

## Guide Notes on the experience of the retreat

### Overview:

These notes will help you as a guide of a group. They tell what others have experienced as they prayed the weeks. They will be helpful even to those who know the *Exercises* well.

If you are praying through these exercises on your own, we do not recommend that you spend time with these notes. Your experience of God in Christ is unique. For a person praying individually, these Guide Notes may cause confusion or a temptation to evaluate your prayer rather than rely on what the Lord is doing through your experience.

Finding Christ in the World offers people a process and way – an experience, really – to interiorize their faith. Those who come to this experience may feel that the religious truths and moral strictures they live by have been imposed from outside. Praying as retreatants, they will come to embrace deeply their graced relationship with Christ and with others.

### To Begin:

At the very beginning, explain to the group that the commitment to make the retreat means that this will be their daily prayer. It will probably replace other prayer for the time being.

Encourage the group to show generosity to God first of all by *being there*, in the place and time that they set aside for prayer. And God always graciously responds.

Be prepared to walk the group through the first pages, pointing out the general introductory notes, and then showing them how each of the twelve Weeks is organized: INTRODUCTION, PRAYER TALK, each day's butterfly pages, a page for reviewing the Week, and TOUCHSTONES.

Tell them what you, yourself, have found helpful as you prayed through the Weeks. The first thing to do for each day's prayer is to look at the material for that day – better the evening before, but at least before you start to pray. So, point out that they will read the four notes in KEEP IN MIND, noting especially the GRACE I ASK. You might remark that we do, indeed, ask the Lord to help us grow in our belief and love.

Point out that each morning, you take the page you are to pray on to the place where you will pray. There, pull yourself together – “recollect yourself” – either standing or sitting. A good practice is to relax, and breathing normally, think *Jesus* as you breathe in, and *Lord* as you breathe out. Now you are mindful that you are in the Presence of God, who attends to us at every instant, as certainly as earth's gravity holds us.

### Retreat Arc:

The retreat is a journey, but not one from point A to point L. It is rather more an exploration of where I am now. It is seeking broader perspectives and exploring new places the Spirit invites me to go. There is an arc in the retreatants' experiences, with some common elements:

- ▶ Retreatants will find their own way of praying. The retreat draws people into prayer and many feel delighted surprise on coming to mature mental prayer. As one man reported, “I can do this!”
- ▶ Retreatants will experience bumps in the journey in the times of dryness and doubt. One typical source is questioning “What am I doing?” or “Where is this going?” Some may even wonder “Am I really praying?” And many will fret about doing the retreat ‘right’. Another common source of dryness is beginning to look for outcomes. They will ask themselves, and maybe the guide and group, “Am I getting anything out of this?”
- ▶ Retreatants will be challenged by the Holy Spirit. The particular challenges will depend on where they are and on the Holy Spirit, but retreatants can expect to go deeper into their own souls and to experience a broadening of horizons. One woman said it this way, “This prayer has gotten me out of the ‘me’ box.”
- ▶ Retreatants will come to recognize a deeper meaning of their lives, and with that, they become more aware of purpose in their lives. It will be common experience for retreatants to claim deeper ‘ownership’ of their faith and Church. “The Church is *me*.” was the conclusion of one retreatant.
- ▶ Retreatants will come to a greater interior peace and serenity. This will be reflected in a greater confidence in their faith lived out. “This is a lot of work but I found out I liked it!”

### Role of the Guide:

Your role as guide of the group encompasses several functions:

- ▶ Convener: Very practically, you determine how to gather persons to make the retreat. Bringing the group together, you convene the meetings, notifying members and confirming time and place for every meeting. If you have control of when the retreat will go on, be aware of the liturgical calendar. One guide found himself helping people through the Passion the week after Easter.
- ▶ Listener: During meetings, your primary role is that of listener. You listen to retreatants, encouraging each one to speak. You listen to a group, managing dynamics which allow for open sharing within the given time. You listen for the Spirit, confident that the Lord is moving among you. Keep in mind that as a listener you are not called on to respond.
- ▶ Witness: Your witness to the group is that they can do this retreat. They can pray and reflect. And they can share in the assurance that they will be heard.
- ▶ Companion: You let each one share their experience. What you and retreatants are doing is encouraging and supporting one another on a journey. Simply listen. Companionship does not include 'fixing' each other's problems or answering all questions. You trust the Holy Spirit is at work among you.

What you are not: Be careful not to adopt the roll of a pastoral counselor, bible teacher, or RCIA instructor.

As sharing goes on, discussion quite naturally begins. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- ▶ Serious discussion is fruitful and holy, but most groups need some guidance. You can watch how it goes and if the group begins to break into sub-groups, you'll want to call for moving on.
- ▶ Discussion that is about "fixing" someone's problem is not very useful.
- ▶ Discussion that goes on too long or that is too scattered can be discouraging. Your task as guide is to keep the group focused on their experience of prayer through the matter of the Week they are in.
- ▶ You will not be rude to break in and suggest moving on – to the next retreatant, if some have not yet spoken, or to a closer focus on the matter of this Week.
- ▶ Good discussion is usually helped by beginning and ending with prayer.

