

Cowley

SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST

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IN THIS ISSUE Retreat

In the **Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Living** reflection, Brothers share **three different visions** for how to shape a retreat experience to “enter more fully into the divine life.”

Br. Curtis Almquist explains why a **retreat is not an advance**, but rather a chance to recollect life with gratitude.

Taking a retreat need not mean traveling far away; Br. Luke Ditewig suggests how we can **experience the gifts of retreat at home**.

A practical, four-page guide on **crafting a retreat day** invites us to collaborate with God.

Have you embraced your calling to the “priesthood of leisure”? Br. Jonathan Maury celebrates the importance of **weaving recreation into daily life**.

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We would welcome hearing what you think of this issue of Cowley magazine. Visit www.SSJE.org/cowleymagazine to share comments, ask questions, suggest future article topics, or read past issues!



Cover photo:

An open door in the Guesthouse beckons.



Letter from the Superior

James Koester, SSJE

Dear Members of the Fellowship of Saint John and other Friends,

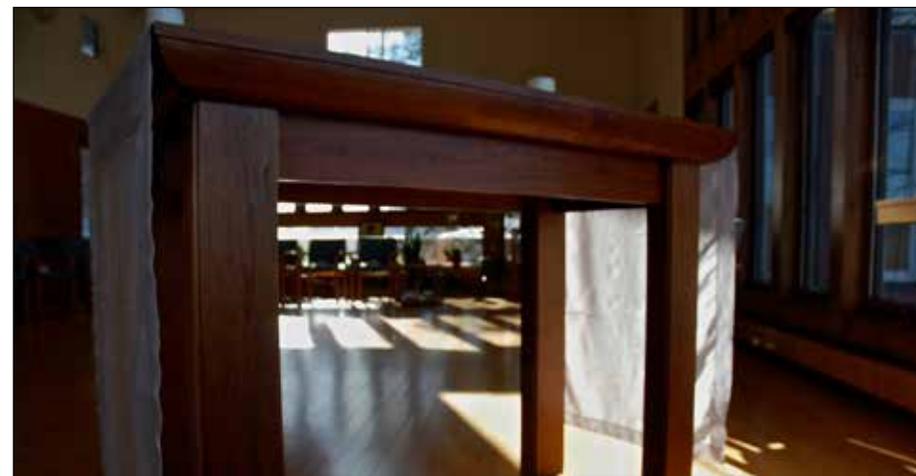
When people first come to know our community, they are often surprised to discover that we Brothers – who gather to pray five times a day, every day – *also* go on retreat! “Don’t you already pray all day?” they ask. Of course it’s more complicated than that, which is one of the reasons that even monks need to set aside times for retreat. As a community, we take a yearly retreat every summer, as well as a retreat day each month. And individual Brothers have further times of retreat throughout the year.

Now I’ll confess that, depending on how I feel, I tend to use our annual retreat time for a number of different purposes. Sometimes it’s an occasion simply to catch up on my sleep or my reading. Other years I’ll use the retreat to spend significant periods of time in

the garden. Yet what sustains me in the weeks or months that follow our retreat is not *what* I have accomplished, but *who* I have come to know.

I remember one evening after supper sitting in the Chapel. We had gathered to spend some time in prayer before the Sacrament and in the midst of our silence we could hear the chorus of birds singing as dusk fell. I remember being in awe as the song of the birds gave voice to the song of creation as it joined with us in praising the Creator.

I remember Sister Rosemary SLG inviting us one year to experiment with praying in the middle of the night. I got up at 2 AM and made myself some hot chocolate. I wrapped myself in a blanket and sat in the rocker. I then had an incredible hour of prayer as I held before God all those who were in any danger



The Chapel of the Transfiguration at Emery House, where the Brothers retreat together.

at that very moment. I had the physical and emotional experience of literally standing between people and danger, of being their intercessor in the fullest meaning of that word.

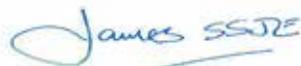
I remember gathering one morning in the Chapel for the Eucharist and being overwhelmed by an awareness of the presence of Jesus in the gathered community; for “*where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*” (Matt. 18:20). As I sat in my Brothers’ presence, I was deeply aware of the presence of Jesus, not simply in our midst, but embodied in my Brothers.

Retreat times sustain me for weeks and months – and sometimes even years afterwards – because of the memory of the One I encountered. Our founder, Richard Meux Benson puts it this way: “*in the retreat you want the real surrender of your soul with all the affections of the heart to God*” (*Instructions on the Religious Life*, 2). Surrender to God rekindles our love for God and renews our experience of God’s love for us. This surrender is the heart of retreat. “*We have meditated well if*

in our meditation we have loved much” (3).

