An interview guide was used to safeguard the quality of interaction on the researcher's behalf. Additionally, it gave some control to the researcher to cover relevant topics and steer the conversation when necessary (Kumar, 2014). Each research question was constructed in line with the research objectives and research questions of this study. Thereby, it was expected to enhance the quality of this research instrument. The interview guide encompassed questions about earlier-stated motivations, the experience itself, the retreat program, the monastery, personal life, and the drawing. Thus, during the interview, the research participant was also asked to discuss and reflect on the motivation and creative assignments. The interview guide can be found in [Appendix 3](#).

5.5 Data collection

The data collection of this study took place from the end of March 2022 till half of May 2022. Data collection largely complied with the originally developed research plan that can be found in [Appendix 4](#). For the motivation assignment, creative assignment, and in-depth semi-structured interviews, retreatants who were going to participate in either the Easter retreat at Sint-Catherinadal in Oosterhout or Nieuw Sion in Diepenveen in 2022 were approached. With the help of the retreat coordinators, the retreatants received an invitation to participate and a guiding letter that clearly outlined the aim and practicalities of this research. This email was sent to them two to three weeks before the retreat to grant the retreatants some time to consider whether they wanted to join the study. In the e-mail, the researcher also introduced herself. Furthermore, retreatants were informed about her presence and participation in the retreats. It was emphasised that the researcher would be present as a person rather than a researcher and that retreatants would not be observed or disturbed in any way by the researcher during the retreat. It was also made clear that their participation and data would be used in an ethical and safe way. Participation was thus voluntary. Those who expressed their willingness to participate in this study via an e-mail to the researcher, were selected.

In addition, those who retreated in the same retreat in 2021 were approached. As previously explained, it was only possible to approach those who retreated in Sint-Catherinadal during Easter in 2021 because the contact details of those who did at Nieuw Sion were no longer available. The proportion of research participants across the two cases is deemed fairly appropriate. However, it remains a limitation that no research participants were included that participated in the Easter retreat at Nieuw Sion in 2021 except Jeannette, who retreated in both 2021 and 2022. For the invitation, see

[Appendix 5](#). All research participants had to give informed consent to participate in this study. They did so orally, via e-mail, or through the consent form as stated in [Appendix 6](#).

Not all research participants completed all three parts of this research. First, those who retreated in 2021 could not complete a motivation assignment beforehand. Thus, Leonie, Simon, and André only participated in the creative assignment and the semi-structured in-depth interview. Finally, one research participant, Dennis, expressed his willingness to participate during the retreat and could also not complete the motivation assignment. Yet, the absence of the motivation statement was partly overcome by asking about their motivation during the interview

Ideally speaking, the point of saturation should have determined the sample size of this study (Kumar, 2014). Yet, as previously discussed, retreat programs are often limited in group size, accommodating approximately up to ten people. Indeed, at Sint-Catherinadal, only five people participated. At Nieuw Sion, the group was significantly larger, consisting of 16 participants. Besides, it was expected that not all retreatants would be willing to participate in this research. For these reasons, only a small number of research participants was deemed feasible. Accordingly, this research attempted to attain a sample size of at least eight research participants. Of course, theoretical saturation would become more feasible if this number increased. Eventually, 14 people expressed their interest in participating in this study, of which 12 people of different ages and gender participated in this study. The researcher met all the research participants in real life because of her presence at the retreats, exempting those who retreated the previous year. Table 4 presents an overview of the research participants. Naturally, the stated names are not their real names. Pseudonyms were given to uphold anonymity.

The small sample size of this study may be considered a limitation to the external validity of the findings (Kumar, 2014). Yet, as previously mentioned, this study does not aim to generalise truths. Rather it aims at the transferability of theoretical insights about the nature of transformative learning by providing a thick description of the whole of the research. Moreover, one should not forget that each research participant completed a motivation assignment, a creative assignment, and an in-depth interview, which resulted in a richness of data supporting transferability. Finally, multi-method triangulation was possible, which increased the credibility of the findings (Kumar, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018)

Table 4: Overview of research participants

Participant pseudonym	Case	Year of participation	Gender	Age	Employed/retired	Motivation assignment	Creative assignment	Semi-structured in-depth interview
Leonie	Sint-Catherinadal	2021	Female	65	Retired	✘	✓	✓
Simon	Sint-Catherinadal	2021	Male	61	Retired	✘	✓	✓
André	Sint-Catherinadal	2021	Male	71	Retired	✘	✓	✓
Sarah	Sint-Catherinadal	2022	Female	68	Retired	✓	✓	✓
Linde	Sint-Catherinadal	2022	Female	67	Employed	✓	✓	✓
Caroline	Sint-Catherinadal	2022	Female	48	Employed	✓	✓	✓
Erik	Nieuw Sion	2022	Male	26	Employed	✓	✓	✓
Heleen	Nieuw Sion	2022	Female	58	Employed	✓	✓	✓
Dennis	Nieuw Sion	2022	Male	29	Employed	✘	✓	✓
Jeanette	Nieuw Sion	2021 and 2022	Female	68	Retired	✓	✓	✓
Frank	Nieuw Sion	2022	Male	80	Retired	✓	✓	✓

5.5.1. Intention testimony assignment

As soon as research participants indicated their interest and consent to participate in this research, they received the motivation assignment in advance of the monastic retreat. This was done via e-mail. The assignment was in Dutch and took approximately five minutes to complete. A reminder was redundant as all research participants completed and handed in these statements in time. When they handed in the assignment, research participants were asked if they had already wished to schedule a date, time, and place for the post-retreat in-depth interview. If so, they were asked to send potential data. Yet, most scheduling took place after the retreats.

5.5.2. Drawing assignment

On the last day of the retreat program, the research participants received the creative assignment from the researcher in person. The researcher also gave an oral explanation of the assignment during the hand-out. The research participants were reminded that the quality of their work would not matter and that they should not worry about that. They were also reminded that they would be asked to describe and explain what they would draw during the in-depth interview. All research participants completed the assignment at home at a time suiting them. Completing the creative assignment lasted between 15 and 60 minutes. All research participants handed in a scan or photograph of the creative assignment in time. No reminders had to be sent. The assignment was in Dutch.

5.5.3 Semi-structured post-experience interviews

All participants that had not scheduled an interview beforehand were contacted after the retreat to do so via e-mail. By now, the researcher had met all research participants in person, and contact details had already been exchanged during previous phases of the research. Some participants received one or two reminders. All research participants completed the interview. The interview took place in person and online. The choice depended on the feasibility and desirability to meet physically and the wishes of the research participant. For the online interviews, the researcher used the digital platform Microsoft Teams. The interviews were held in Dutch and lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the research participants after explaining the necessity of recording to them.

5.6 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

By taking an interpretivist stance, this research is co-creative (Ben-Ze'ev, 1998). The research findings emerged through the interactive connection between the researcher and the research participants so that findings about transformative learning within monastic retreats emerged as the research proceeded (Pitard, 2017). Hence, the researcher has not been in a privileged knowing-all position compared to the research participants. Both researcher and research participant have contributed to this two-way dialogue, and thus knowledge is co-constructed.

The researcher is the primary research instrument in qualitative research. Therefore, researcher bias was inevitably introduced (Gemma, 2018). For instance, the choice of theoretical lens and interpretive methodology impacted how the topic of transformative learning was defined and studied (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Furthermore, it was impossible to separate myself from my own perspective, beliefs, opinions, expectations, meanings, and values during this study (Pitard, 2017). As a researcher, I was part of the world I studied even more because of my presence and participation at the retreats (Adeagbo, 2020). Therefore, I remained reflective of how my own identity and beliefs affected various stages of research and, thus, the findings of this study. During the interviews, I tried to be as open-minded, neutral, and non-judgmental as possible. Furthermore, I wrote informal memo's to reflect on my role and influence during data collection and data analysis. These memos were used to write a

methodological reflection afterwards to safeguard self-awareness, critical self-search, and transparency. The methodological reflection can be found in chapter 8, [section 8.3.1](#).

5.7 Data analysis

A thematic content analysis was performed to analyse the motivation statement and semi-structured in-depth interviews, of which talking about the creative assignment was part. The thematic content analysis involved deciphering the data by assigning appropriate codes to them that capture their essence (Saldana, 2013). This was done by performing several rounds of coding to find, analyse, categorise, define, name, and report themes found in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kumar, 2014). Braun & Clarke (2006) outlined a guideline thematic content analysis, which was largely followed by this study:

First, the interviews were transcribed. These were transcribed in a verbatim manner, meaning that every word was literally transcribed (Kumar, 2014). Yet, stutters and filler words like 'ahs' and 'uhms' were omitted, for these did not contribute to the meaning of the data. Each transcript and motivation statement was read in advance to coding, after which keywords, preliminary ideas about the data, and what caught interest were written down in a mind map. This was done to get familiarised with the data.

Then, a first attempt at inductive coding or bottom-up coding was made by the use of ATLAS.ti. Labels were assigned to sentences or paragraphs to capture the essence of the data. Single words were not coded to prevent the loss of relevant and valuable context. This was done for five transcripts. After five transcripts, it was checked whether preliminary inductive codes fitted the deductive codes that had already been derived from the research questions and theoretical framework prior to coding. The theoretically derived codes appeared not to cover all of the data. Therefore, themes for the 'misfitting' codes were identified, defined, and named. This process took several rounds of coding, collating codes, and drawing horizontal and vertical relationships between codes to improve and develop a proper compact coding scheme. The coding scheme was discussed for feedback and revised for the last time. The final coding scheme consisted of 20 codes and was applied in a final round of coding to ensure that the data was correctly categorized.

Subsequently, themes that overarched different codes and revealed certain theoretical insights about the nature of transformative learning experiences were searched for and found. Four themes were identified, which were: (1) the incrementality of transformative learning and the ways in which the monastic retreat facilitated visitors' unique and personal transformative journey; (2) the relational aspects of transformative learning; (3) the emotional aspects of transformative learning; (4) the difficulty and challenges of transforming.

Finally, these themes helped to structure the findings chapter. Interviewees' quotes that captured the theme's essence were used to clarify and illustrate the themes. As previously mentioned, all research participants received an alias to protect their identity (Table 4, p.37). Quotes that contained personal details were not used, or personal information was left out of the passage. Sometimes, a part of the quote was less relevant to illustrate the theme and thus left out. Finally, it was deemed necessary to translate the original Dutch quotes into English for the simple reason that this report is written in English.

5.8 Ethics and safety

Every effort was made to guarantee voluntary participation in this research as safe, confidential, respecting privacy, and anonym. Thereby, this thesis assures devotion to the ethical principles and scientific guidelines for behavioural research involving human subjects, as stated in the Belmont Report (1979). First, the research participants and other people involved in this research were

respected. Voluntary participation, permission, and informed consent were ensured by informing the coordinators of the retreat programs about the research's intentions, aim, and ethical considerations. With permission and the help of the coordinators of the retreat program, research participants were asked for informed consent. The research participants were given sufficient information about the intentions, purpose, procedure, and ethical considerations as well, before commencing this research. The invitation that was sent beforehand made sure of that ([Appendix 5](#)). Not all research participants signed the consent form ([Appendix 6](#)). Most gave their consent via e-mail when they expressed their willingness and interest to participate in this study. Furthermore, research participants' participation in the motivation statement, creative assignment, and interview were always voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. Moreover, research participants were free to ask questions or share issues about the purpose and procedure of this research. Some did via e-mail, telephone, or in person. Secondly, beneficence was maintained by respecting and taking measures to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Research participants' names and other unique identifiers are not shared or published within the report and will not be shared in any publications about this research. Instead, pseudonyms were adopted to protect the disclosure of research participants' identities (Table 4, p. 37). Data is protectively stored, and only the researcher can access it (Boeije, 2009).

6. RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study included two retreats hosted at two different monasteries: an Easter retreat at priory Sint-Catherinadal and an Easter retreat at monastery Nieuw Sion. Both retreats centred around Holy Week and Easter. Holy Week is the most sacred week in the liturgical year of Christianity, during which the Passion story of Jesus Christ is commemorated (Table 6). Holy Week is embedded in Lent, in which believers prepare themselves for Easter. Often, it is accompanied by fasting, prayer, and penance. Its climax is the celebration of Easter on the last day. Easter is a Christian festival during which the resurrection of Jesus occurring on the third day of his burial following his crucifixion is commemorated. This chapter provides background information about the two monasteries and their respective retreat programs. Some visual impressions of these places support this chapter.

Table 5: The meaning of the various days that comprise Holy Week

Day of Holy Week	Meaning
Palm Sunday	Commemorates the joyful and triumphal entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem, welcomed by crowds waving palm branches while blessing Him.
Holy Monday	Commemorates Jesus cleansing of the temple
Holy Tuesday	Commemorates how Jesus reprimands the Pharisees and religious leaders for their hypocrisy and hunger for power.
Holy Wednesday	Commemorates Judas' decision to betray Jesus
Maunday Thursday	Commemorates Jesus Christ's institution of the Eucharist during the Last Supper
Good Friday	Commemorates the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ following his betrayal, arrest, and trial.
Holy Saturday	Commemorates Jesus Christ's descent into the world of the dead and his spreading of the gospel there while laying buried in the tomb
Easter	Commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

6.1. Introducing Sint-Catherinadal

6.1.1. The priory

The priory Sint-Catherinadal is located in Oosterhout, a city in the Province of Brabant in the Netherlands. The Norbertine sisters have inhabited it since 1647. Before that, it functioned as a castle. The sisters added some outbuildings to the original complex, such as the chapel. An interesting fact is that their direct neighbours are also monasteries. Therefore, the neighbourhood is called the Holy Triangle of Oosterhout. For an impression of the current complex, refer to Figure 4.



Figure 4: Sint-Catherinadal convent complex (Photo by author, 2022)

Although the complex was originally built in a natural environment, it has been assimilated into a more urban area over the years due to the expansion of the city of Oosterhout and the construction of the freeway. Nevertheless, various nature areas are nearby. For instance, one can easily combine a stay at the monastery with a visit to Forestry Dorst (Figure 5) and National Park Loonse en Drunense Duinen (Figure 6).

To continue, the Norbertine sisters are probably the oldest still existing religious community in the Netherlands. This year, they celebrate their 750th anniversary. It must be said that some of them died of old age since the picture was taken (Figure 7)



Figure 5: Forestry Dorst (Photo by author, 2022)



Figure 6: National Park Loonse en Drunense Duinen (Photo by author, 2022)



Figure 7: The Norbertine Sisters pose in their vineyard behind the convent (Photo by Sint-Catherinadal, n.d.)

The sisterhood lives a contemplative life in line with the spirituality of St. Augustine. The celebration and maintenance of canonical hours, consisting of the Liturgy of the Hours -daily prayers- and the Mass -the main Eucharistic liturgical service-is their main duty and primary task. The Norbertine sisters are a closed community. They do not fulfil any functions, roles, and/or tasks outside the walls of the convent in society. Yet, this does not imply that they do not reach out to people outside of their community. To them, hospitality is a great good, and therefore their door is wide open for visitors. With volunteers' help, they also run a guesthouse, restaurant, and shop (Figure 8). They also bought a piece of land and built a vineyard to produce and sell their own wine. By doing so, they try to familiarize outsiders with religious life. They wish to show other people the way to God. Visitors can book an individual stay. Multiple activities are hosted that one can join during their stay. For instance, a vineyard walk and meditation, contemplation days, retreats, and so forth. Because of the old age of the sisters, two external organizations called *Leer- en inspiratiehuis* and *de Levensboom* support the sisters with the receiving of guests and programming.



Figure 8: Restaurant *Wijnhuis de Blauwe Camer* (Photo by author, 2022)

Although the sisters are very hospitable and kind to their visitors, the complex is pretty much off-limits for them to safeguard the sisters' privacy. Guests are expected to remain in the guest house and are also allowed to enter the yard and church. The guest house and rooms were recently renovated. Figure 9 shows one of the rooms. Each of the sisters fulfils a specific task, and the guest-sister is responsible for the guests. She welcomes the guests and takes care of them during their stay, for instance, making up the room, serving the food, and checking in regularly. Guests eat together in the dining room.



Figure 9: A basic but very comfortable guest room (Photo by the author, 2022)

The sisters host a great desire to keep their presence and traditions alive. Yet there are worries about their existence because the old age of the sisters and the absence of any newcomers are serious threats to their persistence.

6.1.2 The Easter Retreat

The Easter Retreat at priory Sint-Catherinadal took place from the 13th until the 16th of April, incorporating Holy Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. An external organisation called *de Levensboom* hosted and coordinated the retreat. The retreat program was in line with the meaning of Holy Week (Table 6, p.41), and its theme was *the Way of the Cross as one's life journey*, reflecting on life as a process of trial and error in the light of the Passion story. The 14 Stations of the Cross, a series of images depicting Jesus on the day of his crucifixion and the accompanying people and crowds, and the last seven words spoken by Jesus guided this theme. The program consisted of an alternation between meals, services, and thematic group sessions. Thereby, the retreat was mainly organised as a group retreat. The canonical hours primarily determined the

rhythm of the day. Those are fixed times of prayer at regular intervals. Morning prayers were at 9:00, Afternoon prayers were at 15:00, and the day ended with night prayers at 19:00. The sisters led the services, except for the Eucharist. This is one of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, which the priest always performs. The bread and wine are consecrated and consumed during the Eucharist to unite with Christ. Each sister had a particular role and function in the giving of the sermons. They carry these out very discreetly, without drawing attention to themselves. For instance, psalms and hymns were recited instead of



Figure 10: Dining room (Photo by the author, 2022)

sung to prompt dialogue with God without attracting attention to themselves. Because of Holy Week, the morning services revolved around the *Officium tenebrarum*, a special form of early-morning prayers. During this service, fifteen candles are sequentially extinguished after each psalm so that the end of the service took place in the dark. The thematic sessions were three times a day and always directly followed by the morning, afternoon, or evening services. Furthermore, they seamlessly fit the content of these services. Each day ended with a short sharing and feedback session, during which each guest shared something about what she had experienced that day. Guests stayed at the guesthouse and ate together in the dining room (Figure 10). Nowadays, the sisters hire a cook for the meals, but they still serve the meals themselves. The meals became increasingly plain as the week

progressed, in line with the tradition of fastening during Lent. Food luxuries were given up in imitation of Jesus Christ's fastening in the desert and to prepare oneself for Easter.

