



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Living in Christ Retreat

We are fortunate today that retreats are available to each and every Catholic adult through retreat centers and many parishes. We've looked at a few examples:

- [GEMS #12: A Vicariate Mission](#)
- [GEMS #20: A Retreat by Parishioners](#)
- [GEMS #29: Do It Yourself Evening of Reflection](#)
- [GEMS #31: Parish Week of Renewal](#)
- [GEMS #72: A Busy Person's Retreat](#)

In this current issue, Laura Broyles, former adult faith formation director, St. Thomas a'Becket Parish, Canton, MI, shares with us an experience of continually offering a retreat at their parish.

The Birth of the Idea

The idea of retreats surfaced from hearing a talk which suggested that we have forgotten our core work of being church: to bring people into personal relationship with Christ. The value of offering ongoing parish-based retreats to help Catholics experience just such a personal encounter was highlighted.

Preparations

Laura's first step was to form a retreat team composed of twelve parishioners which began to study the most effective approach for offering retreats at their parish.

- They first read and discussed the book by Bill Huebsch, *Dreams and Visions*.
- They then attended one weekend retreat which a neighboring parish was continually offering for their parishioners.
- The committee determined that a one-day retreat – offered several times each year - would be a better fit for the everyday schedules of their parishioners.

- As the team discerned their interests and varying gifts, some became presenters, some facilitators, others worked with environment or hospitality, some served on prayer teams.

The Retreat Design

The committee designed a retreat with two core components: three presentations/conversations and prayer/ritual. The Trinitarian talks encompassed the basic message of salvation:

- Talk #1: God's Unconditional Love: to invite an appreciation of God's personal love for each and every person.
- Talk #2: Salvation in Christ and Conversion: to illustrate that Jesus brings us God's saving grace; Christ is always inviting us to relationship.
- Talk #3: Empowered by the Spirit: to lead the participants to an understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives; the Spirit renews the church through each one of us.

The design utilized a parishioners-ministering-to-parishioners approach. By weaving their own faith stories and life experience into their talks, the presenters personified the goals of their talks.



The Retreat Program

The day revolves around the messages of the three talks. Following each talk and time of quiet and a reflective song, small and large group sharing helps the participants to delve deeper into the meanings for their lives.

The day then moves into the second core component: prayerful commitment ritual and liturgy.

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The participants are led through a guided meditation not unlike a "healing of memories" and an examination of conscience. Retreatants are invited to consider the person who has hurt them the most or the one they find the hardest to forgive, writing the name on a small slip of paper. They are also invited to write down the sin or block they think most keeps them from a deeper relationship with God. Everyone is then led in a Prayer of Surrender to Christ.

Another sheet of paper contains a commitment form in which they are asked to consider how they might make changes in their life to continue to grow in faith in the four areas necessary to live in Christ:

- Prayer and Worship
- Communal Life
- Ongoing Faith Formation
- Stewardship/Outreach

When finished they seal their paper into a self-addressed envelope.

The ritual continues as the participants are invited to respond in two ways:

- to leave something behind
- to commit to something new

Leaving behind sin and unforgiveness is symbolized by what they previously wrote; moving forward to a new action is recorded on their commitment form. Approaching a large brazier with burning coals placed in front of a cross, the retreatants are invited to place their paper on the coals, spend a moment in thanksgiving and then proceed to another section of the room where they place their commitment letter in a basket. They are then invited to go to one of the several prayer teams. The teams pray with each person for a few moments, asking God to empower the person with all that he/she needs to live fully in Christ.

With the conclusion of the ritual and their return to the meeting room, participants are invited to share something that touched them during the day –

what they learned, understood, appreciated or what was most memorable. This concludes with a final blessing by the team for the retreatants.

During the closing liturgy, retreatants are involved in the presentation of gifts, including one person who brings forward the basket of their commitment envelopes. In recognition of the retreat, the presider prays a special blessing for all retreatants. (The retreats are held alternately on Saturdays or Sundays. On Saturday, the day ends with the parish's 4:30 liturgy; on Sundays, the pastor celebrates a liturgy for the retreatants at the close of the retreat.)



