

## How to pray on and after a retreat

Finding time to go away on retreat can be a challenge to modern life and a daunting prospect. Even after we have overcome many obstacles to make a booking, the other clamours for our attention and sense that we could really use the time for something else have a habit of making themselves heard. Don't worry – this is normal – but whatever you do, don't cancel. Retreats are many things to different people but what they are particularly good at is offering us new ways of encountering God and new ways of praying, which can become an invaluable resource in daily life. Here are some suggestions for prayer that may be helpful both on retreat and when you return home.

Entering into a time of prayer on retreat is not something many of us can adjust to easily. So when you arrive with the prospect of some space ahead with no distractions, it's perfectly reasonable to feel daunted and a little bit unequal to the task. In the first few hours of retreat it's worth remembering that we are creatures of habit, and since our habit is to live in a busy 24-hour world, it's going to take a little bit of patience and understanding of ourselves to recognise that a shift away from this routine cannot be done in an instant.

A good way to start your retreat may be to do something that will help with the transition to a place of quiet reflection. This is also a helpful way to enter into each time of prayer.

Begin by sitting in an upright position with your back straight, legs uncrossed and feet firmly on the floor. Allow your hands to rest in your lap. Then close your eyes or fix them on a point in front of you. After a few moments become aware of your breathing – you may want to allow your in-breath to be allowing God's loving kindness to enter your prayer and your out-breath to be exhaling all the thoughts and negative feelings that are a distraction to your prayer. Listen to the sounds around you and allow them to be present. As you move into a place of stillness of both mind and body, remind yourself that God is with you.

Using the imagination in prayer can be a helpful way of drawing new insights from the bible. First you will need to choose a passage – find one that particularly appeals to you. Then ask for God's guidance and the gift of prayer. Familiarise yourself again with the bible passage. Now let your imagination enter the scene. Focus on what you can see, hear and feel. You may want to take the viewpoint of a particular character in the story. How does it feel to be this person? What is the mood of the scene and does it change as you progress through the events? Is there any particular part of the scene that attracts you? At the end of the prayer look back and see how you reacted and felt, asking God to reveal to you how he is touching your life through what you have experienced.

At the end of the day it can be particularly helpful to reflect back on what you have done and where you may have sensed God is present – and absent. Reviewing the day, also known as the Examen, is a helpful way of doing this. Begin with the present moment and slowly reflect back on the day's events. Try not to pass any judgment, simply observe the day you have experienced. Focus in particular on how you felt at different moments during the day. Notice when you felt God was particularly present. You may want to thank God for these moments. Then notice the times of day when God seemed more remote or absent. You may want to ask forgiveness for these moments. As you reflect on the events of the day you will begin to see where God may be prompting you towards something deeper within your being, enabling you to move closer towards discovering more about

your own unique place in God's world. End the prayer by asking God to be with you in the coming day.

So now you have explored several ways of praying on retreat, how will find the time to use them in your usual routine? Everyday life has a habit of taking up every second of our waking moments so be prepared to be challenged – but aim small and you may find you can snatch a few moments to re-enter the sacred space you discovered on retreat. This could be on a walk, a daily journey or a designated space at home where you can get into a habit of finding a few minutes for prayer. If you don't manage this in the first few weeks try not to be discouraged. There are ways to help you maintain a reflective prayer life – consider joining (or setting up) a local prayer group and keep a regular space in your diary for future retreats. Above all remember that, like anything requiring a bit of effort, it is worth persevering. We are mostly beginners on the journey of prayer but with practice we can learn to draw on inner resources and find inspiration for daily life.

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