

TOPPING UP THE WELLS

A Return to Rural Victoria

Richard Shortall

IN 2009, I DESCRIBED how an experience of making the Retreat in Everyday Life touched the lives of parishioners living in the rural Australian diocese of Sandhurst, in Victoria.¹ Since that time I have been noticing and reflecting on what has happened to these people as I move around the diocese working on a form of follow-up to their experience of a directed retreat. Just as the long period of drought in this part of Victoria eventually broke two years ago with the coming of steady rain, so making the Retreat in Everyday Life has given these rural people a fresh way of encountering God in the ordinariness of their daily lives.

I would like to describe this follow-up to the retreat experience here, which I have put in place to help the retreatants remain faithful to the ways they learnt to encounter God during the retreat. I have used the phrase ‘relapse prevention’² to talk about my endeavours to help these people remain faithful to the desires that emerged at the end of the retreat.

But before I do this, it is helpful to recall the pattern of discoveries made by retreatants during the Retreat in Everyday Life—what I regard as the graces that they have taken away from the retreat. These are: experiencing God as approachable; feeling that something is happening to them in the retreat; enjoyment; finding value in reviewing their prayer periods; the desire to continue praying with scripture; and a thirst for continuing the direction conversation.

Experiencing God as Approachable

During the preparation day, which takes place a week before the retreat begins, I show participants the difference between ‘saying prayers’ and

¹ See ‘Rural Wells in a Dry Land: How an Experience of the Spiritual Exercises Touches Lives in Rural Australia’, *The Way*, 48/3 (July 2009), 91–101.

² Dr Helen Conaglen from Cambridge, New Zealand, suggested this phrase for the work of retreat follow-up.

‘praying’ with a passage from scripture using *lectio divina* and Ignatian Imaginative Contemplation. Discovering this difference for themselves in their prayer—‘I no longer need to recite prayers’—is usually one of the first significant discoveries that they make during the retreat. It is often a new experience for them to realise that they can pray without using words, since throughout their lives they may have been familiar only with vocal prayer. Once retreatants begin to make this wordless connection with God, they experience God as being much more approachable than before. Let me offer just a brief selection of comments:

The healing by Jesus of those who were deaf or blind reminded me of my own daughter who was born without hearing or sight, and I found myself wondering what it would be like for her suddenly to be able to hear and see.

As I sat with Jesus at the Samaritan well I felt loved and not judged by Jesus.

Not feeling judged was powerfully related to this second retreatant’s experience of her own addiction to alcohol and her husband leaving their marriage. Picturing a gospel scene in the manner suggested by Ignatius gives retreatants another new experience of connecting with God in their prayer. I keep hearing them say, ‘I was able to immerse myself in the scene’, and suddenly they discover how approachable God is for them.

Something Is Happening to Me in the Retreat

As they move into the second week of the retreat, some participants notice little changes in their daily lives.

I feel much happier and I do not swear as much.

Already the retreat has made a difference. I’m calmer. I have made some decisions regarding my family and how I will take on more commitments in my retirement.

The retreat is having an impact on my daily life as a farmer—I am becoming amazed at God’s goodness.

For others, the experience of feeling reassured by God in their prayer touches them deeply as they realise that they are now entering the final years of their lives. Some are utterly amazed when they notice how much God is actively a part of their everyday life. Being able to use their

imagination to connect with gospel scenes gives them a new aspect to their lifelong picture of Jesus

I have never before thought of the Risen Jesus appearing to his mother.

Some retreatants sense that God is confirming them in the examples of mission in their lives—

My prayer is sending me to teach religious education in the local government school.

I find that my prayer is strengthening my courage and ability to work in the St Vincent de Paul shop.

Enjoyment

One of the privileges for me as a spiritual director offering the Retreat in Everyday Life is hearing from retreatants the constant refrain concerning their enjoyment of this first-time experience.

I am enjoying the way positive memories have been evoked and stirred up in prayer.

I enjoy noticing the care of Mary and Joseph for others and for each other.

I am enjoying this new way of praying with scripture [Ignatian Imaginative Contemplation] which led me to stay with the visitation scene for some days.

... and from two senior parishioners:

I thoroughly enjoyed the retreat, despite my forgetfulness, and I am so pleased that I changed my mind and decided to take part.

I have enjoyed these peaceful weeks with God which have helped prepare me for death.

Such typical comments are to be savoured!

The Value of Reviewing the Prayer Periods

Usually I notice that there is a range of reactions from retreatants to this critical retreat tool. Some do not want to make the effort to review their prayer, are not interested, cannot grasp its importance for them, or realise that it might involve becoming too close to God for comfort:

I do not want to get too close to God because I do not know what might then happen.

Others are unable to see without help what is happening in their prayer. When I ask them what has been going on, they will initially tell me that nothing much seems to be happening, but after careful inquiry and encouragement they quickly realise that the opposite is true:

I am grateful for the life I've had.

A few, however, are able to experience a clear sense of being led from one day's prayer to the next.

I notice a reassuring sense of God at this time in my life [aged in her eighties] which helps me to understand my life more clearly.

Where am I being led at this moment in my life?

Without any knowledge of Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, some are even able to recognise the presence of the evil spirit in their prayer.

The Desire to Continue Praying with Scripture

By the end of the retreat, participants begin to acknowledge a desire or a need for a daily time of prayer.

I have discovered the importance of the daily Reflection on the Day in the way it has helped me realise the need for daily prayer, despite my health issues.

