

On Retreat

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Summary: Summarizes the first day's conferences of a weeklong silent retreat. Emphasis is on learning to increase our love of God through the right ordering of our desires in every day actions. Comments on the surroundings. (DDLW #393).

An account of a day in my life, first day of a retreat, July 18-25, spent in silence and in prayer. I should not sign my name to these retreat notes, since I was taking down what I heard. Yet the priest who gave the retreat would not claim them either. He would give credit to St. Paul, to St. Jerome, to St. John Chrysostom, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, to any and all of the saints quoted. Or he would give credit to Fr. Lacouture, S.J., or Fr. Pacifique Roy, S.S.J., or Fr. John J. Hugo, secular. They all give the same retreat, having made it with the first-named priest. The priest who happened to give this retreat this time was Fr. Louis Farina of the Pittsburgh diocese, head of St. Anthony's orphanage, at Oakmont, Pa. Oakmont is three-quarters of an hour from Pittsburgh. It costs twenty-five cents to get there by bus from the Greyhound terminal.

The cost of the retreat (there are four or five through the summer) is what you can pay. If you are just able to pay your fare, you pay nothing. Maybe you pay two dollars, maybe five, and then someone comes along and pays a hundred, so as to include his poorer brothers. Fr. Farina believes in sowing what he has—food, shelter, spiritual wealth. The Lord has to take care of things. If they get down to bread and water, well, then all the better retreat. As it is we had very good meals three times a day—so good, so enjoyable, that it was a pleasure to fast on Friday to thank our Lord.

“Come to the Waters”

My notes are incomplete! I am just taking bits of them here and there and using them. I had made the retreat twice before and had made copious notes. I started making them as clear as I could for those at home who could not make the retreat, who were hindered by illness or family or job.

For inexactitude in quoting, for putting the emphasis here or there (where *I* needed it, probably), please excuse me. I realize that it is hard to print such fragments as this without doing a grave injustice to those priests who give the conferences. But I did want just to give

a taste of my retreat, as though to say to others, “Come and see that the Lord is sweet.” Learn of Him and find rest for your souls.

“Isaias 50:1-2: All ye that have thirst of desire, come to the waters, and all ye that have no silver of your own will and desires, make haste; buy from Me and eat; come and buy from Me, wine and milk (that is, spiritual sweetness and peace) without the silver of your own will, and without giving me any labor in exchange for it, as ye give for your desires. Wherefore do you give the silver of your will for that which is not bread—that is of the Divine Spirit—and set the labor of your desires upon that which cannot satisfy you? Harken to Me, and ye shall meet the good ye desire, and your soul shall delight itself in fatness.” *St. John of the Cross*.

For ten years, here in The Catholic Worker, in Houses of Hospitality and on farming communes, speaking and writing and working, I have been trying to change the social order. Now I realize that I must go further, go deeper, and work to make those means available for people to change themselves, so that they can change the social order. In order to have a Christian social order we must first have Christians. Fr. Lallemand talks about how dangerous active work is without a long preparation of prayer. Aldous Huxley quotes him at length in *Grey Eminence*. *The Catholic Digest* quoted this book at length recently.

The Desert Fathers had these same ideas. When times became so bad (when there was universal conscription, for instance) they retreated by the tens of thousands to the desert wastes to pray, to work, and God knows what the world would have been without them. St. Ephrem came out when there was need and retired again to pray.

First Conference

Christ is with us, though our eyes are blinded, just as He was with the disciples at Emmaus. Keep the attitude of listening. The retreat will be as successful as your silence. Silence is of the whole being, all our senses, of all our powers. Keep only the power of loving. Control our eyes. The eyes let in much noise, just as do the ears. We need solitude, silence of mind. The mind definitely makes a noise. Stay in the company of God. By not looking at others, as well as by not speaking to others we keep in solitude. Renew resolutions of silence every day.

Just before coming on this retreat, I was reading Newman’s historical essays, on St. Basil and St. Gregory, their friendship, their differences. St. Gregory made resolutions of silence very often, for all of Lent for instance. Newman admired this great discipline, “at his age,” too.

