



On Retreat

I just recently returned from my annual, eight day, silent retreat which I made at Our Lady of the Redwoods Monastery in Whitethorn, California (in Southern Humbolt County). Jesuits are expected to make, yearly, an eight day silent retreat. Lay people may think this quite a luxury (given the cost and the time expended), although there were about seven lay women at the same retreat setting when I was there.

Our Lady of the Redwoods is a Trappistine monastery (women of the Cistercian or Trappist Order). It was founded in 1962 by a group of Flemish Belgian nuns who, originally, had thought of inaugurating a new monastery in the old Belgium Congo but the situation in the Congo in those years was rife with rebellion and the revolution which led to its independence. A gifted artist , Bob Usher, had lived in the wilderness area known as California's Lost Coast. Upon his conversion to Catholicism, he was moved to offer his land as a site for a new Cistercian monastery.

The incredible natural beauty of the property deeply moved the Belgian sisters. In keeping with the traditions of the early Cistercians, the new monastery was founded in the wilderness, amidst groves of redwoods and rolling hills, in a valley beside a river. Over the years, the sisters, aware of their responsibility of stewardship, have always been

supportive of local efforts to protect the surrounding forest, restore the watershed and reintroduce native salmon. Redwoods Monastery was also the last place Thomas Merton stayed for a period before he went off to an inter-religious meeting with monks in Bangkok where he died. Maybe some of the readers of this blog may have seen pictures of Merton in the Redwoods Monastery setting. Merton contemplated beginning a hermitage on that wild lost coast.

During my years as a Jesuit, I have made retreats in many settings (Jesuit retreat houses, houses at Jesuit Universities, Benedictan monasteries, etc). But something special happens in making a retreat in the beauty of wilderness. Very few people live in that stretch of Humbolt County. Someone has speculated that, were you to poll a random sample of fifteen or so people, asking them about special spiritual experiences in their life, the majority would report some spiritual experience in nature (and not, particularly, in a church or in formal prayer). They might talk about a sunset, a walk in the woods, sitting under a redwood tree, standing on the lip of the ocean. It helps to place one's self in surroundings congenial to lifting the heart and mind to the God of beauty as the One who cares for creation.

Experienced retreat goers become aware, over the years, of several usual patterns on retreat. First, they often, in the first few days, find themselves sleeping more than usual, even if they came to the retreat thinking they were relatively rested. It is much like the experience of massage therapy, when the therapist asks if there any kinks or knots and the person undergoing massage answers that they are completely unaware of any such knots, only later, when undergoing the massage, to feel the knots keenly. A second thing that happens, usually, on a retreat is an often acute awareness and remembrance, at quiet

times—not necessarily in prayer—of various graces and special presences of God in the past year which, at the time, we did not pay much attention to. As the body slows down and relaxes, the memory of graces flows in. Finally, prayer becomes somewhat easier and more deep on retreat. Even if we pray or meditate daily, only in the intense silence of multiple periods of prayer during the day do we enter a space of contemplative quiet and repose.

I judge Benedictan or Cistercian monasteries by one rule. How well and how reverently do they sing the office of the day (usually sung three to four times a day, for about fifteen or so minutes each time)? The lovely sisters at Our Lady of the Redwoods easily passed that crucial test for me. While I lack the constitution to ever have been a monk, I revel, in a retreat setting, in the quiet rhythm of chanting the psalms and singing hymns around morning prayer, at noon and evening compline. When reverently chanted and prayed, the office of the church can remind us that the psalms contain a wealth of holy sentiments, full joyous praise of God and a veritable school for how we can pray.

I marveled daily as—often throughout the whole day—flocks of the absolutely least skittish deer (including many fawns) I have ever seen leisurely lapped at the meadow in front of the monastery. It is as if, like Saint Francis with the animals, the sisters had learned to tame the wild animals. Fairly easily, I kept reverting to that lovely psalm prayer: “ As the deer longs for flowing waters, so my heart, O Lord, longs for you”. When I saw a fair bevy of skunks on the property, one sister said to me:” don’t fret. They have learned to be quite gentle and friendly when on our property!”

In any given year, the rhythms and focus of a retreat may vary greatly. Sometimes in life it is a time for important decisions or deep re-commitments. At other times, a

retreat is mainly a pause that deeply refreshes. Nothing wrong with just basking awhile in God's tender love and care for us, yes, imperfect or sinful as we are. In the Ignatian pattern, one prays, usually, four times a day for an hour on some scene from the gospels. Again, following an Ignatian focus, one tries to fathom what grace we really need or want. What are we asking God for at this time? While many of us can easily enough enter what Ignatius called "The First Week" (with its emphasis on our sins and failings), most of us need a longer time to let the more important fact sink in—really the only crucial one!-- that God loves us, passionately and personally, flawed and imperfect as we may be. We are, after all, construed in God's very image and called to rest in the bosom of his unending love.

In a wonderful sense, even outside of formal times of prayer, after a few days, almost all of the day becomes a kind of prayer, in the walk in the redwoods or across a meadow, in quiet reading of a spiritual book, in meal times. The sisters are vegetarians but I confess I have rarely eaten such wholesome and tasty bread, fruits, tofu casseroles and cheeses. I could forego eating meat if the meals offered were of that quality. Another amazing thing on retreat—in its silence—is how aware we can become of personality and characteristics just being silently with others as we wait in chapel for mass or the office, sit at meals or help wash the dishes afterwards or work with them in the garden. I was reminded, frequently, of the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins' line: "Elected silence, sing to me".

I finally read a spiritual classic while on this retreat: Jean Pierre de Caussade S.J.'s seventeenth century writing, The Sacrament of the Present Moment. I suppose I had taken, somewhat, to this retreat some worries or questions—being now 73 going on

74—about future states of health, energy, possibility for ministry. De Caussade would have us, following Ignatius, linger long on the reality that God is to be found everywhere, not just in formal ritual and prayer, not just in church, not just in what we might deem pious. God is active prompting and offering grace in every moment of the day. Why worry about what we can not control fully anyway or get hassled about some merely imagined future? Live in the present, doing what we are called to do, then and there, being there. As the Zen monks like to remind us, sometimes the proper slogan is not: “Don’t just stand or sit there, do something!” but its inverse: “Don’t just do something, just stand or sit there”.

My one regret, I said to my Jesuit friend, Rob McChesney, who accompanied me on this retreat, was that I had not gone to this monastery before. Friends of mine have been going there for years and saying how blessed a place it is. I also felt and told Rob that I could easily have stayed on for another week with pleasure, ease and joy. That is a good sign for a retreat. But when I returned and friends looked in vain for some halo effect or asked me how the retreat was for me, I had to say that I have learned that with God I am a very slow learner and that changes in deeper attitudes or behaviors take time to germinate. I also can only say about this or any other retreat that the proof of its ‘taking’ or having impact can only be finally seen in its longer lasting fruits.

If you are tempted to make a retreat for yourself, beware of worries or fears that God might ask of you something you are unwilling or unable to give (that thought comes from the bad spirit). God never asks of us what we are not truly ready to undertake. Do not indulge fantasies that making a retreat is, really, too much of a luxury in time or cost for yourself. After all, you are worth the time and effort given to a retreat. In that sense,

do not indulge any worries but simply indulge yourself. As Jesus once said, comparing us to the birds of the air in a field, “ You are worth so much more and are so more beloved of the Father than any of them!”