

# **Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation**

**Tangaza College  
Catholic University of Eastern Africa**

**A five – day retreat based on the theme:  
Introducing Postulants to Silence and Prayer**

**Author: Sr. Mildrate Nekesa B.S.D.P**

**Tutor: Mrs. Phyllis Muraya**

**April –2004**

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*This is a long essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
a diploma in religious formation*

**April - 2004**

## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this project is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research methods and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Diploma in Religious Formation. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed:



Name of Student:

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Date:

11<sup>th</sup> March 2004

*This project has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor*

Signed:



Name of Supervisor:

Mrs. Phyllis Muraya

Date:

11<sup>th</sup> March 2004

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family especially to my parents Janerose Oundo and Paschal Okumu. May the Almighty God bless and support you in your advancing age.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere thanks to God our Provident father, to my congregation at large and to our province specifically, and in a special way to my community, which has supported me in my endeavors to accomplish my studies at Tangaza. I extend my votes of thanks to Mrs. Phyllis Muraya who has patiently accompanied this work and has tried to help me realize my dream.

Thanks to Sister Loretta Brennan, Director of the Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation/Spiritual Direction for your encouraging messages that expressed your desire to see me succeed.

Brother John Carrigg, you have been so simple to me. Thanks for being available all the time to proof read my essay. I will not forget each one of those who have wished me a successful out come of this work though they are not mentioned here thank you very much for your support.

God bless you all.

# The Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence

The Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence, a semi-contemplative international congregation, follow the spirituality of St. Benedict Abbot – father and protector. With their motto “*Ora et Labora*” the Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence seek at all moments to be alert to the inner inspirations to make their life a continuous prayer. To achieve this, the sisters have during the day, times fully dedicated to prayer. To acquire a spirit of prayer, the sisters also require prolonged pauses for retreats which may be at least six days.

This five-day retreat for the postulants is based mainly on Scripture and the majority of the quotations are from the Benedictine tradition. The Rule of St. Benedict has been widely cited because the Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence follow Benedictine Spirituality and are guided by the Rule of Benedict. Other sources have been used to help the retreatants acquire a wider view of how they can grow in their spiritual lives.

## INTRODUCTION

The exercise of recollecting the divine word in our hearts, amid silence and interior peace, is a Christian tradition handed on to believers as a spiritual heritage. It dates back to Christ, and has continued from the early Church to the present. We do this after the example of Jesus who made forty days of prayer in the desert before the beginning of his public life. "Retreatants down the centuries have therefore imitated Christ, the retreatant *par excellence*".<sup>1</sup> In our time we hear of people going on retreat: members of organizations, political parties, committees in the Church or in other organizations, having a day or two-day retreat, held in some unusual environment outside their normal places of operation. They pull away from their duties to be by themselves, which is necessary because it enables people to focus on what has been going on for some identified period of time.

Christians need to have these moments to pay attention to their lives in general. All of us need some quiet place to realize this. Our spiritual journey is initiated by God, and at his initiative, he invites us to a deeper knowledge and intimate relationship with him. Going on a retreat is a way of responding to God's invitation that we experience through the desire to know him. Christians go on retreat because of the need to deepen a personal relationship with God. If one wishes to discern the various movements of the spirit experienced at deeper level of one's being, a period of retreat would serve for this. As James Neafsey has written,

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<sup>1</sup> AUGUSTINE KLAAS, *Review for Religious*, p 3

One of the fundamental purposes of a retreat is to become aware of how one has internalized the half truths, twisted values, emotional numbness, frantic space and compulsive patterns so that they can be recognized, named and released<sup>2</sup>

Such an understanding of withdrawal from daily activities and the noisy environment of our daily life remains an important motivation for retreats. We have possibilities of making thirty days, eight days or six days of either a preached or a guided retreat.

The focus of this essay however is a five-day preached retreat for the postulants of the Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence, whose main purpose is to deepen the prayer life of the young women, so as to bring them to greater conversion drawing them closer to the Lord. These retreat conferences are aimed at introducing the participants to silence and prayer. The purpose of the selected themes is to foster greater listening to God in Scripture and a deepening of the postulants' relationship with him and with one another, giving value to the Word contained in Scripture.

### **1.1 Retreat Plan.**

In order to help the postulants get into the selected themes, I will try to create a conducive atmosphere for my participants. I intend to give one conference of forty minutes each day, giving them ample time to pray and reflect. I will introduce each conference with a short prayer and end with the Doxology. Material will be given to the participants for personal reflection at the end of every conference. Besides a personal bedroom, the participants will be asked to choose one room each where they can make their personal prayer. These will be used exclusively for prayer. We shall follow the

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<sup>2</sup> JAMES NEAFSEY, *Retreats in Transition*, 14.

liturgy of each day at the Liturgy of the Hours and at Mass, which will be celebrated in the evenings. On the fourth day, Sacramental reconciliation will be made available. The participants will meet in the community chapel for morning prayer, mass, and for silent adoration before the exposed Blessed Sacrament. Mid-day prayer will be personal. We shall have faith sharing sessions each day in which participants will encourage each other through listening to others and sharing some aspects of their reflections. I will make it clear to the participants that the sharing is according to the individual's wish and whatever one wishes to share will be welcomed. The sharing session will also help my participants who are quite young and not very experienced, to remain focused. I will inform the retreatants that I will be available for consultation in the room next to the conference room beginning at 9:30 am to 11:00 am during the five days of retreat. Schedule during the five days (See Appendix 7)

## **1.2 Description of my Group of Participants**

The postulants are young religious women aged 19-21 years, who have been received into the postulancy with the aim of helping them know themselves better and thus find out whether or not they want to embrace religious life in general, and in particular, discover their capacity of living according to the spirit and charism of the Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence. They make this one-year's experience prior to the novitiate. During this period, the main focus in our congregation is the study of the Christian doctrine and liturgy, so that the young religious may deepen their

Christian life and learn how to live according to the Gospel. The seven have been with us for two years, one year before the postulancy and another year as postulants. Throughout this period they have participated actively in our community life, prayer and apostolic activity. Last year they resided in the different houses of the Institute where they had been received as aspirants.