On the first day, the guests arrived at ten in the morning and had a chance to get acquainted with one another. The group size was relatively small, four to be specific. After a getting-to-know-you chat, the retreat coordinator introduced the retreat's theme and explained some practicalities of the retreat program. The retreat coordinator guided meditation on the Passion story, specifically on the theme of betrayal, by using art. Various artistic versions of the 14 Stations were shown to allow different perspectives and focus points on the Way of the Cross. For example, Figure 11 displays how Simon of Cyrene carried the cross as Jesus was taken to his crucifixion. He only did so after he was compelled to do it by the Romans. One had to take a good look at the images and was guided by the coordinator's reflection questions. With the image of Simone of Cyrene, it was asked: 'Did you ever shoulder a burden? How did you experience this?' Retreatants could speak up if they wanted to react or share something with the group. In the afternoon, the Service of Repentance was attended, during which personal and collective sins were acknowledged and regretted in remorse. In the evening, the group went to the *Officium tenebrarum* Gregorian chants at the Sint Jan Church in Oosterhout.



Figure 11: Simon of Cyrene (Painting by Servaes, 1919)

Each day, the retreatants discussed another theme central to the Passion story. On the second day, we looked at whom Jesus met along the Way of the Cross and asked ourselves who stood by us when we experienced suffering in life and how we assisted those near us when they suffered. Friendship, support, and betrayal were central. Furthermore, we discussed the seven meals of the Gospel of Lucas. Special attention was being paid to Jesus washing the feet of his disciples during the last supper, symbolising his servitude and humility. It was reflected upon how one could be of service to the other and be and act humble. In the afternoon, the sisters gave a tour through their gardens and vineyard, which are generally off-limits to guests (Figure 12). In the evening, the sisters arranged drinks for the guests and brought some of their own wine so that the guests could taste it (Figure 13).



Figure 12: The vegetable- and bee garden (Photo by Sint-Catherinadal, n.d.)



Figure 13: Home bottled wine of Sint-Catherinadal (Photo by Schipper, 2021)

On the third day, the retreat coordinator hosted a guided meditation session with objects (Figure 14). Various crosses lay down on the table, and you were asked to pick a cross that reflected your life journey. Some immediately picked one, and others needed more time to decide. Then, one was free to wander through the complex or sit down somewhere and reflect on questions that were asked: What cross do I carry? What memories does it recall? How much can you bear? How do you bear? Afterwards, there was the opportunity to share your personal experience and thoughts with the group. This exercise quite touched most retreatants. In the afternoon, the last seven words of Jesus were read.



Figure 14: Guided meditation with objects (Photo by the author, 2022)

Afterwards, one could attend a silent conversation, during which the group was challenged to let the silence speak. Only now and then someone spoke up and shared something of her heart. The exercise was also about carefully listening to the other and carefully considering your reaction to that. In the evening, it was possible to attend the *Officium tenebrarum* Gregorian chants at the Sint Jan Church in Oosterhout again.

On the last day, the group could decide what to do. The group decided to look at the remaining artistic impressions of the Stations of the Cross once more. The last day was also about saying goodbye to each other. Most guests left before or after lunch.

To conclude, each day, a different theme was discussed that related to themes present in the Passion Story, and more specifically, the Way of the Cross. Retreatants participated in guided meditations and reflected upon the Passion story by use of art, objects, singing, specific forms of interaction, and so forth. With a program so full of activities, personal time was limited. Therefore, guests sometimes skipped one of the previously described activities to create space to read, write, walk, and do some individual reflection. For a complete account of the retreat program, refer to [Appendix 7](#).

6.2 Introducing Nieuw Sion

6.2.1 The abbey

The monastery Nieuw Sion is located in Diepenveen, a village in the Province of Overijssel in the Netherlands. It was originally built and found by the order of the Cistercians in 1980, who named it Abbey Sion (Figure 15). In 2013, however, the 13 remaining monks expressed their wish to move because the abbey became too big and too expensive for them. The abbey was originally meant to accommodate over a hundred brothers. In 2015, eventually, four brothers moved to Schiermonnikoog to make a new start. Hence, Abbey Sion moved from Diepenveen to Schiermonnikoog (Figure 16).



Figure 15: Historical photograph Abbey Nieuw Sion (Abdij Sion, n.d.)

Intending to preserve the religious and cultural heritage of the abbey, the foundation *Nieuw Sion* bought the remaining complexes in 2015 and named the monastery Nieuw Sion (Figure 17). The monastery now hosts an ecumenical community regardless of its Roman Catholic roots. This implies that the monastery is a place representing and promoting the unity of Christian churches and denominations rather than following the Roman Catholic Church. Still, current practices are derived from Roman Catholic religious practices but in a different guise and complemented by religious practices from other denominations.



Figure 17: Nieuw Sion (Photo by Buitinga & Buitinga, 2021)

For the simple reason that the original order followed the Rule of Saint Benedict and thus practised '*ora et labora*', or '*pray and work*', three communities were founded to honour this tradition. Each of them fulfils a part in continuing certain traditions and aspects of monastic life. First, there is the living community. This community consists of people who live in the monastery. Their primary tasks are to celebrate canonical hours, receive guests, and carry out regular maintenance to upkeep the abbey. Secondly, the prayer community takes care of giving substance and continuing the canonical hours. There is the opportunity to join these prayers or silently meditate four times a day. Finally, there is the working community, which consists of volunteers. Each Friday, they come together to do various chores. Furthermore, these communities also strive to sustain an atmosphere of peace and quiet. Inhabitants and visitors are therefore asked to remain quiet in the chapel, cloisters, and tree tunnel (Figure 18; Figure 19). The latter is a path with hanging trees where one can perform ritual walking (Figure 20)



Figure 16: Brother Vincentius painting icons in his atelier in the Abbey at Schiermonnikoog (Photo by van de Veen, 2022).



Figure 18: The Chapel of Nieuw Sion (Photo by author, 2022)



Figure 19: The cloisters (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2022)



Figure 20: The tree tunnel (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2022)

Additional to being invited to join their services, people from outside are also more than welcome to join one of the many activities hosted at Nieuw Sion. There is a large offer of tours, workshops, retreats, hikes, and so forth. Of course, it is also possible to book an individual stay at the guest house (Figure 21). During their stay at the monastery, visitors are allowed to wander freely through the monastery and the outside yard. One could visit the library, explore the vegetable garden, sit in the chapel, help the living- and working community with their chores, or take walks in the beautiful nature surrounding the monastery (Figure 22; Figure 23). It is also possible to camp. Finally, visitors can drink a cup of coffee, eat lunch, and/or join a beer tasting at the lunchroom and beer brewery. To conclude, Nieuw Sion is a nice and inspiring place to stay, and there is much to do as well.



Figure 21: Guest house (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2022)



Figure 22: The library (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2021)



Figure 23: One can walk in beautiful nature that surrounds the monastery (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2021)

6.2.1 The Easter Retreat at Nieuw Sion

The Easter Retreat at Nieuw Sion took place from the 14th until the 17th of April, incorporating Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Volunteers and residents organised the retreat. The program of the retreat was in line with the meaning of Holy Week (Table 6, p.41). The rhythm of the day was largely determined by the canonical hours. Those are fixed times of prayer at regular intervals. Morning prayers were at 8:00, Afternoon prayers were at 12:00 and 15:00, and the day ended with the night prayers at 21:30. A seven-minute silence is standard during these services to reflect or meditate. Guests stayed at the guesthouse and separate guestrooms (Figure 24). The lunchroom provided all the meals, and these were consumed together (Figure 25).



Figure 24: Guest House (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2022)

Eventually, 17 people participated in this retreat. Contrary to the other Easter retreat part of this study, this retreat was intended more as an individual activity as group activities were optional. Thus, it was up to the preferences of the guests how much interaction took place. Visitors' presence during the Canonical hours was expected, but all other activities were optional. The retreat coordinators organised drinks at the end of each day, which the guests could partake in.

In advance, guests could buy a guiding book for Holy Week. This book contained an overview of Scripture readings on the given days and was further intended as a reflection tool in regard to Holy Week (Figure 26).



Figure 25: Lunchroom (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2022)



Figure 26: Guiding book for the Holy Week (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2022)

On Maundy Thursday, the guests arrived at the guesthouse and met the retreat coordinators and each other. The retreat coordinators gave a tour to get guests familiarised with the complexes belonging to the monastery and the terrain. Afterwards, all who were present celebrated the Last Supper of Jesus Christ and the institution of the Eucharist or Holy Communion. During this service, the foot washing was re-enacted. This symbolised how Jesus washed his disciples' feet during the Last Supper, which displayed his humility and servanthood. Furthermore, the church bells rang for the last time before

this service. The ringing of the church bells announces the commencement of the service. But from celebrating the Last Supper, it remained silent until Easter to mourn and commemorate Jesus' death.

The next day there is the opportunity to undertake a hike in the monastery's surroundings, together or alone. Between 12:00 and 15:00, it was completely silent at the monastery to mourn Jesus' death. During the afternoon services, the Pascal candle was blown out and laid down to symbolise Jesus' crucifixion and death as well. During the afternoon services, the Passion of Jesus Christ was read, and those who were present had to speak up and impersonate the crowds during the Passion story. Additionally, Friday is the standard volunteer and chores day. All volunteers then come to Nieuw Sion to perform maintenance and other chores. Some guests lend them a hand. At night it was optional to attend a music ensemble.

On Holy Saturday, there was an optional Lectio Divina. Lectio Divina, literally Divine Reading, refers to a contemplative and experiential way of prayer and reading the Bible to meet and speak with God. During Lectio Divina, one takes time to go deeper into God's word by reading a short passage of the Scriptures multiple times. This short passage is meditated on as an effort to understand it and see how it could apply to one's own life, e.g., letting Scripture speak to you personally. Then, one prays to engage with God about the passage. Finally, one unites with God as the Holy Spirit draws him or her into His presence. After the Lectio Divina, one could creatively process and portray this experience and what came to him or her during a creative workshop. Some guests shared something about their experience with the group using their art. Again, there was the opportunity to rehearse songs for Easter at night.

On Easter morning, guests had to rise and shine early. At dawn, everyone was present at the church to celebrate Easter. The Easter bonfire was lighted, and the pascal candle was ignited (Figure 27). This all took place at dawn to make sure the rising sun was seen. The rising sun symbolises the rising of Christ. Directly when the first beams of sunshine appeared, the church bells rang to remind everyone that Jesus had risen. Everyone rejoiced. The church was dressed in white, and songs were all of a sudden exuberant (Figure 28). People could commemorate their baptism. After the service had ended, people spontaneously congratulated and hugged each other. The retreat officially ended with a festive and abundant brunch, after which some guests left, and others decided to stick around longer to enjoy the further celebrations. For a complete account of the retreat program, refer to [Appendix 8](#).



Figure 28: The altar adapted to Easter (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2022)



Figure 27: Easter bonfire and the rising sun in the background (Buitinga & Buitinga, 2022)

7. RESULTS

In this chapter, the findings of this study are presented. The participants who attended the Easter retreat at Sint-Catherinadal are referred to with the pseudonyms Sarah, Linde, and Caroline. The participants who attended the retreat at Nieuw Sion are referred to with the pseudonyms Erik, Heleen, Dennis, Jeannette, and Frank. Seven of them partook in a motivation assignment prior to the retreat. After the retreat, they individually completed a creative assignment and thereafter participated in an in-depth interview with the researcher. In addition, some of the participants in this study attended the Easter retreat at Sint-Catherinadal in the previous year (2021). They are referred to with the pseudonyms Leonie, Simon, and André. These three participants only completed the creative assignment and the in-depth interview.

The results are structured into five sections. Each section brings forward a facet of transformative learning experiences that were empirically found in the context of this study. The first section illustrates how transformative learning predominantly occurred as an incremental process, extending beyond the geographical and temporal boundaries of the retreat. Simultaneously, this section shows how the retreat functioned as a transformative learning experience in multiple ways and how research participants' personal context shaped these experiences as highly personal and unique. The second section will demonstrate how human interdependency and, specifically, human interaction strongly stimulated or limited transformative learning experiences. The third section describes how emotions were found to accompany and affect these experiences. Finally, the fourth section illustrates the difficulties and challenges the research participants encountered along the way to transformation.

7.1. Transformative learning as an incremental process

Although the main research question raised the expectation that transformative learning would take place within monastic retreats, findings proved otherwise. From the motivation statements and interviews, it appeared that transformative learning occurred as an incremental and subtle process that extended way beyond the boundaries of the monastic retreats into the realms of personal life.

However, this does not mean that the monastic retreat did not fulfil a function within this process of transformative learning. On the contrary, the monastic retreats functioned as a transformative learning experience in multiple ways. Therefore, the following subchapters describe the different roles of the monastic retreat in research participants' transformative learning experiences. It is important to note that each of these sections also demonstrates how the monastic retreat setting – its physical and spiritual setting, and encounters, interactions, and activities that took place within this setting- facilitated individual reflection and thus supported these transformative experiences. The examples will also show the uniqueness of each individual's transformative learning process. Different people partook in these retreats, yet their reasons for coming, their circumstances, experiences, what they took with them, and the changes they made or desired to make are highly individual and based on their different personal journeys.

7.1.1. Experiencing a disorienting dilemma at the monastic retreat

In some cases, the retreat did initiate the process of transformative learning. Various research participants mentioned how they sometimes run into some aspect of the retreat that was new, unfamiliar, and/or disorienting to them. Others described reflection on something that had never crossed their minds before. In that sense, the monastic retreat triggered and accelerated transformative learning.

For Sarah, the encounter with monastic life was disorienting. In her motivation statement, she shared how she grew up non-religious but wished for more Biblical knowledge. She also expressed her curiosity about monastic life. In that sense, her pre-retreat interests have already built up to transformative learning. During the retreat, a confrontation with the sisters' devotion to and

relationship with God disorients her completely. On the one hand, she admired the nuns' simple, modest, and selfless life. On the other hand, she could not get her head around it. Sarah explained how contradictory thoughts were and are still coursing through her:

'The soberness, gratitude, the same dress every day, those are all aspects of monastery life that appealed to me. Not even one bit of make-up on their faces. I find it very intriguing how they live life to the purest. But I also wonder: can they find time in their lives to consider their own desires and ambitions? Or do they only live for God?'

She further explains:



Figure 29: Sarah's creative assignment (2022)

'They pray and kneel to the icon of Jesus over and over again. Why are they doing that? What would God think of this strict way of life? This degree of commitment is what challenges me in my own faith. On the one hand, I can admire the contentment of the sisters. On the other hand, it baffles me that someone can put herself up for such a lifestyle, disregarding oneself for the glory of God. Is there any room to be yourself?'

Obviously, the engagement with the unknown and the unfamiliar lifestyle and beliefs of the nuns is crucial in the disorientation of Sarah's ideas about who God is and how one connects with Him. She also projected this clash in her creative assignment, showing its significance (Figure 29). This elucidates how the retreat made her aware of her beliefs and conceptions of God and stimulated reflection on this contrast in views. She said:

'I did feel a connection with the divine. I also experienced a connection with God in the monastery. Yet, in a completely different way,

I would have depicted Him and expected to experience Him.'

Because the experience did not fit Sarah's beliefs, her own beliefs became explicit to her:

'I am in the personal belief that there should be more happiness, hope, and positive feedback in the world. I always feel the need to express these feelings to my surroundings. Particularly bodily, through dancing or singing. The light colours represent the different forms of expression. The black represents the mourning attire I experienced in the monastery, which was laid over the colours.'

For Caroline, monastic life also stood out to her, but in a more positive way. It made her reflect on what defines happiness in life:

'The fact that a human being is locked up in who knows how many squared meters and despite of it finds delight and joy in it. The fact that one can be so happy and live a fulfilled life. That makes me see human life from a completely different angle.' She continued by telling how it

surprised her that doing the same thing day in, day out, with limited room for spontaneity could still be fulfilling and meaningful, although you cannot go on holiday or tick things off your bucket list: 'But these sisters show me that you do not need that to live a happy, fulfilled and meaningful life. What, in general terms, is defined as a simple and selfless life can actually offer you a great deal. Maybe a simple and selfless life helps you to get to the heart of things.'

Then, there were those research participants who shared how they were struck by the monastic rhythm of services and daily prayers and how it impacted their thinking and doings. For instance, Erik explained how the rhythm of the daily prayers and services had an impact on him:

'For me, the repetitiveness of the services that indicated the rhythm of the day really stood out. Of course, my daily life also has a rhythm, but it is not provided for by prayers. Yet, at the retreat, the rhythm of those prayers constantly reminded me and pointed out to me that there is more to life than this reality I live in. There is something bigger than me outside this reality that simultaneously comes down to earth to be among the people. Within the monastery, your life is continuously determined by His presence. Often His presence is something that we spend time on quickly in the morning and then plan to do in the evening. The latter is something I do not always commit to, often with the excuse of being tired. Yet, his presence is not something you should only reflect on and spend time on during those short moments. In the monastery, you are determined by it constantly. The rhythm makes you return to it each time. It reminds you of it and makes you reflect on your dependability on God. That is when I knew: this life, I do not own it... there is more to it!'

Then he continued talking about his attempt to illustrate how monastic rhythm drew his attention to how his life is determined by God in his creative assignment (Figure 30):

'That is what I attempted to draw with the circle and the churches. I am very poor at drawing, so maybe it is not immediately evident. Yet, these arrows symbolise the rhythm of those prayers and services.'