Retreat is a time to become lost in love with God. We hope this issue of *Cowley* will invite you to consider how God might be calling you to explore a time of retreat. Throughout these pages, Brothers share different approaches to retreat, as well as ideas for ways to weave retreat into our lives and daily routines. Whether we come away with God for a week or an hour, we know that when we truly look and listen for God, God will indeed reveal himself to us, for “*none ever come unto God and are sent away empty. None come to God ever without receiving far more than they spend. Only come to Him, wait upon Him, look to Him, listen for Him, rejoice in Him. Put away everything else which can stand in the way of His being the simple joy of your heart*” (9).

Yours in Christ,



James Koester, SSJE
Superior



Letter from the FSJ



The Rev. William MacDonald (“Mac”) Murray
Rector of Trinity Church, Milford, Massachusetts

We all have busy lives. Twenty-five years ago, living in Reston, Virginia, I was a corporate executive for one of the largest aerospace companies in the U.S. Between 80-hour workweeks and a full family life (married with two children), I was looking for an opportunity to hit the reset button. Through the recommendation of my new spiritual director, I was fortunate to discover SSJE. My first experience was a week-long retreat led by Br. Curtis. I didn’t know what to expect, but I discovered a new world as I entered the gate of the Monastery Guesthouse: a place of quiet, a place of refreshment, a place to rest from the busyness of life. It became my practice to venture back to Cambridge on an annual basis for a ‘booster shot.’ I may have originally thought of my retreat times as an escape mechanism, but what I discovered was that *the gift of retreat* – a gift I gave myself – was actually teaching me how to live a more complete, more centered life.

Over the succeeding years, I left the corporate world, attended seminary, and was ordained a priest. I continued my annual retreats at the Monastery while working at my first parish in Virginia. When I was called to my current parish in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, I

included in my letter of agreement the parish’s support for a monthly retreat. The practice of retreat has become essential to my ministry and to my life.

When I walk through the gate and enter the Guesthouse garden, I feel a weight being lifted from my shoulders. I am entering a new space, a space that has been prepared for me, a space in which I can relax and let go of whatever I’m carrying, a space that will renew and refresh me. I know that God has a plan for our time together, but I don’t always know what it is. Retreat opens space for this loving encounter.

Sometimes I am conscious of bringing a serious concern with me, such as a difficult relationship or a burning question like, “Why is it so difficult for people to work together?” In the silence of the retreat, I can process my strong emotions and contemplate the options before me. But more often than not, I come without any specific expectations, other than to open myself to the work of the Spirit.

There are many ways to enter into a retreat. Sometimes I head for the Guesthouse library and select a book – usually the mystics or poetry – which can serve as the starting place for my

meditations. As I read I listen to what I'm feeling, what I'm hearing, what I'm being drawn to pray about. At other times I make use of the art materials SSJE provides: I paint with watercolors or create clay figures or assemble pictures into a collage. There is something about moving into this different side of me – a side that is rarely accessed – that opens a window into the wonder and mystery of life and inspires worship. In every retreat I fold myself into the Community's worship. The rhythm of the Daily Office and the Eucharist provides a helpful structure for retreat. I often find myself in the Chapel a full hour before worship, just to sit in silence and to listen to where God might be calling me. Even though I am an over-the-top "E" (extrovert) on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, I find these rich times of silence feed my soul.

A few years ago I discovered Emery House. *Wow!* I now intentionally alternate my retreat times between the Monastery and Emery House. They offer two very different environments and invite two very different kinds of experience. When at the Monastery, I rarely venture out. I find myself burrowing in, soaking in the comfort of a safe and hidden place. At Emery House, I find time for long walks on the property or in

nearby Maudsley State Park. I take time to sit and ponder, in wonder, the beauty of the created order, noticing particularly the small details of life around me which I so often miss in my busyness. Sometimes I take advantage of volunteer opportunities around the Emery House grounds. Some of my most memorable spiritual experiences in retreat have come through engaging with the land.

Retreats, of course, eventually come to an end. The time comes for me to step out of the place in which I have been held and nurtured in order to pick up again the call to hold and nurture others. Sometimes I head straight from retreat to one of the Boston hospitals to visit a parishioner or friend. I realize then that I carry a light within me that has been fanned into a flame in retreat, and I pray for the grace to offer that light to those I come to see.

As a full-time rector of a busy parish, I never have enough time to accomplish all that needs to be done. But I have learned to value the gift of retreat and continue to discover in it new insights, new perspectives, and new opportunities – truly the Holy Spirit at work! 🙏



A Retreat Is Not An Advance

Why We Retreat & What To Anticipate

Curtis Almquist, SSJE

O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray you, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

– Book of Common Prayer

A retreat is not an advance. For much of life we are on the advance as we anticipate, investigate, instigate, navigate what is ahead. A retreat is moving in mostly the opposite direction. A retreat is a time to recover, restore, redeem, renew what has been spent or lost in life. If you only live life on the advance, you will completely miss the perspective you glean by looking back on your life. Your retreat experience will give you gratitude for the past, clarity and strength for the present, and hope for the future.

