

RURAL WELLS IN A DRY LAND

How an Experience of the Spiritual Exercises Touches Lives in Rural Victoria

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IN RECENT YEARS AREAS OF AUSTRALIA have experienced severe and sustained periods of drought. Rural communities in Victoria, the state situated in the south-eastern corner of the country, have begun to fear that parched paddocks and water restrictions will become an enduring way of life. As people contend with such harsh conditions there has been an increasing interest in the directed retreats being offered locally throughout the diocese of Sandhurst, which is centred on the city of Shepparton. Such retreats are an opportunity for rural Victorians to quench their thirst at the well of praying with scripture.

I am usually given the opportunity to direct what I call the Retreat in Everyday Life¹ following a visit to a parish or a region in the diocese to conduct a prayer day or retreat day. On these occasions I introduce the parishioners to different ways of praying with scripture. An information brochure outlines the format of the retreat and what is expected of each retreatant: the retreat lasts for three weeks; parishioners meet individually with me five times over this period; they undertake to pray for about thirty minutes each day. If possible I will visit the parish and speak about the retreat at Sunday masses, explaining that the retreat is not just an opportunity, but an invitation, to encounter God differently in everyday life. Building on the prayer experience of parishioners, the retreat is an excellent chance to find God afresh in the ordinariness of their daily lives.

¹ In Australia retreats based on the Nineteenth Annotation of the *Spiritual Exercises* which last thirty weeks are commonly called the Retreat in Daily Life. I chose a name which did not confuse the retreats I offered with these.

Preparing the Retreatants

In the early days of offering these retreats I realised the need to prepare parishioners well for such a constant practice of daily prayer. This is why each prospective retreatant is asked to attend a preparation day held a week before the retreat begins. Parishioners have the opportunity to experience what are usually, for them, new ways of praying with scripture, for example *lectio divina*, Ignatian imaginative contemplation, and the prayer of consideration. They also learn about two tools which will play an important role in their individual direction sessions: the review of prayer and the Ignatian examen. I find it helpful to dispel any notion of the latter being a strict examination of conscience by referring to it as the 'prayerful reflection on the day'. The experience of this careful preparation encourages parishioners to believe that they can now look forward to the retreat, confident in their ability to undertake it. When the moment comes to begin the retreat I gather the retreatants together in order to remind them of what they learnt during the preparation day. I also find it important to encourage them to believe that it is God who has invited them to the retreat.

Who Are the Retreatants?

What sort of person is typically drawn to this new experience of prayer in their lives? Given the current state of parish life in Australia, most of these people come from the upper age-bracket of parishioners, with women far outnumbering men. Many are people who have practised vocal prayer, usually the rosary, or who have experienced the charismatic way of praying. Some have been members of parish scripture study-groups. Most take part in the Eucharist more than once or twice a week. They are people with a taste for God which draws them to want more. In some parishes the local priest or a religious will take the opportunity to make an annual retreat in this way. These priests and religious comment on how much they relish being able to pray with parishioners in the community of retreatants.

Desires

In the first week of the retreat I find it helpful to build on the retreatants' enthusiasm by encouraging them to be aware of what it is they want as they enter these days. In other words, I urge them to spend

time discovering their desires. Suggesting that they try to hear Jesus asking them ‘what are you looking for?’ (John 1:38) usually results in surprising discoveries. One parishioner came to our second direction session with tears welling up in her eyes as she told me, ‘but no one has ever asked me: what do I want?’ In that first week it was enough for her to keep hearing that question, over and over again, and to wonder why it was that Jesus was asking her this. During the same retreat another spoke of the difficulty she had in accepting that Jesus was asking her the question because she believed that she did not deserve to be asked. Both these experiences led to a new and surprising way of realising the reality of God’s love for them as individuals.

Others come to see how much they have been drawn to the retreat. A desire has been welling up in their hearts, of which they have not always been aware. In the words of one retreatant, ‘I want to welcome Jesus into this retreat’. Sometimes they become aware of a restless feeling, which gains focus once they realise that what they most desire is to know what God is asking of them at this time in their lives. Many have retired from years of paid employment but still want to contribute actively to the parish or to their local community. Encouraging them to dwell on what they are *noticing* (Exx 62)² becomes a key task in this first week of the retreat. This helps them to cope with the challenge of establishing a daily rhythm of choosing a passage, praying, doing the review of prayer, and looking back prayerfully over the day. Planning and keeping to this rhythm is, for most of them, something new.