### **1.3 The Venue for the Retreat.**

The retreat will take place in our formation house in Kakamega. We shall use the community meeting room for our daily conferences. The sitting style for the participants will be a semi-circle facing the chalkboard on which I will write each day's theme in relation to the topic. Just in front of the participants near the chalkboard will be a low table on which I will place a Bible and a plant that the postulants have been taking care of. I will also use low instrumental music for a few minutes before the start of the conferences to create a prayerful atmosphere and help to quiet down.

### **1.4 The Evening before the Retreat Begins**

The evening before the retreat begins will be a time of preparation. I will introduce the theme of the retreat, the aim of the conferences, the daily schedule. I will emphasize the value of silence so as to listen, to pray and to nurture the already established relationship with God, self and others. The schedule for five days will be

displayed on the notice boards in the conference room, in the dining room and at the main entrance of the house.

## **1.5 Preparation**

The retreatants will be guided to prepare for the actual beginning of the retreat by a reflection on the need for rest and solitude. Below is an exercise to help in preparation.

### **1.5.1 The Reading. (Mk.6: 30-32).**

In Scripture we see from the very beginning that after God had finished his work of creation, he rested on the seventh day. In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus calls the disciples on many occasions to come away by themselves. "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." (Mk.6: 31) Jesus is compassionate and knows our needs especially our need for rest. We need to be energized, to be nourished by Jesus so as to have something worthy to share with the people we live and work with. To go to a quiet place in "search for God is not meant to be an escape from our work and responsibilities. It is meant to empower us to return to our work with new enthusiasm and new power."<sup>3</sup> The followers of Christ in all ages need these moments to be in communion with him who is the source of all our strengths and of our successes. Today, Christ is making the same invitation to us, to come to this silent place so that we can

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<sup>3</sup> X. GAETA FRANCI, *With You Always*, 46

create silence in our hearts. This silence is not just the absence of noise but it is to listen to him, to establish a relationship or communion with him. Let us prepare ourselves to begin our retreat with this spiritual exercise.

- Before retiring to bed, re-read this text (Mk 6: 30-32)
- Mentally call on Jesus, for a number of times
- Jesus is inviting you now to a quiet place
- He calls you by name ...come away and be at rest.
- Do you feel the need to be in a quiet place?
- Stay with the feelings that come to you;
- Capture your strongest desire now.
- Repeat the verse or phrase that most draws your attention; stay with that.

## 2. FIRST DAY: SILENCE IS FUNDAMENTAL FOR PRAYER

Silence is fundamental for our spiritual life. We live in a world that is dominated by images, music and all sorts of sounds. In silence we learn to listen and to recollect ourselves, to return to ourselves and avoid self-sufficiency deriving from incapacity to listen to one's inner-self. Naturally silent people are capable of listening and communicating with themselves and perhaps with God. This does not mean that all silence serves. There is the silence that threatens, there is the silence that is ignoring the other person or his/her ideas but this is not the silence that enables one to hear what is deep within one-self. The silence of acceptance, silence that is a promise, silence that is

examining the possibilities, the silence of praise, of returning to the origins before the unknown; is the silence that brings us to an encounter with the Lord. Likewise,

both noise and silence can become defensive against painful truths. Sound can banish the quiet that threatens to confront us with the truth of ourselves. Silence equally can be used as a cocoon protecting us against people who would challenge us or make demands we are unprepared to meet. Silence can also become a weapon, wielded in icy ignoring<sup>4</sup>

This explains why many people around us have fear of being alone in quiet, and have preferred the constant company of music, radio, television or constant talk without stopping to reflect on what they talk about. When we cannot opt for silence, therefore, we are not endeavouring to transcend the unknown, the mystery within and around us. It is in silence that one loses the way because true silence makes one poor. It is good that we learn to have some moments of silence in our lives because in silence we not only encounter ourselves but we encounter God too.

## 2.1 The Purpose of Silence

Before his active ministry Jesus is silent for thirty years; after his baptism in the Jordan he remains alone in silence in the desert for forty days. In silence he prepares himself for his mission. Jesus invites his chosen ones to silent places. Through silence Jesus learns to become man, he faces the silence of his Father in Gethsemane and on the cross: “ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”? (Mk 15:34). The absence of noise around develops in us a sense of interior peace as it brings us to an encounter with our very selves. It provides the stillness that enables the ear of the heart to listen

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<sup>4</sup> STEWART COLUMBA, *Prayer and Community*, 51-52

attentively in order to hear God who is not found in the “whirlwind” and to discern his ways. With God in silence, we demonstrate our relationship, our love, like friends who do not need words to express their love for each other.

