

# OPEN DOOR RETREATS

By WINIFRED MORLEY

**W**HEN LIFE PRESSURES WEIGH heavy on us, and we are faced with urgent demands, we all yearn to get away, to find space, to be alone. Perhaps for many, in the past, this need was supplied by going off to a retreat house or religious community to have that space in a conducive setting. Today this is not always possible for a variety of reasons, such as lack of time and, for many, the cost of a closed retreat. If we are lucky enough to have some time, how do we use it?

Jesus often went off alone to pray and the disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, and he taught them what to say. Like the disciples many people today are asking the same question and searching for answers. Reading about prayer can be helpful but books do not always answer our spontaneous questions. In 1981 a group of people came to the Cenacle in Burnham asking for such help and desiring to discover more of the riches of the scriptures. In their parish they usually had some study project that lasted for nine weeks and that year they wished to devote that time to praying and sharing together, so the Open Door Retreat (O.D.R.) was conceived.

Being familiar with the dynamic and richness of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, the Sisters decided to follow the framework of the Exercises in responding to this request. Drawing on the variety of forms of prayer Ignatius introduces the retreatant to, and the leaders' own lived experience, the pilgrimage begins making use of Annotation 20 to help those taking part to integrate their prayer and their daily lives. The leaders share how they experience God creating them, as they reflect back over their lives, the joys and the pains, and how the incarnation, passion and resurrection have influenced them. In recognizing the pattern of God's hand at work, the retreatants are enabled to discover how God is shaping and fashioning them as the potter moulds the clay. Unlike the potter God does not reject this lump of clay, but continues, patiently, forming it to his design.

O.D.R. enables people in the locality, parish, deanery to meet and share at a deep level, that of 'finding God in all things'. Thus the groups I have worked with are nearly always ecumenical and this brings another richness as we share together our prayer and lives, going deeper than the levels of theology and, as it were, seeing another side of God. The

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sessions last for two hours and we try to keep within the time limit so that no one need be anxious about meeting children from school or keeping baby-sitters waiting.

The number of persons following any one O.D.R. is no less than seven and no more than twelve. This is to allow everyone time to share within the given time. As far as possible we try to meet in someone's home. This helps in encouraging the retreatants to pray in their own setting, within the round of daily life with all the noises and distractions of a normal family—baby crying, television broadcasting, piano scales being played. Church halls, while better than nothing, are not the ideal as they are often big, cold, have uncomfortable chairs and can be intimidating for sharing personal material.

The O.D.R. aims to assist the retreatants to develop their own pattern of prayer. Fifteen minutes each day is encouraged, on the material provided. This can be songs, secular writings and always includes some scripture references. Variety is important as the suggestions are the same for everyone, and each needs to be free to use what helps them at that particular time. Within the sessions we also make use of songs, readings and prayer experiences to enrich each other. Above all we are recalling that God is present in the whole of our lives and will be there when the nine weeks are over. Using our senses to find God in his creation can be equally uplifting whether in the country or the city. One retreatant on such a walk discovered the beauty of the local architecture which she had never noticed before even though she passed the same buildings each day going to work. Several have found this exercise enriched by sharing it with their children on a family walk. Using one's own creative gifts in cooking a favourite meal, carving a piece of wood, painting a picture, can all be ways of finding God in our lives.

Taking time to be still, to listen to God, is what we often long for, but often, when we have the time, we either do not know what to do, or we see other things demanding our immediate attention and so meeting with God has to wait. Any task is made easier when we have the know-how to accomplish it, and so it is with prayer. Reflecting on our hands, all they have done since the day we were born, the pain and hurts they have known, the love and comfort they have given—this is always a powerful form of prayer, each of us having our own memories. Memory is an important faculty which is often underused, so we help the retreatants build up the story of their lives by asking them to share, in a relaxed kind of way, events of their own past. Thus each one begins to share from the safety of their history whatever they are comfortable in sharing. This is one of the golden rules in Open Door, that each one is

invited to share only what they feel comfortable in sharing with others; no pressure is used. This helps alleviate any fears that might be around.

