

YOUTH RETREATS

"Hello and welcome to your senior retreat here at the Christian Brothers Retreat House in St. Helena. I'm Brother Richard Moratto, and on behalf of our staff, I am happy that each one of you decided to say YES to making this 3 day retreat. Let's pause for a moment as we sit in an unbroken circle here in this little chapel and remember that we are in the Holy Presence of God..."

Thus begins one of the most important personal and spiritual experiences we are able to offer teens during their four year career as high school students. Its importance can be found, if you will, in the invitation of Jesus to his own first disciples following their recent involvements..." come aside awhile with me and rest" (Mark 6).

The tensions, stresses, secular values and frantic activity of our day-and-age have truly filtered down to today's teens. It is they who have told us of the importance of "coming aside awhile to rest..." and to think and to feel and to pray in a retreat atmosphere that allows them to review and re-direct the best of their desires, values, hopes and dreams. It is they who say to us, "these 3 days of retreat have been the best experience of my 4 years of high school", and at the end of the retreat, "do we really have to leave; I wish we could stay a day or two longer", and, "I have been closer to God on this retreat than at any other time in my life". Such frequently heard testimonies have convinced the Brothers in California that the investment we made in our student retreat house way back in 1962 has been more than worth it.

It would be impossible in this short space to write about all the things that we do with the students while on the retreats, or to attempt to capture the exciting movements of the Spirit as we observe and accompany the students as they go from initial moments of shyness, uncertainty and even, for some, apprehension when they first arrive to a true deepening and flowering of the Spirit within them by the end of the three days. It is important, however, to offer the reader a sense of what does take place that aids the students in such a transformation.

The students, usually, in numbers of between 40 and 50, arrive at 4:30 in the afternoon. Following their registration and assignments to rooms in the dormitory, they are formally welcomed to the retreat in the chapel. Introductions of our staff and a slide presentation are then given in a room in our old mansion. The slides act as the on-sight orientation. After supper, they have a recreation period (there are a number of these periodically placed throughout the three days) which is followed by an activity called "icebreakers" — a fun and nonsense time intended to help them become more relaxed with one another in this new and strange place. They are then divided usually into four or five small groups of eight to ten each with a staff member as facilitator. It is in these small groups, especially, that they are invited to explore the theme of our senior retreats: "Journey — where I am at this time in my life with self, with friends, with family and with God". During these three days, these small groups meet four times. The final small group will deal with how their goals were accomplished on this retreat and an affirmation of each by their fellow students and the staff-facilitator.

Other activities (large groups) include a trust walk, a dyad (an exercise in the skills of listening), a period of community recreation and a number of specifically religiously oriented activities. Among these, we include creative and imaginative morning and evening prayer services (themes center around the topics of hope, praise, thanksgiving, service.. etc.), a quiet time/meditation in chapel the second afternoon, an informal Liturgy of Reconciliation (among the most popular of large group activities) and a Liturgy (the Mass) as the culminating event on the final day. This liturgy is prepared by the students with the guidance of the staff members. A particular period of time is set aside the night before and labeled "liturgy prep" on the

schedule. Students select both scriptural and non-scriptural readings (often to be presented in a dramatized way), the prayers of the faithful, the offertory gifts (bread and wine plus other symbolic gifts of the retreat). They further prepare the music and create several decorative posters for the walls of the chapel.

For the 17-18 year old seniors we offer a two nights/three days retreat. For the 15-16 year old juniors we offer a one night/two days retreat. Junior retreats, usually done in the Spring of the year, have *Values* as their theme. The juniors are asked to participate in large and small group activities in order to explore just what it is they value most. These exercises in values clarification help them to understand and appreciate more fully not only what they believe in but how best, as Christians, they may put these values into operation in service to their fellow human beings. We consistently find that most juniors return to the retreat house with much enthusiasm for their senior retreat the following year.

I would be remiss if I failed to speak to speak of our staff and the unique gifts they bring to our retreat ministry, especially in terms of their strong Christian and Lasallian orientations. It is our belief, as a staff, that we are firstly a Christian Community from which we derive the positive psychological and spiritual energy to minister to the 2000 to 2500 teenagers who come to us every nine months. We are a community of men and women, lay and religious who take seriously and enthusiastically both the message of the Gospels and the spirit and intent of St. La Salle. The students come to us for only two or three days, we give wholeheartedly of ourselves, and then they are gone! This is, at times, difficult and draining. Yet, it is through the strength we derive from being a sharing community of student retreat ministers, and it is in the knowledge that we are a significant part of the students' overall experience of the person and message of Jesus in their lives that we find the faith and energy to keep this special ministry alive and well. If at the end of their retreat the students are more trusting, more caring, more personally honest, more Spirit-filled, then their two or three days with us is a grace we are more than happy to have shared with them. A grace we have come to find out, for most, lasts for many years after.

In his book, *Adolescent Spirituality*, Father Charles M. Shelton, S.J., speaks frankly of very clear trends, interests and values of today's youth:

"Noted pollster George Gallup provides an insightful overview of adolescent religious behavior. In an address before the National Family Life Conference, sponsored by the Department of Education of the U.S. Catholic Conference, Gallup noted that youth are very concerned about meaning and prize human friendship. He stated that young people (1) tend to be more tolerant than their elders toward persons of different races, religions, and backgrounds; (2) continue to be remarkably service-oriented in their occupational choices, with many seeking careers in medicine, teaching, social work and other "helping" professions; and (3) are a particularly religious segment of the population. Although they tend to be "turned off" by organized religion, their levels of religious belief and practice are as high or higher than those of their elders.

Gallup urges that strong support be given to family life because of its centrality in youth's development. He also finds that two encouraging areas for ministering adolescents' spiritual development are Bible study groups and *youth retreats*. Both of these activities are highly popular among youth today and obviously need fostering in youth ministry programs".

And for we who choose to minister to today's youth, these words of challenge and encouragement:

"Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your teaching as if he were teaching them. They must be convinced that the truth of Jesus comes from your mouth..." (Meditations/Retreat-3).

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