## **2.2 Coming to Attentive Quiet before God.**

Many people of our generation are striving to find space in their lives where they can encounter the Lord. We believe that Divine Presence is everywhere, for God is Omnipresent. We live in a world where we are surrounded by noises and activities and in all these God exists. To be able to hear his voice, to listen to him and to discern his will however, we need absence of noise. In silence God converses intimately with man/woman. “God spoke to Elijah not in the mighty wind, not in the earthquake, neither in the fire but in a tiny whispering sound” (1Kings 19:11-13). Jesus instructing the disciples on prayer says: “prayer is not burbling, ... should be done in secret” (Mathew 6: 6-8). In the secret place when we are alone we hear the inner voice telling us of the basic needs for the nourishment of our vocation. Creation of a precious space within us helps us to become reflective and grounded in our decisions because we make them in communion with God. Let us then learn to appreciate that secret place that God has created in us.

## **2.3 God Introduces his Messengers to Silence First**

The participants will listen to the extract from 1Kings 19:9-15 in which they will note that God comes to our encounter peacefully. The reading is also meant to communicate to them that solitude is a place of true encounter with God.

### 2.3.1 The Reading (1Kings 19:9-15)

In the Old Testament we read about the prophets who went to the desert or to the mountain to be by themselves. In the New Testament, we see Jesus going up the mountain to be by himself. In the desert and on the mountain when they were by themselves they conversed with God.

“We see in both the Old Testament and the New Testament and in the History of the Church, that whenever God intended to intervene in history, he prepared a human being for the task. Usually he called this person out of his normal environment and led him into the desert. There he kept him for a long period before drawing him to an encounter with himself”<sup>5</sup>.

When God called Abram and invited him to leave his country of birth and go to the Promised Land “... Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you.” (Gen 12: 1) he had several personal encounters with him in which he made the covenant clear and the relationship deeper and clearer. Abraham became the father of the nation “Israel”. The same was with Moses. First he encountered God at the burning-bush while caring for his father-in-law’s flock. To him God revealed his name “I AM” and granted him the mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses had several encounters with the Lord in lonely places “...Come up to me on the mountain and, while you are there, I will give you the stone tablets...” (Ex 24: 12). Similarly, it was with John the Baptist. He came out of the desert to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... and the coming of the Lord.

In the New Testament, we read that after his Baptism Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit. There he stayed forty days and forty nights praying. In many

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<sup>5</sup> JALICS FRANZ, *Called to share in His Life*, 35

circumstances Jesus goes to the mountains to pray. “In those days he departed to mountains to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God” (Lk 6:12).

In the history of the Church we encounter men and women with similar experiences. St Augustine after his conversion in Milan made a journey to Africa and remained for some years in the desert. St. Benedict after his encounter with God left Rome to a life of solitude at Subiaco where he was alone for three years in silence.

Hence, the prophets presented in the Old Testament, Jesus in the New Testament and the saints in the history of the Church made this experience of being by themselves, to personally encounter God. We need to be in silence, in lonely places to listen and to hear what is deep within us. In lonely places Jesus experiences intimacy with the Father. God speaks to us in silence: only when our heart is attentive can it listen to God speak. Solitude is the place of true encounter with God.

#### **2.4 Suggested Texts for Reflection**

- Jesus invites us to be by ourselves to rest (Mk 6:30-32)
- Jesus withdraws from the crowd to the desert (Mk 1:12-13)
- Jesus prays in order to discern the Will of the Father (Matt 4:1-10)
- Jesus makes his decision having spent time with the Father (Lk 6:12-16)
- In silence we communicate with God (1Kings 19:9-5)

### 3. SECOND DAY: AWARENESS AND PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE.

In our reflection yesterday, we focused on silence as a way to God. Attaining silence is important in our daily life. During a retreat, coming to attentive silence helps the retreatant to recollect and concentrate in prayer. On this second day, we shall learn to practice some way of centering, of coming to quiet, which can help recollect our thoughts and wandering minds to come single heartedly to prayer. Coming to quiet is what we can refer to as attaining self-concentration so that one's thoughts and desires are not running all over but coming to rest: coming to one's core and acting out of the center. Attaining silence during a retreat happens as we move through the days. If one does not succeed in concentrating on the first day, this should not cause any worry, there are more opportunities on the other days. We shall go through an awareness exercise, which should lead to concentration and if you find it helpful then you can try similar exercises at the beginning of your prayer periods. Awareness exercise to help the participants come to inner quiet and to awareness of the sensations, See Appendix 1.

#### 3.1 **God is within and around Us**

Awareness is what our senses bring to our consciousness: we smell, taste, hear, feel, etc. In our spiritual life we talk of awareness in relation to the perceptions that the Spirit brings to our conscience, the insights derived from reflections, contemplation. According to F. Jalics,

Awareness is followed by thought then reflection. It is our first reaction to what we have perceived. Perception leads us to God. Our failure to perceive God is because our restless mind and our hectic activity distract us from perception. To prepare for the grace of contemplation, we must learn to become aware.<sup>6</sup>

Awareness is to live in the “here and now moment in which God is accessible. [This is what our spirituality as Benedictines is all about] to walk in the presence of God.”<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2 Finding God in the environment

Creation is a revelation of God’s silent presence. It brings us closer to the Creator. Formation of nature and the beauty contained in it calls attention of many people to transcend what they perceive by sight. We sometimes ask questions when our attention is captured by what we see in nature: How did this come to be what it is? Who is behind such beauty? However, nature calls us to go beyond what our eyes see. To experience God, his presence and encounter him, we do not need to go far looking for Him, we do not need to do extraordinary acts. What we need to do is to concentrate, to become still and be conscious of the sensations of our body because in it God exists, communicating and working in us, with us through the Holy Spirit.