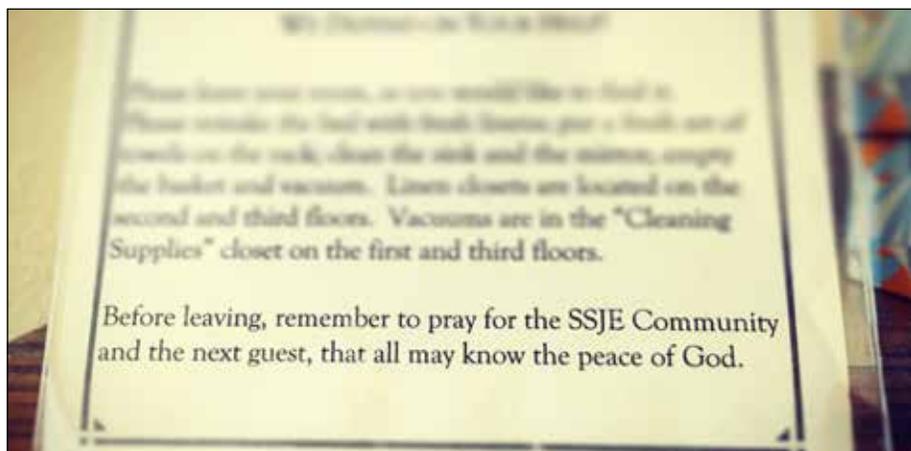
For many people, life is navigated at a pace which may blur their being able to see clearly what is going on. Sometimes what is happening in your life is so close to you, you cannot make sense of it. It's blocked. Only by retreat, by stepping back, can you find perspective and clarity. The psalmist calls this experience "being lifted up." Or you may have passed through a period of suffering. It is very difficult to see clearly through pain and tears. We want to escape from suffering. And yet, there may be something important to redeem from

what is otherwise only pain or loss. Something incredibly good may be claimed from what was undeniably bad. The significance of something lost on you is now found. Until an experience is remembered – until *life* is remembered – it's not a complete experience, because life looks very different looking ahead than it does when you look back and see it from behind. What even may have seemed a black hole at the time may well prove to be a goldmine, in the fullness of time. A retreat is an invitation to get on good speaking terms with the whole of your life, for "the eyes of your heart to be enlightened."¹

A retreat is also a graceful time to look and listen deeply into life. Entering a monastic setting, you will come into a place of silence, sanctuary, and sustenance:

- **Silence**, where you can be still and listen deeply to your life, where God is meeting you, leading you, healing you, nourishing

¹ Ephesians 1:18



An invitation in each guest room links visitors in a meaningful chain of prayer.



you. The psalmist says, “Be still and know that I am God.”²

- **Sanctuary**, where you feel safe, where you can let down your guard. Who you are, what you are, why it is you are the way you are, God knows and God loves. A retreat is often a breakthrough. Meister Eckhart, the 13th-century German Dominican, said that “the eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God’s eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love.”³
- **Sustenance**, where you are fed deeply. The psalmist speaks of our hungering and thirsting after God; Jesus speaks of his “food that will last.” Soul food. And yet, Jesus went to many dinner parties and also knew that people are hungry for real food. A retreat time will help assuage your hungers.

A retreat also affords time for a reckoning with life. Life is a gift, and it will make a world of difference to you if you live your life as a gift, rather than as a given. Take nothing for granted; rather, live your life in gratitude. A retreat will offer you space to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” to recollect how your life teems with blessing.⁴ I am not suggesting you should sugarcoat an experience of life that is bad; however I *am* saying that claiming gratitude for *so much* that is *so good* in your life will be a significant counterweight on the scale of your life. Gratitude will rebalance your life. The psalmist speaks of this as “the sacrifice of thanksgiving,” where you have the time and perspective to name, claim, and offer your gratitude to God for the wonder of life that God has shared with you.⁵ Gratitude transforms life from the inside out. Make your retreat time a sacrifice of thanksgiving as you reckon with your life.

4 Psalm 34:8.

5 The psalmist speaks of “the sacrifice of thanksgiving” in Psalm 50:14 & 24; 107:22; 116:15.

Will your retreat time be difficult? Maybe. The clarity gleaned in retreat may be comforting; the clarity may also be confronting, exposing you to a spiritual trial. In the SSJE *Rule of Life*, we acknowledge there may be an emptiness in retreat time that “may compel us to face the painful signs of our need for healing that it was easier to overlook during our usual routines. So our retreat times will be opportunities to strive against everything that would discourage us from radical dependence on the love of God.”⁶

Will your retreat time change you? Yes and no. Much of what you leave behind at your home and work will still be waiting for you, unchanged, upon your return from retreat. However your retreat will help you garner perspective and strength to do some old things in new ways. Think of the captain of a ship going to sea. In the course of the journey, the captain will need to adjust the ship’s course multiple times. It’s not likely that the captain will make radical, 180° course adjustments; more typical is the adjustment of the course by a fraction of a degree. Those slight adjustments will make all the difference, and will ultimately bring the ship to different port of call. A retreat will be a significant help to get you on course (or *back* on course) in life. In the SSJE *Rule of Life*, we speak of this as “lifelong conversion.”

