

The following thoughts are those of the director, Fr. Ken Bartsch, OFM Conv; and not an outline for the presentations actually offered during your retreat. As a staff we pray about and discuss the theme, then agree to the titles of each talk. Each one prepares his or her reflections, and we share them with the retreatants. Because we enjoy our fellowship and respect one another's wisdom, we're apt to borrow inspiration and images from one another, and tie the retreat more closely together for the retreatants.



Choose Peace

"In his will is our peace." Dante Alighieri

As we come to the altar we feel the Presence of Christ in our solidarity; it seems that the Kingdom of God is nearly within our reach. We listen to God's word and the familiar sounds of His promises and we know that peace is possible. It's not a pipe dream, an absurd phantasm to lead us into foolishness. Rather, it is more real than the stones of our church or the palpable beating of our hearts.

Coming on retreat and resting in the sacred presence of God, we remember our readiness to give our lives totally to Him. As Saint Francis said to the faithful of his day,

"Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that He who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally."

It really is not so strange or difficult. No one has more than the "two copper coins" of our individual lives, and what should we do with our lives but give them freely in love?

During this retreat we study the ways of peace. We will consider the choices before us: Choose Freedom, Choose Mercy, Choose Simplicity, and Make Peace.

Key to the experience of this retreat is the happy discovery that, "I have a choice; I can do something; I am not helpless." We may come into God's presence discouraged and confused; but feeling both loved and safe in His presence, we discover insight, direction, energy, and courage. Each woman and man realizes that, "God has a specific plan for me in this situation!" and leaves his presence with a new sense of mission.

Choose Freedom

For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. Galatians 5: 1

From ancient times the Church has struggled to preserve Saint Paul's doctrine of freedom. Saint Augustine challenged the Pelagian heresy that taught that Christ had died to forgive our sins, but that his redeeming grace was given only once. After receiving that initial grace, he taught, each person had to work out her and his own salvation. Pelagius was a disciplined ascetic; he seemed to exist above the common temptations of the flesh. But Augustine knew the weakness of his own good intentions and the strength of his own desires. Bitter experience and persistent prayer taught him to seek and find God's mercy daily and many times a day.

I will call this to mind as my reason to have hope: The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, his mercies are not spent; they are renewed each morning, so great is his faithfulness. Lamentations 3: 21-23

This meditation on freedom will lead us to choose freedom once again over the temptations of guilt, shame, and anxiety.

Choose Forgiveness

The story is told of the religious goods merchant who sold small pebbles painted with various words: peace, love, joy, forgive, hope, friendship, etc. At the end of the season, when she finished her inventory, she found that she had sold every stone except forgive. That bin remained untouched.

C.S. Lewis observed in his book, "Mere Christianity:"

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive, as we had during the war. And then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is not that they think this too high and difficult a virtue; it is that they think it is hateful and contemptible. "That sort of talk makes me sick," they say.

Jesus teaches us to forgive as we have been forgiven. In the Sermon on the Mount, he says, "Blessed are the merciful; they shall be shown mercy." And he follows His prayer, the Our Father, with a comment: *If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.* (Matthew 6: 14-15)

Clearly we cannot belong to Jesus unless we are ready to forgive others.

And yet forgiveness does not come easily. It is a process and often we can only pray for the willingness to forgive. Sister Helen Prejean, as she accepted the Franciscan International Award in May 2003 spoke of God's Spirit:

"He draws you along this road from outrage and hate to recognition, connection, and reconciliation. In the beginning, no one can ignore these unspeakable crimes (of murder). They are horrifying, unimaginable, and revolting. And yet grace leads us on."



Forgiveness belongs to God. It is a very great mystery. But, helpless as we are, God does not leave us without hope before resentment, bitterness, and the desire for revenge. Rather, He gives us authority over our feelings, attitudes, and desires, and we choose to forgive.

Choose Simplicity

We human beings are complex creatures, and we often make our lives more complicated by our responses to fearful, disappointing, or tragic events.

As we study the life of Jesus, and the vision of Saint Francis, we discover how Jesus preferred the life of simple trust in God. He did not pursue power or authority, luxury or ease. He had no taste for popularity, and no interest in conformity. Saint Paul says of Jesus:

...though he was in the form of God, (Jesus) did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name...

This Way of Jesus leads to a simpler, more joyous life-style. It is without greed, avarice, lust, or pride. It seeks no pleasure in possessions, but builds a spiritual bank account. As He teaches us in Matthew 6: 19-21: *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

A retreat gives us time to consider what is really valuable in our lives and to make new choices. We learn to choose prayer, community, friendship, integrity, responsibility, mercy, serenity, and simplicity.



Make Peace

We have reflected on the **freedom** we have as children of God. We have decided to set out on the road of **forgiveness**. We have meditated on the **simple** life of Jesus, Mary, Francis of Assisi, and all the saints. Finally, Jesus says to us, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."* and he sends us into this world to make peace.

As we reflect on that Great Commission, we might reflect on the Works of Mercy:

The seven corporal works of mercy: Feed the hungry; Give drink to the thirsty; Welcome the stranger; Clothe the naked; Visit the sick, Visit the prisoner; and Bury the dead.

The seven spiritual works of mercy: Convert the sinner; Instruct the ignorant; Counsel the doubtful; Comfort the sorrowful; Bear wrongs patiently; Forgive injuries and Pray for the living and the dead

A contemporary list might add further works of mercy: recycle, preserve the environment, study and pray with the devout of other religions, vote and do politics with a "preferential option for the poor," volunteer for and support worthy causes, etc.

Within the safe, peaceful environment of Franciscan Retreats we allow God to heal the injuries that inevitably assault every human being. We study the ways of peace and go home, sent by God, to be yeast in the dough of our society, a light in darkness, and a city on a hill.

(a copy of these reflections may be found on our web page at www.FranciscanRetreats.net/theme.htm)