

PARISH DIRECTED RETREAT REFLECTIONS

'Non Multa Sed Multum'

By NATALIE T. GANLEY

MOST OF THE THIRTY-FIVE PEOPLE in the circle of folding chairs in the school cafeteria have never heard of the Fifth Annotation. But the courage and generosity that are the primary disposition for the Spiritual Exercises are increasingly evident as introductions proceed. 'I am at a crossroads in my life and I just realized I wanted God to be more a part of my decision', says one person. 'I've always used vocal prayer but now I feel drawn to pray with scripture', the next person adds. 'I can't go away, so my family offered to help me make this retreat in the middle of my work week', says another. Finally, one woman says, 'My husband has just been diagnosed with a brain tumour and I need to find God in this'.

The retreat

Four years ago the parish's first lay spiritual director brought back from a workshop at Loyola House in Guelph, Ontario, Jesuit John Veltri's manual, *Directed retreat goes to parish*. Fr Veltri had designed the retreat in part as a training ground for interns. Our director saw the retreat not only as a way to offer parishioners another kind of retreat that did not involve going away, but also as a way to familiarize people both with the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises and with one-on-one spiritual direction. She assembled four Jesuits including the pastor, two associate pastors, and the director of a spirituality centre on-site, plus another lay woman director who was a fellow parishioner. Since that first December week over three hundred people have made twelve of these retreats. The team has now expanded to seven, a Phase II has been added in response to the request for follow-up, and the team has taken the retreat on the road to two other churches in the area.

What is perhaps most unique about this particular project is that the retreat takes place on-site in the parish and all but one of the lay directors are long-time members of the parish. Four of the seven directors are lay women who are engaged in other jobs and ministries. The retreatants watch the lay directors making the same adjustments in

their schedules as the people they are seeing, whether it be squeezing a retreatant in on the lunch hour or coping with parking problems. As one retreatant put it, 'I saw how busy my director was with her own job, her own four children, and I said to myself, "If she can do all that and pray every day, surely I have time to do the same"'.

After four years, a number of observations have surfaced. We have been astounded that well over half of those people who sign up have not been previously involved in parish activities. These men and women, ranging from their early twenties to mid-eighties, may well be the most diverse group of any that gathers in the parish. One thirty-eight-year-old single father said,

I came for something I had been looking for for a long time and had not found anywhere else. The week delivered exactly what the bulletin promised: meditation, discernment, a first-hand encounter with the scripture and the opportunity to talk with someone of faith who was trained in discernment. I had known Jesuits in school, talked informally about prayer with them. But life changes and the opportunity for regular contact with another person of faith just doesn't happen when we get involved in families and jobs.

He made the Nineteenth Annotation retreat the following year.

We have also observed how many people had not previously prayed with scripture. They may have used it for a lot of purposes, but praying with it was new to most of them. The usual pitfalls are there: trying to cover too much or analysing the passage rather than letting it touch one's heart, but for the most part discovering the power of scripture is among the graces most frequently mentioned in the evaluations.

For the director, this awakening to scripture raises some of the same anxieties that occur in giving the full Exercises. Do we keep the retreatant for a week with one reading, for example, from the Sunday meditation, if it is working? Are we depriving him or her of the exposure to the rich progression of the week's graces if he or she stays there? Should we ever abandon the scripture entirely? Do we assign passages that have portions that might be distracting? How careful should we be with translations? One director used the RSV, for example, for Psalm 46. 'The retreatant stayed with "Be still and know that I am God" all week', the director recalls. 'But I'm sure he wouldn't have if he had read it in another translation.' We continue to mull over these scripture issues with each other, both at our meetings and informally. For now we have concluded that while the choice of readings is certainly wide open, this is a scripture-based retreat. Furthermore, the Ignatian dynamic of moving

from God's love for us, through our sense of creaturehood and our need for forgiveness, into what it means to serve is a progression that we want to keep at least on the horizon.

The retreatants seem always surprised at how their lives and their prayer are intertwined during the week. One young mother spent an afternoon with her children in the middle of the week on a taxing hike up a jagged trail in a nearby park and found the climb to be the parable for her prayer for the entire week. Another said she had signed up for the retreat because she had such a horrendous problem at home with one of her teenagers that she could not dare leave for a weekend retreat. By the end of the retreat, she said, the problem had begun to settle, partly because of her own changed attitude out of the prayer of the week.

