



Launde@Home

Beauty: The First Word

8 - 10 January 2021

Online Retreat Guide



Having a great retreat

Taking an online retreat offers you the gift of *flexibility*. You can schedule your retreat days in a way that works well for you. And you can be on retreat wherever you happen to be: sitting in your living room, visiting your local church, or out walking the dog!

But an online retreat is a very different experience from an organised group retreat and it requires a little more thought and preparation to ensure it works well.

We've put together a few suggestions that might help to make this a more fruitful and enjoyable experience.

Preparing

Wherever you plan on spending most of your online retreat you'll benefit more if you can create an environment where normal, everyday activities and distractions are kept to a minimum. You want your retreat days to be characterised by *simplicity, space and stillness*.

How can I create simplicity?

First, think ahead. If you're cooking for yourself, plan your meals for the retreat period and buy the groceries you need ahead of time. As far as possible, clear your diary; reschedule any commitments and put an autoresponder on your email.

Then, try to minimise distractions. If you're at home, can you move the TV or cover it? If you're away from home, think about what you take with you. If you're planning to spend some time reading, take a novel or devotional book (this is not the time to master the works of St Thomas Aquinas!) Keeping your environment *simple* helps to keep you *focused*.



How can I create space?

As far as possible find (or make) a physical space where you can fully engage with your retreat. This space might be as large as a nearby church or as small as an armchair and side table in your own home. Wherever it is, set it aside as retreat space for the whole retreat. Follow the advice of St Benedict: “The oratory (or prayer space) should be what it is called, and nothing else is to be done or kept there.”

There are simple ways to set aside your ‘prayer space’. You might use candles, icons or religious art as a reminder that this is a place for meeting with God. Place a Bible or prayer book nearby. Make sure any aids to prayer are near at hand, whether they be a rosary, a prayer rope, or recordings of worship music.



Finally, plan your time. Create a rough schedule for each day including meals, worship, the retreat reflections, time for silence, and rest. We’ve included a suggested schedule for your retreat at the end of this booklet which you can follow or adapt. You don’t need to stick to your schedule rigorously, but it will help you create the spaces in your day needed for stillness and prayer.

How can I create stillness?

Having reduced distractions and created space for God, we need to ensure we can settle into the silence and prayer and allow God time to meet with us.

First, make sure others in your life know you intend to be on retreat. If at all possible, you should reduce or eliminate the need to respond to email and phone calls (for some reason, clergy seem to find this especially challenging!) Trust that the world will manage without your help for a few days.

Then set aside your own projects. A retreat is not the time to catch up on your reading, to write a project proposal, or to complete the labelling of your stamp collection. These are all fine and worthwhile goals, but you'll get the most out of your retreat if you take a deep breath, enter into the quiet stillness with empty hands, and allow God to set the agenda. God may want to speak: that's fine. God may want to hear from you: that's fine. God may want simply to be quietly and gently with you, just to 'hang out'. That's also fine.



Remember the first law of a good retreat: *nothing has to happen*. There's not one thing that needs to be achieved, no targets or goals or expected outcomes. Just time with God.

What if I'm sharing my space?

You may be sharing your time and space with others: with family at home, with friends on a trip away, with colleagues from work or church. It might be difficult, in those circumstances, to remove distractions, to set aside physical space, and to find stillness and silence. What then?

Be kind. Those you live with may or may not understand your desire to be on retreat. Talk with them and invite them to help you. Acknowledge that it might feel odd or awkward at times, for you and for them. As you set aside time for silence and prayer, consider also setting aside time (without guilt!) for conversation and recreation with these others.



Children can present the greatest challenge or the most wonderful opportunity. Enlist them as allies and ask for their help. Invite them to join you for some brief silence or a prayerful walk. Help them understand why this matters to you and involve them in the experience.

Managing the technical side

When you attend an in-person retreat, the retreat leader will take care of many of the practicalities: preparing the meeting room, printing any handouts, ensuring there are enough Bibles or art materials available and so forth.



During an online retreat you need to manage the technical matters yourself. As you prepare, it's worth thinking about how you'll do that. You'll need a decent internet connection to engage with the reflections and Zoom calls — are you sure good wifi is available? Which device will you use — phone, tablet, laptop? Will you read any printed materials on the same device, or would you prefer to download and print them? How will you listen to any audio sections?

It's possible to experience the entire retreat with nothing more than your phone, if that works for you: watching the videos, joining the Zoom calls, listening to services, and reading any written materials as PDF downloads. But if you'd prefer to use other formats or devices, something more comfortable, then plan ahead!

Enjoying your Retreat

The evening before ...

Take a deep breath and mentally set aside your responsibilities and concerns. They're important, but they'll still be there after the retreat. Trust that the world can manage without you for a few days. Focus. Become present where you actually are: here.