Being affirmed is something we all need to enable us to accept ourselves and the reflection of God within us. We all realize that self-affirmation is also something we back away from, are reluctant to receive. Seeing beauty in nature is relatively easy, so too is finding goodness in a caring neighbour, but what about oneself? How do I show forth the image and qualities of God in my life? The failings and flaws of our characters are well known to us and are often reinforced by others. Thus when we come to the incarnation in the retreat and try to appreciate the meaning of God among us, we invite the retreatants to affirm each other, and while this is frequently a time of resistance it is also a week when the group awareness deepens. What does the incarnation mean to me? The question gives the retreatants time to ponder and reflect more deeply on the influence of their faith in their daily lives. Trying to express this in some creative form can also be testing but produces some amazing results in collage, poetry, painting and music—even fruit cakes have been made to express the variety of gifts (ingredients) held in one person (cake). Appreciating the warmth of a smile and returning it can be a Christ meeting.

How rich our lives are when we know there is someone who cares for us, is aware of who we are and the struggles we may be experiencing. So during the O.D.R. we invite the retreatants to care for each other, praying for each other and sharing in the refreshments at the end of each session. Often retreatants from previous groups are invited to be a 'prayer partner' for the time of the retreat and this blossoms into a friendship at the end of the retreat, when names are shared. A way of sharing in the passion of Jesus is for the retreatants to share a little of their experience of pain, and then each person supports another in prayer during that week. This is also a special time in the retreat and the fellowship of prayer is almost tangible. We also try to have the support of a praying community during the time of the retreat, as an added dimension of the family of God, and a means of involving the contemplative life of the church.

People come from all walks of life and while, to begin with, they may feel uncomfortable when invited to share what has happened in their prayer, this feeling does not last for long. In the sharing we break the word for each other, sharing only what each feels able and willing to share. This demands trust of each other and it is amazing to see how this deepens as the weeks go by. A true Christian community develops among the group as we know God is with us. One thing we strongly

stress is that we are not meeting to discuss the scriptures and our life experiences, but to share how we have met God in the past week. This enables each one to have the freedom to know that we accept and receive the gift they share with the group, in their truth and however they wish to express it. The leaders respond as is appropriate and there is time for group direction. Thus fellowship develops in a way not often experienced in other groups.

Being still and having space often needs a focus, and while we can aim to have the inner quiet of listening to God we often need something external to hold our attention. During the sessions we use candles, icons, flowers, stones and a wide variety of things, encouraging the retreatant to find what best helps them. Music too can help us centre and be still. Many of the practical aspects follow the guidance given by Ignatius in the Annotations, permitting 'the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature to deal directly with his Creator and Lord'.<sup>1</sup>

Being human we frequently forget the meaningful moments of yesterday as we try to live life today. To enable the retreatants to hold those precious moments we encourage them to keep a spiritual journal, to record their own pilgrimage, as Ignatius did on his pilgrimage. Sometimes even producing the notebooks causes panic; as it recalls memories of school, homework and exercises to be done, marks to be gained. Assurance is needed so that the retreatant can freely use the journal, in a way that helps them, knowing it is for their eyes only. It is using words to capture the moment and movement of grace, in the best way for them—one word, one page or perhaps a drawing.

While our journey to the Lord is an individual process, everyone finding their own way, it is also a communal journey as we are all travelling in the same direction. This is evident in the sharing during an O.D.R.: while the same texts have been used for prayer, the variety of understanding is very enriching and one figuratively 'takes off one's shoes', aware that one is on holy ground, the ground where God meets the individual. Again there is wonder as you hear how God touches the lives of others and their generosity in responding to him. Watching the realization that 'God loves me as I am' awaken in another is awesome. The learning which takes place as one listens to others sharing their prayer experience is far better than a teacher talking at length, as the retreatants and team begin to identify with how God works and touches their lives. Each one becomes more aware of the God within their own history and the pattern of God slowly, gently leading them on.

As in any style of retreat, generosity and fidelity to what has been agreed is important if the process is to work, if the retreatant is to attend

all the sessions, pray for the time suggested and be willing to share what happens when they pray. If for whatever reason someone is unable to attend even one session then the whole group feels the absence of that person and all are less rich because of the missing link in the chain of love that is forming within the group. The leaders too have to be generous in being willing to share with the group something of their understanding of God working in their lives, and in being ready to do themselves whatever they ask of the retreatants, as the leaders make the retreat alongside everyone else. They too must attend every session and share the material between them, thus giving variety of voice and experience.