The Incarnation is an example of an experience of God in the ordinary way. In this experience, God the Creator became man and came to live among men/women. He became human like us in the incarnation. Jesus tells us “to have seen me is to have seen the Father” (John 14: 9). In Jesus is the God that we can see, feel, touch, listen to. St. Benedict, our father and protector, emphasizes on this mindfulness of the presence of

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

God. This awareness pervades his Rule. Benedict talks of listening and *lectio-divina* as the means of attuning the spiritual senses to the divine presence.<sup>8</sup> In chapter seven of the Rule which we study in the postulancy, Benedict bases his teaching on a more practical way of becoming aware of God's presence "in the Incarnation" when he speaks of Jesus as God whom the monks should recognize in the person of the other human being who ought to be adored. God whose incarnate presence is not limited to the Jesus of Nazareth, but in him who remains among us in our brothers and sisters. Christ too teaches us that he can still be incarnated in every human being who accepts the message of the Gospel. He tells us that we can become mother of the Son of God by becoming co-saviours with him.

### 3.3 Praying with Scripture.

We have talked of how we can maintain a close and constant relationship with God. We have seen that it is possible and is Christ's wish that we remain in communion with him. We are going to use Scripture in our prayer applying a method of prayer known as *Lectio-divina*. We shall look at its various stages: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. *Lectio-divina* is one way of maintaining a close union with Christ. It is a prayerful encounter with God in Scripture. It introduces us to the power of the Word of God in Scripture and speaks to the most intimate depth of our being. Benedictine spirituality regards this prayerful encounter with the word of God as a means of ongoing conversion of life, for it is reading which has God for its objective. In the Bible we read that God is the author of the 'Book' which St. Gregory considers as a letter sent

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<sup>8</sup> COLUMBA STEWART, *Prayer and Community*, 28

to us by God.<sup>9</sup> *Lectio-divina* comprises of four steps. We shall see what takes place at each particular step next.

### 3.4 Divine Reading of the Bible (*Lectio*)

This is the moment of prolonged hearing with a freed and recollected heart. In *lectio*, I am called to listen to God as I do to a living person. I listen to God in a biblical text in which I seek to obtain a true significance in all its plenitude. I stick to the text I have chosen and allow it to speak to me. When I read the Bible, I do it with conviction that God speaks to me in an attitude of interiority and in silence I surrender to listen.

### 3.5 Meditation (*Meditatio*)

This is a moment of plain penetration of the text. Words are prayerfully pondered, with the intention of drawing from them a personal meaning by the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. During meditation, the words acquire certain savor, then if this happens I need to stay in the experience for a while. It is the Lord who speaks to me. This stage can demand from one a change of attitude, a transformation or a decision depending on the Word that is heard. For example a consolation can be achieved by one who is experiencing negative feelings or moods; the person becomes peaceful.

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<sup>9</sup> M. COLOMBAS GARCIA, *Reading God*, 25

### 3.6 Prayer (*Oratio*)

In this phase, the text that was read and meditated at length gets transformed into an occasion of dialogue with God. I can use the very words of the text to address or refer to the “Other” who I tell what is referred to in the text and to whom I give thanks with my whole heart. In my prayer therefore, I invoke the Lord with some of the deepest phrases of the Sacred Scripture, such as, *True light, saviour etc*, telling him of my intimate being which derive from the Holy Scripture.

### 3.7 Contemplation (*Contemplatio*)

Contemplation is a gratuitous moment, if I persevere in long periods of letting the mind and heart be illuminated by the Word, in permitting that the Word changes into acclamations, cries or songs and in allowing myself be provoked by a mental change to think as God wants, then God will respond. At the same time I am being inundated by the sweetness of God’s presence and above all with unlimited love. Contemplation transcends the active mind. Concentration is placed on the loving, receptive and trusting presence of the mystery. Contemplation is an experience (not taught), for it is God who allows the human person to embrace this mystery. It is a gift we receive to know God through experience, the mystery of God that places the human heart to inner idleness: a state of listening, of being.

The daily practice of *lectio-divina* is a deep spiritual motivation which gives vitality to one’s “day” to remain new and evangelized. It gives rise to acts that keep one in hope, gives courage and joy. Nurturing of such practice of prayer will enable intimate

growth and a filial relationship with God in Christ. We can do this by learning to keep away from duty one hour each day to be alone with God.

### 3.8 Suggested Texts and Resources for Reflection

- ❖ Recognizing Jesus in a human person (pictures on some walls in different places of prayer) see Appendices 3-5
- ❖ God offers you his face in the person besides you (see Appendix 3)
- ❖ God is present in the cry of a child (see Appendix 4)
- ❖ In the street child who shouts at you for money, breakfast (see Appendix 5)
- ❖ Blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it (Lk 2: 22-28)
- ❖ The Word brings us to eternal life (1John 1:1-3)
- ❖ God rested on the seventh day. (Gen 2:1-3),
- ❖ Come to me and I will give you rest (Matt 11:25-30).
- ❖ God's place of rest (Psalm 95)
- ❖ In the potter's shop (Jer.18: 1-12)
- ❖ A reading instruction on *lectio-divina* (see Appendix 2)

## 4. THIRD DAY: WE LISTEN TO HEAR

Each one of us is called to listen to life outside ourselves, that yearns for the compassion and love of God. We are called to be a prolongation of life, to be Divine Providence for those whom we serve and meet. It is by doing this that we become co-redeemers with Christ. Let us take a few minutes to recall any of the picture that called

great attention during our prayer yesterday. You could try to remember what it meant for you, and ask yourself what message does that portray for me? What was God communicating to me?