“Speak Lord”

Our prayer should be, “Speak Lord, for thy servant heareth.” We should ask God to teach us the secrets of His love. Insist on this love with importunity. No other love is happy unless it finds its roots in this. Loving God seems to be loving nothing? But there is a definite way. We must learn the rules. There is infinite happiness waiting. Also it will free us from the slavery of other loves. God is nothing else but love. “Where love is, there God is.” All other

loves pale in comparison. Our nature is not built for so strong a love, so we must change our nature. “Enlarge thou my heart that thou mayest enter in. How can you tell if a person loves you? By their thoughts, words and deeds. Our love is made up of our actions. There is a conformity, a union of desires, tastes, deeds. many people want to and do make sacrifices, but there is not much change in the temperature of their love for God. On this retreat we study ourselves first. Our *Adam* life. Every one has that. Fr. Joseph calls it our *Pharisee* life. But there is our Christ life too. We are children of God. Grace is participation in the life of God. Human life is natural to us. Supernatural life is added unto us. We have new powers.

Second Conference

Good actions may be human or divine There is confusion in regard to these. The only actions which lead to God are divine actions. Supernatural action has God for its end. The natural has ourselves. Action has value according to whom the action is directed. The act of eating for instance. For our own pleasure, or to build our bodies to strengthen them to serve God. I Cor. xiii. *Charity is to be preferred.* There is such great waste in our lives in just good actions. The whole burden of the retreat is to do all actions for the love of God. Divine love is as different from human love as human is from animal.

(For a week it has been boiling. In New York, in Baltimore, in Washington, the temperatures was 95. The trains and buses were so crowded that it was doubly hot. The B. & O. from Washington to Pittsburgh was packed, as many standing as seated. At three o'clock two families got in with six babies. One woman was pregnant. No one got up to give them seats. I held one baby on my lap, a little girl sat on a suitcase at my feet, and a little boy sat in the corner ledge by the window and kept falling off as he tried to sleep. I soon began to smell of baby. The car smell of cigars and cigarettes. It was filled with men in uniform.)

Love of God

Our greatest danger is not our sins, but our indifference. We must be in love with God. It is not so much to change what we are doing, but our intention, our motive. It is not sufficient that we refrain from insulting a person, we must love. This retreat is to increase our love for God. When we say that we love God with our whole heart, it means whole. We must love only God. And that sets up the triangle—God, the soul, the world. The wife wants the husband's whole love. Suppose a husband pays no attention to his wife, and we say: “Well, he does not beat you, does he? You should be satisfied that he does not kill you. What are you complaining about?” It is the same with God. He is not just content that we are not in a state of mortal sin. Mortal sin is the sin of the Pharisee, putting Christ to death in our hearts. Mortal sin, according to St. Thomas, is a turning from God to creatures. We must do more than avoid mortal sin. We must do more than just stay in a state of grace.

(I remember two years ago Fr. Hugo saying that if a mother had an imbecile child, and someone tried to comfort her by saying, “But he has *life*,” she would not find much comfort

in that. She wants her child to grow in mind and body. If we say, “but I can get away with this or that, I can do so much and have so much, and still stay in a state of grace,” our souls are like the mind of that imbecile child, with no development and no growth.)

The question comes to your mind then, how can we love our husbands, our children, our mothers?

Subordinating Creatures

All the other loves I have must be a sample of the love of God. All the world and everything in it must be samples of the love of God. We must love the world intensely, but not for *itself*. We are human beings; we do not cease to be human beings, but we are baptized human beings. At death we are going to join God with the amount of love we have gathered for Him. What we have when we die we will have for all eternity. “As the tree falleth.”

(Outside the gymnasium where we are having the conferences the early morning mist has lifted. The hot sun shines through the haze. The birds sing, there is the hot sound of locusts in the trees.)

Two people who are deeply in love are thinking of each other all the time, and what they can do for each other. So we must be with God. The love of God is more intense than any human love. Keep asking for this love.

(Between conferences we walk in the fields back of St. Anthony’s, or pace the wide lawn on the side, or sit among the flowers out in front. Surrounding the statue of St. Anthony is a delightful flower bed—zinnias, cannas, petunias, poppies, cosmos, roses, scabiosa. A spice bush moth hovers over, shimmering like a bit of sunlight. The boys are beginning to cut the lawn, and to offset the pain of the noise of the gasoline motor is the prospect of the sweet-smelling hay outside the windows of our dormitories, which during the ten months of the year are classrooms for the hundred children here.)

Third Conference

Our heaven starts immediately on baptism. God is most generous in increasing graces, in increasing this Heaven within us. Supernatural actions bring with them a reward, an increase. Natural actions bring a natural reward and end at the grave. We must try to amass more and more God in our hearts. “Our hearts were made for Thee, O Lord, and find no rest until they rest in Thee.” We have such a capacity for happiness that nothing here will satisfy it. “Enlarge Thou my heart that Thou mayest enter in.” If we had not heard of God, if we had not been baptized, we could go on looking for happiness here with no fault.