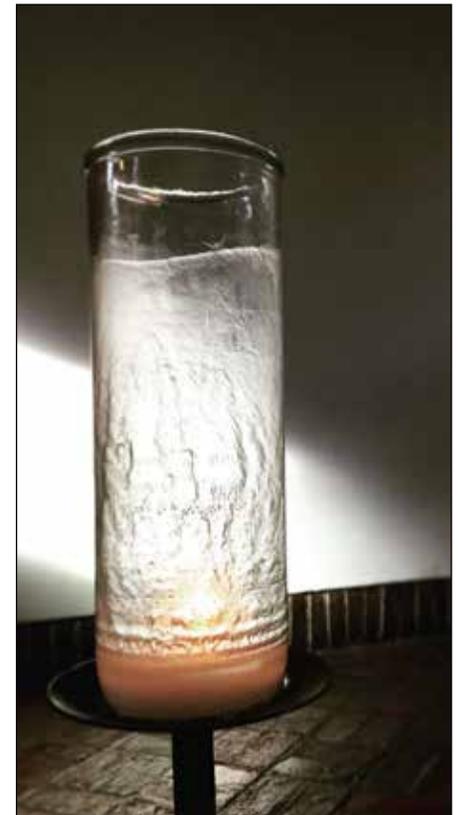
What should you bring with you on retreat? Bring with you your emptiness, your ache, whatever fills, overjoys, or breaks your heart. Bring your questions. Bring your desire. Bring your exhaustion and your need. God is already powerfully at work within you “to accomplish abundantly far more than all [you] can ask or imagine.”⁷ Minimize whatever will likely prove distracting. Don’t bring a satchel

6 SSJE *Rule of Life*, Ch. 29, “Retreat”

7 Ephesians 3:20

of books or work projects. Consider taking a sabbatical from your electronic gadgetry: email, social media, mobile phone. Bring a notebook to log what is catching your heart’s attention. You may want to bring walking shoes or exercise clothing to enjoy movement and the beauty of God’s creation. You may want to bring something for gentle recreation in solitude: sewing, drawing, painting, photography.

God has already caught your attention. Take Jesus at his word that he is with you until the end: the end of your retreat, the end for which God has created you, the end of your life. Your retreat will be an answer to prayer, an answer to God’s prayer for you. 🙏





Retreat at Home

Luke Ditewig, SSJE

Taking a retreat does not necessarily mean going off to a monastery. Retreat can happen nearby, including at home. The core of creating retreat is setting aside normal work and routines in order to focus on personal prayer. Create retreat for yourself with a few hours, a day, or a few nights.

We Brothers create one day of retreat a month for ourselves at the Monastery. Since corporate prayer is our central work, Brothers pray together less on our retreat days. We reduce our schedule by not praying Morning Prayer or Compline together. Most of us sleep in and go to bed early. We do not host guests. Though we do have a Eucharist and Evening Prayer, no one preaches, and we spend the whole day – meals, dishes, and otherwise – in silence in order to honor and not interrupt one another’s prayer.

To create your own retreat at home: what would it take for you schedule a day off from most of your usual routine and instead focus on personal prayer? What would you reduce? To what extent, in what space or during what time could you be uninterrupted? How could you cultivate silence?

The first gift of retreat is often sleep. What would it take to go to bed early,

to let yourself sleep in, and to take a nap? I call these three “the retreat trinity.” After receiving these, when our body is refreshed, we are more able to hear what God is speaking.

While retreat can happen anywhere, it may be easier or more helpful for you to get away, as home can be so distracting. Consider going to a park, a botanical garden, a forest, or a beach. Stroll and wonder at beauty. Stop to gaze and listen. What kind of places invite you to listen, to pray, to connect with God? It might not be outdoors, and it might not be quiet and away from people. Perhaps go to an art museum, a library, or a church.

When guests come to the Monastery, some stay inside, some walk along the river, and some walk the quiet streets nearby. Others enjoy the bustle of Harvard Square. One of my friends who enjoys silence also feels drawn to God when beholding the diversity of people in the city. Perhaps, like him, you may feel drawn to pray in a coffee shop or walking city streets with lots of people.

If you are able to go away somewhere for a night or more, wonderful. This is like a vacation, a reconnection, a restoration, an intervention with God. You might go solo, or you might go with a friend (if you do, choose if and when to

talk and share some time together). Turn off your devices. Do one thing at a time. Savor food. This will help you slow down and pay attention.

Retreat can even be something to share with those with whom you live. What might it be like to cultivate silence together at home for an afternoon or for a day? Perhaps you could choose to not talk, not listen to music, not watch devices, and yet still be together. Build a fire, do your own reading, journaling, gazing, and praying. Then reflect later about your experiences and share what you’re grateful for. I know some housemates who tried this for a season. They doubted the idea but found it doable and refreshing. This practice might be as regular as a weekly Sabbath or a monthly or quarterly retreat.