As directors, we have been increasingly amazed at what an intense experience the retreat is for many people, particularly considering its brevity—an opening, a closing, only two-and-one-half hours of formal prayer over a week's time and only five half-hour meetings with a director. Perhaps its compressed time frame is not unrelated to this intensity. One of the Jesuits from our sister parish observes,

It is indeed labour-intensive. And, yes, you would of course 'reach' more people with parish missions and weekend retreats which are indeed effective. But I would say the difference is between breadth and depth. This is a much more profound experience than a weekend retreat. Doing it for a number of days successively really affects the person and can begin a profound and long-lasting conversion.

As one woman said,

Before the retreat I was kind of dead. I didn't miss Mass. I was a law-abiding Catholic, but this week pushed me into an awareness that there was something else. I had been to the charismatic movement, to prayer meetings, but this being alone in a room with a passage from scripture brought me in touch with a grudge I had. To revisit it was to let it go. I saw that I had done some things, so who am I to judge. Then it all fell away. Just conversation with the director wouldn't have done it. I have never stopped [praying for a period each day] since.

Anger is often an issue during the retreat. Some people cannot pray because they are angry with God. Through the week they deal with that anger and come to a new appreciation that God loves them personally and unconditionally. God becomes other than maker and judge and they discover that they are much freer than they thought.

Sometimes, when the anger or hurt is of too long duration, we might only be able to guide the retreatant towards an awareness of a need for

therapy. Very occasionally, a seriously troubled person appears and it is here that our team meetings with each other provide us with enormous support so that we can be companions to the person in his or her pain for the time remaining. And, of course, we pray for retreatants individually and with the other team members.

The intensity of the experience has caused us to ask if the retreat gives rise to more than can be handled in five days. One director has asked if it is too intense for interns (that is, trainee retreat-givers). Our conclusion was that it was not. Twice we have used interns and felt the daily supervision by another team member enabled them to handle tough situations. Similarly, being able to tap the diverse skills of the other directors through the week can be a comforting resource once the intern phase is over.

Preparation and follow-up

The obvious response to the retreat experience, of course, has been 'How can I keep this going?' In our Saturday closing we address this issue by discussing use of the daily or Sunday readings for continued scriptural prayer; keeping the connection between life and prayer through the awareness exercise; and reading signs that one might be being drawn at least occasionally to availing oneself of spiritual direction.

A logical follow-up that a number of retreatants recognize immediately is the full Exercises. In the first year of the retreat, nine of the fifty-four retreatants went on for the full Exercises and the percentages have stayed steady. As one of the directors points out,

The best thing about this retreat is how it makes the dynamic of the Exercises so accessible. With minimal inconvenience, in a half hour a day at home, a person gets something they can't get anywhere else, an experience that is different from reading about it, being preached to about it or watching another person do it. And once you have this experience yourself, you are hooked and very likely on your way to doing the full Exercises because you have had a taste of them.

While direct preparation for the retreat is minimal, the particular context of the parish is certainly a factor. Ours is a large magnet parish of eight thousand in the city with a long history of Sunday morning and evening adult education. Some portion of each year is usually devoted to topics relating to Ignatian spirituality. Weekend retreats number at least a half dozen and days of recollection are frequent, though all but a few are targeted to certain groups in the parish such as catechist, young adults or liturgical ministers.

The pastor points out,

Also, as a Jesuit parish we have an articulated spirituality of the Incarnation and the value of the human project, as opposed to spirituality as an escapist experience. So there is a subtle grounding, a certain air being breathed that makes a retreat in daily life seem most appropriate. Certainly since these retreats started we have more people than ever before asking for the Spiritual Exercises.

We have considered a Phase III and wondered if it might take the form of an eight-day retreat spread over eight weeks, perhaps during Lent. The logistics, along with questions about undertaking the project as a team or as individual directors, continue to challenge our imaginations.

