

Why go on a Spiritual Retreat?

The powerful benefits of time alone with God



Fr Francis Hoffman

You could be as wealthy as a king -- yet miserable -- if you have no friends. Or you could be as poor as dirt -- yet happy -- because you're surrounded by loved ones.

A recent study of human happiness by the distinguished British economist Richard Layard concludes that the most significant factor for personal happiness is relationships with other people. And what personal relationship could be more important than the relationship with God?

The saints -- who were notoriously happy -- gave witness to this reality. Even St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Claretian Martyrs of Barbastro, and the Carmelite nuns of Compiègne sang hymns of joy on their way to martyrdom. Immersed in conditions that would make mere mortals sad, these friends of God faced suffering with joy. It was their friendship with God that gave them strength and joy.

But friendship takes time and needs to be strengthened by conversation. Couples who have strong marriages will tell you about the importance of getting away for a long weekend to spend time alone in conversation. We need to do the same with God, and that's why the Church warmly recommends annual retreats for the faithful.

Retreats are a time away from our normal activities to spend time getting reacquainted with God, to examine the priorities of life and to make concrete and practical resolutions for improvement. Retreats can be a powerful step toward personal conversion.

An Ancient Practice

Before Our Lord began His public ministry, He spent 40 days in the desert praying and fasting as a way to prepare for the important work ahead (see Lk 4:1-13). Those were days of retreat.

During His three years of public ministry, Jesus would sometimes invite His disciples to "come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while" (Mk 6:31). Again, days of retreat.

When Jesus entered forcefully into the life of St. Paul, He directed him to rise and go into the city, where he would be told what to do. For three days St. Paul neither ate nor drank, preparing himself to receive the spiritual direction of Ananias (see Acts 9:1-9). Those, too, were days of retreat.

Down through the centuries the Holy Spirit has raised up great saints and founders for the reform and service of the Church. While the methods of the Franciscans, Jesuits and members of Opus Dei have varied considerably, what their founders shared in common was a profound spiritual experience while on retreat, whether in the forests surrounding Assisi, the caves of Manresa, or in a residence of St. Vincent de Paul.

These saints were seeking solitude in order to listen to God. Jesus was calling them apart to spend some time with Him.

Retreats Today

Current Church legislation encourages the parish pastor to organize periodic retreats or missions for the good of the faithful, while all those who are to be ordained are required to make a weeklong retreat. Similarly, priests and Religious are asked to make a yearly retreat.

For the good of the Church, as well as for the good of their own souls and the sake of their families, lay people are also encouraged to get away for a few days each year to rekindle their relationship with Christ.

There are many types of retreats, and many Church organizations offer retreats of various lengths and topics. Retreats may last two days or 40 days; they may be organized for men or for women, or for couples together.

They may follow a traditional format with a priest-preacher as the retreat master, offering several spiritual conferences or meditations daily. Or they may be more charismatic in tone.

They may be directed or undirected. You might make a retreat with a large group in a hotel, or by yourself in a Trappist monastery.

In general, however, prudent pastoral experience suggests the following elements are most helpful for making a good retreat: silence, the holy Eucharist, confession, spiritual reading and closeness to the Blessed Mother.

How to Make a Good Retreat

First, silence. Look for a retreat setting that fosters an atmosphere of silence, not as a penance, but as a means for listening to the Holy Spirit and getting to know Jesus while getting to know yourself.

When you go away for a weekend retreat, you're going away to be with God and to deepen your friendship with Him. Too often, in daily life, we're overwhelmed with sensory distractions and can't hear the voice of God. When you go on retreat, turn off your cell phone and unplug yourself from all cyber-communication.

God wants your attention. Everyone else can wait.

Second, the holy Eucharist. Since the holy Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, it's most helpful for a retreatant to attend Mass and receive holy Communion daily while on retreat. It's also helpful to spend time in silent conversation in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and even to participate in Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament during the course of the retreat.

The Church so warmly recommends Eucharistic Adoration that a plenary indulgence can be gained whenever any of the faithful spend 30 minutes in adoration before Our Lord.

Third, confession. A retreat is all about seeking, finding and loving Christ. As you spend time in silent reflection and examination of conscience, the Holy Spirit will prompt you to confess your sins to a priest.

Often, the yearly retreat provides special graces to make a deeper examination of conscience, which moves the soul to more profound contrition. Souls sometimes seek to make a general confession of their entire life -- renouncing pride, envy, lust and jealousy -- and so open their souls to the redeeming graces of Christ.

For true and lasting spiritual progress, it's essential that a person make a deep and searching examination of conscience, express heartfelt contrition, and confess his or her sins to a priest.

Fourth, spiritual reading. What a joy to read the Bible slowly and in silence. How much good it does for the soul!

Pride of place is to be accorded to the New Testament, and first of all to the Gospels. The soul benefits greatly by reading and thinking about the words and actions of our blessed Savior.

Early in the morning is often the best time to feed the soul and spirit with the words of the Gospel. Many have also found it very helpful to read spiritual works by the saints and great masters.

Timeless classics, such as Father Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange's "Three Ages of the Interior Life," or Thomas á Kempis' "Imitation of Christ," or Father Francis Fernandez's "In Conversation with God," are always a good bet.

Fifth, closeness to the Blessed Mother. After Our Lord ascended into heaven, the apostles gathered around Our Lady and accompanied her in prayer. After 10 days, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit infused grace in each one in the Upper Room, and the Church was born.

Those days of prayer and petition were fruitful because of the apostle's closeness to the Blessed Mother.

During your retreat, take time to pray the Rosary daily and meditate deeply upon each mystery. As you reflect on the example of the Blessed Mother, you will draw closer to Our Lord.

Going Back Home

As your retreat draws to a close, be sure to make a few -- no more than three -- practical and generous resolutions to improve in prayer, service and sacrifice. Be sure to write down those resolutions in your notebook, or post them to your PDA.

Finally, beware of P.R.S., also known as "Post-Retreat Syndrome." This is the tendency to fail in one or more of your resolutions soon after your return. Shake it off and begin again.

With God's grace, and your humble contrition, you will make progress. TCA

For More Information

For more information about retreats that may be available in your area, check out the www.catholiclinks.org website section on retreat houses. You can also consult your local diocesan directory, speak to your parish priest or contact Catholic organizations in your area. Those who might be interested in a retreat preached by this author can contact Shellbourne Conference Center, available on the web at www.shellbourne.org.

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