We claim times of retreat, above all, in the hopes of setting aside more time for

personal prayer. In our Monastery, each Brother generally sets three periods for personal prayer along with recreative activities like walks and gentle exercise. Four times a year, our monthly retreat day focuses on fasting and intercession. We fast throughout the day and, in the afternoon, take a turn of an hour in intercession before the reserved Sacrament at our side altar in the St. John’s Chapel. On your own retreat, pray as you already do, in whatever form is already familiar: with or without words, eyes open or closed, standing, sitting, kneeling, in another shape, or moving. Set a few times to pray through the day. Do what you know. And try something different.

If you have been on retreat at the Monastery or away elsewhere, what was most meaningful to you? What are one or two aspects of that experience you



could choose to recreate for yourself?

Retreat, and any particular retreat, may take many forms and locations. How to begin? First, consider places nearby, even in your own residence:

What spaces calm and refresh you?

What activities help you slow down, rest, and listen?

Where do you feel safe and secure?

What invites you to encounter and struggle with God?

What setting prompts thinking deeply?

The space you choose need not be far away. What's more important is choosing to stop and spend time in those spaces. Stop and breathe. Stop and

listen. Stop and pray.

Then, as you craft your retreat time, consider what you will stop, and what will help you to stop. What would support you in putting aside your daily work and routines in order to focus on prayer? How would companionship help or hinder you either in the planning, provision, or experience of the retreat?

Retreat is much more than going away and it does not require going far away. Start small. Try and try again. May you be creative and intentional as you choose time and space for retreat. You have what you need, and you are worth it. God waits with delight to be with you, to refresh and deepen you. 🌿



A prayer corner in one of the Emery House hermitages.

Your Retreat Day

how to cooperate with God

God has already whetted your desire or awakened your awareness of your need for a retreat day. What is God's invitation to you? Prayer is always a response to God's initiative, and retreat is the same. Retreat, at heart, is simply about making ourselves available to God.

This guide invites you to cooperate with God as you plan your retreat time. Less is more. We hope the suggestions in these pages will set the stage, so that you can receive God's gift of love in a time of retreat.



Don't frontload your retreat day with "guilt appeasement": catching up on overdue correspondence, organizing your closet, reading the stack of books that is gathering dust. Don't have your electronic gadgetry close at hand. (Take a digital sabbath!) Keep a "Not for Now" pad of paper at hand, on which you can make a cryptic list of the niggling thoughts and reminders that surface on your retreat day... things to which you will attend *after* your retreat day.

Do get current with the longing of your soul.

* From what do you need freedom? Perhaps from fear, despair, anger, jealousy, loneliness, discouragement, grief, overwhelmedness ...

* What do you crave? Perhaps hope, forgiveness, peace, love, light, compassion, wisdom, encouragement, joy...

Your retreat won't be about *everything*. It *will* be about something which has caught your heart's attention. God is behind that.

the current longing of your soul



Place, Provisions

setting the stage

Where can you be still and silent?

What setting will be re-creative for your soul? An inside space, or outside space, or both?

What "accompaniment" do you need? Perhaps:

- * music, a window, a candle, an icon
- * a comfortable chair, a prayer cushion, a kneeler
- * a Bible, a book of poetry or meditation, a journal
- * food and drink (enough, but not too much)
- * a place to rest; a place for physical exercise
- * gentle re-creative activity
(e.g., drawing or painting, sewing or beading, photographing, playing a musical instrument)

What is necessary and helpful?



The Plan

a loose schedule

When will your retreat day begin and when will it end? *How* will it begin and end?

The entire day will offer you space to "pray your life"; however you might find it helpful to demarcate three specific times in the day, each for about an hour, when you will be especially focused in your prayer. You know your own "biorhythms." When are you most attentive between the early morning until the evening? The bright times will be the right times for you to be intentional in your prayer.



Preparation

getting ready to pray

To begin, you want to come into a clearing, as best as possible. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, when asked if he spent much time in prayer said, "No." But, he said, he spent a great deal of time "getting ready to pray." How to prepare? Use the preparatory practice that is meaningful to you, or, if you are out of practice:

- * You might find it helpful to use your breathing as respiratory therapy for your soul. Breathe out what is in the way. In a word, repeatedly name the "blockage" with each exhalation. Breathe in the elixir. In a word, breathe in what is healing, or helpful, or hopeful. Do this repeatedly with each inhalation.
 - ◆ You might get in touch with more than one thing that is in the way, and more than one thing that will help you get on the way. Breathe your prayer.
 - ◆ How long? Long enough.

- * You might find it helpful to prepare with a passage or scene from the Bible, or with some poetry that helps you recollect your life in God's presence. For example:

"I waited patiently upon the LORD; he stooped to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay; he set my feet upon a high cliff and made my footing sure." (Psalm 40:1-2)

- ◆ What do you need to be lifted out of?
- ◆ What do you need to be lifted into?

Or:

"Mercy and truth have met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven." (Psalm 85:10-11)

- ◆ God already knows the truth about you, and about others. Name the truth God already knows.
- ◆ And ask for mercy:
 - God's gift of mercy for you.
 - God's gift of mercy for some other person whom you carry in your soul.

