

A TIME OF BLESSINGS AND PEACE

30 Mini-Retreats to Celebrate
the Retirement Years

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INTRODUCTION

As I write tonight, I am living my 74th year. It has been ten years since I stopped working full-time. Since then, I have been actively engaged in volunteer service, spiritual direction training and practice, and developing my skills as an author. At this stage of my life, I have also found myself reflecting often about what I have learned over the years—especially in the realm of spiritual development. I have had help in this pursuit. Esteemed spiritual writers such as Fr. Richard Rohr, Sr. Joan Chittister, Sr. Janet Schaeffler, and Robert Wicks (among others) have helped me find perspective and provided me with some of their hard-won wisdom regarding the process of aging gracefully and growing spiritually in the process. I am most grateful for these mentors.

I am also convinced that I am called to share bits and pieces of their wisdom as well as my own discoveries about what might be called “spirituality in the sunset years.” After all, countless research studies have demonstrated that we are capable of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth throughout our lives. So, to think of the retirement years only as a time of decline and disorder is a terrible mistake.

In these later years of life, our attitude about aging and about life in general is just as important as it has always been. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl writes: “Everything can be taken away from us but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” Therefore, let us cultivate an attitude of openness, a willingness to reflect upon the stories of our lives, and use them as opportunities to grow. And let us embrace the stories of others and glean from them the wisdom they provide. In *The Gift of Years*, Joan Chittister describes eloquently the road we are being invited to travel:

This is the period of spiritual reflection, of spiritual renewal in life. Now is the time to ask ourselves what kind of person we have been becoming all these years. And do we like that person? Did we become more honest, more decent, more caring, more merciful....? And if not, what must we be doing about it now?

In his book *After 50*, Robert Wicks describes a profound conversation he had with one of his spiritual mentors as they walked along the Shenandoah River. Out of the blue, his friend and mentor said,

“I think now may be a good time for you to take your spiritual life more seriously”...What I instantly felt he was trying to tell me was that it was time to leap more freely and deeply into what was truly more important in life. It was time to really:

- Seek and embrace God at the center of my life;
- Care for others from a deeper place in my soul; and
- Nurture my own interior life through creative, new, and simple ways.

In the pages that follow, you will find thirty chapters or reflections. Use them daily for a period of thirty days or space them out over any number of days or weeks. Each reflection contains a short essay plus a question to ponder. Each also includes one or two Scripture references and one or two sacred songs to enrich your prayer time. The reflections, Scripture passages, and/or songs can also be broken open using a *Lectio* method, which gives you the opportunity to go into more depth with the topics, if desired (see chapter 6 for more about the *Lectio* approach). Most important, simply be open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, revealed to you in the process.

May the Spirit inspire you and give you peace!

EXPANDING YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYER

1. Getting to Know You

The title of this chapter comes from the beautiful song written by Rodgers and Hammerstein for the Broadway musical and film *The King and I*.

We will never know all there is to know about our wonderful triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, we can learn many qualities and characteristics by virtue of reflecting upon our faith, sacred Scripture, church history, and the scholarship of numerous excellent teachers and authors.

And, while we can assume that God knows everything about us, God constantly delights in hearing about what we are discovering daily about ourselves, the world around us, and the Divine. As we deepen our relationship with God, we are invited to fall more and more in love.

So, how do we cultivate this special loving relationship with God? The process begins with awareness. Saint Ignatius of Loyola suggested that we must train ourselves to find God in all things: in people, in works of art and in nature, as well as in those places (like a church building) where we customarily think of God.

Many years ago, I attended a marvelous workshop where the instructor hung a series of thirty pictures from various magazines on the walls of the classroom. He asked each of us to find one picture that captured some characteristic of God. There were pho-

tographs of people as well as of beautiful landscapes and inanimate objects. One participant chose a picture of an interaction between a woman (possibly a mother) and a child. There was obviously great love and affection being shared. She explained why she chose the picture: “I see love here. God is love.”

I have conducted this exercise many times over the years with various age groups. It opens the door to further conversation about the beauty and grandeur of God and the many ways we can be reminded of God’s presence in our lives—if we have “eyes to see.” Moreover, it is intriguing to observe how two people can pick the very same picture yet see two completely different metaphors for God. Because each person brings her or his own story (set of experiences) to the picture, each has a unique interpretation.

The spiritual writer Paula D’Arcy is fond of saying, “God comes to us disguised as our lives.” Indeed, God is as close to us as the air we breathe, always inviting us to enter more deeply into loving relationship. Practicing the virtue of awareness of God takes time and reflection, but the rewards are both inspiring and satisfying. Hopefully, at this stage of our lives, we have more *time to reflect*. I can tell you from personal experience that I have developed a greater appreciation for the presence of the Lord in my life since my retirement, as I strive to put into practice the realization that my Lord is right here, right now—loving me unconditionally.

