



08-B-35

ST CASSIAN'S CENTRE, KINTBURY, ENGLAND: TEN YEARS ON. (3)

In the second part of his article (continued from the last Lasalliana), the first Director of this retreat centre for young people offers an outline of a typical session at St Cassian's.

For the first couple of years, the sessions were less structured than they eventually became, and included a few elements which we later discarded. I'll omit the details here. Called to formulate the theology of the Centre and to describe the process for a team which eventually came to include a few new members each year, I used to talk in terms of the four «Becomes»: 1. Become *relaxed*. 2. Become *aware*. 3. Become *reconciled*. 4. Become *good news*. In a few paragraphs which will not do justice to the variety of ways of opening up this pattern, let's try to show its internal logic - of how one «Become» leads to the next.

1. Become relaxed

The first task facing the team meeting a group of young people, coming to the centre from two or three different places, is to help the newly forming group to *relax* together. Fear, nervousness, self-consciousness and shyness are of course common, especially on a first visit to the centre, and the work of the first evening must be to overcome these barriers which affect not only individuals in various degrees but the whole group. That means meeting in a big circle, after the evening meal, and introducing ourselves to the whole group — a painful business for many. The team tries to lead the way by offering models which the young people can use to talk briefly about themselves, their family, their special interests, and so on. Often a question, directly related to the main theme of the retreat, may be included, for instance «Can you remember ever getting lost or feeling lost when you were a child?» or «When you look back over the past few months, can you identify a high point and a low point?»

A few practical instructions and rules about the centre will follow, including such essential points as «no smoking in the bedrooms», «no disturbance at night», etc.. Then there is a chance to continue the discussion informally, mingling with new people before the evening ends with a night prayer. After singing some modern hymns (the participation being a good indicator of how relaxed the group has become!) and a couple of short readings and reflections, we would usually sit in darkness and pass round a lighted candle, each one being invited to make a short prayer before passing the candle to their neighbour. Prayers might range from «Please help my mum to get better from her sickness!» to «Thank you, Lord, for bringing us here!», to «God, I don't know if I believe in you!» to a period of silence, which might be awkward and embarrassed or reverent. Sometimes the silence spoke louder than words. The leader in introducing the prayer must recommend honesty: «Don't be afraid to be yourself!». Of course it may take some people the whole of the three or four day period to become relaxed, but if they make that step eventually (and the whole atmosphere of the centre is geared towards helping them to do so) they will have made a truly significant step, even if it is only the first one in our series.

2. Become aware

The task of «*becoming aware*» occupies the next full day of the retreat programme. After an informal morning prayer on the theme of the retreat (including some suitable Scripture, music and guided reflection), a presentation of the theme chosen for this retreat is offered by the team: the person directing this programme may give a talk, perhaps illustrated by extracts, music or slides, and often including a worksheet to be completed by individuals and then discussed after a coffee-break in small «sharing-groups» of about eight people (led by members of the team) to which each one is assigned, and to which they will belong for the rest of the

retreat. The presentation is designed to help individuals become aware of themselves, of other people in their lives, of God (insider or outsider?) and to write down some answers to share in the small groups.

Having become aware of myself and some others, I can now become aware of *these* other members of my group and how they see life, what problems they face and where they look to find solutions. As time goes on, these groups can develop an intimate atmosphere of personal trust. This is always the intention, and much will depend on how skillfully the group is led — on the leader's self-confidence and sensitivity, including the ability to talk and be silent at the appropriate times, to encourage the shy and the reticent, to control the talkative, to challenge those who are hiding behind masks, to respond to and influence the dynamic at work in the group, and to encourage relationships to develop and deepen. You lead by example, of course, so you must be ready to share something of your personal story, if you are to ask others to do so. At the same time you must learn when to respect silence and how to help others handle silence and become at ease with it. Members of the team learn this by practice and by imitation, and by the mutual encouragement they offer to one another. Some have a natural gift for it, and their personal qualities make them fine leaders.

The growth in awareness of self, of others, of God in my life, is celebrated in a lively evening Eucharist, the different parts of which have been prepared by each of the small groups. The chance to work creatively together (say, in choosing readings and music, in preparing a collage or a mime, or in devising a penitential rite or a thanksgiving rite) enriches the relationships within each small group (even if it's often hard work and is another test of the leader's skills!), and the whole group benefits from this by celebrating a liturgy which is usually enjoyable, prayerful and lengthy (though the time is not usually noticed by the youngsters until the Eucharist is over). Exclamations of delight and surprise follow this unexpected success, which helps to consolidate further the life of this community which has existed for not much more than twenty-four hours, but which has been moving forward together — almost always at a rate and in a direction the young people had never dreamed of. We have just celebrated one of the communal and individual highlights of our life together.

3. Become reconciled

It is to be hoped that the movement of the group has brought its members to the third stage, where the challenge is to *«become reconciled»*. The increased self-awareness of the previous stage normally includes some sense of what is incomplete, unhappy, inconsistent, unhealed or wrong in my life. «Things go better with peace», so how do I find peace? How do I become reconciled? A considerable part of the next morning will be spent facing this challenge as an individual, but the whole group and then the small groups must explore the need for reconciliation and the various ways of seeking this. Each one will be helped to prepare a personal programme for a quiet period (of about one and a half hours), which might include a period of personal prayer and reflection outside in the gardens and woodland or in the attic prayer-room, where the Blessed Sacrament will be exposed. Selected portions of Scripture and personal experience, and sometimes creative writing (eg. a letter), might help. There may be an opportunity to go for an «Emmaus walk» with one other member of my group, with whom I choose to share more deeply my story and my problems; or perhaps the chance to have a chat with any member of the retreat-team I choose; or the opportunity to book a slot with the retreat chaplain for a personal experience of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This latter opportunity became an increasingly popular feature of the retreat, as the centre developed. It is a sensitive and delicate area, and its success depends largely on the help of a sympathetic priest with whom the young person can relate and can trust. This is far more important than the mechanics of the Sacrament, though these may need to be explained and simplified to help and encourage those who fear this often unfamiliar and abandoned territory, which, if I can become sufficiently relaxed, may open up for me an unknown country which turns out to be the land of the Lord's healing and liberating love.

Very occasionally, friends might want to celebrate the sacrament together; more rarely a young person might want to invite a non-clerical member of the team to accompany them a very touching invitation, which I have experienced. For me, the theological model of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to be found in John 21, where around the charcoal fire, Peter's symbol of failure and denial (See John 19, 15-18, 25-27), Jesus offers a new start to his friend, whom he calls by the name which recalls their first meeting (cf. John 1, 42) and to whom he gives another chance to say a threefold Yes, in love and friendship which will take the relationship beyond that threefold denial, as well as healing it (John 21, 15-17). The conversation makes Peter «saddened» or «deeply moved» (verse 17), but this is a positive experience which ends with a new call to «follow me» and undertake a dangerous journey where he «would rather not go», an inevitable feature of his commitment to be a good shepherd of Jesus's lambs and sheep. The consequence of this third step may well be the difficult task of going home and making peace, perhaps with a member of the family with whom one's relationship has become sour or empty, and which Jesus wishes to heal.

Bro Damian LUNDY