The Prayer

receiving the gift

Prayer is a gift. If you are out of practice, or if you have lost your way, here are two suggestions.

- * Pray your gratitude. Being thankful to God is Eucharistic, absolutely transformative. Being grateful for your life will help you pick up the scent on the trail of life.
- * Don't do all the talking. The psalmist says, "*Be still, and know that I am God*" (Psalm 46:10). Prayer is our relationship with God, at God's initiative, and God has something for you. Listen up. All of your preparation to pray may simply leave you in a clearing where you can listen. Listen up.

Post-script

collecting the day

At the end of each prayer session, "collect" the grace of your prayer. What did you say; what did you hear? What did you receive; from what were you relieved? In the Gospel according to John, after the feeding of the multitude, Jesus says to his disciples, "*Gather up the fragments that nothing be lost.*" Gather up the graces. You might find it helpful, at the close of each prayer time, to write what is clear to you: your questions or answers, the gifts you've been given or the help you need, the next step to take.

Finally, at the end of the day, collect and pray your gratitude for your day and for your life. The psalmist asks, rhetorically, "*How shall I repay the LORD for all the good things he has done for me?*" (Psalm 116:10). Start and end with gratitude. 🙏



Recreation

Weaving Leisure into Life

Jonathan Maury, SSJE

In the first creation story told in the Book of Genesis, God's spirit broods over the waters of chaos and speaks the universe into being, "Let there be light" – the first day of God's creating work. Over a succession of five days, God continues creating – dry land, the dome of the heavens, winged birds, earthly creatures, and humankind – and blessing everything that God has brought into being, pronouncing it all "very good."

Then comes the seventh day: "And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done." After much creative labor, God takes "a day off," simply to enjoy the fruits of this work and delight in all that creativity. "So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation."

Though enshrined in the Hebrew Scriptures as the Sabbath – a weekly day of rest – the rhythm of activity and leisure, creation and recreation, remains as countercultural in our present moment as it was in the world of our ancestors in faith. We live in a culture of doing, driven by a mindset that has accustomed many of us to deriving our sense of self from what we *do*, finding worth only in our work and its tangible gains. Small wonder then that, as a culture, we feel compelled

to work almost constantly!

Yet relentless work distances us ever further, not only from the mystery we call 'God' – the One who rested on the seventh day – but also from the persons we are created to be, ever reflecting God's image and likeness. In a chapter of our *Rule of Life* entitled "Rest and Recreation," we recognize "the hallowing of rest and the keeping of sabbath" as "an essential element in our covenant with God." Similarly, Chapter 29, on "Retreat" reminds of the "opportunity to experience the intimacy we have with God in our union with Christ," as we rest in retreat, and allow "exercise





In the Cloister garden, peace and natural beauty wait just steps from busy Memorial Drive.

and gentle recreative activities in solitude [to] help us be open to the Spirit.”

Lest, however, we turn taking leisure into yet another task, we do well to remember also Jesus’ parable of the good and trustworthy servant, who is commended, on the completion of much work, “Well done ... now enter into the joy of your master.” These words signal for me a mysterious truth: rest and joy are linked. They are complementary graces; they reveal to us the stream of divine love always running beneath the surface of our lives.

As we grow into who we are made to be, God stirs in us what I would call a vocation as “priests of leisure.” Leisure time can be as sacred as prayer: both invite us to pause and reflect on all the gifts we have received — and, even more importantly, the gift that we ourselves *are*. Resting from our labors as God did, we rejoice with God, who from the beginning has delighted in us.

Growing up on Nantucket Island, I

had some very memorable encounters with God as I spent leisure time outdoors. On long solitary bike rides to the seashore, freshwater ponds, and saltwater marshes or walking on the autumn moors, simply gazing on the created beauty around me, I felt pervaded by a strong sense of peace, connectedness and gratitude. I came to recognize these re-creation times as acts of worship, complementary to the profound experience of liturgy in church.

Perhaps it was this rhythm that drew me to monastic life, for it still holds true for me today. In our community, we schedule annual times of vacation as well as retreat; and over the years, I’ve come to experience these two forms of leisure as occupying a single continuum. How often have I struggled to “work” my intentional time of retreat, only to find that the very gifts of reflection and connection I desired were graciously given to me during an itinerary-less vacation!