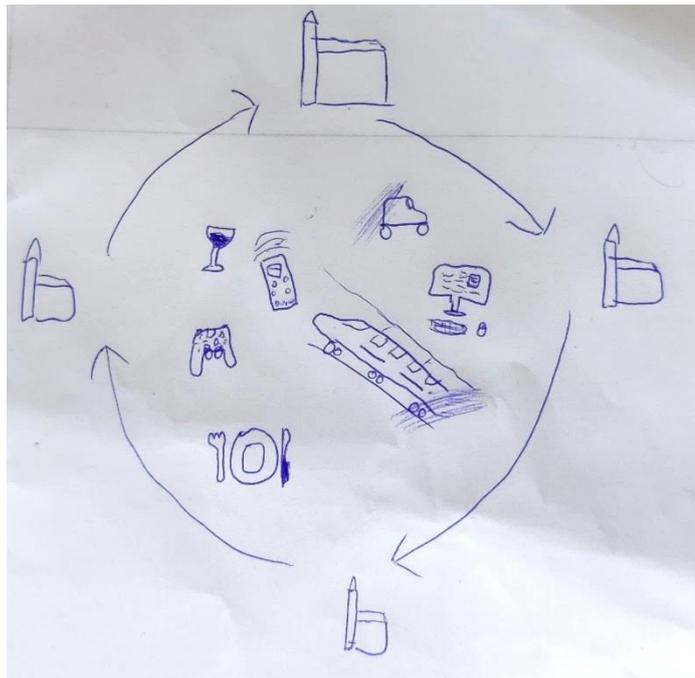


Figure 30: Erik's creative assignment (2022)

He also symbolised his daily life in the drawing and how the rhythm of prayers stand above that daily life:

'Maybe the rhythm of the prayers and services take me to this transcendence although they take place in this reality. So the rhythm of the prayers and services bring together God's reality with our reality.'

Then there is Leonie, who became aware of a deficiency in her attitude towards the Christian faith. When she spoke of what surprised her during the retreat, she said:

'I told you that I have a complicated connection with the Catholic faith. I actually do so with the entirety of faith and religion. What surprised me during the retreat was that the Bible had

more to offer to me than I initially thought. I was able to experience the multifaceted character of Biblical stories again and understand what it has to offer to people living today. Even though I already knew this deep down below, it was nice to experience this kind of amazement. Whenever I am in a monastery like this, I realize the complexity of my connection with religion. It touches me. It reminds me of a saying; *you can take a child out of a war, but you cannot take the war out of a child.* For me, it works like that with religion. I can try to resist religion, but still, it resides within me. This experience made me realize that I cannot let it be and that I must do something with it. Time will tell what this will be.'

Thus, the disorienting moment Leonie experienced during the retreat quite abruptly challenged her perspective on religion and her position as a non-believer. Yet, how she will proceed with this revelation is something that she will further explore in her everyday life.

7.1.2 Experiencing facilitation of a personal quest at the monastic retreat

A disorienting dilemma does not necessarily have to be a singular moment. It can also be a phase. The experience of a disorienting phase illustrates the incremental character of transformative learning. The following passages contain research participants' accounts of missing something in life. Since the disorienting phase had already manifested itself in their personal lives, it was part of their motivation to retreat. In some cases, the retreat facilitated and accelerated this quest by offering a lead, which the following examples illustrate.

To start with Linde first. Before the retreat, Linde shared in her motivational statement that she was looking for a spiritual home but had not found one yet. It was not that spirituality was utterly absent from her life. Instead, she was already involved in meditation, visiting prayers and services, and also, through her job, she had encounters with spirituality. Thus, she was already involved in transformative learning before the retreat. Nevertheless, being in a religious environment became less evident over the years. In her motivation statement, she writes:

'Because I miss it so much, I decided to retreat... I hope I will be touched again by how Christian spirituality is dear to me and discover how important it is for me to keep in touch with it in my daily life.'

During the retreat, the retreat coordinator read some Celtic blessings, which struck her. She was immediately interested and asked whether she could borrow the book. Later, she was again struck by Celtic spirituality during a guided meditation exercise. Afterwards, she spoke of how the retreat took her a few steps further in her quest for a spiritual home:

'I can say that Celtic spirituality renewed my views of where my spiritual home could be.'

Hence, the discovery of Celtic spirituality accelerated her quest.



Figure 31: Linde's creative assignment (2022)

Linde also emphasised the importance of being introduced to Celtic spirituality in her quest for a spiritual home by drawing the Celtic cross symbol in her creative assignment (Figure 31).

This example clearly illustrates how the disorienting dilemma – the quest for a spiritual home – was already present in her personal life and ended up being the reason to retreat. Simultaneously, it clearly shows that the retreat fulfils an important function within this quest by offering Linde a new lead to explore and work on, thereby accelerating her reflection on what could be her spiritual home.

Then there is Caroline. Her motivation to retreat went way back to a personal event that happened to her many years ago. She explained how she was unhappy and buying self-help books to get her life back on track when she heard a voice whispering in her ear at night:

“Search your heart and find me. Look for me in your heart.’ I am telling you, I heard it! It even woke me up, the voice... Ever since, I have been searching my heart to find Him. God is everywhere, right? I know he is everywhere, for sure. He is out there in the heavens but most closely in our hearts. Since I experience quite some physical complaints, I would feel devastated if I would die and have not found Him yet. Now I get emotional, sorry. It is because I have been looking for Him in my heart ever since that moment, yet I do not really know how to get there.’

In her creative assignment, she also illustrated this search for God by drawing a river (Figure 32):

‘For me, the river symbolises Jesus Christ, and he takes me to the sea, which symbolises the Father. Jesus flows to the Father, so I must stay in that river, you know? My choice to retreat is an attempt to anchor more firmly within the river bed to prevent myself from losing track. I want to stay in the river.’

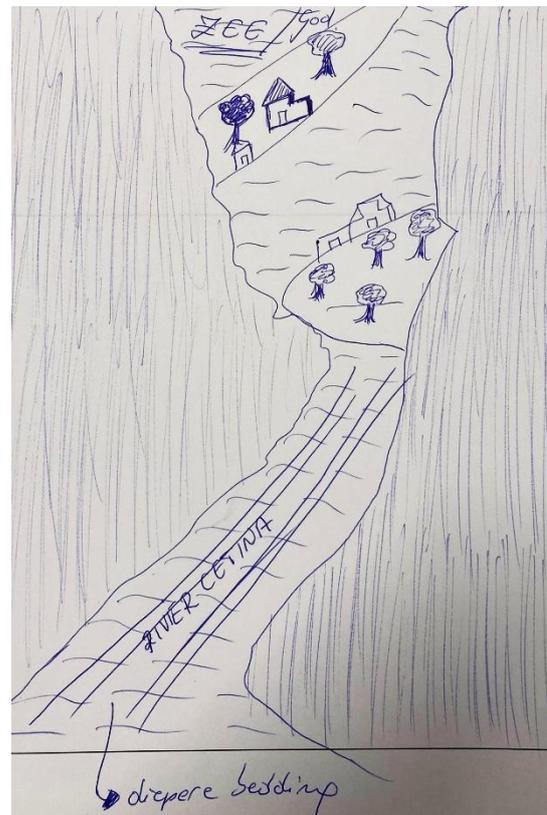


Figure 32: Caroline's creative assignment (2022)

Although for Caroline, there was no finding of a missing piece or a specific lead that accelerated this search for God in her heart, she mentioned:

‘The retreat brings me a piece of connection with God. It is like finding God and taking Him with me. I know that makes no sense because God is always with us. Maybe the appearance of the monastery helps me to find this connection with God because the sisters represent God. All of their actions are meant to strengthen their relationship with God. The mere fact that my feet take me to this place shows my inner yearning to connect with God. Even though I am not sure how to do this exactly...’

Caroline’s account illustrates how a disorienting phase can be present for many years in one’s personal life and be the reason to retreat. The retreat played a facilitating role in her quest, although she did not find a definite answer yet.

7.1.3. Experiencing critical reflection at the monastic retreat

Additionally, the monastic setting facilitated and supported individual critical reflection. The first subsection will discuss and demonstrate the types and thematic of reflection that were present. The second subsection will demonstrate how the monastic setting itself proved to be facilitative of reflection.

Types and thematic of reflection that were present

As discussed in [section 4.4.10](#), critical reflection has three hierarchical categories: content-, process- and premises reflection. First, content reflection considers the ‘what’-questions: reflecting on what happened. Secondly, process reflection considers the ‘how’-questions: how one dealt and acted upon or should have dealt and acted upon the experience and the factors that affected it. Finally, premise reflection considers the ‘why-questions,’ which enables one to reveal and see deeply held assumptions. It is worth noting that research participants only engaged in content- and process reflection during and following the monastic retreat. There were no accounts of premise reflection.

Another interesting finding is that the monastic retreat’s religious and psychological thematical focus influenced what was reflected upon. Consequently, most research participants critically reflected on thoughts, observations, or experiences related to psychological and philosophical points of view. Fewer reflections took place concerning socio-linguistic and moral-ethical points of view. Finally, none of the research participants critically reflected upon aesthetic or epistemic points of view.

For instance, Dennis, among many, engaged in critical content reflection on the personal meaning of Easter:

‘Moments of reflection mostly take place during the services. The element of seven-minutes-silence strongly evoked reflection. At first, you have to get used to it. The first time you participate in this seven-minute silence, your mind is all over the place. At first, you have more general thoughts like: it is nice to be here; or I feel good; or I am looking forward to this. But eventually, I was struck by the fact that it was Easter of all days. All of a sudden, I thought: What does Easter mean to me?’

Or Leonie:

‘I am in need of retreating to keep the fire burning. Even more to remain reflective: to consider what you should do in this life rather than running along with everyone. So indeed, for me to retreat is also a basic need.’

Besides, André was one of the few participants who engaged in moral-ethical content- and process reflection. Referring to his creative assignment, he spoke about how the retreat was an appropriate time to critically reflect on his moral compass and how fellow retreatants played a role in this:

‘During the retreat, you engage in spirituality, contemplation, and reflection. That is what retreating encompasses and means to me. You meet other people. Simultaneously, stillness predominates. I called that love. And what is then very important to me is to take a critical look at my moral compass. Which norms and values do I have? Now and then, I feel a need to reflect on my own moral compass. What did I do? How did I perceive things? Which decisions did I make? Yes, it is important for me that if I meet other people during the retreat and also trust them, to also critically reflect on the functioning of my moral compass. Does my moral compass still properly function, or do I compromise too easily? That is what I intended to draw with a complete lack of drawing skills.’ (Figure 33).

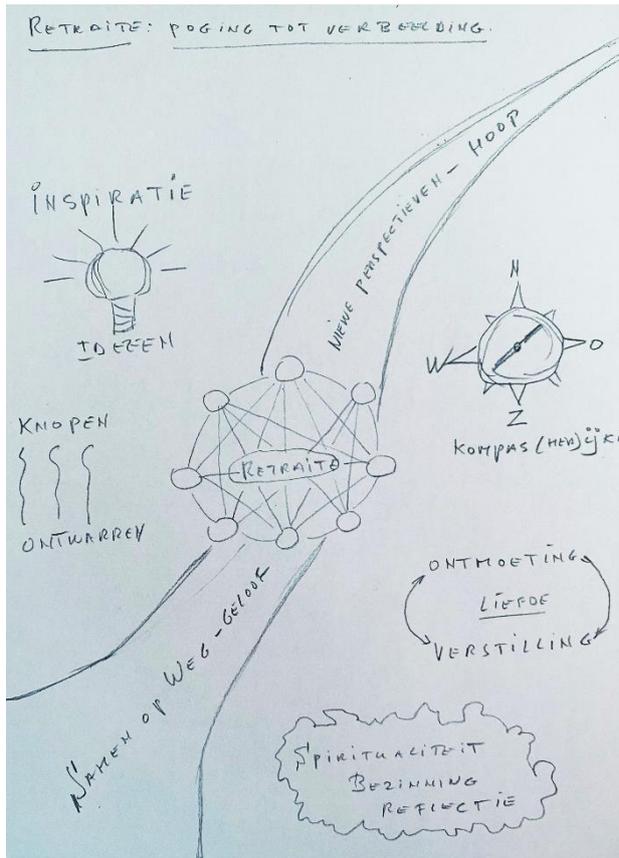


Figure 33: André's creative assignment (2022)

The monastic setting was facilitative of individual reflection

Furthermore, research participants' stories about their retreat experience also revealed which aspects of the monastic setting were facilitative of individual reflection. Research participants referred to many aspects, such as the beauty of the monastic environment, time orientation, being taken care of by the sisters or community, nature, little pressure and expectations, and the rhythm of daily services and prayers. Yet, two aspects of the monastic setting were emphasised mostly: symbolic practices and the monastic atmosphere. The following personal accounts will show their facilitative character.

Symbolic practices facilitated reflection

Many research participants were impressed by the power of symbolic practices: how the expression of something in a visible and tangible form accessed deeper layers of knowing.

For instance, Heleen explained and projected how seeing and carrying out symbolic practices stimulated reflection on Easter and knowing certain religious knowledge at a deeper level (Figure 34). After her explanation of coming from the Dutch Reformed Church, where the use of symbols is no longer practised, she continued how her encounter and experience with symbolic practices stood out to her:

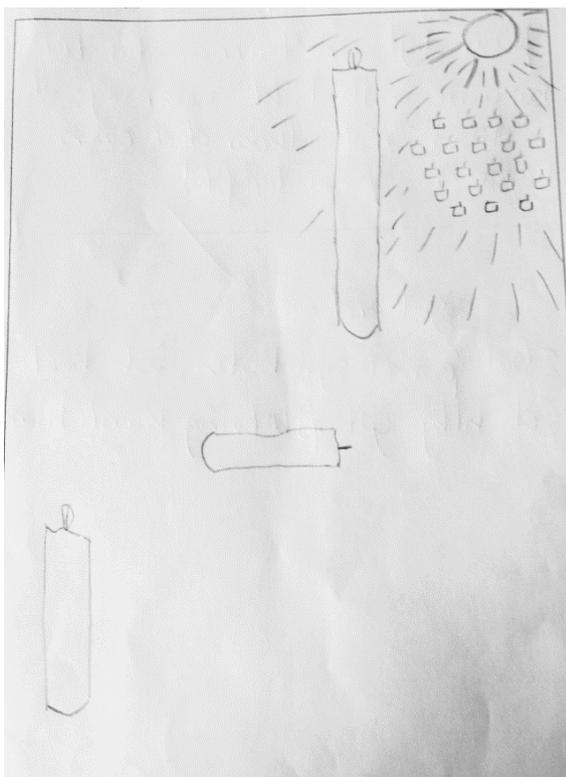


Figure 34: Heleen's creative assignment (2022)

'The laying down of the Paschal candle struck me the most. There are all kinds of symbols, signs, and objects through which you can envision certain knowledge. However, I must say that baptizing the Paschal candle on Easter was a bit strange to me. I am not quite sure what I think about that yet. I found it a bit strange, at least. I thought: is it really necessary? Is it something we should do? Is it a good thing to do? Anyhow, the fun part is that you are free to express yourself in any way in a monastery. I thought to myself: maybe there are people to which this is a very precious and meaningful gesture. Furthermore, it was beautiful to walk up front and remind myself of my baptism by touching baptismal water. Actually, during crossing oneself, I thought: Oh, I have never done this before! I recall that I did not know how to do it properly. Not that it mattered. I thought that it should be okay if I just brought the baptismal water to my forehead and touched it. These were various symbols through which something I already knew occurred to me

again, but this time it felt very tangible to me. It touched me. It enabled me to see Easter more vividly, which was really valuable to me. For me, the use of symbols evoked a deeper layer of knowing.'

Jeanette told how a role play in the Passion story helped her to connect more with it:

'We read the Passion of Jesus Christ in an interesting and beautiful way. The lector read the words of Jesus. The rest of us had to read passages originally spoken by the crowds. To give an example, we said things like: Crucify Him! And we asked for the release of Barabbas, the murderer, instead. By becoming part of the story, I could just picture myself as part of the crowd, asking for the crucifixion of Jesus, or more likely scream.'

Finally, Simon summarized the importance of stories, symbolic practices, and participation:

'I discovered the impact and meaningfulness of stories, myths, and symbols. The richness of those things. Especially the religious and symbolic practices. Various churches and also the Bible are full of them. The power of these practices lies in making certain stories, their important underlying messages, tangible, visible, and understandable to people.'

A more specific example he gave was a meditation exercise with objects, specifically crosses. This exercise helped him to reflect on what he had and was currently suffering in and gain a possible new perspective on how to deal with this suffering:

'We participated in a guided meditation exercise with music and objects. The exercise specifically revolved around crosses. This fitted the retreat theme very well because we discussed *The Way of the Cross as one's life journey*. About 30 crosses lay on the table. They had varying sizes. Some were richly ornamented, others were more basic. Furthermore, they came from different periods, diverse places, and so forth. The retreat coordinator said: 'Think carefully about the Passion of Christ. Then,

what cross do you have to carry in your life? Which cross fits your life?' Then, each of us had to pick a cross that fitted. Then, the meditation session started. Some music supported it. First, you had to carefully observe and touch the cross and think of the following questions: In which hand do I carry it? How big is it? What do I feel? What do I see? Then, you had to shift your attention to your hands. In which hand do I carry the cross? How heavy is it? Is it easy for me to carry or not? It struck me that I initially carried the cross with my left hand, but my right hand had to support it almost immediately. Apparently, this thing was goddamn heavy for me. I thought to myself: but what suffering does this cross represent? I started thinking about it. I realised it had something to do with my childhood, specifically my parents and the claim they put on us children, on me. Those were unfair claims, and the whole situation weighed so heavily on me! It still weighs on me. I think I needed this exercise to discover this pressing situation on me. Then, I also experienced I could let go of it. I felt less burden and more space for myself. So yes, this was an incredibly impressive and meaningful exercise for me. It also made me reflect on what kind of attitude I am supposed to take to this suffering.'

Especially striking is the fact that all research participants that joined the Easter retreat at Sint-Catherinadal, whether in 2021 or 2022, shared something about the reflective power of this exercise.

An atmosphere of silence and contemplation facilitated reflection

Furthermore, many research participants valued and described the impact of the typical atmosphere of silence and contemplation that prevailed in the monasteries and their surroundings.

For instance, Frank shared how the atmosphere of the monastery acted as a shield against the outer world and pressing voices and that this enabled him to shift attention to his inner world:

'I felt free from the pressing voices of society, and instead, I sensed an atmosphere of contemplation when wandering through the corridors of the monastery. I sensed an atmosphere of peace and quiet. I also sensed an atmosphere of inner development that arises from the conscious choice to live a monastic life.'