Take a few moments to ask yourself: why am I making this retreat? Listen to your heart. Are you looking for rest, for inspiration, for a challenge? Do you need respite from painful circumstances, or to face a hard situation? Are you seeking peace, direction, guidance, God?

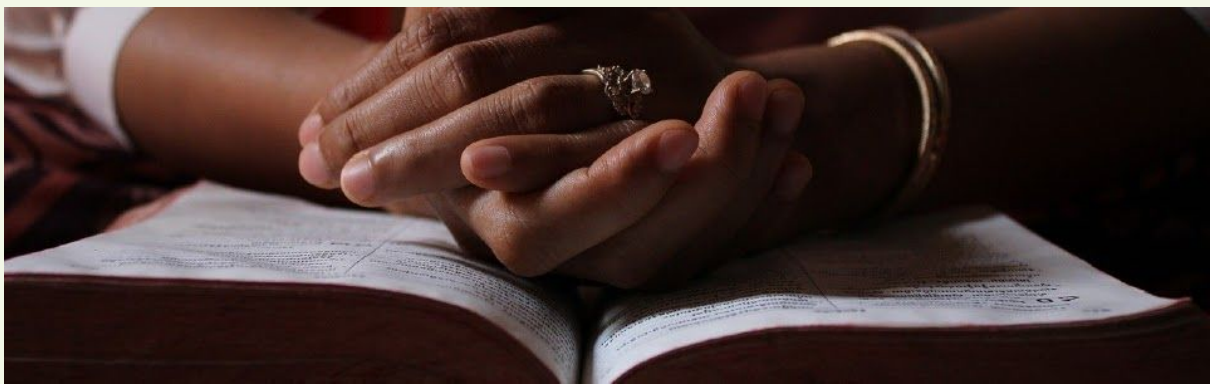


During the retreat

Embrace the silence. Allow yourself time to experience stillness, both around you and within you. It can be hard to “unplug” from the hurry and noise of everyday life. Give yourself time to decompress. Walk. Sit. Read. Watch. Listen. Try not to be anxious if “nothing is happening ...”

Use the silences to listen. Listen to the world around you: birdsong, breezes, rain on a window. Listen to your own heart: your anxieties and joys, your questions and meditations. Listen to God.

Dive deeply into prayer. Continue to use your usual approaches to prayer (for many people this might include the daily office, quiet times, or Scripture reading notes) or try something new: *lectio divina*, the rosary, prayer walking, Ignatian meditation, centering prayer, using art to pray, praying with icons ... the possibilities are almost endless. Try to let go of any anxieties about whether you're doing it *right* or doing it *well* and just enjoy the sensation of doing it at all!



Engage in some devotional reading. You may want to explore a particular part of the Bible — an entire book, like Galatians or Ruth, or just one or two Psalms or a chapter of John's gospel. You may have other reading material such as a book about prayer or some poetry. Not all retreat reading needs to be overtly 'spiritual': sometimes a good, thoughtful novel can open up reflection about the shape of our lives before God. But don't use reading to fill the time. Give yourself permission to lay aside your book when you're ready to pray, or reflect, or simply rest.

You may find it helpful to journal your experience of retreat. Write a diary describing your prayer, your reflections, your walks and conversations. Write a letter to God sharing your hopes, concerns and needs. Write poetry, if that's helpful for you.

Enrich each day with variety. Eat simply but well. Go walking in the sunshine — or in the rain! Take a nap, if you need it, remembering the wise words of the Psalmist that “God gives to his beloved sleep” (Psalm 127.2). Read, pray, write, draw, sit in silence, weep, dance, sing. Your heart has a good sense of what you need, so don’t be afraid to follow it. Finally, enjoy the retreat. Don’t be overly anxious. There’s no right or wrong way to make a retreat. Trust that God is at work in you, even when you can’t tell how. Relax ...!

After the retreat

Make sure you allow time to end your retreat gently. If your retreat concludes in the afternoon, plan for a quiet and undemanding evening, giving yourself time and space to readjust to normal life again. The longer your time of retreat, the more important this will be.

You may find it helpful to set aside an hour or so for a post-retreat reflection a few days after you finish. Take time to ask: What did I experience? What did I learn? What challenged or changed me? What have I taken away from my time on retreat? Is there anything I now want to do differently? Is there anyone I need to talk to as a result of this retreat?



And, of course, you might want to open up your diary and begin planning your next retreat ...!

Suggested Retreat Schedule

Pre-Retreat

Evening

Dinner

Preparation and reflection

Retreat Days

On Waking

Listen to Morning Prayer

Simple breakfast

Morning

Watch the video talk

Time for reflection

Silence, prayer, meditation

Lunchtime

Listen to Midday Prayer

Simple lunch

Afternoon

Watch the video talk

Time for reflection

Rest time (a walk, a nap, or read)

Listen to Evening Prayer

Evening

Dinner

Join the Zoom call (7.00pm)

Rest and recreation

Listen to Compline



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