Spiritual Conversation

Meeting with a spiritual director and speaking about their innermost reflections is also a new experience for most of the retreatants. During the preparation day I am careful to describe these encounters as easy, gentle, manageable conversations that focus on what has been happening when they pray each day. Usually it takes two or three sessions for them to feel at home talking to a stranger about such personal experiences. Since we will meet five times over the course of the retreat, twice in the first week, once in the second and third weeks and once at the end, there is time for them to settle comfortably into this manner of spiritual conversation.

² I am using the translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* by George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992).

Over and over again I have noticed a constant pattern in what arises in these sessions. Retreatants are amazed as they discover how simple it is to pray with the passages they have chosen from scripture, whether they use *lectio divina* or Ignatian imaginative contemplation or the prayer of consideration. 'As I pray with Psalm 139 I feel enveloped by the Holy Spirit. For me this is enough. I am satisfied with that.' I can still remember the delight on the face of an eighty-year-old woman as she told me her retreat discovery: 'I no longer need to say words'. The passages she had chosen for prayer enabled her to rest in God's presence in a way which was totally new to her.

Noticing

Gradually, as the days of the retreat unfold, retreatants begin to notice that their daily time of prayer is having a new impact on the rest of their day. Using Ignatius' examen prayer they develop a habit of looking back prayerfully over each day. One retired officer from the armed forces was amazed to discover that he had a sense of God breaking through into each day. He was no longer staring at a brick wall as he prayed. Another felt more calm as a result of his prayer—something that his wife had observed and pointed out to him. Even though she was not making the retreat herself, noticing this effect in her husband drew her into the retreat experience of the household. Others become aware of being energized, of growing in a new-found trust in God and of recognising the needs of others more clearly.

Although surrounded by signs of the continuing drought, gradually the retreatants begin to notice a different weather-pattern in their times of prayer. Rain clouds from God are dropping showers of grace. Like myself, many of the retreatants grew up in a parish environment where there was little opportunity to encounter God in a relationship of one friend to another (Exx 54). Typically, God seemed distant or like a severe parent or teacher. Usually the first surprise of the retreat, particularly after praying with passages such as Psalm 139, Isaiah 43:1–7, 1 Kings 19:11–13 or Revelation 3:20, is the discovery of how much God looks upon the retreatants with eyes of loving acceptance. The sense of a God who wants to enter the home of their hearts and sit with them is deeply refreshing. For some it is enough in the first week of the retreat simply to keep gazing at this new face of God.



Second Week

Once we come to the second week of the retreat I gently inquire of the retreatants whether they have found themselves drawn to stay with a particular passage for more than one day. Even though those making the retreat have never been taught what Ignatius writes about repetition (Exx 62), I am constantly amazed at the way many discover for themselves the idea of staying with a passage until they sense that it is time to move on. When this happens, I usually explain Ignatius' notion of repetition in the following way. As I look at an object in the distance, for example a tree, my eye catches something which pulls me in that direction. I might need to use a pair of binoculars to see what it is: a bird's nest high in the tree's branches. Then I spend time just looking at the nest. This description typically helps retreatants to dwell on whatever has caught their attention while praying without hurrying forward.

As we continue talking about such an explanation, retreatants come to realise that what catches their attention in prayer can either be an experience of sunshine or of a dark cloud. Dwelling on these experiences in prayer helps them to become more aware of the spiritual experience God is giving them. The daily fidelity to the prayer of the retreat enables them to let go and be led by God. Often they are quite unaware of this until we talk about what has happened during a time of

direction. Again, such discoveries confirm for me the value of giving parishioners the opportunity of undertaking a *directed* retreat.

Spiritual Desolation

The retreat journey is not always smooth, and sometimes the drought conditions that they see around them enter the prayer of individuals. Barren moments in the daily prayer, that restless itchiness which urges one to cut short a time of prayer, the sense of busyness which whispers that it will not matter if today's prayer is skipped, are typical experiences which surface in the second week. Again without any prior knowledge of how much the wiles of the evil spirit are at work in this special time of prayer, the retreatants realise that something is amiss, but lack the ability to interpret such experiences. I find that a simple, clear exposition of Ignatius' rules for the discernment of spirits in the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises* is helpful and reassuring to them. Whenever retreatants face these puzzling occurrences, it is as if a shower of rain comes upon them; they are able to focus once more on God and move forward.