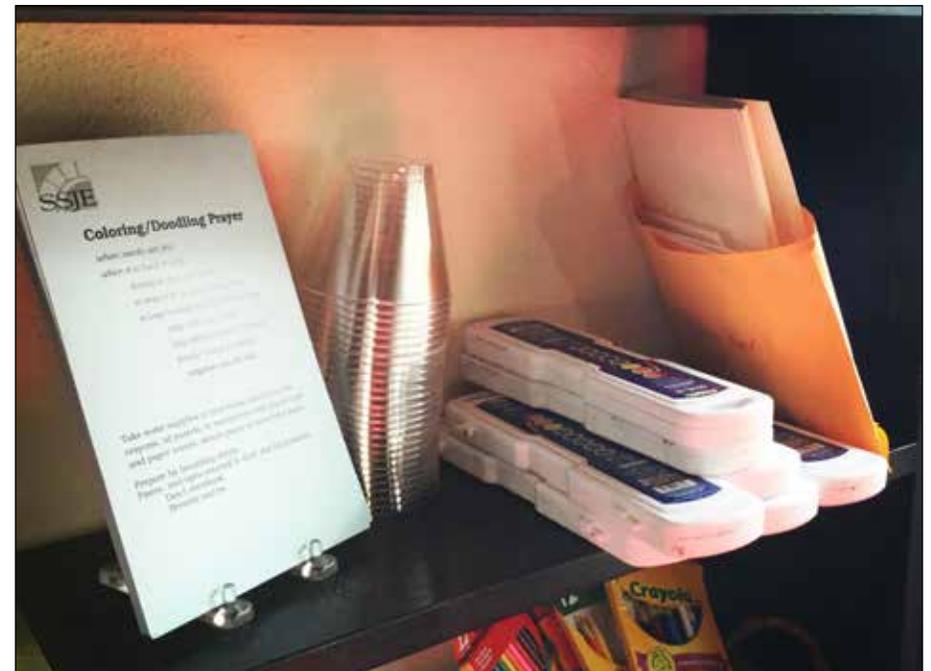
The title of Thomas Green, S.J.’s

introduction to Ignatian retreats, *A Vacation with the Lord*, serves to remind me of the wisdom of Jesus’ promise in the Gospel according to Matthew, “Come to me...and I will give you rest and refresh your souls.” And I find it to be valid whether I’m headed to a retreat center or a vacation spot.

Our times of leisure need not be lengthy to be transformative. We can take up the “priesthood of leisure” during a week’s vacation, a weekly day of rest, or even an afternoon break. However long you have, risk appearing foolish and being playful with the time. As a culture, we are often as serious about recreation as we are about work. Playfulness puts us back in touch with our bodies and feeling selves, so that we’re not constantly analyzing with the mind, but simply experiencing in wonder. Play can restore in us the integrity of how God has made us — mind, body, and spirit.

The Book of Genesis preserves two folkloric creation stories, each illuminating the other’s vision of God. I find the second story pleasingly playful. In this rather anthropomorphic telling, God is portrayed as childlike, in the “cosmic sandbox,” forming humanity out the mud and breathing life into the “earth-being.” God created the universe to play in and companions for sharing the divine delight.

Whenever your life gives opportunity for leisure, dare to be spontaneous, even silly. Play a round of miniature golf and don’t mind if you lose. Take a vacation from analyzing and striving. Join in a raucous pillow fight! Literally or figuratively, work a lump of clay or take a handful of sand and make like God: breathe some life into it. And then, be sure to sit back and simply delight in all that you have done and all that you are — just as God does. 🌱



Watercolor paints in the Guesthouse invite retreatants to try praying in playful ways.



Our Homes are Open to All

Retreat is one of the cornerstones of our ministry because we believe so strongly in its transformative power. We would love to welcome you on retreat at the Monastery in Cambridge, or at our rural monastery, Emery House.



“This sacred space has taught me much about the rhythms of life.

It has enlightened me about the gift of silence – a silence not associated with secrets, isolation, or darkness; a silence not associated with abuse. This silence is different – it is a gift that allows for the busyness that occupies my non-stop brain activity to be overtaken by the rituals of reciting the psalms, singing canticles, reading scripture, and offering prayers. What

appears, at first, to be rote and mechanical slowly and rhythmically escorts me into a new mental landscape – one that allows me to enter a vastness, a space of simple being, an abundant quietude. This quietude, in return, allows me to make space in my heart for what God might need me to hear. It allows me to engage the depths of my hopes and concerns. I confess, I am smiling as I type this – as I would never have imagined myself as much of a monastic-style person – but I have found a nourishing freedom by what has now become my twice-annual sojourn to the Monastery overlooking the river. And I have learned that freedom is an important part of what I need in order to maintain a healthy spirit of grace as I witness and engage in the reconciling ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. I believe it is something we all need.”

**– The Rev. Ruth Faith Santana-Grace
Executive Presbyter
Presbytery of Philadelphia
Presbyterian Church USA**

**We invite you to explore our program retreats
or consider an individual retreat with us**

www.SSJE.org/visit | guesthouse@ssje.org | (617) 876-3037



Changed Hearts & New Powers

“I cherish the liturgical cycle of feasts and fasts because they are a way to stay connected to the traditions of our faith, while at the same time helping us maintain a connection to the natural rhythms of our world. It is clear to see how the liturgical cycles of Lent, Easter, Pentecost and Advent took shape in relation to the natural seasons. As vital as they seem, our modern creature comforts and gadgets can easily distance us from both the rhythms of nature as well as the rhythms of our faith.



