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The Grace of Directing the Exercises

By Scott Coble, S.J.

To direct the Spiritual Exercises is to be a privileged witness to the deepening of the love relationship between God and the retreatant. I have had the opportunity to direct the full 30-day Exercises for about 30 men and women. I have also directed several people through the Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life (SEEL), a program that spreads the Exercises throughout a period of several months at a less intense level. Finally, I have directed several people through an eight-day abbreviated version of the Exercises.

To direct the Exercises is to enter into the relationship between God and the retreatant in such a way that the true director of the retreat, the Holy Spirit, has as clear and free a hand with the retreatant as possible. In one sense, this means that I, as director, will do as much as I can to stay out of the way of the Spirit. In a more active sense, this means that I will try to positively nurture the relationship between God and the retreatant.

One aspect of this nurturing is to provide retreatants with a way to talk about their experiences in prayer. Some are unaccustomed to paying attention to the emotions and spiritual movements that arise during prayer. I can help them find the words to describe these and help sort them out. Others after several days of very easy and consoling prayer hit the wall with what seems to be a miserable, wasted day. This gives me an opening to discuss consolation and desolation in prayer, to validate their experience, and to tell them that this does not mean that their prayer is bad in some way.

A second aspect of this nurturing is to suggest the next step, based upon the retreatant's experience so far. This is not telling the retreatant that, since this is day 14, the contemplation must be a particular Gospel passage. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the true director, and the retreatant and I are trying to discern the Spirit's direction. As I listen to the retreatants' experiences from day to day, and as the retreatants hear themselves, clarity of direction arises on many levels, from suggesting the particular day's prayer to progressing through the main stages of the retreat, to discerning God's call beyond the retreat.

In day-to-day steps, the Spirit might simply lead a retreatant through one of the Gospels. But often the Spirit may move in an unexpected way. For one retreatant, I suggested that, if so moved, she might look at the visitation of

Mary to Elizabeth. This off-handed suggestion on my part led to an extremely fruitful and consoling prayer for the retreatant and gave her some important insight into her life outside the retreat. Many times, a little bump from the Spirit has prompted a prayer suggestion which ends up being valuable to the retreatant.

Retreatants move through the major stages of the retreat as the Holy Spirit directs, not according to some imposed schedule. Often they worry that they are behind or ahead of where they should be. My role as director is to keep retreatants focused on their own personal relationship with God. They may finish in 30 days, but with different amounts of time in each stage. One retreatant completed the 30-day retreat well after the official 30 days.

Inspiration does not stop at the end of the last day of the retreat. The Holy Spirit in the Spiritual Exercises helps enlighten the retreatant about the future and gives the retreatant the spiritual tools he or she needs to discern the continuing call. And this means my role as director phases out, leaving the retreatant better able to hear and to follow the Spirit in real life.

Besides the deepening of the relationship between God and the retreatant, I also find that my own relationship to God is enhanced by the process of directing the exercises.

My own prayer life deepens. As I assist the retreatant, I am looking more explicitly for how the Spirit is moving. In giving instruction to the retreatant, I also am giving instruction to myself. As I ask the retreatant to describe his or her emotional events during prayer, I become more aware of those movements that are happening in me as I converse with the retreatant. Finally, the retreatants' perspectives help me to refine and refresh my own.

I also find that my trust in the working of the Holy Spirit steadily increases as I gain more experiences in direction. At the beginning of a retreat, I often wonder just how and if everything will come together. And by the end I once again stand amazed at the wonderful and often completely unexpected ways in which the Holy Spirit accomplishes her mission. ■

Scott Coble, S.J., assistant professor of mathematics at Gonzaga University, has during the last 25 years directed the 30-day Spiritual Exercises, the Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life, and several eight-day retreats both in Spokane and at the Jesuit Retreat Center in Los Altos, California.