

Aim and purpose of a retreat
"It is Your face I seek, because
my soul thirsts for you, my Lord."

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What is a retreat?

Normally, retreats are called '*spiritual exercises*' because of Saint Ignatius who introduced the exercises into the spiritual life of the Church. In English *retreat* means: *to withdraw, to be alone for a while, to have time for yourself*. On a retreat God should be the only companion to whom you listen and with whom you talk. You can be sure that God already eagerly waits for you, hoping that you will lend him an ear. He asks you for an audience as expressed in an old prayer where God says:

"I always wanted to talk with you but you had no time for me...I always wanted to tell you: 'I am here for you'. But you were afraid... I always wanted to converse with you but you never gave me a chance to finish my words. Because you are free to decide whether you want to listen to me or whether you want to be left alone in your silence."

In short: God asks you: "Do you have some time for me in these days? The two of us ought to talk once again about everything that affects you, whether it is what worries you or what excites you. Take some time with me for unhurried conversation in a relaxed and calm atmosphere, without rush and distraction".

We on our part need to listen with an attentive ear to what God wants to tell us *now* at this moment of our life; what he wants me to hear today after 10, 20 or 30 years of my religious or priestly life. The issue is the *here and now*, in the year 2009, where I am stationed now, at my present age and with my present worries, anxieties and fears.

Jesus himself frequently took time to be alone and to pray as scripture tell us:

But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and great multitudes were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But He Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray. (Lk 5:15-16)

And the apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. (Mc 6:30-32)

We all get tired and need time to think anew about our commitment to the Lord and our mission in the service of the Kingdom which Jesus entrusted to us (Jn 20:21). We might have to look more seriously at our life and hear the message from the Book of Revelation in a very personal way:

I know all about you; how you are reputed to be alive and yet are dead. Wake up; revive what little you have left; it is dying fast. So far I have failed to notice anything in the way

you live that my God could possibly call perfect, and yet do you remember, how eager you were when you first heard the message? Hold on to that. Repent (Rv 3:1-3).

But what we need most is to find a new enthusiasm and a new affirmation from the Lord who wants to say to each of us: "You are in the right place. I need you where you are, be assured I am right there where you fulfill your mission. You can count on me all the time." We have to be assured of his love and care, to experience his caring presence and be filled with joy. That is what God want to tell you:

If you are ready to listen to my words, then I would like to tell you: "From the beginning of your life have I loved you! My love for you remains in eternity. Whether you turn away from me or you turn to me, I will love you forever in ways no one can ever love you."

Not Success nor Optimism are words for God in the Bible

The ultimate aim of these days is that you will find new joy in God and new enthusiasm for your mission. They should lead you to a point where you could say with the prophet: *The joy of the Lord is my strength!* This joy, however, is in no way based on human success nor on pure optimism in a better world to come in the future. Both words *success and optimism* are not found in the Bible in connection with God.

Concerning the word *success* the great Philosopher Martin Buber once remarked: "The word *success* is no word used for God in scripture". The Bible put in that place the word *faithfulness*. If we, who are called to carry on the mission of Christ, should forget this, we will easily fall into frustration and discouragement in our pastoral work. God has called us to carry on his mission in faithfulness and trust and we should not worry about success nor failure but just go on doing our work for God's Kingdom. After all, it is *not our* mission we are called to proclaim but his. We are only his faithful representatives or his *ambassadors* as Saint Paul puts it.

The other word not found in scriptures is the word *optimism*. Our faith is not based on optimism but on *hope against hope*. The firm belief that God will accomplish his world transforming plan in the end, is not based on human optimism but exclusively on the firm belief in the resurrection. In the resurrection of the body of Christ the world has already be transformed into that state of existence which we await with joyful hope to come for the whole of creation at the time God has appointed. This hope in the resurrection gives us the audacious courage to go on doing what we are doing which other people may find futile or even regard as pure nonsense.

Prerequisites for a good retreat

1. A hunger and thirst for God

According to an estimate made by historians, there have been around 10 000 religions on this globe since humanity appeared. The aim and goal of these religions could be described as the expression of humankind's deepest desire for union and communion with God, the Divine or the Deity. Our Christian faith, similarly, holds that we are created for God and that "our heart is restless until it rests in God". The reason why we can find our rest only in God is because we are created in "his kind", in *his image* as we read in the Creation Story:

And God created the great sea monsters, and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was

good... Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind"; and it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in **Our image**, according to **Our likeness**." ... And God created man in **His own image, in the image of God** He created him; male and female He created them. (Gen 1:21-27)

All that God created, he created in *its own kind* but human beings he created in *God's kind*, after his own image. Therefore, we will find our true being and fulfillment only if we become like him.