He then explained:

'Silence is always part of a monastery. Silence corresponds with inner contemplation and reflective practice. The more you emerge in this silence, the more you experience over time. I mean mentally or spiritually.'

Linde, Leonie, and André respectively confirmed this typical aspect of the monastic setting and their enjoyment of it. Linde said:

'The retreat showed me that I thrive in silence. The silence that prevails in the monastery and its surroundings encourages you to search for contemplation. So, the monastic setting really invites you to reflect!'

Leonie added:

'The atmosphere that prevails... I would describe it as an atmosphere of peace and quiet. Somehow, it felt like coming home to me. It is an atmosphere of peace, reflection, and doing things attentively. For me, that is a balm for the soul.'

Finally, André went on to add:

‘Silence is not confrontational for me. On the contrary, I enjoy the atmosphere of stillness and contemplation. It encourages me to reflect.’

7.1.4. Experiencing a change in points of view at the monastic retreat

As mentioned at the beginning of the previous subsection, research participants merely engaged in content- and process reflection during and following the monastic retreat. The occurrence of these two types of reflection and the absence of premise reflection could explain that only small, straightforward transformations in points of view – more specific knowledge, ideas, beliefs, judgments, expectations, and so forth- took place. The following examples illustrate the changes in psychological and philosophical points of view:

For Heleen, straightforward transformation in her philosophical points of view entailed an alternation of her image of God:

‘I now know that God is really out there. Yes, yes, yes! I indeed came to this realization. What else could it be? Everything fell into place, and it was pointed out to me that God is close. God is more tangible than I thought. He is and can be closer.’

Furthermore, for Jeanette, straightforward transformation of her philosophical points of view challenged and alternated her view on how one should use and read the Bible:

‘I grew up with a certain conception of reading the Bible. In our church tradition, the comparison between Scriptures is central. Where does it say that? Where do we read that? Who says this, and who says that? He says this about a text, and he says that about a text. Because of this, Bible study can become very abstract. The essential question of ‘what do you do with it yourself?’ is not always asked and is, certainly within the Reformed Church, seen as a bit dangerous. Maybe ‘dangerous’ is a strong word, but the Bible is not just about you. Bible study is meant to teach you more. And Lectio Divina is a very different way of approaching Bible study. Basically, the question is: What is God saying to you right now? Sometimes God does not say anything to you. That is also a possibility. Sometimes He does speak.’

For Jeanette, Lectio Divina was another conception of how one could read and use the Bible, which she embraced. And yet she also said:

‘Lectio Divina is not a replacement for other types of Bible study. I would rather see it as complementary: besides exploring and diving deep into the Scriptures, Lectio Divina taught me how to ‘experience’ the Scriptures.

Later, she added:

‘Lectio Divina introduced me to another approach to reading the Bible. Not to mention that it also let me experience that it is possible that God directly speaks to me, to us! Well, God speaking maybe sounds too big. Yet, God does influence your thoughts or something like that. Well...that sounds pretty vague too, now I think about it, but something like that.’

Or Erik, for whom straightforward transformation in his psychological and philosophical points of view resulted in a change in his ideas about his theological career:

‘Behind the monastery, you have one of those paths with these hanging trees over the path. I have forgotten its name [red. Tree tunnel]. These trees form a corridor you can walk through. It was possible to still look through its vegetation, but that is normal for the time of the year. Step by step and in silence, I performed a walking meditation: focusing closely on the physical experience of walking. At this moment, something really changed for me. I walked on that path and looked through the vegetation into the wide world. During this walk, I suddenly realised:

there lies my vocation! It does not lie in the monastery, not in the closed nature of the church, but in the world beyond. Outside those walls, that is where my place is. That is where God wants me! This is interesting, of course, because soon I will start working for the church, and now I discovered during such a walk that God is telling me that my calling is not in its closed nature.'

7.1.5. Considering transformation and/or experimentation after the retreat

For those research participants who engaged in transformative learning and did consider an alternation of points of view, critical reflection on whether and how to integrate these small perspective changes took place post-retreat.

For instance, Erik would like to see church services changing from a one-man-show, in which predominantly the preacher determines the service ('As church-goer, you are nothing more than just waiting while watching the preacher performing his service'), to a service carried by the church community:

'I can feel that in churches where the services are similar to those in the monastery, the people together are part of the service as a church community. In those cases, it is not a one-man show. For me, this symbolizes the service of Jesus Christ himself, in which we are together and not separate individuals. If something does not go well for you, or if you cannot participate in the service on your own, you can just be there and are carried by the whole community instead of by one individual. That is the great part about being community together.'

For Erik, his changed understanding of what defines a liturgy and how it should be deployed or celebrated already took place before retreating, and he had been playing around with his changed beliefs about liturgy for some time. This informed his valuing of observing and valuing the services at the monastery. He saw what could be, and this also accelerated the maturation process of this alternated meaning scheme. Thus, after the retreat, he expressed his willingness to integrate his changed understanding of the liturgy:

'Yes, I would be willing to look for different ways in which a community could become part of the liturgy.' He also discussed a challenge in bringing about change in traditions: 'I am not sure how yet. I visit the Dutch Reformed Church. In that sense, I also follow the pattern that the preacher makes up the liturgy.'

Furthermore, Sarah's yearning for more biblical knowledge and her curiosity about Christian religion and faith was not stopped by the clash between her beliefs about God and the divine and that of the sisters, which was described in [section 7.1.1](#). Rather, the disorienting moment did have a post-retreat continuation, which became clear when Sarah shared her intention to start reading the Bible:

'I own a beautiful Bible. Nevertheless, I have never read it. Then I thought to myself: I also own a Children's Bible. Maybe I should just start reading out of it because every time I look at that Bible, I feel some sort of need to get to know more about it. It is a beautiful book, but then, where to start?'

Or Caroline, who redefined her beliefs about what brings happiness in life after she saw how happy nuns are with such a simple and, in our eyes, maybe even a limited life. After the retreat, she considered integrating simplicity into her personal life:

'Speaking of simplicity. If I move, I will just keep basic stuff like a bed! I would only take basic stuff with me, really!'

When she was asked whether it was only possible for her to declutter and downsize when moving to another house, she replied:

‘No, moving is not really necessary. I can also declutter in my own setting indeed. I could stop ordering stuff and throw away plenty of things. I should arrange and throw away what is not of value or give away.’

Most 2022-research participants were still in the process of considering whether to do something with their changed perception of things and, if so, how. For those research participants, it is beyond the scope of this research to draw any conclusions about whether they will convert these considerations into a definite change in lifestyle or fade out. Again, this shows the incremental character of transformative learning in this study and how a monastic retreat is just a transformative learning experience through which transformative learning transcended

However, some 2022 research participants have already turned these considerations of integration into incorporating minor or more significant decisions and changes in personal life.

For instance, Linde bought two books about Celtic spirituality to explore further whether this could be her spiritual home. She also got inspired to create her own spiritual home if it does not exist out there yet:

‘You do not have to look to existing practices. Other ways are also possible.’

This plan is still in consideration. Linde is thinking about experimenting together with a group of friends or colleagues.

Jeanette also integrated small changes after her introduction to Lectio Divina:

‘Did I continue exploring Lectio Divina? Yes, additionally, I looked for more information about it and started experimenting with it. Amongst other reasons because I was about to organise a camping program in which I wanted to integrate Lectio Divina. One day we had a practice afternoon to get ready. Eventually, I could not help out in any organization because my mother fell ill. Another time I practised Lectio Divina with a friend of mine. Soon, I will be in charge of leading a workshop on Lectio Divina in my new congregation. In that sense, it still plays a role in my life.’

Then there were also Leonie, Simon, and André, who participated in the Easter retreat at Sint-Catherinadal the previous year (2021). André’s transformative learning experience faded out quite quickly after the retreat. However, one year later, Leonie and Chris were still experimenting with the integration and are thus still in the maturation phase of their transformative learning experiences.

Leonie’s motivation to retreat was in line with her quest to find meaningful fulfilment for her life as a retiree. Her retirement took place half a year before the retreat. The most important meaning sources had been her family and her work. Yet, the kids grew up, and she stopped working:

‘I had never questioned the meaningfulness of my life because I had my family and my work. Then one day to another, this drastically changed when I retired’

She retreated because it suited the question she had so perfectly:

‘I did not so much hope that I would find the answer. I hoped that it would get me started if it was only by getting a small building block. So, I hoped it would bring me something

through which could further get a grip on the emptiness I experienced ever since my retirement.'

And indeed, she received a lead during a guided meditation exercise:

'During the exercise, you had to choose and carry a chosen cross, which symbolised your suffering in life.'

Leonie picked a small and lightweight cross. During the guided meditation, she realised she had little suffering to bear in life. She saw a rainbow coming out from one hand to the other and thought of servitude:

'If life gave you much, you have much to share.'

Afterwards, she said:

'I had been playing around with this idea of working at a hospice to volunteer, and that is what I decided to commit to after this experience in Sint-Catherinadal... Before retreating, the thought of commitment was something that withheld me from volunteering. Would it fit me? Do I want to commit to it? What if they ask too much of me? Such questions crossed my mind. The experience of the retreat helped me get over these doubts.'

Thus, after the retreat, Leonie signed up as a volunteer at the hospice. Yet, one year after that, she now shared:

'I do experience volunteering at the hospice as very meaningful, but I am not sure whether this is something for the longer term. I think the retreat gave me the right ingredients to make something meaningful out of life, but I am still unsure how to shape it. I am still searching. I have not yet completed my journey for a meaningful life as a retiree.'

Finally, there was also one case where the monastic retreat was experienced as an affirmation of one's changed perspective. Prior to the retreat, Frank spoke about his catholic education and how he again longed to relive and re-experience the celebrations and ceremonies of Easter as he had in the past. When asking Frank about this after the retreat, he told me how it was different than he had expected. Easter did not mean the same to him anymore:

'I admired the devotion to God the Father that was central to the story and celebrations. Phenomenal, really phenomenal! I think of absolute devotion as phenomenal, but simultaneously I was so confused about it. I could not understand it anymore. No, it did not make sense to me anymore. I remember kneeling in front of my bed as a child before sleeping, praying, and really believing. As a child, my faith was rock-solid and fully dedicated. Now I cannot seem to reach the same level, while this is an essential part of the Christian faith, of course.'

When asked why he could not surrender to God anymore, he replied:

'My faith in the existence of God has disappeared. The all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful God, the worship of Him, and all the pleas prayed towards Him are not a reality anymore. I believe in the power of nature, which is superhuman and wonderful, and of which humankind is a part. That is what one could call Godly. To me, a metaphysical power that influences people's lives is not realistic. Instead, this influence is based on one's own behaviour or on that

of its society. Unfortunately, my Childtime feelings and dedication have disappeared.’ Finally, he concluded: ‘I am no longer the same man, the same boy.’

Frank’s story illustrates his realisation that his philosophical worldview had changed irreversibly:

7.2 Transformative learning occurred not merely as an individual process but also as a relational process

Although academic research often depicts transformative learning as an individual process, -you are the only person that can change yourself-it emerged from the data that transformative learning also occurred as a relational process. Research participants’ accounts stressed that social interactions and relationships acted as the most important stimulator and/or inhibitor to their transformative learning experience. This influence applied both within the monastic retreat and in personal life. Transformative learning is not easy to do or commit to, as will be discussed further in [section 7.4](#) from p. 69 onwards. Therefore, a social environment that is supportive and understanding of this process becomes increasingly important. It is in the interaction with other people that one’s transformative learning process gains support and validation or disapproval and rejection. Thus, the presence and power of human interdependency in the process of transformative learning should not be underestimated. The following subsections illustrate this.

7.2.1 Examples illustrating how interactions support transformative learning during the monastic retreat

Research participants seemed to feel supported by fellow retreatants in their transformative learning experience at the monastic retreat. In general, they valued the monastic environment for the unique openness present. Various research participants expressed how they could easily talk heart-to-heart about their innermost thoughts. Sander explains:

‘People do open up more easily, especially if I compare it to everyday life. I noticed that I was more into sharing what really occupies me most and what I find hard to deal with in life. I spoke to many people about the burdens in life in terms of your job, relationships, sickness, burn-out, et cetera. These are not conversation topics you start talking about when having a cup of coffee in everyday life, but it does commonly happen at the monastery.’

Additionally, research participants explained that having deep conversations about their innermost thoughts helps them to become aware and/or reflect on what they deeply believe about the smaller and greater things in life. Therefore, human interactions at the monastic retreat facilitated individual reflection for many. For instance, Linde expressed:

‘I was struck by two or three moments in which I really felt something changing inside me, partly due to the group. I also spontaneously shared this with the group. I told about my brother and how he attempted suicide. I felt it so deeply, and I felt the impact of it. But at that moment, I felt like I placed this event in a new perspective or new light.’

Linde also emphasised the importance of social relationships and interaction by drawing a circle of people holding hands in her creative assignment (Figure 31, p. 56).

There is also Leonie, for whom interactions built up to her experience of a change in perspective on a meaningful life as a retiree:

‘You share a lot with your fellow participants. When you hear their stories, you subconsciously start to compare their lives with yours, whether you want it or not. For example, it turns out that you have been lucky compared to someone coming from a broken family, someone who has lost a child, or any other terrible situation that you can think of. It makes you look

differently at your own situation. This switching of perspectives is a good thing. If you let the stories of others really get to you, it makes you realise how lucky you are. This realisation has had a great impact on me.'

7.2.2 Examples illustrating the negative impact of relations on transformative learning during the monastic retreat

Social interactions did also restrain the research participants' process of transformative learning. Several indicated that when interactions were absent or remained superficial, they experienced difficulty descending deeper into reflective thinking to reach their core beliefs. For instance, Frank shared:

'I had hoped there would have been some kind theme central to this retreat, for instance, by means of a lecture or group session. Unfortunately, this was not the case. There was only this Lectio Divina exercise on Saturday. Yet, I would have wished for more guidance, more input from both the coordinators of the retreat and peer-visitors as well.'

Or Linde, who said:

'There were also many times that I did not proceed in my reflective thinking when in the group. Of these moments, I thought: we remain too superficial. I would have liked to go deeper. That would have helped me to find a greater connection to my Source.'

Various aspects of transformative learning, like being disoriented, critically reflecting on whether your beliefs are sound, reorganizing your beliefs, sharing this with your environment, incorporating changes, et cetera, make people feel vulnerable. Therefore, negative responses or interactions did make research participants feel unsafe or unsure. These thus limited their transformative learning process. For instance, Caroline expressed that something another retreatant said made her feel very bad:

'She is the type of person I wouldn't feel secure with because I felt an energy of judgment around her.'

Negative interactions limit space to freely reflect and learn because of the absence of (mutual) respect, as clearly stated by Caroline:

'If you show no kindness to another person, no love or use language to build bridges... well, forget it!'

7.2.3 Examples illustrating the positive impact of relations on transformative learning once at home

Also, upon returning home, the importance of human interdependency to transformative learning became apparent. Some research participants expressed how they felt supported by their friends, family, and colleagues, which helped them proceed with transformative learning.

For example, Leonie joined the retreat together with her husband, Simon. During the interview, she shared how Simon has been of great help in supporting her not to fall back into old patterns ever since the retreat. Instead, he stimulated her to explore new insights and convert them into behavioural changes:

'Simon and I joined the retreat together, and it brought something to both of us. Consequently, we can be there for each other by talking and keeping each other going. It keeps you involved.'

She also emphasised the relational aspects of her transformative learning experience:

'Although your learning experience is personal, you can still support each other.'

She compared it to teamwork:

'As a team, you can participate in communication training. Each person learns something unique from that training, but thereafter you can support and confirm each other as a team so that new behaviour becomes internalised over time. That is the beautiful advantage of retreating as a couple.'

Her husband, Simon, confirmed:

'My wife is my best friend and vice versa. We are each other's sounding board. I have my journey, and she is dealing with all sorts of things in her way. Of course, we do not only reach out to each other. We reach out to other people as well. Yet, it is of great value to me that my wife shares in my experiences and that we can talk about it together.'

Furthermore, Heleen expressed that she keeps reminding herself what she wants to hold on to that through conversation and sharing her experiences about the retreat:

'For instance, when colleagues ask me about my retreat, I feel at ease to tell them about it, and it helps me remind what I want to hold on to. These situations stimulate reflection.'

However, she also noticed how difficult it is for others to really understand what she experienced and how symbolic practices facilitated reflection on the meaning of Easter:

'I tell people about how an Easter Candle touched me. They ask, 'You were touched because you saw a candle?' And I say: 'Yes!' and start explaining the story about how the candle helps me understand how he [red. Jesus] rose from the grave. At that moment people just look at me, at which I tell them: 'You should just join us next year, so you can experience it yourself. It is an experience that just cannot be explained in words alone''.

7.2.4 Examples illustrating negative impact of relations on transformative learning in personal life

Simultaneously, some research participants expressed that they experienced a lack of support from their friends, family, and colleagues and how this impacted and/or threatened their transformative learning.

Linde, for instance, expressed how she sometimes finds it hard to quest for her spiritual home because she has no one close who supports her. She also indicated that it sporadically remains challenging that the most important person in her life, her husband, is not joining her quest:

'I think it is also sometimes difficult for me because my husband does not believe in God. So we do not often talk about it. Hence, my marriage is not a place where I can structure my quest for a spiritual home. I have to turn to other people for that. For example, sometimes I would like to join a church service on Sunday morning, but I also want to spend time with my husband, especially when he proposes to take a nice walk together. This means that I am not with someone who is also interested in visiting a service. I have to make choices. Do not get me wrong: I am also well able to do my own thing. But I do not want to leave him alone every time. It is also nice to do things together. That is what makes it hard for me.'

