

My Yearly Retreat: Crossing a Bridge



I made my yearly retreat in Fairfax, Marin County at a villa the Jesuit Community has there. Across the Golden Gate Bridge where it was sunny, not foggy and in a nice setting, near redwood trees and where I saw each day at least one and often more deer on the property. The usual retreat for a Jesuit includes five-hour-long meditations or prayer times each day. I also tended to go for a nearby walk of about 45 minutes and on five of the eight days went to mass at Saint Anselm's in San Anselmo or on the last day (a Sunday) at Saint Rita's in Fairfax. My first two-and-a-half days there another Jesuit was also there on retreat and I said mass in the villa with him.

Like many retreats, some sessions of prayer were filled with good feelings and deep prayer and some were just dry. The important thing is to stay with it for an hour and do the best you can. On some days I had deep devotion and on others just a mediocre sense of God's presence and calling to me. On my retreats I usually follow for eight days a variant of Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises (which usually last a month). In my past, I have made four times the full 30-day Ignatian retreat. My last long retreat I did in Louisiana in 2017 when I was fifty years a priest. I also did one in Gloucester, Massachusetts when I was 50. I did my first one in Los Gatos when I was a novice and another one in 1976 at El Retiro. The format of the Spiritual Exercises consists of 4 different weeks. Week one is about sin (that of the angels, that of Adam and Eve and those of my own). We are asked, however, to consider a powerful colloquy prayer in which we look at Christ who died for my sins. Then, we are told to ask, what have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? and What ought I to do for Christ? In our own prayer we ask for sorrow and

forgiveness for our sins and for mercy. There is a suggestion that we pray to Mary, to Jesus and to the Father and also the Spirit for what we want from them. Usually, on an eight-day retreat, the first week is shorter than the other three.

In the second week or phase of the Exercises (usually longest of the so-called weeks), we are called to pray about the Call of Christ the King to us (as a reminder that what we would do for a King or Inspiring leader we should more even do for Christ, the most inspiring leader we will ever meet). Also, it reminds us of our own call to be a disciple by Jesus. Then, there are prayer periods on the incarnation (during which I tried to speak to Mary and the wonder of her response: "Be it done to me, according to your word"). I also tried to speak to and touch the womb of Mary as she carried Christ. Then, there is a meditation of the Nativity of Jesus. I followed both Luke and the shepherds and Matthew and the Magi and the flight into Egypt, Luke helps us see the nativity mainly through Mary and Matthew through Joseph. I imagined myself trying to hold the baby Jesus, aware of his being just a baby and at the same time my savior, Lord and Messiah. Then, there is a meditation on the Baptism of Jesus by John (where Jesus just joins others lined up to be baptized as they and we are). Jesus comes to it as a sinner but the Holy Spirit alights on him and God declares: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am pleased". I prayed to John the Baptist and Jesus and also to my own godparents and tried to renew my baptism vows. As the scripture scholar N.T. Wright notes: "Those of us who follow Jesus to his baptism by John will get a sense that God will also say to us: "This is my beloved in whom I am well pleased." I am often reminded of this on the many occasions I am called to do a baptism (and I will be baptizing two of my grandnephews in Napa on August 21).

I then meditated on Jesus' temptation in the desert. He too could be tempted as I and you often are. It is important to follow Jesus in not arguing about and/or with temptation as Israel did when it grumbled for bread, flirted disastrously with idolatry and put God to the test. Jesus succeeds where Israel (and we too, too often) failed. His path is humble service. Trust in God does not mean acting stupidly or forcing God into doing some spectacular service. Next, I did a meditation on the call of the disciples (Found in John, and also Mark, Matthew and Luke). John tells us of Jesus' call to Andrew, John and James, also Peter and Nathaniel. It is his call to us too: "Come and See". In the Synoptics, it takes the form of Jesus speaking to them on the boat and telling them to leave it (and their father) and to follow him as disciples. I know that I am also called to follow Jesus and be his disciple and I prayed that he help me find where and how best to follow him, especially as I grow older. (there is a theme about that last part that ran through my retreat). I followed the call meditations on reflecting of Jesus in Cana and his turning water into wine.

Next, I prayed over Mark 6: 45-56 where Jesus goes off to the mountain to pray and sends the disciples off in a boat. I tried to pray with Jesus as he prayed. Then, a great wind come up and Jesus walks on the water near them. They are fearful and scared. He says to them "It is I—Don't be afraid". Those words "Don't be afraid", so often said by Jesus to the disciples are also spoken to me and to any who encounter him. I also prayed the gospel about the Transfiguration and

about when James and John ask to be the favored disciples. Jesus reminds them that following him is about the cross and our getting called to be servants and so follow Jesus. It is also about poverty and selling all and giving it to the poor.

I then turned to the third week of the Exercises: the passion and death of Jesus. I did hour-long meditations on the Last Supper, the Agony in the Garden and arrest of Jesus. I also prayed about the Trial of Jesus before Pilate and his crucifixion and death. While the meditations of the third week can be hard because of the passion and death of Jesus, it also can be a time of consolation for us as we try to follow Jesus on the way of the cross. Finally, in the final week of the Exercises, I prayed about the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, to the disciples at Emmaus, and then a special two meditations of Ignatius during the Fourth week. In one he speaks of an appearance to Mary, his mother. While this is not in the scriptures, Ignatius assumes (as did a number of saints over many years) that he would have appeared to Mary. A final important meditation is focused on our trying to find God in all things.

Three other things also helped me on this retreat. One was a prayerful re-reading of James Martin's book, *Learning to Pray*, which, once again, gave me great consolation and help. I also read carefully two documents Ignatius wrote: His Autobiography and his Spiritual Diary. Both are filled with his many mystical gifts—gifts of tears and also having something he heard during mass like a heavenly chorus of song. I really got a stronger sense of Ignatius the mystic.

But the third thing was the most important single thing during this retreat. My Jesuit Rector, Tim Godfrey, told me at the beginning of the year that he thinks I must leave the parish and go retire in Los Gatos (the Jesuit place for retired Jesuits) this coming January and deal with my last years there. I will be just short of 85 next January and, often, Jesuits go to Los Gatos when they begin to get older and show some of their age. It is usually thought best to go to Los Gatos before one is so old that they are beginning to get dementia. The command saddened me and left me angry for a while but I did say often to superiors that I would be willing to go to Los Gatos when it is necessary (as often it is for Jesuits). During much of the retreat I prayed to God to be the Center of my Life and to help me by drawing me to face my sorrow at being told to go to Los Gatos (many of other Jesuits who are older than me continue to work at the jobs in their Jesuit community) and a number of my fellow Jesuits at Loyola House and parishioners feel I am not yet old enough and showing it to have to go this soon. But it is something that eventually would happen so I continually asked God to help deal with my sorrow in having to leave and my surprise and also help me to see what ministries (spiritual direction, helping in a parish in the San Jose area, continuing to write) might be offered to me. I have lived in San Francisco or Berkeley and Oakland for at least 60 of my 84 years and have many friends and family in the area. So, as I asked God in my retreat, I also ask the parishioners to pray for me as I have to leave my 13 years working in the parish. Pray hard since it is a difficult thing I am facing. Bless all of you. I have found working in Saint Ignatius parish a true blessing and spiritual help.