A retreat is a time spent with someone who loves you very much and whom you would like to know better. It is a vacation with the Lord, a chance to get to know God and Jesus better and to let God know you better. Relationships develop through mutual self-revelation; even if at the beginning they are superficial, they can grow deeper.

Do I experience a desire for an intimacy with God? If God really created me for an intimate relationship with him, then my heart must burn with the desire to fulfill God's intention. Such a desire, no matter how faint, is the necessary first step towards a renewed deepening relationship of intimacy with God. Only if I have this desire can I embark on a journey leading to a more conscious awareness of God's presence in my life.

God's desire for us created in us a desire for God and for what God wants for us. If God desired me into being, then the deepest desire of my human heart is for complete union with God, a union which also includes union with all members of God's family and harmony with the universe.

Scripture tells us that God is always interested in us. You may not believe that yet, but let us assume that God not only takes a personal and caring interest in each one of us, but also that God always pays attention to each one of us. God maintains a conscious relationship with each one of us.

There are some common obstacles we have to face. First, there is the fear that I am worthless; God could not desire a union with a person like me. Then there is the fear that God may demand a great deal from me and I am afraid of the consequences this will have on how I will have to live my life from now on. For a change try this prayer:

Lord, I have an image of you as someone who does not love me, and I want you to change that image so that I can believe that you care about me and have my well-being at heart. I want to experience you as the deepest desire of my heart and I want to experience your desire that created me and sustains my life - wanting me to be who I am.

Who of us can express his/her hunger for God in these words of Scriptures:

O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water. So I gaze on you in the sanctuary to see your strength and your glory. (Ps 63: 2-3)

As a doe longs for running waters so my soul thirsts for God, the God of my life. When shall I go and see the face of God? (Ps 43:1-2).

Without such a hunger for God it will be difficult - if not almost impossible - for me to hear the voice of God, to get in touch with him or be reassured of his presence in my life. How great is this hunger and thirst for God in me now?

How Do I find God?

There was a young man who approached a hermit with this request: "Show me how I can find God." "How great is this desire of yours?" asked the saintly man. "More than anything in the world," came the reply. The hermit took the young man to the shore of a lake and they waded into the water until it was up to their necks. Then the holy man put his hand on the other's head and pushed him under water. The young man struggled desperately, but the hermit did not release him until he was about to drown. When they returned to the shore, the saint asked, "Son, when you were under water, what did you want more than anything in the world?" "Air," he replied without hesitation. "Well, then, when you want to find God as much as you just then wanted air, your eyes will be opened to the wonder of God.

"I am the bread of life," Jesus told them. "He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (Jn 6:35).

2. The help of the Holy Spirit

Without the Holy Spirit we can do nothing. A constant cry for enlightenment, strength and guidance should accompany every day of the retreat. Our helplessness without God's Spirit is indicated by these passages from Scripture:

And Yahweh said, "I am going to speak to you." As he said these words the spirit came into me and made me stand up, and I heard him speaking to me (Ezk 2:1).

I fell flat on my face downward on the ground. Then I heard a voice saying, "Mortal man, stand up, I want to talk to you. While the voice was speaking God's Spirit entered me and raised me to my feet and I heard his voice.

I saw a hand reaching out towards me, and it was holding a scroll. The hand unrolled the scroll...God said, "Mortal man, eat this scroll; then go and speak." I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said, "Eat this scroll that I give you; fill your stomach with it." I ate it and it tasted as sweet as honey (Ezk 2:9-3:3)

It is only when the Spirit enters the prophet that he can stand up, hear and understand what God wants to say to him. The Spirit's task is beautifully explained: *to raise us up, to enable us to hear and to understand the word of God.* In the last passage the prophet is commanded to eat the Word of God, only then is he to speak. In a retreat you are asked to fill yourself again with the Word of God so that you have something to say to others afterwards. There is no gift from God that is more desirable as the gift of the Spirit. In the words of the great protestant theologian J. Moltmann:

The gift and presence of the Holy Spirit is the greatest, most wonderful thing that can happen to us, to the human community, to all living beings and this earth of ours. For in the Holy Spirit we have the presence ... of God himself, the creative, vivifying, redeeming and sanctifying God. In the presence of the Holy Spirit we have the beginning and the end of history of sin and guilt, suffering

and death. In the presence of the Holy Spirit we have the beginning of that process whereby the creation is being perfected until it becomes the Kingdom of God.