Or Frank, who gave up his luxury life and often came up against astonishment and a lack of understanding. He was on his own, but he persisted because his old life did no longer appeal to him ever since he discovered it brought him nothing:

'My case is the moving from simplicity to richness and back, as a matter of speech. The richness was not meaningful to me, but many of my colleagues said: 'For God's sake, what are you doing, Frank?' To which I replied: 'I am tired of all the other shit.' That was it. I did not even know where or how I would end up. I only knew that I did not want that way of life anymore. It was a resolute decision, and my farewell to this life was also very resolute. I was looking at many uncertainties because I had left many certainties behind. Nobody joined me. My wife and I had a divorce. All the people around me called me crazy. The children say: 'What are you doing, dad, for God's sake?' My family did not understand me. I did not have any interest in business anymore. But I never felt like I was in a black hole of some sort. I only felt that I ended up all alone. Nobody admires you if you make such a decision in your life. Except for maybe that friend that says: 'Amazing that you do this, but I do not think I will follow you in this.'

Yet, one could imagine that not everyone stands as firm in their shoes as Frank.

7.3 Transformative learning did not occur merely as a cognitive process. Emotions played a big part as well.

The data revealed that emotions accompanied each phase of transformative learning. Furthermore, research participants' accounts demonstrate how they got the power to facilitate, stimulate, or endanger transformative learning. This suggests that transformative learning is not merely a matter of the head but also of the heart.

7.3.1. Emotional responses to disorienting dilemmas

Emotions communicated moments of importance to the research participants. They felt emotions when their life was affected and when beliefs or perspectives were challenged.

For instance, Heleen's feelings of scepticism towards the creative implementation of a Bible text defended her point of view that art was nothing for her because she thought of herself as sober:

'Nothing to the disadvantage of artists, but I am a bit too... How to put it nicely...too rational or something like that. I do not like to be carried away by emotions. I rather stay sober.'

However, her daughter convinced her to join the activity anyway. So she did, and during the session, she noticed how her scepticism was challenged and how, subsequently, her preconceptions about art changed. Additionally, she felt moved by the Bible text 'Your grace is enough for me' while crafting. Her emotions communicated how this exercise impacted her, especially when she shared her creative process with others:

'There was the opportunity to present your work. I was not really into that. Yet, one after the other shared their story, so then I thought: now I have to share as well. So I did. I started talking about how I experienced the process, and I teared up. It truly hit me. How extraordinary. It was a very special moment to me.'

Or Sarah, who experienced resistance as an emotional reaction to the sisters' weight of religion and devotion to God:

'Also these songs they sang. It was so... [red. Sarah made a monotone impression of the songs sung]. Aahh! I would almost scream!'

This example illustrates how emotions strongly defended Sarah's points of view and what was important to her:

'I realized that happiness, joy, and positivity are important to my life. The weight and sadness of Jesus' Way of the Cross, the Psalms, repentance, and lamentations were really hard for me to endure.'

7.3.2. Emotions stimulated or obstructed transformative learning

Simultaneously, emotions can also motivate or hamper transformative learning.

For Linde, being touched by the Christian religion each time she encounters it was the reason to proceed with her quest for a spiritual home. The emotions she felt revealed the importance of this quest to her and kept motivating her:

'Every time I experience it and feel connected to it, I grasp how much it is worth to me. It touches me so deeply that I must recognise that it is an essential part of my existence. It does not come to me naturally. I have to keep in touch with it, keep connecting to it, and keep searching for it.'

Hence, the positive emotions that arise from her connection with the spiritual facilitate the continuation of her transformative journey.

Simon, too, expressed the importance of emotions in the transformation of his philosophical perspective on life. For him, feelings of enthusiasm and joy stimulate him to keep developing his philosophical beliefs and experimenting with decisions and activities that fit this perspective:

'I should make it explicit once more that it stimulates me to continue because I enjoy acquiring new insights and coming further in this search. I think it is incredible to be doing this. That keeps me going, know what I mean?'

For Caroline, it is the other way around. She is trying to find God in her heart but feels obstructed from searching because of her fear of answers and their consequences:

'It distresses me: what if I must be in the monastery to find God in my heart? Should I become a nun? What if this is my calling, and I really have to live in a nunnery?'

7.4 To transform appeared to be challenging

Transformative learning does not only require you to reorganize your ways of thinking, feeling, and understanding. It also includes reorganizing your life: how you act upon it and the decisions and changes one makes in alignment with changed beliefs. Eventually, one demonstrates and shares held perspectives through communication, decision-making, and behaviour. In the context of this study, most research participants did consider the integration of a changed point of view, as described in [section 7.1.5](#). Yet all 2022-participants were still in the maturation phase and could only indicate expected or potential threats to the changes they desired to make. Although two of the three that participated the previous year (2021) were still experimenting with changes, their accounts gave an impression of actual threats to the integration of transformation. Anyhow, the data reveals particular habitual forces that seem to obstruct the continuation and maturation of transformative learning. Additionally, one's attitude or, more specifically, inclination towards the comfortable, the easy, and the normal threatens transformative learning as well. The following sections give an account of potential and actual habitual forces, attitudes, and the fade-out effect that consequently lies in wait.

7.4.1. Habitual forces

Previously discussed findings illustrated how the monastic setting facilitated research participants' transformative learning experiences. The physical and spiritual environment, encounters and interactions, and retreat activities facilitated disorientation, acceleration of a quest, stimulated critical awareness and reflection on beliefs, evoked a change in those beliefs, and encouraged consideration

and action to integrate rearranged beliefs. Considering the contrast between the monastery and one's home setting, it was unsurprising that many transformational cues were present at the monastic retreat. Yet, from research participants' accounts, it came to light that it may be the exact same contrast that limits people to let changes mature upon returning home. Once returning home, the monastic environment is no longer there, and what was easy to do over there is not easy to integrate into everyday life. Rather, it takes effort and sacrifices. This view was shared by many of the participants. More specifically, this study found one's social context, daily life, work, and societal expectations interfere with transformative learning and perspective maturation. The following examples illustrate this.

Social context

As described in detail in [section 7.2](#). from p. 65 onwards, transformative learning also occurred as a relational process. Research participants showed their dependence on friends, family, and colleagues to engage in, continue with, and properly finish transformative learning. If there was a lack of support or understanding from these social environments and/or other people important to the research participants, they felt less incentivized, more unsure, or even insecure about communicating new insights and proceeding with change.

Everyday life

Research participants also identified everyday life responsibilities, expectations, distractions, and routines as habitual forces interfering with transformative learning and incorporating changes.

For instance, Linde expressed how she quickly drifted on the issues of the day once she returned home:

'You might be thinking that I could search for ways to implement self-acceptance and a spiritual home at home as well. Yet, how easily are you distracted, or do you allow yourself to get distracted by everyday life, for instance, by doing laundry or calling people? These distractions are so present in everyday life, while I could emerge in peace and quiet in the monastery because it is present over there.'

Indeed, Erik mentioned this contrast between the monastic environment and daily life too:

'While being in the monastery, you make all these plans about how you are going to apply the things you have learnt to your own life. I do not need to pray four times per day at set times, but I would like to read a Psalm or listen to a song more often. That is what I intended to do so after the retreat. By way of contrast, you come home and immediately forget about it. Or you just do not commit to these intentions, you know?. I find it hard to do so. I would not know how to integrate or implement my plans into my daily life. At the same time, I think it would be so cool if there were opportunities to implement the monastic rhythm of the prayers in the village where I live. Imagine that each morning, you have the opportunity to pray at a chapel, that you would have access to a space like that. On the other hand, I would probably not commit if the opportunity was there. At first, I would go several times, but over time I would lose interest, commit less, and go less often. There are these other things in life: appointments, tiredness, and the need to exercise. I would not commit unless it is very close, and it would take me little effort to come, know what I mean?'

Work

Other research participants mentioned how their jobs, on which they spend or are expected to spend a lot of attention, energy, and time, could be an intervening force in making changes. Therefore, it is not only complex to see options in busy schedules but also to let these changes root properly. This is acknowledged by Dennis and Simon:

Dennis would like to integrate the monastic rhythm into his daily life because of the benefits he experienced during the retreat:

‘The prayer services and their rhythm are, to my constant amazement, so good for me. It makes me so happy. Even though we sit in church four times a day, I feel so peaceful and focused in the moments in between. It made me think of trying this out in my daily life. Unfortunately, such working days do not exist.’

Simon, who retreated the previous year (2021), highlighted one’s career as the main threat to a transformative journey when considering the amount of attention, time, and headspace devoted to it. Furthermore, he pointed out how his retirement made a difference in his journey. It felt like an opportunity to truly devote time to exploring and alternating his perspectives on life and work on change:

‘If you still have your career, that is the imminent threat and risk to holding on to acquired insights and change. You easily lose it to the delusions of everyday life. That does not happen to me anymore since I am retired. The space resulting from my retirement helped me continue serious efforts and keep on moving. When you have your career, it is even more tempting to just return to the order of the day. That is unfortunate, but I understand very well that this happens quite often when you are busy with work. The benefit for us retirees is that we can maintain holding on to acquired perspectives and change more quickly. I feel like I have gained a lot of new insights very quickly, which was only possible due to the time and space I have in my life right now. It is not only time, it is also space, headspace. If you are not busy with anything and everything, you can just spend the entire morning meditating on two extracts. Before, I was never able to do this, I always had to read papers quickly to prepare for meetings. Well, I am happy that all of that is behind me.’

Society

Finally, some research participants proposed that societal expectations and culture also play a part in the previously discussed habitual forces and are also habitual forces in themselves. A culture in which performance, progression, growth, materiality, and consumerism are dominant is not always compatible with the (changed) perspective, and therefore there is friction between the desire to change and societal conventions.

For instance, Frank argued that he had to go against societal norms and conventions in order to pursue a simple and modest life:

‘It only works if you choose to focus mainly on yourself, on bragging, showing that you have a lot of money, or power, because you care about prestige, or because you want to present yourself in that specific society. If you want to present yourself in this society, it is very hard to live a simple and humble life. When you have found out that you don’t have to present how awesome you are because you know you are just a human being made of flesh and blood, it is not hard anymore. It also takes no effort in comparison to the other attitude. Yet, we are always in divisiveness between these.’

Or Simon, who argued that our neoliberal society focuses so much on materiality and consumerism that, as a result, most people are pretty distracted and concerned with the outer world and forget about their inner worlds. According to him, it is hard to change if you do not find a balance between those two. He asserts:

‘The outer world actually interferes tremendously. We are so occupied with all kinds of minor and secondary matters. To give an example: we talk can about soccer like it is of paramount importance. While I feel like: there are more important things in life that require more of our

attention. We get distracted too much from those things. Moreover, I think that many people have lost sources of significance and meaning in our society a little. In the past, society was more dominated by religion, and this institutionalisation kept us more connected to the practice of signification and meaning. Religious institutionalisation disappeared, and this connection seemed to have disappeared as well. It has disappeared more and more, and nothing has come in its place.'

Then there is Erik, who explains that those things that Frank and Simon mention about society are contrasting with the reality upheld within the monastery. It is exactly this contrast that we feel capable of thinking, feeling, and understanding in a different way in the monastery, but as soon as we return to our daily lives, there is also this other way of thinking, feeling, and understanding:

'Our society constantly puts pressure on making profit and progression. Within the monastery, none of these things are relevant because God does not expect you to do so. Market thinking is non-existent in a monastery. You do not have to do better and better every time. We do not have to set new goals as soon as we reach the first, as society tends to do.'

7.4.2. Attitude

One's attitude was also found to be an important determinant in whether transformation will mature. Some research participants felt inclined towards the comfortable and did not feel an immediate need to integrate what they transformatively learnt. For them, a fade-out effect lies in wait.

For instance, Sarah expressed that she is currently satisfied with her life and, therefore, not really into making any changes:

'I would not make any different choices or do things differently so quickly. That is not like me.'

Or Sander, who shared his wish to create a place with the same openness and unique interactions as were present in the monastery. However, at the same time, he felt uncomfortable persevering:

'Of course, I want that in my daily life, but I am not going to initiate some commune over here. Forget it! Still, I would like to contribute. Maybe I should consider the possibilities and my role in this once more. The strange thing is that I am pretty proactive, but a bit less so in this area. Because it's kind of scary to take a step like this.'

7.4.3 Fade-out effect

Most research participants participated in 2022 and were still in the process of maturation when this study took place. Shifts in their beliefs were not as visibly observable yet as behavioural changes most commonly associated with transformation had not been made by most of them. However, findings suggest that transformation costs you something, whether it is effort, time, energy, relationships, appearance, et cetera. As Leonie nicely put it: 'new behaviour needs to carve its way in, and that does not happen that easily.' Yet, due to the limited time span of this research, interviews took place from one week to one month after the retreat for 2022 research participants. Therefore, time will tell for whom of them fade-out effects lie in wait. Furthermore, this study only included three research participants from 2021. Therefore, it was beyond the scope of this research to study the post-tourist experience phase in detail. Consequently, nothing more than an impression of the maturation phase could be given.

8. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to provide insight into how visitors to monastic retreats experienced transformative learning within monastic retreats. In this chapter, the main findings are presented and discussed by use of existing literature and the theoretical model that guided this study. This is followed by a theoretical and methodological reflection on this study's main strengths and limitations. Finally, recommendations for future research are suggested.

8.1 Discussion of main findings

The main research question of this study was: How do visitors experience transformative learning within monastic retreats? In the following section, the main findings will be discussed: (1) Transformative learning occurred predominantly as an incremental process extending beyond the boundaries of the monastic retreat into the realms of personal life; (2) The monastic setting was facilitative of transformative learning; (3) Participants' personal context such as circumstances, experiences, and motivations shaped their transformative learning experiences as highly unique ; (4) Transformative learning was not merely an individual process but also had a relational dimension; (5) Transformative learning was not merely a rational process but was accompanied and affected by emotions; (6) Transformative learning and transforming itself were challenging.

8.1.1 Transformative learning occurred as an incremental process with accelerating moments and was therefore not confined to the spatial and temporal boundaries of the monastic retreat

Regardless of what the main research question suggests, transformative learning does not take place within the spatial and temporal boundaries of a monastic retreat. It was expected beforehand that it would be so for two reasons. First, other studies in the field of tourism predominantly depict transformative learning as abrupt and limited wholly to the tourist experience, discussing the more abrupt, sudden, and fundamental pathway to perspective transformation after a reflective insight. (Kirillova et al., 2016ab; Kirillova et al., 2017 Robledo & Batle, 2017). For instance, Pope (2021) even discusses how transformation amongst adventure tourists can occur within half a day. Secondly, a monastic retreat is very different from one's home environment. Therefore, it was assumed that the right conditions for abrupt transformation would also be in place in this setting. Yet, in light of the theory, it is interesting that the incremental and subtle character of transformative learning experiences has been either overlooked by or has been outside the scope of these studies. Mezirow (2000) argued that epochal transformation occurs less often than incremental transformation because more conditions must be in place for the first to happen. A possible explanation for that incremental transformative learning tourist experiences have either been overlooked by or have been outside the scope of other tourism studies could be the potential selection bias found in these studies. By taking a close look at these studies' methodologies, it was discovered that their study population consisted of tourists that had identified themselves as being transformed by their travel experience. This could be seen as a selection bias, which has influenced what has been found and concluded about transformative tourist experiences and thus how these experiences are understood: as fundamental and abrupt. This academic focus neglects the more soft, subtle, and incremental occurrence of transformative learning. Thus, although these findings reject the positioning of transformative learning taking place within monastic retreats, this study does contribute to the academic understanding of transformative tourist experiences by complementing the theoretical insights about fundamental perspective transformation with insights about incremental perspective transformation.

8.1.2 The monastic retreat setting is facilitative of transformative learning

Previous research shows that the tourism- or destination setting is an important stimulator and facilitator of transformative tourist experiences (Robledo & Batle, 2017; Dilette et al., 2018). All kinds

of transformational cues arise from the unfamiliarity and/or otherness of the destination, people, and activities whilst travelling (Reisinger, 2013). In this case, contextual transformation facilitators corresponded to (1) symbolic practices, (2) the monastic atmosphere of silence and contemplation, and (3) encounters with the monastic community.

The influence of symbolism, embodiment, and rhythm is somewhat unexpected. The theory positions transformative learning in the domain of the mind. At the same time, this finding raises the question of whether the body also plays a part in transformative learning through the manifestation of embodied knowledge: the knowledge that 'resides in the body' and 'that is gained through the body' (Sodhi, 2008, p. 1).

Secondly, a possible explanation for the impact of silence on transformative learning may be found in the field of psychology. Silence is known to have various positive effects on the brain. This may suggest that silence renders a more responsive mind to transformative learning (Turner, 2013; Valle, 2019; Pfeifer & Witmann, 2020).

Finally, findings demonstrate that the encounter with the monastic community was experienced as a disorienting dilemma and a source of inspiration and reflection. Pung & Chiappa (2020) drew a similar conclusion. Their study identified 'witnessing the everyday life of and interacting with residents and people of different cultures' as one of the main initiators and facilitators of transformation. It is argued that tourists are more likely to reflect upon their own perspectives and ways of living when confronted with others. This may then lead to scrutinisation and possibly alteration of one's own meaning perspective and eventually one's ways of living.

8.1.3 Personal context such as circumstances, experiences, and motivations shape transformative learning as highly unique

This study demonstrated how the retreat could function as a transformative learning experience by facilitating individual reflection. The findings represented transformative learning as a uniquely individual process. Each research participant was on their own journey for different reasons, learnt different things, and desired and/or made different changes afterwards. Moreover, it was demonstrated that their personal life triggered, affected, and interfered with retreatants' transformative journey in multiple and complicated ways at various points in the process. This suggests that tourists' life stories affected transformative learning experiences in many ways. Other studies validate parts of this interplay. For instance, various studies debate whether transformative tourist experiences are intentionally embarked upon or are the result of an incidental experience (Snyder, 2008; Reisinger, 2013; Tomljenović & Ducić, 2017; Kirillova et al., 2016a; Fu et al., 2015; Robledo & Batle, 2017; Sheldon, 2020). Yet, this study found that incremental transformative learning had sometimes already begun before they had an experience that could be understood as transformative. For instance, some participants had already been experimenting with ideas about transformation. It became clear in the interviews that for some participants, the motivation they formulated for attending the retreat was part of a long-term desire for and process of change. Moreover, this study's findings are in line with the raised expectation that transformative learning and the integration of transformative learning are negotiated and/or challenged when the tourist returns back home (Brown, 2009; Reisinger, 2013; Kirillova et al., 2016a; Robledo & Batle, 2017). Thus, the findings, and existing literature, confirm the decision to include personal context as an essential component that needs to be considered when researching transformative tourist experiences.