#### 4.1 Life is a Universal Teacher of Truth

St. Benedict in the Rule exhorts us to “listen so as to attend to the important things in life and not let anything go without being open to allow ourselves to be nourished by the inner meaning contained in the events in life”.<sup>10</sup> The verb ‘listen’ as we are accustomed to hearing it used, also refers to other expressions such as to keep order, to pay attention, to be able to hear, to incline the ear, to heed. It is applied differently depending on circumstance and context in which it is being used. In Scripture, the verb is used to call on attentive hearing and taking to heart the given instructions, to be able to remember and follow them. Literally, it refers to maintain order in a given circumstance, to give some attention to whatever is taking place at the moment. St. Benedict refers to listening as “opening of the ears to divine voice”<sup>11</sup> and an inclination of the heart to the Lord who speaks to us. The first word in the Prologue of the Rule, “listen”, is an exhortation to attentive listening. “Listen carefully with the ear of the heart”<sup>12</sup>, says Benedict; bringing to our notion that it is by listening attentively that we will be able to take his message to heart and to remember it thereafter. Listening therefore enables nourishment by the inner meaning of the message. Joan Chittister commenting on the same says; “spirituality does not come by breathing, it comes by

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. JOAN CHITTISTER, *Rule of Benedict (Prol. 4)*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid (Prol 9)*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid (Prol 11)*

attentive listening.”<sup>13</sup> We grow in our spiritual life by listening with the ear of our heart, listening to our feelings, thoughts and senses to discover what is going on around and within us. Attentive listening will gradually bring us to awareness of what surrounds us, allowing ourselves to feel its effects. We learn and grow from any circumstance or event only when we allow ourselves to listen and be spoken to by it. Similarly, if we want to learn, to hear from God and know his intentions in order to respond to them and do accordingly, we ought to listen attentively—with the ear of the heart. This willingness to listen to the voice of God that St. Benedict is calling us to in the Prologue is what will in our own lives pull us away from the limitations of our own lives, calling us to something beyond ourselves that we can perceive only by listening: to our emotions, feelings and thoughts. “God’s word to us can be meditated in our own human relationship as well, provided they are well grounded in attentive listening and prayer.”<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.2 Listening to Our Life

We all experience feelings, thoughts sensations, but one could ask this question: How then can one relate these human experiences to God’s action? And, is awareness, contact with myself “prayer”? Carlos G. Valles quotes a similar question asked by a directee during spiritual direction, and in the process, he gives a spontaneous answer deriving from his many years of experience. He replies: “yes, because if we are in

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* (Prol 20)

<sup>14</sup> COLUMBA STEWART, *Prayer and Community*, 45

contact with God, our faith makes us see and feel God in all things.”<sup>15</sup> The spiritual exercises become in the end a sacred awareness of the divine presence in us and in all things, an intimate and committed worship in action of him in whom we live and move and have our being. The spiritual exercises of becoming aware of our sensations, thoughts, emotions and feelings will be useful, will become prayer only when we deepen in them our sense of the Transcendent.

The silence of mind acquired in the spiritual exercise is a supreme adoration before God and finding him in constant personal awareness of the world he has created around us and within us is the anonymous prayer which in the secret liturgy of the universe unites us to the source of all being with every breath we take and every word we utter in our daily surrender to life.<sup>16</sup>

Life has a treasure to communicate to us. It is a treasure to be discovered only by one who finds time to listen to his/her life in daily events. God's gifts are given to us not for selfish use but to be nurtured so that others can access God's love, mercy, compassion...through us and that God's intention of man becoming co-creator with him may be realized.

#### 4.3 God Bids us to Listen

What happens in prayer is a dialogue, a personal encounter between Creator and creature in love. “The good pray-er is above all a good listener.”<sup>17</sup> In dialogue there is both communication and listening. We speak but also give time to the other person to speak as we listen. Think of a dialogue between two people who really love one another. One speaks and also gives time to the other to speak as he/she listens to

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<sup>15</sup> G. CARLOS VALLES, *Mastering Sadhana*, 78-80

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 80

<sup>17</sup> H. THOMAS GREEN, *Opening to God*, 32

respond. This is what our dialogue with Christ ought to be: a responsive dialogue depending on what we say to each other, otherwise it turns into a mono-logue. It is good to remind ourselves that when God wants to bring to our understanding some hidden Truth about himself, he calls for attentive listening in the first place. God calls for Israel's attention at the pronouncing of the *Schema* "Hear O Israel...[to love the Lord with the whole heart, soul and strength], take to heart these words which I enjoin you today" (Deut 6:4-7) and at the Transfiguration, "listen to him" (Matt 17: 5). In your prayer ask God to enable you to hear the message that he has for you.

#### 4.4 Suggested Texts for Reflection

- This is my beloved Son. Listen to him (Mk 9: 2-10)
- Love the Lord your God with all your being (Deut 6:4-9)
- Blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it (Lk11: 27-28)
- Listen my people to obey (Psalm 81)

### 5. FOURTH DAY: PRAYER

Listening that we discussed yesterday is an art, a skill that we learn by doing. The more we practice it the easier it becomes to attain. It is important to learn to listen because listening is an attitude that communicates our readiness to hear. And if we are ready to hear God's message in prayer then we need to listen.