The team

Certainly the most unexpected grace of the enterprise has been the team itself. Currently, we are seven: three Jesuits, including the pastor, a priest on staff and one Jesuit in residence, Fr Jerry Campbell, who founded the Jesuit Center for Spirituality on the site in 1983. The Center's purpose, according to Fr Campbell, is 'to offer the Exercises in the 19th Annotation format to lay people in the area and to train some of these people to give the Exercises'. Three of the four women directors had made the full Exercises with Fr Campbell before their training and all four later trained with him to give the Exercises to others. This shared formation has created a common ground that helps make working together easy and enjoyable. While Fr Campbell's leadership is indisputable, his self-effacing style actually fosters rather than limits the spirit of collaboration in the group. He comments,

The fact that the team has a single focus is significant. On the parish staff, for example, everyone is doing different projects and this makes it very difficult to collaborate. Here the focus is one common ministry. It's similar to what we had in the novitiate [the pastor came to the parish after being novice master], but there we missed the women.

Another of the Jesuits adds,

When we Jesuits are just to ourselves, we presume too much and don't communicate enough with each other. Having the women is a challenge to us and it works really well. But the really significant thing about this team is the joint stewardship of the project by the Jesuits and the lay women on the team. Unlike so many other enterprises, this is not a Jesuit project that the women are helping with. The women on this team claim ownership of it equally with us and this makes all the difference.

The women tend to agree that the team is a laboratory of collaborative ministry. One of the lay women who formerly directed the adult education in the parish says,

The collegueship here is different because it is real. In a parish staff situation you talk about collegueship but everyone knows it is in fact consultative and that the pastor does have the authority, the last word. This is not so here. I felt uncomfortable in the infant stages when I was the only lay woman with four Jesuits, but when the numbers evened out a bit, I have felt the collegiality as real. As we have continued to do the retreat together, our mutual respect has deepened and that is due in large part to perseverance. We have all hung in together and that gives us a kind of strength.

For this woman the turning point in the ownership came one evening when three representatives from another diocese came for dinner to inquire about the programme.

Around the dining room table at the parish center we experienced ourselves as others are seeing us. As we listened to each other articulate our experiences of the retreat and what it was to work together we recognized that we indeed had an identity as a team.

Working as a team has been more time-consuming than we thought. Quite simply put, the enterprise is not time efficient. Preparation meetings, evaluation meetings, team meetings twice a week during the retreat, and once-a-year planning days, in addition to the actual work of giving the retreats, eat up time and seem sometimes impossible to schedule with team members in such different professions. Even though all the directors have other work, the group also manages once or twice a year to schedule a discussion meeting to exchange thoughts and experiences of some aspect of the Spiritual Exercises. It may be because we are all involved in other work and not interacting with each other on a continual basis, that our coming together for the retreat, even for the meetings, is most often lively and refreshing.

We have asked, what does it mean to be a team? Last year we felt some undercurrents that suggested some of us had been operating out of different expectations as regards that question. At our annual all-day session we spelled out our priorities and came to a consensus of what was expected, what was desirable and what was optional. This delineation of priorities not only cleared the air, but was essential to have in hand when we invited another director to join the team.

Communal discernment

Certainly the most dramatic bonding of all for the team happened when the group decided to enter a communal discernment on the question of whether we should take the retreat beyond the parish. A day and an evening was reserved at a nearby retreat house and Fr Campbell agreed to lead the discernment. Prior to the day the team met to define (and redefine) the question, we prayed individually over the question, as well as studying and praying over the *Deliberation of the first fathers* (St Ignatius and his first companions). One of the women recalls,

We were astounded. We each had gone into it knowing we were in some very different places in regard to the question. Then, through the working of the Spirit, we came out in the same place. Praying over the advantages and disadvantages together in that room with the newsprint pasted all over the walls was unforgettable. I saw that you really have to be willing to let go of your stuff and trust the Spirit.

From this day forward (said another of the women) I had a sense of being bonded with the Society, even more so than through what we had previously done with the Exercises. This discernment technique was uniquely Jesuit. We entered into it with Jesuits and saw that it validated what we knew but never had tested.

After going through the process we saw much more clearly the difference between decision-making and discernment. We realized that true communal discernment is for major turns in the road and we came to a new appreciation of how our own commitment to regular prayer is a necessary grounding for any communal discernment. And we were amused that the Jesuits, who we had presumed had much more experience at this, seemed just as surprised as we were that it worked so well.