8.1.4 Transformative learning is not merely an individual process but also a relational process.

Arguments provided in the previous section do indeed emphasise the uniqueness of each transformative journey. Nonetheless, this is not to say that transformative learning solely takes place as a completely individualized process.

Mezirow (1978b; 2000) understood the power of the social dimension of transformative learning to be bound to the stabilisation and validation of transformed habits of mind or points of view, and thus the maturation phase of transformative learning. He thereby conceptualised transformative learning mainly as a separate and individual intrapersonal process. As it was expected that the impact of human interaction and one's social context would extend beyond the maturation phase of transformative learning, human interaction was included as one of the concepts in the conceptual framework of this research. Indeed, human interactions were found to be the strongest facilitative and inhibitive factor throughout the whole process of transformative learning in this study. This applied to both the retreat experience and the home environment. The finding of this study builds up to a plethora of research that did report the relational aspects of transformative learning (Nowaczek, 2013; Robledo & Batle, 2017; Dilletta et al., 2019; Pope, 2021). In line with the 'contact hypothesis' and the concept of 'connected knowing', it is argued that human interaction also holds transformational power because it respectively challenges one's meaning perspective and encourages one to adopt a point of view from somebody else (Belenkely & Staunton, 2000; Nowaczek, 2013; Robledo & Batle, 2017). More specifically, research participants valued the monastic environment for its openness. Research participants talked about how special it was that heart-to-heart conversations and the exchange of innermost thoughts followed so easily. According to Pope (2021), a monastic environment could fall into the category of 'safe space', where an atmosphere of openness and togetherness encourages people to be open to change and also create the feeling of shared experiences.

Yet, most of these tourism studies did not aim to study the role of social context in transformative tourist experiences and, therefore, only accidentally found facets of this interplay. Moreover, these studies' generated insights are solely about the impact of the social context within the tourist experience and/or tourism destination, not beyond. Thereby they did not provide a substantial grasp of the relational dimension of transformative learning, whereas this research made a deliberate attempt to study the relationship between social context and transformative learning. By doing so, this study made a significant contribution by demonstrating the impact of the temporary social context of the retreat and one's everyday social context on one's transformative journey. Moreover, this study found that the relationship between social context and transformative learning is not necessarily positive, as other tourism studies suggested. Instead, human interaction can also powerfully limit transformative learning and/or intervene in perspective maturation, for instance, when one feels unsafe, uncomfortable, unsupported, misunderstood, or when one does not find relationships or communities in which the transformative perspective can be shared. To conclude, these findings confirm this study's expectation that human interaction does play a more prominent role in transformative learning than presented by the original theory and presented a more in-depth and complete demonstration of the relational dimension of transformative learning than has been given so far.

8.1.5 Transformative learning is not merely a rational process. Emotions also play a big part. Furthermore, it was found in this study that transformative learning is not confined to cognitive and rational functioning. Rather, emotions occurred as a pathway to critical awareness and critical reflection and could also facilitate or intervene in the continuation of these processes. Both positive and negative emotions occurred. As previously discussed in [section 4.2](#), Mezirow (1978ab) did neither take into account nor acknowledge the role of emotions and feelings in transformative learning in his

original theory. In his later revisions, he admitted that negative emotional experiences often accompany transformative learning since emotions defend our meaning perspectives to ensure stability and order in our perception and thinking (Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 2009). At the same time, however, he did not integrate emotions as a central concept in his theory, positioning emotions as something connected to transformative learning but not really what it is about (Illeris, 2014). Therefore, the theory maintained its rational tone.

Yet, a plethora of research criticizes this bypassing of emotions and feelings in transformative learning. For instance, Nowaczek (2013) and Ponder & Hollaway (2013) concluded that transformation does not come from the intellect alone but also arises from emotions based on their respective findings on transformations within the settings of respectively ecotourism and yoga tourism. Moreover, Soulard et al. (2021) illustrated how tourists refer to both their emotions and thoughts when reflecting on their transformation. Many others share their call for acknowledgement and integration of emotions complementary to cognition (Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 2000; DeSapio, 2007). However, this call has not been translated into theoretical development yet. Only, Mälkki & Raami (2022) were found to further conceptualise this call. They introduced and integrated the concepts of edge emotions -unpleasant feelings that occur when we or others doubt our meaning perspectives- and comfort zone – the feeling of comfort and stability when our meaning perspectives are not challenged- into Transformative Learning Theory to go beyond the rational limitations of transformative learning. They do so to go beyond the rational limitations of transformative learning and generate acceptance for dimensions other than the cognitive to have an equal role in transformative learning. Yet the point must be made that all these studies solely demonstrate and conceptualise the role of negative emotions in transformative learning, while this study also found positive emotions to play a role. Hence, the role of positive emotions should also be further explored and studied

Nevertheless, this study joins the call for integrating some kind of emotion theory to nuance the rational tone of Transformative Learning Theory. Inspiration on how to do so might be found in those studies that follow an existentialist philosophical point of view. For instance, the work of Kirillova (2016ab;2017) has been an important contributor to this strand of research, advocating and demonstrating how intense emotions are on equal foot with heightened cognition when it comes to transformative tourist experiences.

8.1.6 Transformative learning is difficult

Finally, this study revealed the (potential) difficulties of negotiating, integrating, and maintaining what was transformatively learnt into daily life. There are two possible explanations for this. The first explanation comes from theory. Mezirow (1978b, 2000) argues that reaching the final stage of transformation is very difficult. This final step requires one not only to perceive, think, and communicate differently but also to live differently. Hence, full perspective transformation is only reached when one makes meaningful changes, takes meaningful decisions, and/or shows meaningful behaviour consistent with the transformed perspective. Transformative Learning Theory identifies emotional struggles, inclination towards the comfortable, habitual forces, and a lack of social support and validation as factors that delay, obstruct, or prevent the transformation from becoming integrated into daily life. This is in line with what was found in this study, where one's social context, everyday life, work, and societal expectations and ideas, attitude, and emotions were identified as intervening forces to the maturation of changed points of view. Another possible explanation comes from tourism literature that applies explicitly to transformative tourist experiences. In tourism studies, the disappearance of benefits from the tourist experience is referred to as the fade-out effect. The fade-out effect occurs within two or four weeks after the tourist experience. Its occurrence is often explained in terms of the contrast between the tourism setting and the home setting (Brown, 2009; Kirillova & Letho, 2015; Robledo & Batle, 2017; Gill, 2018b, Pope, 2021). This is

also in line with the findings of this study because research participants often indicated how it was not easy to think, feel, or do what was easily thought, felt, and done within the monastic environment. Another plausible explanation could be that transformation is also extremely difficult because it costs you something, whether it is effort, time, energy, relationships, appearance, et cetera.

8.2 Reflection on the use of the theoretical model

An understanding of the way that transformative tourist experiences come about was primarily absent within the field of tourism studies. This study adopted Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory to bridge this knowledge gap. Although many tourism studies do refer to Mezirow's conceptualization of transformative learning as valuable for unravelling the transformational potential of travelling, a rigorous application of it was largely missing (Reisinger, 2013; Fu et al., 2015). Therefore, this thesis built upon the essential concepts of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory whilst also including additional elements of personal context, retreat setting, and social context to contextualise and expand on the model. This resulted in the theoretical model that was presented in [section 4.4](#). Applying this theoretical model has resulted in insights into the nature and process of transformative learning and how it was indeed affected by the personal context, retreat setting, and social context in various ways. More importantly, by not focusing on transformative outcomes but rather on the process of transformative learning, this study was able to reveal the occurrence of an incremental and subtle form of transformative learning, something that has been overlooked by or has been outside the scope of other studies in the tourism field.

Yet, the use of the theoretical model also had its limitations. First, it was hard to distinguish certain concepts. For instance, the boundaries between critical awareness and critical reflection were not distinguishable. Moreover, it was particularly difficult to accommodate reflections on and changes in points of view related to the categories identified by Mezirow (2000): socio-linguistic, moral-ethical, philosophical, aesthetics, psychological, and epistemic. This was, first of all, because these concepts were found insufficiently developed and defined, and secondly, because the reflections and changes often pointed towards multiple categories. Finally, findings also hint that one's view of the self, the psychological category, is always influenced when one of the other categories is critically evaluated.

Secondly, the emphasis on critical reflection as the basis for transformation and the neglect of emotions remains problematic. Thereby, the role of emotions in meaning-making is neglected in Mezirow's model, while many studies, including this study, have found that emotions play a role in transformative learning. It is seen as a limitation that this study's theoretical model did not account for this. Hence, although the usefulness and applicability of this model were empirically demonstrated, it needs further revision to improve its comprehensiveness. The model could seriously benefit from including insights from studies that incorporated a theoretical framework known for its accurate representation of the role of emotions in transformative learning to acknowledge the role of emotions in meaning-making. For instance, theories grounded in existential philosophy do grant emotions an equal position to cognition in our meaning-about the world. After theoretical improvement, the proposed model could potentially prove its usefulness in other tourism studies as well, though the concept of retreat setting should then be adjusted to the setting it is applied to.

8.3 Discussion of methodology

8.3.1 Methodological reflection on the role of the researcher

The value of retreating myself

As previously mentioned in [section 5.2.3](#), I found it important to pursue a certain level of contextual depth. I saw an opportunity to retreat myself. This has been valuable to this research in several ways.

First, I believed I could learn most about transformative learning within monastic retreats by participating in a retreat myself (Barnes et al., 2005). It allowed me to move beyond understanding this tourist experience and its context from a distance to 'living' the context in which transformative learning was intended to be studied. My own experience helped me to relate better to the research participants when interviewing them about their experiences. For instance, I was able to turn to certain reference points and ask better follow-up questions that I could not have used and asked if I had not participated myself.

Secondly, this approach enabled me to access and bond with the study population. In general, the monasteries were very careful about letting me approach their visitors. Furthermore, visitors were very careful to share such a highly personal and sometimes vulnerable experience. Difficulties with accessing the study population also became apparent when some of the people I approached expressed concerns and doubts about my intentions and presence at the retreat. So yes, as a researcher, I had to be very careful and invest time bonding with people to gain their trust. The importance of my participation and presence at the retreats was also clearly illustrated by the fact that some people were only willing to participate after meeting me in person.

To conclude, this element of the research design has allowed me to move back and forth between academic literature and my own experience, thereby adding greater richness to exploring transformative learning within monastic 'than would have been possible by either a purely academic review or merely a personal account' (Béres, 2018, p. 161).

Methodological consequences of retreating myself

Obviously, being present at both retreats has had some methodological consequences as well. In advance, I decided, together with the retreat coordinators, that it would be best if I would be present at the retreats without performing any research. This was for various ethical reasons that have been discussed in [section 5.2.3](#). Although the retreat coordinators complimented me for how I dealt with the researcher-participant balance, I cannot claim that I could fully eliminate my role as a researcher. Sometimes, I caught myself scanning for clues of transformative learning. At other times, fellow retreatants asked me about my research. Thus, it was sometimes challenging to maintain a position as a participant.

Furthermore, I spent quite some time connecting and bonding with my research participants as a fellow retreatant. Evidently, this had an impact on my positionality. Research participants approached me as one of them and saw me as a friend over time. I found myself in situations in which I was all of a sudden aware: oh, I am no longer only a researcher, I also became a friend. When I visited research participants for the post-retreat interview, it was not uncommon that I received a hug or that I stayed longer just to chat or have lunch together. It is not uncommon for researchers to get closely related to the research participants over time (Rowe, 2014). Yet, it is good to be aware of it and admit it. It did have an impact on my interviews. On the one hand, it supported the aim of having an in-depth interview because people shared their innermost thoughts with me. This was essential because it enabled me to access and capture the interviewees' inner worlds and personal lenses to a further extent that could have been achieved without investing in these relationships. On the other hand, I noticed that research participants had to switch a bit once interviewing them because they were used to me as a fellow retreatant and not as a researcher. As an interviewer, I maintained a more distanced and neutral role, which made some research participants a bit uncomfortable at the start. Another point of attention would be that some research participants started to ask me questions in return during the interview. As a result, interviews became conversations now and then. This might have led to researcher bias more than I intended.

As a final point, I would like to remark that my close relatedness to the research participants does suit the co-creativity standpoint of interpretivism, according to which both the researcher and research participants contribute to the research findings through their interactive connection (Ben-Ze'ev, 1998; Pitard, 2017).

Further remarks about researcher positionality

There are more dimensions to relatedness than my position as an insider. Relatedness can also occur 'along the dimensions of culture, class, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, childhood lived experiences and so on' (Rowe, 2014, p.629). In general, I felt more at home at Nieuw Sion compared to Sint-Catherinadal. I could not always relate to the theme of the retreat of Sint-Catherinadal: 'The Way of the Cross as one's life journey,' and the conversations held about it because I have not experienced a lot of suffering in my life yet. Maybe that is because of my age, or maybe I am just lucky. Whatever may be the case, the theme sometimes created a distance between the research participants and me. Furthermore, those research participants with whom I retreated at Sint-Catherinadal, were quite a bit older than me. Besides, some of them had quite a different religious orientation than me. I noticed how it was slightly more difficult for me to fully connect, relate to, or understand them during the interviews. Thus, adopting a neutral and open-minded stance took some more effort. I felt more related to the research participants who retreated at Nieuw Sion, partly because the age difference was smaller but more probably because we were more on the same terms regarding religious beliefs.

Finally, researcher positionality does not only affect data collection and data analysis. It also affects report writing and, thus, the presentation of results, as the researcher has the power to elevate and minimize certain voices. This has been dealt with by constant reflection on whether all voices were represented in this research.

8.3.2 Credibility

Credibility, as the equivalent of internal validity in quantitative research, was assured in various ways:

In general, there was a long-lasting engagement between the researcher and research participants in the field. Sufficient time was invested in familiarizing myself with the setting and context and building relationships and trust with research participants. Both the multi-method approach and the presence and participation of the researcher in the monastic retreats enabled this. Each research participant completed a pre-retreat motivation assignment, post-treat creative exercise, and post-retreat interview. This methodological setup made sense to the research participants, as positive feedback was received. Research participants felt stimulated to sit down and think deeply about their intentions. Some expressed how this made their intentions clearer to themselves. Furthermore, the drawing exercise was perceived as a great stepping stone toward the interview. Research participants expressed how they appreciated they were granted some time to reflect on the experience by themselves first and felt prepared for the interview. Additionally, the use of three methods enabled multi-method triangulation, a valuable strategy that has not only enhanced the accuracy of this research's findings and conclusions about transformative learning. It also resulted in a richness of data through which transformation could be understood in a broader context: one's journey of life (Kumar, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Followingly the strengths and limitations of each method and data analysis will be discussed in more detail.

First, the pre-retreat motivation statements were of great value because these prevented and limited recall bias about one's motivation. Often, it was noted that research participants stated their motivation regarding retreating differently during the interviews than they had originally written down in their motivation statement. Yet by use of the motivation statement, this could be corrected for. Thus, the inclusion of a pre-retreat motivation statement assured a true capturing of motivations and

thereby increased the credibility of the findings. Yet, not all research participants completed this motivation statement. Some retreated the previous year (2021), and some only decided to join this study when the retreat had already begun. For those research participants, recall bias most probably is interfering with credibility.

Regarding the drawing exercise, it must be admitted that guidelines must be improved next time. They were too open to participants' interpretation. On the other hand, this created conditions of creative freedom and also the freedom to express and highlight what was of value to them. Besides, research participants completed this assignment outside the researcher's presence. The researcher has not interfered with this process in any way. Therefore, the drawings present unbiased true reflections of the research participants' experiences. Furthermore, talking about the drawing also really stimulated the research participants to not only project their inner world but also speak about it. Thereby, this method supported and facilitated a deeper level of interaction between the researcher and the research participant.

Additionally, the choice to be present at and participate in the monastic retreats especially helped to increase the credibility of the interviews (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This made the researcher an insider who shares a common language with research participants because of common experiences (Coghlan & Miller, 2014). Furthermore, trust was built. The depth of the interviews could not have been reached if the researcher had not participated in the retreats and had not invested time in building relationships with the research participants. This was also noticed in the free expression of one's true feelings, thoughts, opinions, and experiences during the interviews in comparison with the motivation statement. The latter were conducted before the research participants and researcher became acquainted in real life. Furthermore, the researcher constantly tried to engage in active and interpretive listening, meaning that full attention was paid to the interview, both verbally and non-verbally. Furthermore, participants were frequently encouraged to support their statements with examples or further explanations, for instance, by the use of probes and silences. Yet, the credibility of the interviews was also sometimes threatened, for example, by the use of close-ended questions instead of open-ended questions. Most times, this was resolved by asking for further explanation. Furthermore, follow-up questions were sometimes leading instead of neutral, steering the research participant in a certain direction or expressing the viewpoint of the researcher. Nevertheless, the use of a semi-structured interview guide ensured that most questions were carefully constructed and properly asked. Moreover, the researcher constantly reflected on the introduction of researcher bias during and after the interview. These reflections were written down on memos and used to better prepare for and beware of these pitfalls regarding following interviews. Another interesting point was that there was little difference between the online and face-to-face interviews. Beforehand, it was expected that online interviews would negatively influence the openness of the interviewee. A plausible explanation could be that all research participants had met the researcher face-to-face before and felt comfortable enough to share regardless of the physical distance.

Finally, the emergent data was analysed persistently, meaning that transcripts were read over and over again. Recoding and relabelling took place until the elements most relevant to the nature of transformative learning were identified, and sufficient insight about these themes was learnt. Yet, no other researcher besides the researcher of this thesis was involved in coding and data analysis. Therefore, researcher bias might have crept in. Emerging researcher bias could have been downsized by investigator triangulation, calculation of inter-rater reliability, and a discussion about codes and the application of the coding scheme. Furthermore, credibility could have been improved by the performance of a member check, e.g., asking for and receiving feedback about the results, interpretations, and conclusions from the research participants. This could have helped to discover any researcher biases. Yet, a member check was beyond the time scope of this study.