Final Week

By the time the retreatants reach the final week of the retreat they have settled into a manageable rhythm of choosing a passage, daily prayer, reviewing their prayer, reflecting on the day. The value of taking time to show them how to review their prayer and look back over each day prayerfully has also become apparent. During the times of spiritual direction I become aware of how much that characteristic Ignatian word 'noticing' becomes more and more a part of our conversation. The retreatants progressively grow in their awareness of God visiting them in their daily prayer. They are surprised and amazed at this. Their conversations begin to fill with a sense of deep gratitude. For me, it is always a privilege to witness this shower of grace so freely given yet so rarely anticipated.

Communal Reflection

The retreat concludes with another gathering of all the retreatants. We begin with the Eucharist, in order to acknowledge and celebrate the many graces showered upon us by God, and then spend time reflecting on the retreat before sitting down to dinner. One of the blessed moments of that

evening is when the retreatants address the following questions: what has praying with scripture meant for you? What was the most consoling experience for you? What was the most difficult time for you?

As the answers well up from the group I quickly write them on a whiteboard. When there are no more answers I stand back from the whiteboard and exclaim with delight, 'Behold the graces of the retreat!' We then pause and gaze at the board, which is now covered with answers to the reflection questions. It is a wonderful moment when we can soak up some of the experiences of the retreat, a chance to notice how much the group has been drenched with the graces of God.

The answers to the first reflection question highlight the way in which praying with scripture has become such a manageable activity. It seems that the structured nature of the retreat helps this process to occur. Whether people make the retreat at home or at their place of work, it is clear that working within its structure over a three-week period keeps them committed to the exercise. Retreatants find that praying with a scripture passage draws them into an experience of God that they repeatedly describe as being affirming, real, marked by trust and enjoyable. Many express amazement that they have been able to manage all that was expected of them over the three weeks of the retreat.

When they focus on the most consoling experience of the retreat, retreatants repeatedly mention the way God looks upon them. They wonder at God's acceptance of them, at the fact that they matter as individuals to God and are treasured by God. Realising that they have been able to develop a relationship with God that was previously unknown to them is another typical consolation felt by retreatants. They also often mention a sense that something over which they had no control was happening during the weeks of the retreat. They discover how much they were being *led* in a way of praying prompted by God.

When we focus on the difficulties experienced during the retreat, most begin with their attempts at getting started and making the time for prayer each day. It is not easy for many of them to be stretched out of their comfort zone. Some find it difficult to accept that their expectations of the retreat may not be the ones which God has for them. Others mention their struggle with the temptation to intellectualise scripture, grappling with the passage as if it were a text for study rather than sitting and allowing God's words to wash over them. Some find the level of honesty to which their prayer calls them a struggle from which they are tempted to

pull back. Others find themselves dredging up areas of their life which they had hidden from themselves. Sometimes the difficulty involves coming face to face with painful moments on which they are reluctant to dwell. One retreatant named a struggle which rather delighted me: 'having to leave my early morning prayer to go to work'.

Discoveries

What are the discoveries I have made while offering these retreats to an increasing number of parishes in the Sandhurst diocese? Two stand out more than any others. The first relates to the signs of drought I see everywhere as I move around the diocese. The chance to undertake a directed retreat in this form offers parched and weary parishioners a spiritual soaking. The retreat experience mirrors what they see around them—the patches of green beneath the windmills which dot the landscape of dry paddocks. It meets a keenly felt need in the lives of these people. Because of their rural environment they constitute a disadvantaged section of the population in the state of Victoria. Constraints of distance and cost mean that they are usually unable to benefit from the opportunities offered by the retreat houses of Melbourne. Giving the Retreat in Everyday Life in the way I do means that the retreat house comes to them.



The second discovery arises from the comments that retreatants make on the evaluation sheets they are invited to complete when the retreat ends. The majority of the retreatants have never experienced any form of spiritual direction before in their lives. As they look back over the five occasions of spiritual conversation during the retreat they express deep gratitude for the opportunity to speak about their experiences in prayer. These conversations help them to notice for themselves what is happening within them. They value the fact that they have been listened to in such a non-judgmental fashion and that their experiences have been taken so seriously. Having been able to express themselves in this way to a spiritual director, they leave the retreat feeling heard, affirmed and encouraged in their capacity to encounter God deeply in the context of their everyday lives.