FOR REFLECTION: *Think about one particular way you have felt God’s grandeur within you or in a relationship with another person.*

FOR READING: *John 3:16, Philippians 1:6*

FOR LISTENING: *“Love Broke Through” (Toby Mac);
“Goodness of God” (Ce Ce Winans)*

2. Lessons from Saint Ignatius

As a young soldier, Saint Ignatius Loyola had a powerful spiritual awakening while recovering from a severe wound that he suffered during a battle. While the injury and surgery were very painful, the long recovery process presented him with significant time to grow in his relationship with God. In fact, it was during this period that he resolved to found a religious order (the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits) and pledged to devote the remainder of his life to prayer, study, writing, and the administration of the Jesuits. Retirement can be a bit like a recovery process as one recovers from a life lived at a hectic pace. Consider taking a little time now to become more familiar with Ignatian spirituality.

Ignatian spirituality is built on the premise that the world and everything in it are part of God's magnificent creation. Therefore, the world is good. In fact, Ignatius insists: "All the things in this world are gifts of God, created for us, to be the means by which we can come to know him better, love him more surely and serve him more faithfully."

So it is that we can look at a bee pollinating a flower, a spider weaving an intricate web, and a robin building a nest as examples of the grandeur of God. Likewise, we can appreciate the intimacy of a mother who holds her child to her breast, a conductor who directs an orchestra, and an architect who designs an incredible building—the list goes on and on—and see the hand of God in all of these extraordinary experiences.

Through the centuries, many books have been written about Ignatius, his practices, and his prayer styles. His influence on Christian spirituality has been and continues to be profound! Here are two of the forms of prayer he created and made popular through his teaching:

The Examen: This is slightly different from the examination of conscience, which is often used before celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In the Examen, we mentally review the events of the day to see where the goodness of God was particularly present or where we failed to appreciate it and act upon it.

Pope John XXIII, the initiator of the Second Vatican Council, found this practice so effective and important that he prayed it twice a day: once at lunchtime and once at bedtime. He did not want to miss a single important detail of his day, so he “backed up” his memory (like a computer) twice a day.

Another centuries-old (and still popular) Ignatian prayer technique is gospel contemplation. In this practice, we use our senses in an imaginative way to reflect upon a gospel passage, making it come alive. We enter into the scene and live there for a few minutes, becoming a character in the story—at times even interacting with other characters.

Details on both of these popular prayer practices, as well as other interesting information about Saint Ignatius and the Jesuits, can be found at www.ignatianspirituality.com. Explore and enjoy!

FOR REFLECTION: *Visit the website listed above and learn a bit more about Ignatian spirituality. Take a cue from Saint Ignatius and try out one of his prayer techniques.*

FOR READING: *Genesis 1:31*

FOR LISTENING: *“Holy Ground” (John Michael Talbot); “Thy Word” (Amy Grant)*

3. Trust—Surrender—Patience

For many of us, the concept of spiritual surrender is one of the least understood and most difficult to practice of all spiritual principles. This is due, in part, to the very human tendency to want to have control over everything that affects our lives.

According to *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (fourth edition), the most common definition of surrender, and the one that is generally implied in a secular (non-spiritual) context, is “to give up possession of or power over; yield to another on demand or compulsion.” The *spiritual definition* of surrender is more closely represented by the second definition found in that dictionary: “to give up claim to; give over or yield, esp. voluntarily, as in favor of another.”

There is a vitally important distinction between these two legitimate definitions of surrender. The first is used in adversarial situations such as contests, battles, or wars. One of the two parties has been overwhelmed. They have lost the contest and must give up. On the other hand, the definition that applies to spiritual surrender means that one party recognizes the right and responsibility of the other party to exercise control over the situation.

As we move into our retirement years, it is important to understand, appreciate, and apply the principle of spiritual surrender. Otherwise, we risk a twilight of anxiety and frustration. And to be successful at surrender, we must also apply the virtues of trust and patience.

A story from a good friend of mine illustrates these three principles working together. Early in her career, working for a not-for-profit food distribution organization, Cara would attend an annual national conference where chapters of her organization would meet to network and plan strategies for making the organization more effective. Cara was bright and energetic and felt that she would be a great addition to the national board of directors. She

considered running for the board, but colleagues suggested that she was not well known by the general membership and might lack the experience necessary for such a position. She was disappointed but decided not to run.

Cara stayed with the organization for many years, contributing to its success in significant ways. As she was approaching the end of her career, the time for election of new board members came around once again. To her great surprise, she received a call from a member of the nominating committee asking her if she would consider running for president of the board.

She thought her chance at such a position had passed years earlier. After reflection, prayer, and conversations with respected colleagues, she decided to run. She and the other members of her slate worked hard, worked smart, and won the election. In retrospect, she realized that when she trusted the Lord enough to give God her leadership dream and had gone about her day-to-day responsibilities to the organization with integrity, professionalism, and patience, she eventually received an opportunity to seek a leadership position above and beyond what she had anticipated.

Being able to know when to let go of the need to control and simply fall into God's loving embrace is perhaps the true meaning of the principle of spiritual surrender.

FOR REFLECTION: *Have you ever tried to give something to God during your prayer time? If so, were you able to leave it with God, or did you keep taking it back?*

FOR READING: *Isaiah 26:4; Colossians 1:9–11*

FOR LISTENING: *“Thy Will” (Hillary Scott and The Scott Family); “Take Lord, Receive” (St. Louis Jesuits); “Even If” (Mercy Me)*