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A CLOSED RETREAT

Its Value for Physicians

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"Come to Me, all you that labour, and are burdened, and I will refresh you." (Matt. 11:28). These words of Christ are impelling and refreshing, and are a timeless source of abundant spiritual and physical good among multitudes of souls.

A well-established purpose of the Retreat Movement for Catholic Laymen is to foster these refreshing words of Christ in such a way that they provide a realistic source of spiritual enrichment and personal enlightenment for the Catholic individual. This long-standing work of the retreat movement is of great importance and significance. It provides the lay apostolate with extraordinary means for perfecting spiritual and moral virtues and for furthering fundamental principles of Christian life and thought which strongly augment underlying forces of continuing Catholic lay action.

The retreat movement is a rapidly growing custom in the United States, and it has achieved remarkably well one of the special desires of Pope Leo XIII, who recognized with extreme insight

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that need for all human subjects "to retire a little while and turn their thoughts from the earth to better things." In some states and areas the practice of "making retreat" is comparatively new. It has become increasingly popular however, and has proved to be a source of generous spiritual and physical benefit, and thereby an important source of unusual power for the lay apostolate.

The purpose of this paper is to point out that "making a retreat" is one of the most unusual means of providing for a person a type of experience that not only deepens his religious conviction and fosters a spiritual way of life but also achieves a state of natural physical and mental rest.

These unique benefits of retreat are extremely impressive and are largely responsible for the increasing personal interest of innumerable Catholic physicians in the retreat movement. There are many reasons why this is so. Situations that occur in a physician's life often serve to create real reasons for establishing the practice of making a retreat regularly. This life is both complex and busy, and not infrequently overly strenuous.

Exposure to many separate environmental forces tends to disturb what is otherwise a reasonably satisfactory balance between man's body, mind and soul. Frequently, continuing demands on his time and matters requiring careful decision and action highlight a physician's teeming professional and personal life. There is the simple situation of trying to grasp details of knowledge of a patient's complex illness while conscious of the demands for his presence elsewhere — the telephone calls of colleagues, the bedside of a seriously ill patient, the schedule of surgery in the hospital and the meeting of a medical, civic, church or school committee. Efficient means of modern communication also load a physician with appreciably more problems than he can reasonably carry into practice. The ordinary expenses of existence and even the less evident pressures of social, political and cultural effects steadily increase and substantially effect stressing influences on a person.

The results of these continuing influences serve to emphasize the physician's pressing struggle to carry out at times a manner of living that is intimately designed to be pleasing to God and basically rewarding to his patients and associates, and to members of his family.

As notable as these aims are, a physician's mode of living often accounts for his steady loss of awareness of the commonly felt effects of strain. His responses to the ever increasing demands of each individual and by every group of human beings to whom

he is both normally and decidedly devoted may be noticeably less effective and less thorough. Unimportant annoyances and frustrations, and even temptations of special pleasure and personal advantage heretofore controlled adequately with modest effort, often-times assume a role of jumbled significance and false importance. Not only may he gradually lose sight of the usefulness of prayer and frequent meditation, but also the measureless value of the sacrament of penance and gifts of Holy Communion may be ignored with increasing frequency.

Since the physiological effects of sustained psychological and physical fatigue often evolve insidiously, even a so-called sensible and scientifically trained human being, such as a doctor of medicine, may become frequently and unexplainably bewildered. Biological reactions of continuous stress and fatigue differ widely in individuals, however, and many separate factors play diverse roles of importance in the total make-up of each human being. The type of physical and psychological endowment, the difficulty of carrying out a standard of excellence in medical practice, the degree of gravity of conflict in his family and social group, the economical aims and the caliber of professional relations all serve to influence the physician's extent of vulnerability to the ordinary stresses of a busy professional and personal life.

When basic causes for physical reactions of continuous fatigue are permitted to continue, however, there occurs a diminishing ability to concentrate and to think, and

increasing inability to cope satisfactorily with controversy. Once lofty goals of the physician's personal life and his pious vocation appear less and less cherished, with further disregard for real prayer and for frequentation of the Sacraments; and what was at one time a frequent and ardent participation in Holy Mass may become decidedly less evident.

Some of the manifestations of psychological and physical reactions, together with a clear-cut state of mental depression and anxiety, are also brought about by the nagging reproaches of conscience and the awareness of gradually losing one's soul. A state of anxiety and depression is also largely responsible for the physician experiencing a strong desire "to wipe out" all undesirable feelings with special therapeutic measures which would provide a sense of sustained tranquility and "peace of mind." All too often this means for some physicians the little stressed start and the unwarranted continuing use of different pharmacological means. Sedative and stimulating compounds, alcoholic liquors, tranquilizer agents and narcotic drugs, which obviously afford convincing, but temporary, feelings of false "well being" only serve to compound unfavorable problems of far reaching consequence when used over and over again.