Outreach

Soon afterward we prepared a brochure and circulated it to a few churches who had inquired informally about our coming to give the retreat at their parish. We quickly discovered that informal asking is far from a formal request. During the next few months our outreach took the form of waiting. Occasionally we even wondered about the wisdom of our summer discernment. Then one of the women directors contacted a pastor she knew in a suburban parish that matched our own in size and activity.

The retreat was cancelled once because of space problems in the parish and was then reset for the following September. Five of the seven

directors made the twenty-mile trip daily, each separately so that most of the day was covered. The experience was a great success. Among the participants was a woman in her eighties who said she had prayed her whole life, but this was the first time she felt she was in conversation with her Lord.

The week shed light on our parish programme as well as on future retreats we might do outside the parish. While we found a deep level of spirituality in the group, and a parish where lay people were truly empowered, we found ourselves choking a bit on our Ignatian vocabulary. We had to keep alert to the fact that many of these people, unlike our own parishioners, had no grounding in Ignatian spirituality or in the Jesuit tradition. We also learned that we could assume nothing—for example, the Saturday morning closing time that was so right for our parishioners was a most inconvenient time for these people who lived so far out of town and had only Saturdays with their families. We came to realize that in our own parish the day-to-day interface with people we have directed that we take so for granted—seeing them at liturgy or meeting them at a sacramental prep class—often leads to a conversation that involves an informal but real follow-up on the retreat.

When the parish asked us again six months later to come (by this time we had also been invited to a suburban Episcopal church), we were faced with a new set of questions about the direction we should take in our outreach. Did we want to replicate the experience over and over at the same church? Could we be instrumental in empowering others to do this for themselves? While we clearly cannot be in the business of training directors at other churches, how can the people who could be directors in these places be identified? Again, these questions challenge our ingenuity and invite us to broaden our vision, even as we acknowledge our limitations.

The retreat in an inner-city setting

After coming across town to observe our opening session, two Jesuits at our sister parish in the centre of the city did the retreat last fall on a small scale with five retreatants.

Adapting the retreat for a different economic setting would not involve major changes, according to the pastor, but he adds that the more pre-evangelization there is, the better the retreat will probably work. Days of reflection with the choir and other committees, weekend parish retreats that introduce guided prayer are all ways of preparing for the week of directed prayer and for opening the way for continuing spiritual direction, he believes.

Even with one of us doing a good deal of spiritual direction, people sign up for direction and then don't show up. There has to be some intermediate step—like this retreat.

People with less education clearly need more structure in the retreat, and you can't just say 'Go take a look at Romans 7'. You might have to give people the passage on a piece of paper and include questions like 'Where did you find yourself with this passage?' In other words we are really beginning with meditation before going into Ignatian contemplation as such.

Where there is real material poverty, issues arise like the lack of privacy in one's own home because people must live so crowded together. To say to people, 'Find yourself a place away from the rest of the family' might not be realistic.

Also, our parish is in a high crime district, which makes it difficult for people to come out at night, yet most people are working and have to be seen in the evenings. Even so, the numbers of minorities who have signed up for the second retreat have grown so that two Jesuits from the adjoining high school have been recruited to help give the retreat.

Conclusion

The response of these retreats has been so overwhelmingly positive that one must conclude that this kind of format suits our contemporary life-styles. Like the Annotation 19 retreat, the week has emerged not as a poor substitute for a retreat away, but rather as perhaps an even more effective way of integrating one's life and prayer. We have found it to be, for the most part, simple and easy to tailor to one's circumstances, and as Fr Veltri says in his introduction, 'requiring a minimum of imagination'. Most of all it seems to resonate with that operating principle within the vision of Ignatius: locating the enterprise where the people are, in the midst of their lives. Certainly one of the richest fruits of the retreat has been the experience of being a team of Jesuits and lay directors who together are co-determining the direction of the enterprise.

As this article was being prepared, one of our retreatants, an artist who was paralysed from a spinal injury, died of a brain tumour. The pastor had given him and his wife the retreat at their home several blocks from the church a year ago. In the eulogy a friend referred to the first reading (Jer 18) which had been used in the retreat. He spoke of how much the reading meant to Denis and of how the retreat had so changed the man in the midst of his last illness. 'I celebrate with Denis now,' he said, 'because he is walking with God.' Each of the directors attending the liturgy said they felt so especially privileged to have been part of the retreat that may have been for Denis the first steps of that walk.