8.3.3 Transferability

The findings of this study are based on unique and personal accounts of retreat experiences. As previously mentioned in [section 5.2](#), it was not the aim of this study to generalize truths about transformative learning. This is because stories and experiences are not generalizable in statistical terms (Self, 2019). Nonetheless, the personal accounts presented in this study may be representative of what other retreatants or even other tourists have experienced as well. Therefore, this study delivered a thick and careful description of the research process, research context, findings, and interpretation of the findings. A first attempt to estimate and judge the confirmability and transferability of the findings of this study has been made in the discussion of the findings. Yet, the so-called transferability judgement cannot be made by the researcher of this study but should be made by the readers of this thesis (Gasson, 2003; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Since a thick description has been provided, it is expected and aimed that readers are enabled to make a judgement about whether the insights of transformative learning provided in this study are applicable to other settings and contexts. Readers are thus invited to see which theoretical insights and conclusions apply to similar or other contexts.

8.5 Recommendations for future research

This is the first tourism study that applies the concepts of Transformative Learning Theory more rigorously whilst also integrating and exploring new concepts to the original theory. Furthermore, this study is unique for its slightly longitudinal orientation, including pre-retreat and post-retreat measurements, and for the participation and presence of the researcher during the retreat. However, the time scope of this research still appeared to be too short of taking into account the maturation phase of transformative learning properly. Therefore, the aim to provide theoretical insights into the whole process of transformative learning was not attained. Interviews took place one to four weeks after retreating. The beneficial effects of travelling often fade out within one month (Kühnel & Sonntag, 2011; Kirillova & Letho, 2015). Yet, most of the research participants had not passed through the maturation phase yet. Three participants retreated the previous year, and for them, the interview took place a year after retreating. Interestingly enough, one had experienced temporal transformation, and the other two were still experimenting with maturation. No conclusion can be drawn from such a small sample size, but this might suggest that the maturation phase of transformative learning has a long time span. Other studies also discuss that it takes very long before transformative learning reaches a visible stage. They even argue that transformation is eventually not an end-state but a process (Snyder, 2008; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). The fact that 2021-participants are still experimenting with the integration of changes confirms this claim. Interestingly enough, multiple studies argue that the post-trip phase is critical to transformation (Kirillova, 2016a; Robledo & Batle, 2017; Pope, 2022). Yet when looking for it, no studies were found that explore this post-trip phase in more detail. Thus, for further research, it could be interesting to investigate this phase in more depth. This could be done, for instance, by adopting longitudinal research that allows for tracking tourists over time after their travel experience. This would further enhance academic understanding of transformative learning in regard to travel. From a practical perspective, this could generate knowledge on how to achieve lasting changes.

9. CONCLUSION

The central question of this study is: *'How do visitors experience transformative learning within monastic retreats?'* From this study, various theoretical insights about the nature of transformative learning could be derived using a slightly revised application of Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning. First and foremost, visitors have been on their own personal and unique transformative journeys. For them, the process of transformative learning did not take place within monastic retreats, as it was suggested by the main research question, but beyond. Transformative learning occurred predominantly as an incremental and subtle process, extending beyond the geographical and temporal boundaries of the monastic retreat into the realms of their personal lives, with the possibility of having started before and continuing after the retreat. With this finding, this study provides a contrasting account to many of the applications of transformative learning within other conducted tourism studies. The latter tend to portray transformative learning experiences as abrupt and fundamental, and limited wholly to the tourist experience. Irrespective of not being confined to the retreat experience, it was demonstrated how the monastic retreat supported visitors' journeys. It functioned as a transformative experience by facilitating individual reflection through its physical and spiritual setting and activities. Specific to this case, symbolic practices, the monastic atmosphere of silence and contemplation, and the encounters with the monastic community were contextual factors that triggered and facilitated visitors' transformative experiences within the monastery retreats. Simultaneously, visitors were clearly on individual journeys. Their personal circumstances, experiences, and motivations shaped their transformative experiences and also the phase of incremental transformative learning they were in. Thus, transformative learning experiences were varied, and their occurrence and manifestation were unique per person. Consequently, the retreat facilitated this transformative experience in multiple ways. It acted as a disorienting moment, accelerated a disorienting phase, evoked, stimulated, and facilitated critical reflection. Furthermore, it facilitated changes in points of view and supported maturation. Moreover, what one takes away from such an experience is also highly individual. Visitors learnt different things and desired and made different changes upon returning home. Nevertheless, it was not merely a process on the individual level. On the contrary, one's social context and, more specifically, human interaction acted as the most important facilitator and inhibitor, both at the retreat and beyond. Human interdependency was clearly demonstrated. One could say that transformative learning, therefore, has a relational dimension. Furthermore, visitors did not solely experience transformative learning rationally but also emotionally. Therefore, this research is in line with those that advocate acknowledgement and further research of emotions to nuance the rational tone of Transformative Learning Theory. Finally, visitors experienced how the continuation and fulfilment of these transformative learning experiences were challenged upon returning home. Interestingly enough, the results suggest that transformational cues arise from the contrast between the monastic setting and everyday life and were facilitative of one's transformative learning experience on the one hand. On the other hand, findings suggest that the same contrast obstructs transformative learning when one's social context, everyday life, work, and societal expectations interfere with the continuation and fulfilment of this experience into lasting changes after returning home, and a fade-out effect lies in wait.

Overall, the results of this study have shown how monastic retreat visitors experienced transformative learning and how this experience came about and was partly facilitated by the retreat. This study succeeded in providing the reader with insights into the process and nature of transformative learning, which appeared to be (1) incremental, (2) personal and unique, (3) relational, (4) emotional, and (5) vulnerable. Thereby, this study provides an academic contribution by giving a thorough portrayal of the process of transformative learning.

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APPENDIX 1: MOTIVATION ASSIGNMENT

Handleiding motivatie opdracht

Doel van de intentieopdracht

Onderdeel van dit onderzoek is het in kaart brengen vanuit welke intenties er deelgenomen wordt aan een retraite in het klooster. Ik vraag u daarom mee te doen aan een korte opdracht bestaande uit één vraag. Het beantwoorden van deze vraag kost nog geen 5 minuten.

Wat is uw naam?

Jouw antwoord

Uw gegevens

- Uw naam en alles wat u zegt wordt vertrouwelijk behandeld
- Uw naam komt nooit in een rapport of artikel over dit onderzoek
- Alle data worden op een veilige manier opgeslagen

Contactgegevens

Als u vragen heeft over dit onderzoek of over deze specifieke opdracht, schroom niet om contact met mij op te nemen!

e-mail: naomi.vanwijk@wur.nl

telefoonnummer: 0642987842

Opdracht:

In deze opdracht vraag ik u te reflecteren op de intenties die u heeft voor uw deelname aan een kloosterretraite.

Belangrijk om te weten:

- Er zijn geen goede of foute antwoorden
- Beantwoord de vragen zelf
- U mag altijd stoppen

Zou u in een paar zinnen kunnen omschrijven wat u heeft doen beslissen deel te nemen aan de paasretraite?

Denk daarbij aan de volgende vragen.

- Wat is uw motivatie om op retraite te gaan?
- Wat zijn uw verwachtingen van de retraite?
- Wat hoopt u te vinden tijdens de retraite?
- Wat hoopt u te leren van deze retraite?

Jouw antwoord

Zullen we alvast het interview inplannen?

Na uw retraite, zou ik u graag nog een keer interviewen over uw ervaringen. Het interview vindt plaats op een datum, tijdstip en setting (fysiek/online) van uw voorkeur. Idealiter vindt het interview plaats 1 week tot 2 weken na uw retraite. Als u al voorkeuren heeft, kunt u ze hieronder kwijt. U kunt ook contact met mij opnemen via naomi.vanwijk@wur.nl of mij bereiken via mijn mobiele nummer: 06 42987842

Jouw antwoord

APPENDIX 2: CREATIVE ASSIGNMENT

Introductie:

Bedankt

Allereerst, bedankt dat u op deze wijze een bijdrage levert aan mijn afstudeeronderzoek 😊

Doel onderzoek

U doet mee aan een afstudeeronderzoek naar klooster-ervaringen. Het doel van dit onderzoek is het uitdiepen van de unieke ervaringen die retraite-deelnemers opdoen in het klooster. Daarom wil ik graag weten wat een deelname aan een retraite voor u betekent.

Doel opdracht

In deze opdracht daag ik u uit om op een creatieve manier uit te beelden wat u van uw klooster-retraite heeft geleerd.

Let op: het draait hierbij absoluut niet om de kwaliteit van de tekening of uw tekenkunsten. Dit onderzoek stelt de boodschap die u in de tekening legt centraal. Deze mag u toelichten met het interview dat nog zal plaatsvinden.

Uitnodiging interview:

Het laatste onderdeel van dit onderzoek betreft een interview over uw retraite-ervaringen. Het interview kan in persoon of digitaal plaatsvinden, afhankelijk van uw eigen voorkeur. Als u nog geen interview met mij heeft ingepland, dan kunt u via mijn contactgegevens laten weten wat voor u een geschikt moment is.

e-mail: naomivwijk@gmail.com of naomi.vanwijk@wur.nl

telefoonnummer: 0642987842

Uw gegevens

- Uw naam, tekening, en uitleg over de tekening worden vertrouwelijk behandeld
- Uw naam komt nooit in een rapport of artikel over dit onderzoek.

Opdracht:

In deze creatieve verwerkingsopdracht vraag ik u te reflecteren op wat u geleerd heeft van deelname aan de retraite. Dit mag u breed interpreteren. U kunt uw invulling van deze creatieve opdracht bijvoorbeeld toespitsen op:

- iets dat u geleerd heeft over uzelf of iets in het leven
- iets waar u zich veranderd in voelt
- iets waar u nu anders over denkt/een andere kijk op hebt
- Bepaalde keuzes die u zou willen maken
- Bepaalde veranderingen die u zou willen maken

Wederom, het gaat absoluut niet om de kwaliteit van de tekening of uw talent voor tekenen. Creatieve aanleg is geen vereiste. Bij wijze van spreken, een harkpoppetje is prima. Als u het leuk vindt om helemaal los te gaan met creatieve skills, is dat ook goed. Hoe dan ook, dit onderzoek focust de boodschap die u in de tekening probeert te leggen.

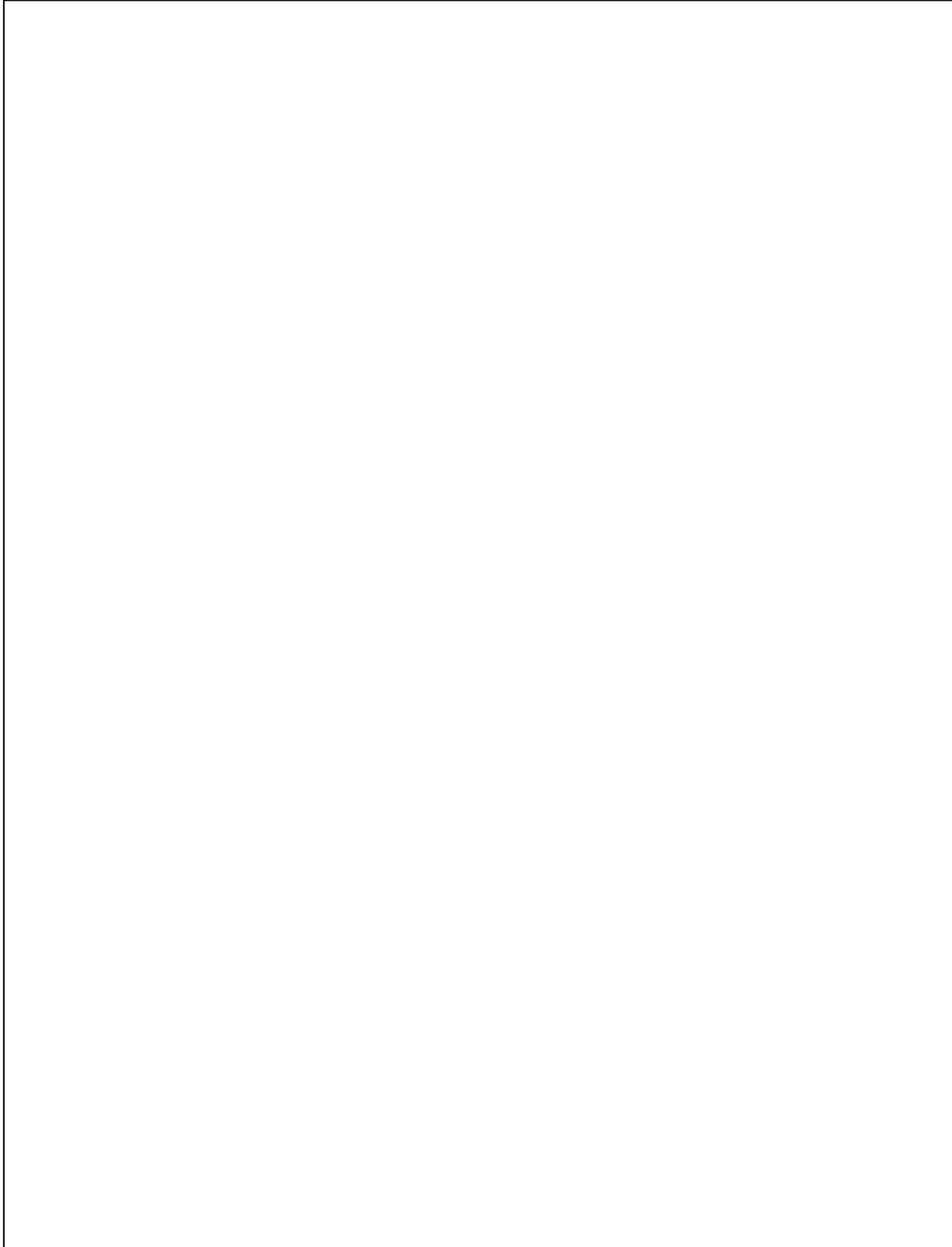
U mag zelf kiezen of u de opdracht nu maakt, of later thuis uitwerkt. Als u de creatieve verwerking liever op een later moment doet, stuur dan een foto of scan alvorens het interview plaatsvindt, naar naomi.vanwijk@wur.nl

Bedenk iets wat u tijdens de retraite heeft geleerd. Dit mogen ook meerdere dingen zijn. Teken iets wat dat symboliseert op het lege vel papier. Onthoud: hoe goed u tekent is niet van belang!

Naam:

.....

Ruimte om te tekenen:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for drawing or sketching. It occupies most of the lower half of the page.

Leg in een 3-4 zinnen uit wat u getekend heeft en wat de tekening betekent. Onthoud: U kunt dit ook nog verder toelichten in het interview dat zal plaatsvinden.

Vul uw antwoord in de tekst box hieronder in:



APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Bedankt

Allereerst, wat leuk dat u interesse heeft en mogelijk een bijdrage wil leveren aan mijn afstudeeronderzoek! 😊

Doel onderzoek

U doet mee aan een afstudeeronderzoek naar klooster-ervaringen. Het doel van dit onderzoek is het uitdiepen en begrijpen van de intenties en ervaringen die retraite-deelnemers opdoen in het klooster. Elke ervaring is uniek! Daarom willen we graag weten wat een deelname aan een retraite voor u betekent. Dit helpt ons begrijpen waarom retraite-programma's belangrijk zijn voor individuele deelnemers en de maatschappij.

Doel van dit interview

In dit interview gaan we in gesprek over wat u ertoe deed besluiten om deel te nemen aan de retraite. Daarvoor kijken we ook terug naar de intentie-opdracht die u van tevoren gemaakt heeft. Veder, zal ik u vragen hoe u de retraite in het klooster heeft ervaren. Bijvoorbeeld, wat u waardeerde aan de retraite en of de retraite u iets geleerd heeft. Daarvoor kijken we ook terug naar de creatieve opdracht die u op de laatste dag van de retraite gemaakt heeft. Het interview duurt ongeveer 45-60 minuten. Voordat we aan het interview beginnen, spreek ik nog wat praktische zaken met u door.

Uw gegevens

- Uw naam en alles wat u zegt wordt vertrouwelijk behandeld
- Uw naam komt nooit in een rapport of artikel over dit onderzoek

Toestemming:

- Bevestigt u dat u wilt deelnemen aan dit interview?

Ik zou dit interview graag willen opnemen via audio--recording. Dit is opdat ik de data zo objectief mogelijk kan analyseren en zo tot juiste bevindingen kom. Deze opname wordt veilig opgeslagen en niet verder verspreid. Alleen ik heb er toegang toe. De opname zal dus niet worden gedeeld met anderen.

- Gaat u er mee akkoord dat dit interview wordt opgenomen?

Als laatste, u mag ten alle tijden dit interview beëindigen en u bent mij niet verplicht daarvoor een 'geldige' reden voor te geven.

Nu we alle praktische zaken hebben behandeld, kijk ik er heel erg naar uit om samen in gesprek te gaan. Bent u er klaar voor? Dan zet ik de audio-recorder aan.

Inleidende vragen:

Ik zou het leuk vinden om eerst wat te weten te komen over wie u bent, hoe uw dagelijks leven eruit ziet en wat u in het dagelijks leven doet. Daar zullen de eerste vragen over gaan.

Ik kan me voorstellen dat het een fijn gevoel geeft, als ik mezelf eerst even verder voorstel, zodat u weet wie er tegenover u zit.

De onderzoeker vertelt iets over haarzelf.

- Kunt u me iets vertellen over wie u bent?
- Hoe ziet hoe uw dagelijks leven eruit?
 - Vervolg vraag over werk/vrije tijd/gezinssamenstelling

Intenties:

Tijdens dit onderdeel van het interview refereert de onderzoeker naar de intentie opdracht die de respondent voor de retraite heeft ingevuld.

Van tevoren heb ik je een paar vragen gesteld over de intenties die u had om deel te nemen aan de paasretraite in Catherinadal/Nieuw Sion. De volgende vragen haken hier op aan

- Wat was voor jou de aanleiding om op retraite te gaan?
 - Motivatie/verwachtingen/vinden/leren
 - Was u al voor de retraite bezig hiermee, en zo ja hoe?
 - Waarom had u die intenties?