Today we are going to talk about prayer: What comes to your mind when you hear of prayer? Probably as children what we understood by prayer was our verbal

expression of our needs, our thanksgiving to God for what we received as his providence. Then as catechumens we learnt the set prayers: Our Father, Hail Mary... and as members of a religious community, we knew of the Liturgy of the Hours. Yes, all this is prayer but as we mature in our understanding of who God is, where he is found, we get to a deeper and different understanding of prayer. We shall discuss prayer as experience of a loving relationship with God that arises from one's true openness of who he/she is before the Creator, experience bringing the person into contact with God, resulting into communion. A relationship that transforms one's attitudes towards God, others and nature.

To deepen this experience of loving relationship with God, others and with Christ, we ought to commit ourselves to a continuous search for God, not only through verbal prayer and community prayer, but also through personal relationship with God which Benedict refers to as the individual's communion of his heart to God. Such prayer is what nourishes our community prayer. It is the prayer defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as the "raising of one's mind and heart to God".<sup>18</sup>

### **5.1 The Mind that Ascends to God**

The mind that ascends to God in prayer is that which is modeled on Christ, a mind that withdraws from the usual worries and desires with a longing of dwelling in the Transcendent. Pure prayer in any circumstance is for one who on the model of Christ himself, has withdrawn from the turbulent throng. Such a person is eminently in

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<sup>18</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 2559.

a position to maintain an unbroken communion with God, so that everything he/she does is God.<sup>19</sup>

This communion with God is a means that transforms an individual's whole life into a single and continuous prayer. On many occasions Jesus exhorts the apostles to pray without ceasing, to maintain the unbreakable bond with him. "Pray that you may not undergo the test" (Lk 22: 40) and on another occasion, "get up and pray that you may not enter into temptations" (Lk 22: 46). To await his second coming, Jesus urges us to pray continually, that we are not taken unprepared because we are not sure when this will come. Watch, Jesus says " But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come... what I say to you I say to all: Watch." (Mk 13: 32-37) How can we do this? How can we pray without ceasing?

We can bring continuous awareness of the presence of God to our mind if in our daily events, we turn to God, call on him not only in danger and need, but also in success and joy. We can establish this communion in very simple ways such as, trying to bring to mind one verse in Scripture or a phrase that can serve as a stabilizing element to some experiences like danger, anxiety, fear, lust, dryness, idleness, etc. and practice repeating the verse during these experiences. Take for instance the opening verse of Psalm 70 "O God, come to my aid," with its response: "Lord make haste to help me," that is said at the beginning of the Divine Office. It would be a good practice for you to repeat this verse in your experience of idleness, and in every other experience

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<sup>19</sup> JOHN CASSIAN, *The Conferences*, 336

you undergo. This practice can help to experience how the awareness of God can be conceived and kept in mind.

## **5.2 Jesus Our Model of Prayer (Lk 11: 1)**

Jesus is a pray-er *par excellence*. Jesus lived his life in close union with the Father and taught his immediate followers through Word and experience. His decisive moments are marked by long moments spent in prayer to the Father. The assurance of his being “ my beloved Son...” (Lk 3:21- 22), the vocation to be a messiah through suffering “While he was praying, his face changed in appearance ... and behold two men were conversing with him...” (Lk 9: 28-29) comes through prayer.

Those who followed Jesus closely as disciples witnessed his attitude of prayer and his example moved one of his followers to request to be taught how to pray. “Lord, teach us how to pray...”(Lk 11:1). He taught them the Lord’s Prayer simply referred to as “Our Father” Responding to their need, Jesus gives them his Word. “When you pray, say Father hallowed be, your name. .”(Lk 11: 1-4). Jesus relates to the Father in a very intimate way, as Son, he lovingly says ‘*Abba Father.*’ He introduces us to this very intimate union with God whom he refers to as ‘Father’. It is after this teaching and example of the Son of God that we come to relate likewise to the Father as our own loving Father, daddy.

## **5.3 The Prayer of Jesus and Our Prayer**

On teaching the disciples to pray with his Word on various occasions in Scripture, Jesus apparently:

wanted them to ponder and reflect on the Good News he was proclaiming. As they spent time in meditating upon his Word, they were praying. That is why he frequently took them to lonely places such as the Temple/synagogue, olive grove, a desert place, up a mountain, to pray. He wanted them to permit his Word to find a home in their hearts.<sup>21</sup>

The Word of God is alive, active and effective. As we read, ponder and reflect on the Word in our lives, it will gradually transform us, just as it did the immediate disciples of Jesus. Praying with the Word of Scripture gives insights into our Christian living; it puts us into contact with God or with Jesus. Prayer comes and is all through the life of those who follow the example of the Lord: to know, to be and to live the Christian vocation. Jesus withdraws to lonely places to pray. We too need solitude to communicate with God. Christ prayed always before choosing what to do. The beginning of every event of our life ought to be done in communion with God and before the decisive moments about ourselves to be enlightened to decide well. Jesus is the model of his disciples, of what he tells them to do. He is our model too. Prayer opens us to receive the mercy and compassion of God, to receive what he has for us. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray for our physical, spiritual, emotional needs. We would do well to always keep that in mind.

#### **5.4 Jesus' Word is Alive in the Gospel**

Jesus' word is really a living word for us. Jesus who spoke more than 2000 years ago speaks to us today. The very Jesus whom the disciples met in Scripture, in gatherings and in the breaking of the bread speaks to us in the Holy Scripture: he invites us to come away from our crowded environment to listen to what he has for us. Our

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<sup>21</sup> E. ROSAGE, *Praying with Scriptures in the Holy Land*, 14

daily encounter with Scripture draws us more deeply into a personal encounter with Jesus so that we can hear the message that Jesus wants to give, the message that brings us to a deeper union with God.