A farmer has a crab apple tree and engrafs a sweet apple tree on in. By Baptism we have engrafted in our human tree the divine. If other branches break out, these take nourishment away from the engrafted tree. The farmer keeps lopping them off. We are children of God because we have His own divine life in us by grace. Grace life goes on into eternity. The

blood tie ends at the grave. We form part with God because He has given us of His life. We must cultivate divine life, let it get all the nourishment. “Whether you eat or whether you drink, do all for the glory of God.” This does not mean that we do not enjoy our spaghetti for lunch. God gives us natural happiness too, in order to help us to love Him. We do not give up spaghetti because we like it. We eat to nourish, to serve God because we Love Him.

Natural Actions

There are good actions, supernatural and natural, divine and human. There are bad actions—sin. We turn from God, from good to evil, from light to darkness, from Heaven to hell. We are going to be saints in heaven to the degree that we are on earth. Natural actions are imperfect actions and lead to venial sin, which leads to mortal sin. So we are separated from God. No one sins to offend God, but to gain pleasure. Natural actions mean a slight turning from God. Sin and purely natural actions show difference in degree. When we commit a mortal sin it is not a sudden thing. We started to move to that mortal sin a long time ago. The more we go in for purely natural actions, the more we have the tendency to sin. Fight mortal sin? Impossible. Fight venial sin? But natural actions lead [to] tendencies which lead to venial sin, which leads to mortal sin.

False Religion

(Remember Father Roy’s comparison. A man who goes to spend an hour in church for a natural motive is on his way to hell as surely as the man who goes to a brothel. The only difference is the latter goes quickly, the former slowly. What a controversy that caused around the office for weeks . . . but it seems so simple now. An ad in the New York Times a few weeks ago: “I took God into partnership and after that there were no stoppages, no strikes.” How to bring God into business and make it pay! All this and Heaven too! Tom Girdler, famous head of Republic Steel, endorses this book. It was in the Republic Steel strike in Chicago in 1937 that the Memorial Day massacre occurred where twelve were shot dead and a hundred wounded. Maybe it is since then that God is being taken into partnership by the author of this book and by Mr. Girdler. The natural motive, making the business pay. No wonder that religion is called the opiate of the people!)

The Natural Motive

The only way to get rid of sin is to get rid of the roots of sin. Going to confession to get rid of the habit of mortal sin is like lopping off the top of the rank weed. The roots remain. Fighting sin is like bailing out a boat without bothering to stop up the leak.

What causes us to commit sin? Because we do not love God. It is not one drop of cold water poured into the barrel of hot water that chills it, but it is many drops. It isn’t the one

hundredth day of the fast which causes a man to die of starvation, but the days of weakening. Every purely natural motive weakens us.

The battle against mortal sin is a hopeless one. We must attack roots: the natural motive. Then sin will be dried up. The Christian fights on this plane always. Our whole attitude towards the world must be changed. St. Paul: All things NEW. 2 Cor. 5:17. Like being in love.

Fourth Conference

Why this pull in us? This double attraction? Before the Fall all our powers were obedient. Now they are in rebellion. They are off balance; unruly, gotten out of hand. To lead a spiritual life we must bring back that obedience. Bring back *pure* nature. Now it is weakened. Rom., chap. 7. The law is spiritual, but I am flesh, sold under original sin. For that which I work, I understand not. For I do not that good which I will, but the evil which I hate, that I do. There is a law of the flesh. All people are essentially good. But there is that which is in them—the law of the members, fighting the law of the mind, captivating them in the law of sin against the law of the spirit. Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death? The grace of God by Jesus Christ our Lord. It is by denying satisfaction to the flesh that we strengthen the spirit. Rom. 8:13. Wisdom of the flesh is death. Our Adam life and Christ life, are like white and black threads all entangled. Gradually and slowly we must take out of our lives all that is of self. Gal. 5: 6, 17. There is a double attraction. Some lives are a turmoil because people are strengthening both Adam life and the Christ life at the same time.

Seed of holiness

When we were baptized a seed was placed in us. It tries to grow into a full-blown tree of holiness. Everyone is given that seed at baptism. It is not too late to begin cultivating this seed of the degree of sanctity God intends for us. The burden of the retreat is to uncover that sanctity and let it grow, to start now. The only purpose for which we were made was to become saints. What is to be done, how is it to be done? Continue asking Mary that we be taught.

It is half-past five, just past benediction. I am sitting by the little statue of St. Anthony by the flower bed. There are two large fat robins and three smaller ones. There are two woodpeckers bigger still, with very long bills. There are three tiny birds so small the grass almost hides them. A chipmunk runs across the grass, and a little rabbit, scarcely bigger than the woodpecker, races across the lawn to stand posed under the flower bed. A typical St. Anthony scene.