3. Prayer

Personal prayer is our expression of our relationship with God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The last part of the sentence is the most important. Prayer is first the activity of the Spirit in us before we see it as our activity. As Paul sees it:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom 8:26-27).

A correct understanding of prayer comes only when we acknowledge the Spirit's role and then learn to respect it in practice. For Thomas Merton prayer is essentially the work of the Holy Spirit. We must get out of the way so that God can produce the effects he desires. In his words:

It can therefore be said that the aim of mental prayer is to awaken the Holy Spirit within us, and to bring our hearts into harmony with his voice, so that we allow the Holy Spirit to speak and pray within us, and lend him our voices and our affections that we may become, as far as possible, conscious of his prayer in our hearts.

In the seminary we had a famous professor who would tell us: "Always remember when you give a retreat, the only part of a retreat that remains, no matter how good the retreat-master might be, is the hours your retreatants have spent in prayer with the Lord. The rest they will most probably forget." According to the Gospel of Luke there is only one matter we should pray for: the Holy Spirit:

"And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"(Luke 11:9-13)

Jesus' mission was to release the Spirit; Pentecost is the fulfillment of this mission and not an appendix to Good Friday and Easter. All prayer to the Holy Spirit is grounded in asking for the coming of the Holy Spirit. To ask for the Holy Spirit is to ask for his all-embracing presence. The Holy Spirit is the unrestricted presence of God, a presence in which our life awakens, becoming utterly alive and endowed with the Spirit's energies.

St. Paul's wish and fervent prayer for his co-workers and communities concerns their growth in the experience of God's love for them and their love for each other. Since God's love became visible and tangible in the person of Jesus Christ, so for Paul the aim and goal of all Christian living is that *Christ may make his home in our hearts* so that we may come to understand the immensity of God's love for us poured out through the Holy Spirit. Also for him the ultimate gift of God for each one of us is the Holy Spirit, the love of God.

I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your heart, living within you as you trust him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love and may you be able to feel

and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep and high his love really is; and experience his love for yourselves .(Eph 3:17-19)

Let your roots grow down into him and draw nourishment from him. See that you go on growing in the Lord and become strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught.(Col 2:7)

The Spirit is the face of God turned towards us. When God turns his face towards his creatures they will live. God's radiant countenance is the source of the Spirit's outpouring, the source of God's life, love and blessing. When we pray "Let your face shine on us and be gracious to us." we ask for the vivifying presence of the Holy Spirit. God's face shining with joy is the radiant source of the Holy Spirit. His light floods through us and our faces become mirrors reflecting and disseminating this light. The experience of the Spirit is the "light shining in our hearts" (2 Cor 4:6). (J. Moltmann)

All the knowledge about our faith will not suffice if we don't have the master's spirit.

A young man was apprenticed to a master artist who produced the most beautiful stained glass windows anywhere. The apprentice could not approach the master's genius, so he borrowed his master's tools, thinking that was the answer. After several weeks, the young man said to his teacher, "I'm not doing any better with your tools than I did with mine." The teacher replied, "So, it's not the tools of the master you need; it's the spirit of the master you need."

There are things we do not know: we do not know how to make a successful retreat; neither does a retreat-master know how to give a retreat, because only the Spirit can touch the hearts of the participants. The retreat-master can bring God's Word to the ears of his listeners, but it is the Holy Spirit alone who can carry it from the ears into the heart. Only the Spirit can make it effective in the lives of the participants. Only when the Spirit speaks in us and is present in us can we really make a good retreat.

Questions for reflection:

- 1. Is there a real hunger for God in my life? Do I want to get in touch with God?***
- 2. Do I want the Lord to heal me from my blindness, lameness and paralysis knowing what consequences it would have in my life?***
- 3. What do I pray for most when thinking about myself and the people I really love? How much does praying for the Holy Spirit count in my Life?***