### **5. 5 Suggested Texts for Reflection**

- Jesus in communion with the Father (Lk 5:16)
- Jesus discerns in prayer (Lk 6: 12-14)
- Who do you say I am (Lk 9:18-22)
- The transfiguration of Jesus (Lk 9: 28-36)
- Teach us to pray (Lk11: 1-4, Matt 6: 9-13)
- Desire for a close union with God (Ps 63)
- Jesus is the Son of God (Lk 3: 21-22)

## **6. FIFTH DAY: THE COMMUNITY AT PRAYER**

Jesus prayed in private, in solitude, but he also prayed in the company of people. He prayed with the apostles in isolated places, in the synagogue and in the temple. So far our emphasis has been on personal or individual prayer. Today we shall focus on communal prayer. We pray privately and we also pray as a Church, as a community of believers.

### **6.1 Be joyful, Pray without Ceasing**

Prayer has both individual and communal aspects. St. Mathew writes “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt

18: 20) The Church as a community is called to be on watch awaiting the Lord's coming. The Lord Jesus exhorted his disciples "to pray at all time and not to lose heart" (cf. Lk 18:1). "The Church has been faithful in obeying the Lord's instruction 'pray at all times'. It never ceases to pray and makes this exhortation her own".<sup>21</sup> "Through him, let us offer to God an unending sacrifice of praise" (Heb 15:15)

"The priestly office of Christ is continued by means of his Church, which praises the Lord ceaselessly and intercedes for the salvation of the world, not only by celebrating the Eucharist but also by the Divine Office."<sup>22</sup> Our celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours in the community joins us to the prayer of the Church. Community prayer makes us in a way the voice of the total Christ. Our religious vocation calls us to a particular mission. to give continuity to the mission of the prayerful Christ. Let us then dedicate ourselves to this office and help the people of God dedicate themselves too by good preparation before beginning of prayer, coming to prayer with a settled mind, with fidelity and love.

## 6.2 The Work of God (*Opus Dei*)

In the Rule of Benedict, community prayer is the work of God. "When we read the word to others and listen to it ourselves, we are doing the work of God in their souls and in ours."<sup>23</sup> The Divine Office is distinguished from other liturgical actions by its structure: "distributed throughout the day, creating privileged moments which help

<sup>21</sup> A. G. MARTMORT, *The Church at Prayer*, 155, (From General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours 10, see VSC 84).

<sup>22</sup> BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE, *Constitutions*, (Article 48)

<sup>23</sup> JULIAN STEAD, *A Rule for Beginners*, 105

direct all activities towards the ideal of ceaseless prayer.”<sup>24</sup> The celebrations at different hours of the day focus on the paschal event geared towards God’s glory. By celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours, we give glory to God, touched by what we celebrate, we become open to the gift of God’s life. When we pray at different hours of the day, we do so after the example of Jesus himself and of the apostolic community that gathered together at different hours of the day to pray.

The Christian practice of gathering at different hours of the day for prayer is rooted in the Jewish tradition of liturgical worship. According to the Gospels, Jesus went out at different moments of the day to pray. He prayed in solitude and also prayed with the apostles. He took them to lonely places to pray. They testify that Jesus’ work of each day was closely bound up with his prayer. The Acts of the Apostles too has it that after the ascension the disciples gathered regularly in the temple to pray, especially for prayer at the ninth hour. “Peter and John were going up to the temple area for the three o’clock hour of prayer” (Acts 3: 1-2). It was on such an occasion that Peter and John invoked the name of Jesus to heal the crippled beggar at the Beautiful Gate. In Jerusalem the community prayed throughout the night for Peter who was in prison, while evening prayer was prolonged until after midnight (cf. Act 20:7-11).

The Liturgy of the Hours is necessarily a communal prayer. Its celebration at different hours is aimed at bringing people together. The members of the community come together at different moments of the day to celebrate the joy of God’s graces

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<sup>24</sup> A. G. MARTIMORT, *The Church at Prayer*, 156

received. It has its origin in the spiritual ideal of ceaseless prayer that is set before us by the New Testament, basing on the Jewish usage right from the Old Testament.

### **6.3 Suggested Texts for Reflection**

- We deepen our knowledge of the Divine Office in Liturgy and Constitutions.  
(See Appendix 6)
- We hear, worship and witness in community (Acts 2: 44-47, 16: 25-34, 20: 7-11)
- They were all gathered in one place in prayer (Acts 2: 1-5)

## APPENDIX 1

## AWARENESS EXERCISE

Let us leave our chairs for a while and be seated on the mat. Get yourself into some comfortable position. Pay attention to your sitting. Close your eyes if it helps you. Take a long breath in, then, out. Repeat that again, repeat once more and try to hold your breath for some moments and then let it out. I now invite you to remain in silence for some minutes (five minutes). After the five minutes: Now pay attention to your hair, concentrate on your face. Now, attend to your forehead, to the left eye. Concentrate on your right eye, to the nose, mouth, left ear, right ear, concentrate on the chest, back, left arm, right arm, stomach. Feel your buttocks on the mat. Now concentrate on your left leg, then right leg. Feel your left thigh on the mat, then right thigh. Move down to your knees, think of how you use your knees, of what importance they are to you. Now give attention to the unmentioned parts of your body; each at a time. Concentrate on yourself as one body (whole). Feel your whole presence before your maker. Gently open your eyes if you had closed them. I invite you to share with the rest of us, if you wish, what you experienced in the five minutes or since we began the exercise. In sharing you can also tell us what attempts you made to attain the silence. Describe this silence if you can. Tell us anything you that you thought or felt during the exercise. The purpose of this is to notice what you experienced, not to judge it or to worry about it. Anything you notice is fine – all is neutral.