Retraite context:

Om te onderscheiden of de setting van het klooster en/of de retraite-activiteiten een rol speelt in wat de participant geleerd heeft over waar hij of zij in veranderd is, worden de volgende vragen gesteld.

Voordat we verder gaan naar het volgende onderdeel van dit interview, ben ik benieuwd

- Hoe heeft u de retraite ervaren?
 - Wat raakte u?
 - Waar was u door getroffen?
 - Wat intrigeerde u?
 - Wat is u bijgebleven? / Is u een specifiek moment bijgebleven?
 - Wat waardeerde u?
 - Waren er nog elementen die u veraste tijdens de retraite, zo ja welke?
 - Mensen/activiteiten/programmaonderdelen
- Hoe heeft u het klooster ervaren, de omgeving en de atmosfeer?
 - Wat waardeerde u?
- Wat doet het kloosterleven met jou?
- In hoeverre zette de retraite en/of de kloosteromgeving aan tot reflectie?
 - Waarop heb je gereflecteerd?

Nog even een korte terugblik

- In hoeverre kwam de retraite overeen met de bedoelingen en verwachtingen die u net omschreef?

Een ander perspectief:

Tijdens dit onderdeel van het interview refereert de onderzoeker naar de creatieve opdracht die de respondent op de laatste dag van de retraite heeft gedaan. Aan de hand van het gesprek over de tekening, leidt de onderzoekster het gesprek naar een van de hieronder beschreven vragen. De onderzoekster probeert de antwoorden te refereren aan het persoonlijke leven van de gesprekspartner, om de klooster-ervaring in een bredere context te zetten.

- In hoeverre heeft de retraite invloed gehad/je gewezen op jouw perspectieven op het leven?
 - Bijvoorbeeld: jezelf, relaties, de maatschappij, je werk, religie/geloof/God, waarheid, enzovoorts
 - Verrijking/bevestiging/verandering
 - Heeft u die kijk altijd al gehad in uw leven?
- Was u hier al mee bezig voordat u op retraite ging, zo ja hoe?
 - Hoe dacht u hierover na voordat u op retraite ging?
 - Hoe probeerde u hier mee bezig te zijn/invulling aan te geven voor de retraite
- Kunt u omschrijven wanneer u zich dit realiseerde?
 - Hoe voelde u zich op dat moment?

Eerder, heb ik u uitgedaagd de retraite op een creatieve manier te verwerken. Ik ben benieuwd naar uw creatieve verwerking. Zullen we hem erbij pakken en bespreken?

- Kunt u mij vertellen wat u getekend heeft?
- Welke boodschap heeft u in de tekening gelegd?
 - Eventuele vervolgvragen, vragen om verduidelijking of voorbeelden
- Die ervaring waar u net over vertelde, doet het nu anders denken over X?
- Zijn er nog andere dingen, die u wilt uitlichten, waarin de retraite een impact op u heeft gehad? of Zijn er nog andere dingen die u ontdekt heeft tijdens/n.a.v. de retraite?

Na de retraite:

En toen was de paasretraite voorbij en ging u weer naar huis.

- Hoe was dat?
- Wat nam je van de retraite mee naar huis?
 - Hoe ga je dat verwerken?
 - Heb je ideeën hoe je dat in je leven wil inpassen?
- Wilt u komende periode aan de slag naar aanleiding van wat u tijdens de retraite ontdekt heeft? Zo ja, kunt u daar wat over vertellen?
 - Hoe gaat/kan datgene wat u ontdekt heeft een invloed hebben uw leven (in het grootste en het dagelijkse)
 - In hoeverre heeft het al een invloed?
 - In hoeverre inspireert het om
 - Bepaalde keuzes te maken
 - Nieuwe ideeën/inzichten uit te werken
 - Veranderingen te maken
 - Hoe wilt u dat aanpakken?
- Wat verwacht u dat het makkelijk maakt om vast te houden aan wat u mee naar huis heeft genomen?

- Wat verwacht u dat het moeilijk/belemmerend gaat maken om vast te houden aan wat u mee naar huis heeft genomen?
- Hoe zou u de periode voor, tijdens, en na de retraite omschrijven/vergelijken?

Afronding:

We komen richting het einde van dit interview. Ik denk dat ik wel een impressie heb gekregen van wat u naar het klooster bracht, hoe u de paasretraite hebt ervaren en hoe u er aan de slag mee wilt gaan. Maar voordat we dit interview afronden:

- Heeft u nog iets anders te vertellen over uw deelname aan de retraite?
- Heeft u verder nog iets toe te voegen aan dit interview?

Hartelijk dank voor het delen van die ervaringen en uw verhaal. Als u daarin geïnteresseerd bent, kan ik de onderzoeksresultaten van mijn scriptie ter zijner tijd met u delen.

Einde interview

APPENDIX 4: ORIGINAL RESEARCH PLAN

In Table 7 an overview can be found that sets forth the various research activities and their scheduling over the two months of data collection.

Table 6: Schematic overview activities and planning of the research

Date	Time	Activities
week 9 until week 11	2 weeks	Approaching monasteries with request for research. Includes travelling to monasteries to get to know one another. I will introduce myself and my research personally to them. Discussing the appropriateness and feasibility of my research for them. Drafting an invite in consultation with monastery or coordinator(s) retreat-program.
week 12	1 week	Sending invite to envisaged study population and potential research participants by using the network of the retreat coordinators. . Being available for questions about the purpose and procedure of this research. Preparing research proposal presentation
week 13	1 week	Presenting research proposal. Revision of methods according feedback received from peer review. Having research participants willing to contribute to my study Final revision of research set-up methods in consultation with monastery or coordinator(s) retreat-program.
Week 14	1 week	Final revision of research set-up methods in consultation with monastery or coordinator(s) retreat-program. Send intention testimony assignment to research participants
Week 15 Retreat from 13 th to 16 th of April	1 week	Participate in Easter-retreats. Keep a reflective journal log. On the last day of the retreat, host creative assignment. Also share contact details to schedule post-experience interviews or already schedule them immediately.
Week 16	1 week	Process retreat, look to interview guide based on own experience. If

		necessary, revise. Evaluate retreat with retreat-coordinator(s). Schedule interviews. Prepare interviews. Send reminders for interviews. Maybe start interviewing research participants at the end of this week.
Week 17-Week 18	2 weeks	Interview (remaining) research participants. Meanwhile, start transcribing. Evaluate research with retreat-coordinators, and make an appointment about sharing the research results with them. Data collection is finished

Uitnodiging Afstudeeronderzoek



Hoi! Ik ben Naomi van Wijk. Ik ben 24 jaar en ik woon en studeer in Wageningen



Ik studeer de master Tourism, Society, and Environment aan de Wageningen Universiteit



Voor mijn afstudeerscriptie doe ik onderzoek naar de intenties en ervaringen van retraite-deelnemers.



Wat mij echt is bijgebleven van de retraite ...



Doel onderzoek:

Dit onderzoek probeert inzichten te verwerven in :

- de intenties waar vanuit mensen deelnemen aan een retraite
- De retraite-ervaringen
- De impact van een retraite

THANK
YOU

Daarom willen we graag horen wat een retraite voor u betekent. Dit helpt ons begrijpen waarom retraite-programma's belangrijk zijn voor individuele deelnemers en de maatschappij

Voor dit onderzoek zoek ik 8 à 10 deelnemers. Het zou mij helpen als u aan dit onderzoek wilt deelnemen!

Hoe ziet dit onderzoek eruit?

Dit onderzoek vindt plaats voorafgaand, tijdens, en na de paasretraite van X tot X april bij klooster X. Tijdens het onderzoek neemt u deel aan een:

Korte intentie-opdracht van 5 minuten. Deze wordt van tevoren naar u opgestuurd of vult u in bij aankomst bij het klooster



Creatieve reflectieopdracht. Deze is in het programma van de retraite opgenomen. Let op: Creatieve aanleg is niet vereist.



Interview van 45-60 minuten waarin u over uw retraite-ervaringen kan vertellen. Deze zal plaatsvinden na de retraite. Op een datum, tijdstip, en setting naar uw voorkeur.



MEEDOEN AAN DIT ONDERZOEK?

U bent welkom om mee te doen en een bijdrage te leveren aan mijn afstudeeronderzoek!

Als u geïnteresseerd bent in een deelname aan dit onderzoek, laat het dan weten via: **naomi.vanwijk@wur.nl**

Heb je vragen? Schroom niet contact met mij op te nemen!



Wat gebeurt er met uw gegevens?



De onderzoeksgegevens worden gebruikt voor wetenschappelijk onderzoek. Ze worden op een veilige manier opgeslagen, namelijk door versleuteling met een wachtwoord. Alleen de onderzoekster heeft toegang tot deze bestanden. Verder worden uw gegevens volledig geanonimiseerd. In de scriptie en eventuele publicaties worden nooit gegevens gepresenteerd die terug te leiden zijn naar u als persoon.

- Uw naam en alles wat u zegt/schrijft wordt vertrouwelijk behandeld
- Anonimiteit wordt gewaarborgd. Uw naam komt nooit in een rapport of artikel over dit onderzoek
- Alle data wordt op een veilige manier opgeslagen

APPENDIX 6: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Toestemmingsformulier deelname onderzoek kloosterretraites

Hoi! Ik ben Naomi Maarseveen en vanuit de Wageningen Universiteit doe ik mijn scriptie-onderzoek naar de intenties en ervaringen die retraite-deelnemers opdoen in het klooster. Dit doe ik voor mijn afstuderen aan het Master-programma Tourism, Society, and Environment.

Allereerst, wat leuk dat u interesse heeft en mogelijk een bijdrage wil leveren aan mijn afstudeeronderzoek! 😊

Met dit formulier vraag ik u officieel om toestemming met betrekking tot deelname aan dit onderzoek. Ik vraag ik u hieronder ook uw naam en e-mailadres achter te laten, zodat ik u ter zijner tijd kan benaderen voor het inplannen van een interview. Daarna volgen een aantal praktische punten over vertrouwelijk gebruik van gegevens, anonimiteit, en vrijwillige deelname met afsluitend een toestemmingsverklaring.

Vergeet niet na het invullen van dit formulier onderaan op 'verzenden' te klikken!

E-mailadres:

Je e-mailadres

Wat is uw naam?

Jouw antwoord

Wat is uw leeftijd?

Jouw antwoord

Doel onderzoek:

U wilt meedoen aan een onderzoek naar kloosterretraites. Dit onderzoek probeert inzichten te verwerven in

- De intenties waar vanuit mensen deelnemen aan een retraite
- De retraite-ervaringen en de impact daarvan

Dit helpt om inzicht te krijgen in hoe mensen kloosterretraites verschillend benaderen en ervaren. Daarnaast kunnen deze inzichten helpen om te begrijpen waarom en hoe kloosterretraites belangrijk zijn voor individuele deelnemers, en daarmee ook een maatschappelijke belang dienen.

Hoe ziet dit onderzoek eruit?

Als u besluit deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek, nodig ik u uit om deel te nemen aan een korte intentieopdracht, een creatieve reflectieopdracht en een afsluitend interview. De intentieopdracht kost 5 minuten tijd. U ontvangt de intentieopdracht alvorens deel te nemen aan de retraite bij de Willibrordsabdij, Sint Catherinadal of Nieuw Sion. De creatieve reflectieopdracht is opgenomen in het programma van de retraite. Creatieve aanleg is hiervoor geen vereiste. De afsluitende interviews vinden binnen 14 dagen na de retraite plaats, op een nader te bepalen dag, tijdstip en plaats van uw voorkeur. Het is ook mogelijk om het interview digitaal te laten plaatsvinden. De interviews worden met uw goedkeuring opgenomen met een audiorecorder.

Risico's en voordelen van dit onderzoek:

Dit onderzoek brengt geen persoonlijk risico met zich mee.

Vertrouwelijkheid en anonimiteit:

De onderzoeksgegevens worden gebruikt voor wetenschappelijk onderzoek. Ze worden op een veilige manier opgeslagen, namelijk door versleuteling met een wachtwoord. Alleen de onderzoekster heeft toegang tot deze bestanden. Verder worden uw gegevens volledig geanonimiseerd. In de scriptie en eventuele publicaties worden nooit gegevens gepresenteerd die terug te leiden zijn naar u als persoon.

- Uw naam en alles wat u zegt/schrijft wordt vertrouwelijk behandeld
- Anonimiteit wordt gewaarborgd. Uw naam komt nooit in een rapport of artikel over dit onderzoek
- Alle data worden op een veilige plek opgeslagen

Vrijwillige deelname:

Dit onderzoek is van vrijwillige aard. Als u besluit mee te doen, dan bent u nog steeds vrij om u op enig moment terug te trekken zonder een geldige reden verschuldigd te zijn.

Contactgegevens en vragen:

Als u nog vragen hebt naar aanleiding van de uitnodiging en dit toestemmingsformulier, schroom dan niet deze aan mij te stellen. U kunt overigens tijdens het gehele onderzoek met vragen bij mij terecht.

e-mail: naomi.vanwijk@wur.nl
telefoonnummer: 06 42987842

Toestemmingsverklaring:

Ik verklaar dat ik bovenstaande informatie gelezen heb en mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek bevestig.

<input type="radio"/> Ja <input type="radio"/> Nee

.....

APPENDIX 7: RETREAT PROGRAM HOLY WEEK SINT-CATHERINADAL 2022

Programma Retraite Goede Week '22

Klooster St Catharinadal Oosterhout

Woensdag 13 april

Aankomst vanaf 9.30 uur

10.00 uur ontvangst - kennismaking met elkaar, met de begeleider en met het klooster; praktische afspraken

10.45 uur **1^e sessie** inleiding in het thema: De kruisweg als levensweg

12.00 uur middagmaal

15.00 uur boetedienst

16.00 uur **2^e sessie** Thema: verraden worden en vallen

17.45 uur avondmaal

19.00 uur avonddienst

19.45 uur kort afsluitend gesprek

Donderdag 14 april (Witte Donderdag)

8.00 uur ontbijt

9.00 uur morgendienst (donkere metten)

10.00 uur **3^e sessie** Thema: ontmoetingen op de kruisweg

12.00 uur middagmaal

15.00 uur middagdienst

16.00 uur **4^e sessie** Thema: de 7 maaltijden in het evangelie van Lucas

17.45 uur avondmaal

19.00 uur eucharistieviering

19.45 uur kort afsluitend gesprek

Vrijdag 15 april (Goede Vrijdag)

8.00 uur ontbijt

9.00 uur morgendienst (donkere metten)

10.00 uur **5^e sessie** Thema: een kruis dragen

12.00 uur middagmaal

15.00 uur lijdens-herdenking

16.00 uur **6^e sessie** Thema: de 7 laatste woorden van Jezus

17.45 uur avondmaal

19.00 uur avonddienst

19.45 uur kort afsluitend gesprek

Zaterdag 3 april (Stille Zaterdag)

8.00 uur ontbijt

9.00 uur morgendienst

7e sessie Thema: een terugblik op de eigen levensweg

11.30 uur korte terugblik op programma en verblijf

12.00 uur middagmaal

13.00 uur afscheid en vertrek

Verdere invulling van het programma:

Iedereen is uitgenodigd de diensten in de kloosterkerk bij te wonen.

De groepssessies bestaan afwisselend uit inleiding, lectio divina aan de hand van teksten, meditatie, beelden en muziek

In de persoonlijke tijd is er ruimte voor lezen, schrijven, wandelen, en zo gewenst een persoonlijk gesprek met de begeleider.

APPENDIX 8: RETREAT PROGRAM EASTER NIEUW SION 2022

Programma Paasretraite 2022 – er kan nog wat wijzigen

nb: Dit is wat we graag aanbieden om in de rust van het klooster te kunnen inkeren in jezelf, maak er gebruik van of volg je eigen route – geen enkel onderdeel is verplicht.

Dag	Tijd	Activiteit	Plaats
Witte donderdag	15.00	Aankomst/ kennismaking	Gastenhuis
	16.15	Rondleiding	
	18.00	Avondgebed	Kloosterkerk
	18.30	Diner	Kloosterkerk
	Avond	Zingen in de kerk	
		Ontmoeting	Smederij
	21.30	Nachtgebed	Kloosterkerk
Goede vrijdag	08.00	Ochtendgebed	Kloosterkerk
	08.30	Ontbijt	Gastenhuis
	10.00	Mogelijkheid voor wandeling, alleen of met Klazien	Verzamelen bij de poort
	12.00	Middaggebed	Kloosterkerk
	13.00	Lunch	Koffieschenkerij
	15.00	Middaggebed	Kloosterkerk
	18.30	Diner	Koffieschenkerij
	21.30	Nachtgebed	Kloosterkerk
		Ontmoeting	Smederij
Stille zaterdag	08.00	Ochtendgebed	Kloosterkerk
	08.30	Ontbijt	Gastenhuis
	12.00	Middaggebed, stille meditatie	Kloosterkerk
	12.30	Lunch	Koffieschenkerij
	10.00-16.00	lectio divina in woord en beeld: schrijven, schilderen, collage maken	Smederij met Ralda en Bettuelle
	16.00	Afsluiting LD dag	Koffieschenkerij
	18.00	Avondgebed	Kloosterkerk
	18.30	Diner	Koffieschenkerij
		Ontmoeting	Smederij
	21.30	Nachtgebed	Kloosterkerk
Paasochtend	06.00	Wake en ochtendgebed	Kloosterkerk
		Ontbijt en afscheid nemen	Gastenhuis
	10.00	Kamers leeg	

In de ochtend, middag of avond heeft iedere gast de gelegenheid om individueel een meditatieve wandeling te maken, in en rond het klooster:

- Kruiswegstaties, start in de kloostergang rechts, bij het beeld van de wandelende monniken
- Labyrint, in de linker binnentuin, deur in de meest linkse kloostergang, gezien vanaf de hoofdingang
- Berceau, achter het klooster, rondom de moestuin

Er is ook gelegenheid om te schilderen of te tekenen, in de druivengang liggen materialen.

We vragen je om in de kloostergangen, het labrynt en de berceau de stilte te bewaren. Ook op het pad door de akkers naar het bos, tegenover de poort, wordt de stilte gewaardeerd.