

Why Clergy and Seminary Students Need to Take Spiritual Retreats

There is always a certain danger in talking about the spiritual disciplines near the end of the semester. We are all worn down by the demands of classes, work, family, internships and our commitments within the church.

At this point in the semester, if I were to tell you that there was one more thing you needed to do to improve yourself, how would you feel? Perhaps like the figure in Edvard Munk's painting *The Scream*?

Actually, in this talk I am going to persuade of the opposite--namely, not that you need to do more, but that you need to cut back on as many of your church-related activities as you can to create the time and space you need for rest, prayer and personal renewal.

When I suggest cutting back church-related activities, a number of you will probably look at me very skeptically and say, "But you just don't understand! The church is growing. There are a lot of things that need to be done. People in the church expect *me* to do all these things. The idea of getting away from it all to rest and pray just isn't realistic or practical--my church would never sign off on my taking time away from the church for personal renewal--the demands of ministry are just too great."

In response to this criticism, I want to ask you to consider three things:

1. The example of Jesus in taking time away from active ministry for prayer, modeling this pattern for his followers.
2. Time away for prayer is necessary because our authority in ministry comes not from our own activities but from God.
3. Consistently taking time away for prayer and personal renewal is essential to avoid burnout.

In conclusion, then, taking time away for prayer and personal renewal provides an essential foundation not only for emotional health and personal spiritual growth but also for also for the development of a better teaching ministry within the Church.

1. Let's begin by looking at the example of Jesus, looking at how Jesus understood his ministry and prioritized his time, providing a model for his followers. If one reads the Gospels closely, one will notice a recurring theme. When Jesus achieves the greatest successes in his ministry and his reputation grows and he is in greater demand, he does what we would least expect--he retires to solitude to pray.

Consider how Jesus' ministry begins in Mark's Gospel

Mk. 1:10-11 (the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends on Jesus and the Father himself expresses his approval of Jesus): following this great success Jesus retires by himself to a lonely place in the desert to pray (1:12).

Mk. 1:32-34 (Jesus has such extraordinary success in healing people and defeating the powers of the evil that the whole town turns out to see him): Jesus retires by himself to a solitary place to pray (v. 35).

Mk. 6:39-43 (Jesus miraculously feeds five thousand people who have gathered to hear him): Jesus retires by himself to a solitary place to pray (v. 46).

Let's look also at what is said about Jesus' later ministry in Luke's Gospel:
Lk. 5:15 (After healing a man of an incurable skin disease, people believe Jesus can heal anyone and do just about anything): Jesus withdraws to lonely places to pray (v. 16).

As Jesus' fame increases and opposition to Jesus' ministry also increases, we now find Jesus taking even greater time away, spending the whole night praying (Lk. 6:12; Lk. 22:41 [Gethsemane]).

"Anything which leads to greatness is to man an occasion of self-confidence, so that he does not wholly surrender himself to God." (Aquinas)

This ties in with my second point:

2. Prayer is necessary because our authority in ministry comes not from our own activities but from God

Where does the power and authority in your ministry come from? Does it appear to be based, at least in part on your natural giftedness or personal achievement? Is it these things that make you adequate for the job and acceptable to others?

Our ministry depends solely upon the authority of Jesus and His Kingdom and this is precisely why we need to take time apart to pray. It is a way of admitting to God and other people that in and of ourselves we are not adequate to the task of ministry and that we are totally dependent upon outside help, the help of Jesus Christ.

Now if this is true, then we cannot afford not to take time out from ministry to pray, because our ministry depends on it.

Without prayer, there will be much activity but little spiritual fruit in your ministry.

"What you feed grows and what you starve dies." Time spent in prayer allows us to grow spiritually and strengthens the spiritual focus of our ministry. When we put off prayer, we deteriorate and our ministry loses its focus and spiritual power and there is little spiritual fruit.

Further, moving on to my third point, ministry that is conducted without time away for prayer is spiritually, emotionally and physically damaging.

3. *If you try to shoulder the burden of the ministry by yourself (without a major investment in prayer), in time this burden will crush you.*

Several recent studies have been done studying why ministers belonging to evangelical denominations experienced burnout. In the denominations studied, about half of the ministers were functioning well in ministry, even though they were often under great pressure. About one-quarter were so burned out that they could no longer regularly complete the basic tasks of ministry and would soon drop out of the ministry. The remaining fourth showed early signs of burnout and most would in several years time become members of the chronically burned out group and were likely to eventually drop out of the ministry.

The principal difference between the people that avoided burnout and survived in ministry and those who burned out and dropped out was that the former protected their

time to rest and pray. Those who tried to shoulder the whole burden of ministry themselves, without devoting adequate to rest and prayer, burned out and dropped out.