## APPENDIX 2

**Introducing the participants to *lectio-divina*****Divine Reading of the Bible.**

Let us get into an attitude of listening to begin our moment of prayer in which we are to use the Holy Scripture in the process of *lectio-divina*.

**Text: (Mk 6: 30-32)**

*Lectio*

I will read the text and re-read it slowly as you listen to the text, try to identify its meaningful elements. See if you notice a treasure you had not discovered before. Re-read the text with conviction. Listen with interiority to hear the Lord talk to you.

*Meditatio*

*Meditatio* involves ruminating on the word read and the deepening of the meaning. Repeat to yourself the most significant words. Apply the message to yourself today.

Let us go back to the text of Mark 6: 30-32. In the above context, the scene might have taken place when the apostles returned from their mission activity. Perhaps having been sent by the Lord to different places. The verbs in (v 31) “gathered together”, “reported”, “taught”, describe the apostles’ need for being by themselves in the next verse. There is an aspect of listening, and having listened to them, Jesus says: “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while” (v 32). Rest is a

frequent theme in Scripture; for example, it occurs in the book of Genesis at creation, in the book of Psalms during the Exodus and Jesus himself uses the word several times in the Gospels. Rest is intimately related to the themes of creation and salvation. Our ministry, our life flourishes when there is a constant coming back to Jesus in whom we find rest. Now that we have re-read the text, let us turn to the meditation hoping to capture the message for ourselves.

Each of us must ask what is the message geared to me? We shall find the answer reading and re-reading the text, in prayer and reflecting on the passage which our memory instinctively recalls because in *lectio-divina*. As Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini states in his book *A Prophetic Voice in the City* we “ walk through the meadows of Scripture allowing ourselves to string pearl after pearl that those jewel-like words mutually reinforce each other and help us to have the sense of God’s word and enter into its mystery of his word.”<sup>25</sup> One path of reflection on the above text can be: The mission to which we are sent that has its origin/foundation in Christ. He initiates it, sends us, blesses it for success and so it is brought to fulfillment only in him. This coming back to it shows that success does not depend solely on me. Another path would be looking at this aspect as expressed in (Matt 25: 11) “Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest” This in turn is a confronting aspect of co-responsibility: A person who does not believe in Christ’s constant presence besides him/her and deeply feels responsible for his/her life, that every thing has to weigh on his shoulders will at a certain point in life be crushed by life’s burdens because he/she associates all the

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<sup>25</sup> CARLO MARIA MARTINI *A prophetic Voice in the City*, 10

failures to himself or herself. Whereas, the one who believes in the nearness of the Lord will know that even in his/her weakness the Lord is near to share the burden. He is not alone. It is God who created me, gave me a mission, and he is with me in the present and in the future.

### Contemplatio

*Contemplatio* does not consist in reflecting on the text rather in placing oneself in an attitude of prayer to the memory pleasing to God. Here you may perhaps feel some resistance to coming away by yourself or you may question yourself why is it that I always feel burdened if Jesus shares life with me, or why should I rest when I am not weary physically? In adoring and silent contemplation, the Lord comes towards us with his grace, but first allows this resistance, those questions to take on their voice so that grace may reveal itself. We experience grace as moments marked by joy, encouragement and loyalty. This is a personal and unpredictable moment.

### Oratio

*Oratio* is the step that nurtures and satisfies the soul, here comes dialogue with the Lord who has just spoken to me in the word that I read and meditated upon. I dialogue with the Lord: Lord I thank you because you have called me to a quiet place. I always complain when life proves hard for me, when duty is tiring and when I meet disappointment. At times I say, I alone, sometimes I just leave everything and do not converse with you about the burden. This time, I ask you pardon my Lord for having

not recognized that you are co-responsible with me. And, I thank you for revealing this to me this day that, in you there is consolation, there is rest. Amen.

## APPENDIX 3



... ill and you cared for me (Matt 25: 36)

## APPENDIX 4



... naked and you clothed me (Matt 25: 36)

## APPENDIX 5



I was hungry and you gave me food (Matt 25: 35)

## APPENDIX 6

### Constitutions

The priestly Office of Christ is continued by means of his Church which praises the Lord ceaselessly and intercedes for the salvation of the world, not only by celebration of the Eucharist, but also by the Divine Office. (Art 48)

A sister by means of celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours is joined to the public prayer of the Church and becomes in a special way voice of the total Christ. (Art 49)

Conscious of the great value of the Divine Office, a sister, animated by a Benedictine spirituality, should deepen her knowledge of it in the Liturgy and in Sacred Scripture, appreciate its dignity, and celebrate with fidelity and love: Morning Prayer, the Minor Hour, Evening Prayer, and Compline. To make possible a better celebration of the Liturgy, **Sacred Chant** should be cultivated in the Congregation. (Art 50)

## APPENDIX 7

## SCHEDULE DURING THE FIVE DAYS OF RETREAT

- 7:00 waking up
- 7:30 morning prayer
- 8:00 breakfast
- 9:00 conference
- 9:40 personal reflection
- 1:00 lunch
- 2:00 rest (optional)
- 3:00-4:30 personal prayer
- 4:30-5:30 faith sharing
- 5:30-6:00 free time
- 6:00 mass
- 7:00 dinner
- 8:00-8:30 Silent adoration before the Blessed Sacrament (exposed)

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