Inside the big house there is the sound of setting tables and the happy sound of children's voices. They help in preparing vegetables, setting tables. You see little girls darning stockings and ironing clothes. They work hard and they play hard, and they make a meditation every

day of fifteen minutes, and when they quarrel, Fr. Farina says happily, “See how they are sanctifying themselves.” And the nuns could retort, “and everyone around them.” (Too many mothers send the children off to the movies, to get them out of the way, thus preventing this sanctification.)

Fifth Conference

What did Christ say about this principle we have been talking about? He condemns our use of the things of the world. All the things we can love outside of God are three: the world goods, body goods, soul goods. Goods of soul are friendship, love, honor, praises, glory. The goods of world and body are obvious. Every action has an end, a means and a result. He commends their use for God. He condemns their use for natural motives. St. Luke says, *Blessed are you poor, woe to you who are rich.* This is in regard to world goods.

Blessed are you who hunger now; woe to you who are filled (body goods). Goods of soul: *Blessed are you who weep, woe to you that now laugh. Blessed shall you be when men shall hate you. Woe to you when men shall bless you.* The world is the opposite of Christ. (St. Luke is more ascetic than St. Matthew.) Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you. They can only hate the natural. They cannot hate the grace in you. If we practice these things, then people say we are crazy. Fine. We are then fools for Christ. Then, perhaps, they will leave us alone. People in love wish to be alone, anyway. So God lets these things happen so that we can be alone. *If anyone takes thy goods, ask them not again. If you love them that love you—sinners also do this. Do good, hoping for nothing thereby.*

Good Actions Wasted

There are so few saints because they will not act like this. Matthew 6. Justice is good, but if we are rewarded by men, we have then received our reward. The majority of Catholic lives are made up of good actions for natural motives. *“I did this or that for them, and they did not say thanks.”* When this happens, be happy. God will give you thanks. If you are disturbed, it shows the natural motives. So many good actions wasted.

(Outside the sun has set, the trees are breathing coolness. Such quiet, only the locusts again.)

Results? Are we to be as perfect as St. Francis, as St. John, as St. Peter? No, we are expected to be perfect, “as our heavenly Father is perfect.” Because God wants it. We must aim high because He says so. Lay up to yourselves treasures in heaven. What do you think about all day? Worldly things? There is your heart. Are you concerned about health, bodily goods? There your heart is. If one falls in love, all the habits of life are ruled by that love—letters, telephone calls, whatever we do.

All for God

Suppose, on getting married, a woman says: “*Are you sure you can supply me with clothes, with food?*” We are in love with God; we will have what we need. Behold the birds of the air: they neither sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns. (Fr. Bosch says: “Yes, but see how skinny their legs are.” He is making fun of the “extremism” of the retreat.)

God is a sensitive lover. God will not force you to choose Him. It is an insult to God to worry so about the things of the world.

(Right now, today, as I sit here at this conference, the five hundred dollar payment on the mortgage is due at Maryfarm. I haven’t the slightest idea how it has been gotten together and paid. For I am sure that it has. If by any chance it is not paid, then that, too, is His will. And we will all take it, whatever happens. If the mortgage is foreclosed—the farm is all paid for but a thousand dollars—then we will live on a rented farm—that is all.

The conferences for the day are over. It is dusk and a most delightful coolness in the air. We have just finished singing the *Salve Regina*, and it is almost time to prepare for bed.

Out in front of the convent building, which adjoins the school building where we are, the nuns, seven of them, sit with their sewing baskets. These sisters are Zelatrice of the Sacred Heart, an Italian order, and from their bright serenity, their happy way with the children, and with us, one would never know that not only all Sicily is being invaded, but Rome being bombed by British and United States forces. This unhappy world! Thank God there are such oases as these where one can gather strength and fortitude for the combat, the strong conflict which goes on in one’s own soul.

It gets dark as I sit here, and the fireflies add wonderful effects to the little round flower beds. The birds of the air, the flowers of the field, was ever Solomon in all his glory arrayed as one of these?)

P.S.—This is only one day of the six-day retreat, a fragment, though a long one. I could not resist using it for the paper, because all of us at Mott street, and many Catholic Workers from around the country have spent their summer vacations making this retreat. It is the burden of our two pamphlets, *In the Vineyard* and *The Weapons of the Spirit*, and of the pamphlet *This Is the Will of God—your perfection*, all by Fr. John J. Hugo, the latter published by the Sunday Visitor Press, Huntington, Ind.