With proper foreknowledge and resourcefulness most physicians abort "gloomy" events such as these. An innate endowment of superior intelligence and a state of emotional stability, which are

supposed to be characteristic of the physician's constitutional make-up should be useful advantages. Most physicians organize proper time of their daily activities, provide frequently of well-recognized benefits of physical exercise (golfing, fishing, swimming, bicycling, etc.) and provide regular periods for short diversions of "free time" from a busy professional practice.

In a state of abundant privilege and remarkable scientific accomplishments, however, which provide many modern means for functioning efficiently and normally, an extremely successful physician may "have everything he needs" except one of the most important — time to think and time to set his life and soul in order. A period of solitude is essential, and this ever increasing need is of profound importance.

Providing for one of the most pressing needs of physicians and laity alike is an indisputable advantage of retreat. Complete freedom from distraction and days of ample time for solitude and devout quiet furnish a type of atmosphere that is both satisfying and relaxing. Proper physical relaxation is unquestionably essential for clarifying one's own thoughts and for reaffirming personal goals and objectives. Indeed, the special environment of retreat compels a person to "take stock" of himself.

Proper time in retreat is allotted not only for contemplation and for spiritual reading, but also to regularly scheduled religious conferences. Conducted by a re-

treat master possessing special ability and unusual insight, conferences embrace a number of topics of special value and significance. Remarkable awareness of the reasons for a person's depression and anxieties, and their influence is especially evident and emphasis is given to the ever important power of frequent prayer for controlling one's thoughts, feelings and compulsions. Wise religious counseling which is always available privately, permits opportunity for special consultations to some of the complicated moral and ethical problems which a person might have.

These activities of retreat are a notable source of good for many physicians. His capability for understanding more deeply the problems of other people may be appreciably enhanced. Thus, in a positive way he furthers his ability to guide with compassion some of the human subjects in his practice and own profession, especially those who are possessed by disorders of anxiety, fear and insecurity, and by less evident disturbances of perverted ethics and logic.

A professional man devotes much of his life to a search for so-called scientific facts and for more effective methods of improving means for diagnosis and treatment. It is not out of place, and certainly not unfashionable, for him periodically to take the time to stress fundamental tenets of faith and to utilize means that increase with certainly the depth of his faith and inner perfection

and the breadth of his moral perspective.

Both the unusual religious experiences and the strong intellectual forces of retreat stimulate a person in this regard. By increasing his knowledge of basic tenets of reason and the special virtues of faith and charity which underlie the vast knowledge of Catholic morality, the physician also enriches his respect for the fundamental Christian principles of morality and ethics. Since these well established principles dominate basic concepts of proper medical ethics and standards of excellence of practice, any opportunity to enlighten one's moral wisdom and soundness, perhaps to a degree paralleling or surpassing ever-increasing scientific knowledge, should be of real concern to a physician and his science and practice of medicine.

The extraordinary circumstances of days in retreat, however, are those that serve to acquire for the individual a greater recognition for the dignity of his soul and its proper stature in relation to God. *This provides man incalculable good.* The frequent opportunity for exposure to the special benefits of penance and the supernatural gifts of intimate contact with the Blessed Sacrament serve abundantly to permit a physician to grow in the knowledge and understanding of the will of God.

The noteworthy increase of faith and the spiritual reinforcement of grace beget a type of physical and mental buoyancy that is of distinct usefulness to man's intellectual fa-

cilities and physical well-being. Indeed, the physician can leave closed retreat enriched and enlightened by the grace of God, and carry out with extreme freedom of will and intelligent reason a harmonious program of realistic peace with himself, with his vocation and with God.

Leonardo da Vinci, who excelled in almost every principle profession of his time, and who pursued varied interests with extreme success, recorded this advice in one of his notebooks: "Every now and then go away — for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer, since to remain constantly at work will cause you to lose power of judgment."

His Holiness, Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical letter on Laymen's Retreats described inexpressibly some of the roles played by the properly timed retreat movement:

In these Exercises an opportunity is given to a man to get away for a few days from ordinary society and from strife and cares, and to pass the time, not in idleness but in the consideration of those questions which are of personal and profound interest to man: the question of his origin and his destiny, whence he comes and whether he goes . . . retreats are like so many Cenacles where in courageous souls, strengthened by God's grace and following the teaching of eternal truth and the prompting of Christ's example, not only perceive the value of souls, not only conceive the desire of helping souls (in proportion to each one's vocation), but also learn the ideals, the dreams and the boldness of the Christian apostolate. . . . We hold it for certain that in the growth of this work lies the most powerful support against growing evils."



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