Many speak of the desire to continue praying with passages from scripture or to spend time prayerfully reading them, perhaps making the effort to follow the daily cycle of readings used in the Eucharist. Others realise how much the retreat has given them a framework or a discipline to help them pray each day.

I will miss the retreat rhythm now that it is over.

A Thirst for Continuing the Direction Conversation

When asked how they found the experience of speaking about their prayer to another person, all retreatants acknowledged how much they came to value this new experience. Feeling that they were accepted, understood, made to feel at ease, helped them to engage in these conversations with confidence and trust.

You listened with great understanding to my reflections, even when I sometimes found it difficult to express my thoughts.

It has been easy to talk to you.

I felt comfortable, not frightened.

As the retreat draws to a close, I might suggest that a participant consider the possibility of continuing these conversations through ongoing spiritual direction. While it is not physically possible for me to offer this to all of them, at least some take up the opportunity whenever I make my follow-up visits to the parish.

Observations on the Retreat Experience

At the end of each retreat it is clear that the experience of disciplined daily prayer over several weeks has made a significant impact on each participant. The question on my mind as I drive away from each parish at the end of the retreat is this: what will happen next? Will at least some of the participants continue to pray regularly with scripture in the ways practised during the retreat? Such curiosity has drawn me back to the parishes to discover the answers to these questions.

What Has Happened since the Retreat?

Within a few months of offering the Retreat in Everyday Life I return to the parish and invite participants to an evening gathering. I have found that a simple format works best on these occasions. I begin with a guided



experience of silence lasting no more than ten minutes, often using the exercise of focusing on the sounds around us. I then invite them to respond to three questions and I write their answers on a whiteboard. These are the questions with a selection of typical answers given to them:

What were your desires at the end of the Retreat in Everyday Life?

- to keep up the retreat momentum and do this for myself;
- to continue spending such time in prayer;
- to walk more closely with the Lord by means of a more prayerful life;
- to feel a closer connection with God;
- to be at peace with others through this way of praying.

What has happened to these desires since then?

- my desires have increased;
- my prayer is now more spontaneous;
- other things have taken over my life, but the Lord is always there;
- I have found it too difficult to maintain a regular pattern of prayer;
- I have struggled and fallen away from regular times of prayer.

What do you desire now?

- to keep growing in my relationship with God;
- to have more quiet times in daily life chatting with the Lord;
- to get started again praying with scripture;
- to deal with the experience of relapse;
- to have the opportunity to gather like this on a regular basis.

At these gatherings *my* desire is that the answers given by some of those present will indicate the need for an ongoing group experience which will help to nurture their current efforts at daily prayer with scripture. I am also alert to any indication of a relapse having taken place in their post-retreat intentions. I find that some parishioners fall into the first category. Most, however, freely admit that they have lapsed into their pre-retreat pattern of only occasional personal prayer. Once I sense a clear desire among them to take the next step in their prayer journey, I explain what I can offer them by way of *relapse prevention*.

How I Deal with Relapse

Over the five years that I have been helping parishioners deal with their experiences of relapse in its various forms, I have followed a simple approach which has worked effectively. Whenever a group of retreatants expresses the desire for this follow-up, I explain that I will try to return every three months for a gathering in the evening. The aim is that we meet for one hour and conclude with supper. We begin with five to ten minutes of silence to help quieten everyone after the busyness of the day. I then offer a brief input on one particular way of praying with scripture, followed by a guided experience of that way. I remind them of the importance of reviewing a time of prayer and offer a few questions, familiar to them from the retreat, to help them do this in common. We then have time for questions and comments on the evening's work, before concluding with a guided experience of the Prayerful Reflection on the Day.

The brief input that I offer each evening is more often a reminder of a way of praying taught during the preparation day for making the original retreat than something completely new. On any given visit I might focus on *lectio divina*, or Ignatian Imaginative Contemplation, or the Prayer of Consideration. I have begun to introduce parishioners to the way of praying with a painting that I discovered while working as a visiting retreat director at the St Beuno's Ignatian Spirituality Centre. Whatever the input chosen or requested by the particular parish group, I have found that the simple, consistent shape that has evolved for these evenings proves effective in preventing any relapse by retreatants away from their ongoing commitment to praying regularly with scripture.

Since 2007, about half the parishes where I have offered the Retreat in Everyday Life have taken up this form of follow-up. My usual pattern is to visit each of these parishes once every three months. In one parish the group of retreatants has been faithful to these gatherings for five years. In making these return visits to parishes, I have noticed how faithful those who come along are to these evenings. This suggests to me that what is being offered meets a need in a very effective way. Also, I have been struck by the quality of the personal review of prayer which is shared within the group—manifesting a growing level of trust in one another.

As I move around this far-reaching diocese, I find that the lack of spiritual resources in the way of readily accessible prayer teachers, retreat guides and spiritual directors highlights the need for such return visits

to parishioners who have made the Retreat in Everyday Life. Without access to these simply run evenings, the natural tendency is for retreatants to find themselves becoming adrift from their post-retreat desires. Those who commit themselves to attending these follow-up gatherings regularly find themselves encouraged in their attempts at daily prayer with scripture. A few take up the opportunity for individual spiritual direction and find that their faith lives are greatly enriched by a regular commitment to these conversations. Both the group and the individual experiences have helped to prevent spiritual relapse.

In 2005, when the late Bishop Joseph Grech asked me to show the parishioners in his diocese different ways of praying with scripture, I discovered many dry wells eager to be filled. The Retreat in Everyday Life has proved to be an effective way of bringing water to these wells. And the subsequent ongoing commitment to simple follow-ups has helped to maintain the water level.

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