Follow-Up

A couple months after the retreat, the commitment letter (unopened) is mailed to each of the participants in another envelope with a cover letter inviting them to consider opening their commitment letter when they have some time for personal prayer and reflection and consider how, since making their retreat commitment to God, they have lived it out.

Who is the intended audience? Who is the actual audience?

The intended audience is any and all adults, but most especially those who tend to be less involved in their faith or whose experience of Christ is detached from daily life. The first few retreats were given specifically for staff members, parish pastoral council and commission members before it was open to all parishioners. The committee felt it was important for those in leadership to experience the retreat so they could support and invite others to it.

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The earliest retreats seemed to be attended by those already involved in the parish and/or seniors. Gradually, others who are less involved have begun to attend. There is often at least one table of young adults.

Retreats are offered every other month from September through Lent. The hope of the team is to eventually make the retreats a part of the sacramental preparation process. It is already incorporated into the RCIA experience.

Publicity: Invitations to participate

Since publicity and invitation need to be constant and ongoing:



- a logo was developed which is used on everything enabling people to become familiar with this ongoing opportunity
- a personal letter of invitation to all parishioners is sent from the pastor
- a video clip from an actual retreat is posted on the parish website with a voice-over inviting people to the retreat
- articles, comments and invitations appear on the parish Facebook page, in the Sunday bulletin, in Mass announcements, in the vicariate newsletter
- "business cards" are on the tables during each retreat which include the year's retreat schedule; people are invited to take them and share them with their friends
- past retreatants speak at weekend liturgies, sharing what the retreat meant for them

Hospitality matters

The retreat team from St. Thomas a'Becket pays particular attention to hospitality and environment in various ways:

- Each registered retreatant is sent a letter of confirmation days prior to the retreat to confirm and outline the day.
- Each person is greeted at the door, signed in and given a nametag and booklet to help them with the day.
- An ice-breaker begins the day which aids in making everyone comfortable with being there.
- A continental breakfast is served upon arrival. A simple but nourishing lunch of various kinds of wraps, with fruits, vegetables, dips, chips, drinks, and cookies is provided.
- Breaks are offered throughout the day.
- The environment is welcoming: comfortable chairs, dim lighting, and attractive backdrop for the PowerPoint screen and speaker area. The prayer "chapel" has dim lighting, candles, cross, plants, etc.



Have the participants and/or the parish been changed by these retreats?

Laura tells us: "Some participants have become more involved in parish life and reported that it made them consider how much they need to continue to grow in faith. Several people who had been inactive in the church have returned and become active parishioners."

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Some people are making the retreat more than once and because we do have different presenters they hear something new, but even if they did not, it does not seem to matter to those who want to make the retreat again.”

Some participant responses have been:

- The sincerity and genuine faith of the speakers has touched me deeply.
- The retreat helped me gain more understanding, love and commitment to Christ and his love for us. It has been a spiritual and fulfilling experience.
- The ritual was an emotional and amazing experience.
- I have never experienced being prayed for by a prayer team before and it was so wonderful!
- This was a faith renewing experience. I felt lost before coming on this retreat.
- The retreat made me think about my relationship with God.
- The Holy Spirit component gave me a whole new understanding of the role of the Spirit in my life.
- I appreciated the personal testimonies, always part of the presentations, because they helped me connect what was being said to life.
- The table sharing helped me to articulate my faith experiences.
- It has changed my priorities.

One gentleman had been away from the church for fifty years. He made this retreat three times because, for him, he felt he had to assimilate slowly all he was hearing. In the end he was reconciled and returned to the church, and he joined the retreat team.

When asked if anything surprised her, Laura replied: “The commitment and excitement of the team seems greater than I see in some other ministries.”



Evaluations

Some of the changes that have resulted because of the concluding evaluation include:

- more time during table sharing
- time for the quiet reflection prior to the table discussion
- the icebreaker

There have also been requests that a second retreat be offered.



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*
http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/p25/The_Seasons_of_Adult_Faith_Formation.html and <http://www.lifelongfaith.com/2015-adult-faith-formation-symposium.html>