Hearing the reflections of retreatants on the final night of the retreat and reading the evaluation sheets are also affirming moments for me as a spiritual director. Over and over I am made aware of how much the retreatants appreciate the opportunity to experience spiritual direction. They come to enjoy being gently encouraged to listen to their experiences and to notice what is happening to them. Gradually they find that they 'feel comfortable' and are able to express their thoughts and feelings so freely to another in a spiritual conversation marked by 'empathy and encouragement'. One retreatant described the experience of spiritual direction as 'like having a personal trainer'. Constantly I notice with amazement the way these *novice* retreatants put their trust so fully in the experience of being directed (Exx 17). It is such a privilege to watch God's drenching grace come upon them.

Follow-up

The parishioners who undertake this form of the Spiritual Exercises leave the experience feeling satisfied, having been awakened to new ways of meeting God in their everyday lives. For many this is enough for the moment. Others leave the retreat desiring more. They want to continue the pattern of their daily prayer with scripture, but realise that they will need a framework to help them remain faithful to living out this desire. Suggesting that they choose a passage for prayer from the daily readings of the liturgical year certainly helps them in this endeavour. Given that many have access to the internet, referring them

to the prayer resources of such sites as Sacred Space and Creighton University's Online Ministries Home Page³ has also proved beneficial.

Some parishioners find it helpful that I periodically revisit the parishes where I have given retreats. One parishioner calls such visits the opportunity for a *top-up*. A supporter of my ministry who is a clinical psychologist recently suggested that I use the title *relapse prevention* to describe these efforts. I liken my top-up visits to those occasional bands of rain which pass over our parched countryside. Usually these gatherings provide the opportunity to offer a guided experience of prayer, followed by reminders of how to remain faithful to the review of prayer. After several such visits, parishioners become more and more at ease in sharing what they have noticed in this review with the rest of the group. Sometimes there may be questions or comments about their experience of prayer during the past months. The atmosphere of ease which marks these conversations in the group seems to be a natural consequence of the experience of opening up to another person in the sessions of individual direction during the retreat. These occasions always conclude with a guided experience of the Ignatian examen followed by supper.

Occasionally some retreatants want something more, beyond participating in these top-up gatherings. Having relished the experience of spiritual direction during the retreat, they want to continue the opportunity for spiritual conversation. About every three months I return to the parishes of such retreatants in order to offer them ongoing spiritual direction. Once again I am amazed as I listen to them speak of the joys and struggles of remaining faithful to their daily prayer with scripture. The experience of such spiritual direction reminds them of their earlier desires and encourages them when the evil spirit brings them doubt, or lack of confidence in their ability to pray and reflect, or even a bout of laziness. As these parishioners continue to sit with the question 'What is it, God, that you want of me?', it is my hope that one day some of them might be ready to take on the role of leading others to discover how to pray in everyday life.

As I undertake these follow-up sessions I realise the need for a more structured approach to this aspect of my ministry in this diocese. *Relapse prevention* does describe the experience of some retreatants in the months after the retreat. Without the continuing support which my

³ See www.sacredspace.ie and www.onlineministries.creighton.edu.

top-up visits provide, retreatants can easily allow the rich discoveries of the retreat experience to fade. The development of this follow-up project is still a work in progress.

The Adaptability of the Spiritual Exercises

Although I have focused here on offering the Retreat in Everyday Life to parishioners in one area of rural Australia, the approach I have adopted is not specific to this area. I have also given parishioners in New Zealand the opportunity to experience this form of the Spiritual Exercises, under quite different environmental conditions. The continuing situation of harsh drought conditions is a foreign one in a land blessed with so much rain, but the thirst for a daily rhythm of scripture-based prayer is just as strong in rural New Zealand. A spiritual ministry based on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius is not limited by a particular climate, geographic environment, history or culture.

My ministry has been blessed in the two countries where I work. Twenty years ago I was given a copy of John Veltri's booklet on how to offer directed retreats to parishes.⁴ I never fail to thank God for putting that booklet in my hands and allowing the seed planted to flourish in a dry land.

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⁴ John Veltri, *'Directed Retreat' Goes to Parish* (Guelph: Loyola House, 1984). His writings are familiar to many Australians. John died in 2008.