– Br. James Koester

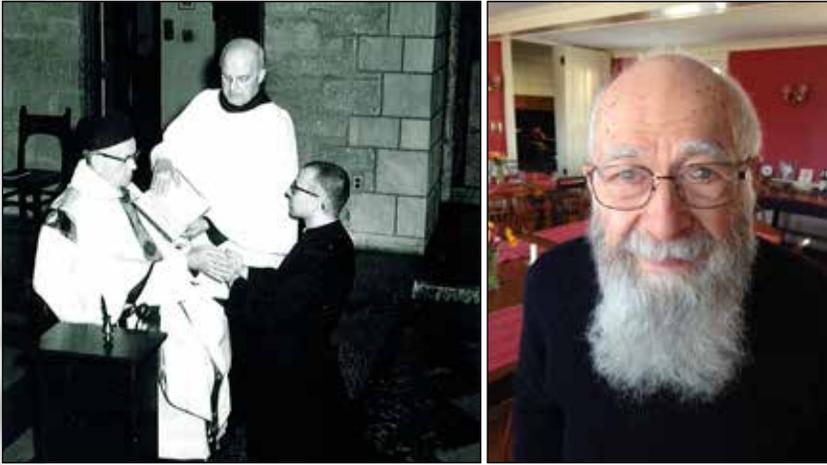
In the frenetic pace of this modern life, change is frequent and often disorienting. As Christians, we are called to change, but not merely for the sake of change. Our founder, Richard Meux Benson wrote that we change because ‘...our coming to Christ changes everything, and therefore even to old scenes we return with changed hearts and new powers.’

Our guests often comment that they leave their retreat a changed person. This delights my Brothers and me, for we, too, are changed by the encouragement and kindness which so many provide to us. Our community is not self-sufficient. None of us are. We are grateful for the fullness of our friends’ support, for it sustains us and encourages us as we continue our mission to share the life-changing good news of the gospel. My Brothers and I thank you.”

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Br. David Allen (L) during his Life Profession and (R) now, as he celebrates the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood.

Celebrating Sixty Years of Ministry

On Friday, 21 December (the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle) Br. David Allen celebrated the 60th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood. He was ordained priest at Saint John's Bowdoin Street, by Bishop Spence Burton, a former Superior of SSJE. Br. David recalls that that day was a high point of his early time in the Society. In joyful celebration of our Brother David's long and faithful ministry in our community, we share his own recollections of his first inquirer's visit to SSJE, as well as his reflections on the future of the Society:

"On my first inquirer's visit to the SSJE, I flew from San Francisco to Chicago, where the plane was grounded by a blizzard. My journey by train the rest of the way to Boston through that snowstorm was an adventure in itself, as was my walk through about a foot of snow from Harvard Square to the back gate of the Monastery. Two novices who were shoveling snow let me in through the backdoor and the kitchen. A hot bath and tour of the Guesthouse helped me to settle in. My sleep that night was accompanied by dreams of Psalms and chants. The next day I began to feel very much at home. My feeling of being called to a monastic vocation was confirmed by a three-day retreat based on the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises later that week. On the plane flying back to San Francisco, I was filled with such euphoria at having made that decision that I wondered if my fellow passengers noticed anything special about me.

Looking back over decades in this community, I can see how the Society – sustained and supported by our vows, our ministries, and our dedication to the Beloved Disciple, St. John the Evangelist – has been able to face the challenges of each era and move ahead from strength to strength in the service of God."

Forming Those Who Form Others

In a world where the needs and possibilities for ministry are endless, it can be a challenge for us all to decide where we should put our energy and resources to work. The SSJE Community's Mission Statement offers guidance in these decisions and reminds us that one of the principal ministries of the Society has been and continues to be the work of ongoing spiritual formation.

One important focus in our work of spiritual formation has been engaging with seminarians. We are particularly interested in forming those who will have a role in forming others, believing in the 'ripple effect' our efforts could have on future generations. Here are some of the ways we have been involved with seminarians recently: In November, Br. David Vryhof was asked to lead a Day of Reflection for the faculty and students of the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, reflecting on how monastic wisdom and spiritual practices might inform their lives in community. In January, Br. Curtis Almquist led a three-day retreat for Middler Students from the Berkeley Seminary at Yale Divinity School, on "Abiding in Christ Amidst a Tyranny of Expectations." Later in January, Brs. Luke Ditewig and Keith Nelson traveled to the Virginia Seminary to teach a week-long course entitled "Teaching Others to Pray." The course aimed to acquaint the students with a variety of prayer practices and ways in which they might use these to deepen the lives of those whom they will serve. In March, Br. Curtis returned to Berkeley to lead a colloquium entitled, "Wisdom: The Eyes of the Heart Being Enlightened." We cherish these opportunities to share from the storehouse of monastic wisdom what has been given to us.

Here's something to ponder: How might a "Mission Statement" or a "Rule of Life" help you shape your priorities and make conscious decisions about how to employ your energy and resources for God's greater glory?





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