Practical Details of Planning a Prayer Retreat

Length

Besides the time we ordinarily spend in prayer, it is good to get away at least once a year to take a personal prayer retreat to engage in focused personal study and more extended prayer. This prayer retreat could be as short as 24 hours or as long as 4 days, depending upon what one is hoping to achieve.

Besides getting some personal space and having time for more extensive prayer, a personal prayer retreat can allow one to study a particular spiritual theme in greater depth. This may be a theme relevant for your own personal growth or it can be on the general theme of a series of sermons one is considering preaching six to twelve months down the road. Time away can give us new perspectives and help us to reframe our ministry in more healthy and constructive ways, so that we are no longer driven by a desire for success or the good regard of others or by a fear of failure.

Where to Go

There are three Protestant retreat centers in Michigan which provide room and meals for people wanting to take private prayer retreats:

- (a) [The Hermitage](#) (a Mennonite retreat center) in Three Rivers
- (b) [St. Gregory's Abbey](#) (an Anglican Benedictine monastery) in Three Rivers
- (c) [Saint Augustine's House](#) (a Lutheran Benedictine monastery) in Oxford (between Detroit and Flint)

Basic Structure of the Retreat: A Suggested Outline

For further discussion, see Stacey S. Padrick, "Rendezvous with God: How to Plan a Spiritual Getaway," *Discipleship Journal* 120 (Nov.-Dec. 2000), which is available online at <http://www.navpress.com:80/dj/> (type "Rendezvous with God" in the "Search the Discipleship Journal Archives" box) and Timothy Jones, [A Place for God: A Guide to Spiritual Retreats and Retreat Centers](#) (New York: Image, 2000).

I. Beginning of the Retreat: Decompressing and Putting the Last Year of Ministry in Perspective So One Can Move Ahead

A. Address to God: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Kings 3:10)—we humble ourselves before God and ask God for help, given the weakness of our nature.

B. Time for Silent Reflection--putting away all the pictures in one's mind from everyday work and creating an open space to listen to God

C. Examen--Review of Recent Events and Self-Examination, Together with a Recognition of Where One Has Failed and Repentance

- We See Where We Are Weak and Have Failed, Followed by Repentance and Prayer

- Reflection on Particular Events That Have Brought Us Sorrow or Comfort
 - What have been the biggest blows to me in my personal life or in ministry during the past year?
 - What made these particularly difficult to handle?
 - What scriptures have I come across that spoke to me in this situation?
(Time for meditation on these)
- What Unexpected Grace Have I Experienced?
- What Spiritual Fruit Have I Seen Emerge in the Course of Ministry and How Does This Bring Honor to God?
 - Take time to express gratitude to God and give thanks to God for these.

D. Conclude by

- gathering up and writing down insights one has received
- forming some basic resolutions regarding ministry in the next year
- renewing one's ordination vows and recommitting oneself to the ministry one has received from God
- offering a prayer of thanksgiving

II. The Main Part of the Retreat: Reflection and Prayer on a Particular Theme

- The main theme for the retreat must be selected in advance.
 - This can often be profitably done by selecting a single short book on a particular theme that one wants to study and meditate on (for example, Segundo Galilea's *Temptation and Discernment* to study renewing prayer as the foundation of one's ministry or David G. Firth's *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms* on forgiveness.
 - Example: My own retreat for the semester
 - Major Theme: The Humility of Christ
 - Book Studied: Gerald Vann, *The Pain of Christ and the Sorrow of God*
 - A short classic devotional work (like Walter Hilton's *Eight Chapters on Perfection* or a selection from Richard Rolle's *Fire of Love* or the short text of Julian of Norwich's *Showings*) can also be used as an anchor to orient one's spiritual reading, meditation and prayer during the retreat.
- Psalms, prayers and thoughts to be used in meditation and worship can be selected in advance and jotted down in a notebook over a period of months.
 - This notebook can be
 - ♣ labeled with the topic and date of the retreat,
 - ♣ used to jot down insights during the retreat and
 - ♣ a helpful point of reference if one later preaches or teaches on the theme.

- Develop a rough schedule for periods of prayer and breaks for meals, resting, and walking or other exercise.
 - This is not to make you more productive; on the contrary, it's to help you limit your prayer times and balance these out with appropriate amounts of rest and exercise, so you don't overdo it.
 - Start with shorter periods of prayer at the beginning and lengthen these periods a bit during subsequent days of the retreat.
 - Plan for a healthy amount of rest and (if the weather is good) some walking or light exercise outdoors in between periods set aside for prayer and spiritual reading and don't feel at all guilty about the time you spend resting, enjoying nature or just vegging out; rest and renewal are an important part of why you're there.

III. Closing of the Retreat:

- Recollection: Identify at least two significant insights gained during the retreat and jot these down in the notebook.
- Closing Prayer (Gratitude to God for Time Away)
- Thanks and Financial Gift to Retreat Center/ Monastery