Having two persons lead the retreat is a great benefit and I prefer to give the retreat with a lay person, as the group can more easily resonate with the lay person. Mothers can easily share with each other the problems of trying to find space and time to pray when they have young children, something outside my experience. They know what it is like having to struggle to find the fifteen minutes, maybe while the baby is having a sleep or the children are safely in bed or before the day begins, and they gently challenge and help each other from their shared experiences. The bathroom seems a very popular place for prayer in many households. One mother shared how she took time to pray when the children played together, and once she heard them whispering 'It will be OK when Mum comes down, she's always nice when she has prayed'. Another had a small prayer stool which she used for prayer and as the children noticed this they wanted to join her, so Dad had to make a large enough prayer stool for the three of them—what a beautiful way to encourage our children to learn about prayer. When we have married couples on the retreat sometimes they have their prayer time together at either the beginning or end of the day. One couple, I remember, both prayed after their evening meal: one prayed while the other was with the children and then they changed places. When I hear such things I rejoice that some children today are learning of the wealth of God early in their lives.

On any journey there are high points and low points, peaks and troughs; so too in the O.D.R. Having the courage to share that one week has not been good—while the intention to pray has been there other things have prevented it happening as we desire—this can be a revelation to some retreatants. I remember working with a priest who shared how tough the week had been and how empty his prayer. Several of the group later said how much they were helped by this as they never thought of a priest or sister finding prayer difficult. They were encouraged to keep going. We all know the real experience of desolation and

consolation, how neither last for ever, but the knowledge is different from the experience. When journeying together and sharing our consolations or desolations we gain strength from each other and learn that these are natural movements of our faith journey. During the week on sin or the passion many experience the darkness, dryness, rejection or loneliness that is the reality of sin and passion. Just looking at Jesus as he hangs in suffering on the cross can be a profound prayer experience, knowing that that is the depth of his love for me.

Many people mistakenly equate Ignatian prayer with the use of the imagination, while it is only one method he uses to assist the retreatant in prayer during the thirty days. In the O.D.R. the retreatant is also introduced to imaginative meditation by trying to stand in the shoes of one of the New Testament persons who was touched by Jesus, and to enter into their experience as Jesus cures, challenges, meets with them. While we introduce this in a fun kind of way it is always a profound experience and, as so often happens, the character we receive is the one we can or need to be with at that time. So a busy person often ends up with looking at Martha and the challenge of Jesus not to be so busy. The bride at the wedding of Cana often helps to see Jesus in a different light. Yes, he did enjoy himself and note the needs of others and move out to help them, so why do I worry over things in my life?

One of the riches of the O.D.R. is that each one can meet their God as they feel able and in the manner that God chooses to come to them. 'We are all God's favourites' is so true. To lead such a retreat is a blessing. Like watching the rosebud unfold to reveal its hidden beauty, so the O.D.R. enables one to see the individual blossom as they come to recognize that they are loved and precious. This results in a great bond being forged among the group as together they have a special unrepeatable experience, which is precious to them, so they know each other at a depth not usual in other groups.

A disadvantage in the O.D.R. is that the group moves along following the momentum within the nine weeks and this means that all move through the dynamic together. In an individual retreat each goes at their own pace. However the O.D.R. retreatants do have the material to go over later on their own, and I have found that while perhaps at the session someone is not ready to move into the next stage, (and you might suggest that they stay with what is happening for them), during the week they move into the new stage and are praying with the others.

The outline of the retreat remains the same while the input varies according to the person sharing. The Open Door Retreat has been criticized for this, but it has been my experience, after giving these

retreats for many years up and down the country, that while the outline is the same and the dynamic too, the retreatants bring their own gifts and this always makes the difference. Every retreat is different because the retreatants are different, just as in any Ignatian retreat the dynamic is the same and the desire to bring the retreatant to freedom before their God remains the same, but the process and pilgrimage are different for each one.

At the end of an O.D.R. retreatants will often be led into finding a spiritual director, as they have been helped by having someone listen and guide them in prayer. Some go on to make the retreat in daily life, the 'Nineteenth Annotation', or to make an individually directed retreat. All are eager to continue their spiritual growth. As the group has been so bonded over the nine weeks, frequently they decide to continue sharing and supporting each other. This is when the team have to enable and allow the group to stand alone. While offering helpful suggestions of how the group might proceed, the team needs to stand aside and let them be. Usually there are potential leaders within the group who are well able to lead the group further and they should be encouraged to take up this role. After the first O.D.R. the team will be tempted to stay with the group for the follow-up, and share in the rich experiences still, but once they have given a few O.D.R.s they begin to see how this is not possible or practical. Thus the learning for the team is to let go and let God work in his people.

Experiencing an O.D.R. either as a retreatant or a member of the team reminds us yet again of the great wealth we have in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius for helping each other find our God in and through the journey of everyday life, if only we take the time to stop, look and listen.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Louis J. Puhl (trans), *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*.