### A Couple of Common Issues:

These are some common issues you may encounter:

- ▶ Some are very generous and God blesses that; some struggle and that's OK. Keep encouraging them.
- ▶ Some retreatants may have set patterns of prayer, such as the rosary or daily readings. Just let them know that they will do very well to take the retreat they have undertaken as their daily prayer for this time.
- ▶ Everyone has distractions in prayer. Whatever comes into your mind and heart, stay with God. He may want you to work on that. Whatever happens, keep turning to the matter of prayer for the day.
- ▶ Write ON the pages as well as in a journal, if you keep one. Read back through what you've written; it's a great way to make progress.
- ▶ Some people already pray mentally but many have never done it. Encourage them to say what they need to say to God.
- ▶ Some people get stuck. They need encouragement to carry on.
- ▶ Some people stay in their heads. Ordinarily the group will help him or her by sharing their emotions and feelings during prayer.
- ▶ When a theological problem comes up (why does God allow evil?) you don't do theology, you stay with the person's *experience*. Ordinarily the better way to proceed is to park the problem. Suggest holding the question for a while and stay with the material for the day. Point out that this sort of question usually takes us out of prayer.
- ▶ Questions sometimes arise about Jesus' moral teaching ("Treat them as tax collectors!"). The retreat invites us to focus on Jesus' mindset and heartset. We note what moves him and how he treats people.
- ▶ Best norm: anything that leads to argument or dispute is not from the Holy Spirit.

## WEEK ONE: GOD CARES FOR ME INTIMATELY

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ Are retreatants finding their way through the logistics of the materials: reading the brief note, praying the scripture, noting the FURTHERMORE, and jotting down notes?
- ▶ Are retreatants praying? Some will enter the prayer, others may be reading or studying the materials. Some will pray every day, others will struggle with finding time in their day. You may need to recap the structure of the materials, walking through each component and answering any questions.
- ▶ Regarding repetitions, you might simply state that repetition helps deepen our experience.
- ▶ Ultimately, you will look for a sense of generosity and magnanimity in the retreatants. Keep encouraging them to pray daily with the materials.
- ▶ Establish, model, and inspire openness and a trusting environment in group gatherings.
- ▶ In the beginning weeks, retreatants may need some help on how to share the content of their prayer. You might help them start by asking them to share on the points in I REVIEW MY WEEK OF PRAYER.
- ▶ You might listen for key words such as ‘intimately’ or ‘maturely’. The word ‘maturely’ stated in the grace of the week captures hearts and imaginations. Others may begin their retreat with yearning, asking “what does it mean to seek God whole heartedly?”
- ▶ There are sure to be questions and comments regarding praying. One retreatant asked, “How do I know what I need to say?” Many people will be helped with the reminder that we speak to the Lord from our hearts, and for many this will be a new way of coming to prayer. What you need to say in prayer does not come out of a requirement, but out of your desire. What do you *want* to say to the Lord?
- ▶ Retreatants may find it good to consider how important relationships take root, grow, and are maintained. All relationships, including that with God, require time, honesty, listening, and learning.
- ▶ Following the meeting, you’ll want to jot down a few notes about what happened.

## WEEK TWO: GOD’S PLAN

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ By the end of the second week of the retreat the retreatants have come to a practical decision: they will make the retreat or will not make the retreat. However, not all of them will know of their decision.
- ▶ Praying the retreat has taken a certain priority of place in the daily living of those who will continue the retreat.
- ▶ The retreat experience will be opening in two directions: toward the transcendence of God’s creating and toward the deep intimacy of God’s desire for me. One retreatant marveled, “I am amazed to think what God’s imagination is—just look out the window at all the different colors of green.” Another reported, “God created light. God creates me in light. God creates light in me.”
- ▶ Feeling God’s presence helps one know God is with me always. It is the patience revealed in the statement “I trust God is doing what He is doing.”
- ▶ Increased trust is coupled with increased gratitude. “I gave thanks for my breath, heartbeat, the wonder of my body working all together, and healthy. God creates me this way.”
- ▶ A few retreatants may have a deeply intimate experience of God’s loving. It would not be surprising if the retreatant is unable to put words around the experience. Such prayer experience is sure to produce abundant fruit so the guide and group may leave the experience to the retreatant and not push for words or explanation.
- ▶ The retreatant will benefit greatly if the guide inspires a sense of savoring, or ‘marinating’ in, the goodness of the Creator and the beauty of creation.
- ▶ A few retreatants may want to turn immediately to the thought of service and action. Yet, at this point of the retreat, it is grace to allow the Lord to do what the Lord does, which is love us.
- ▶ Following the meeting, you’ll want to jot down a few notes about what happened.

## WEEK THREE: GOD'S PROJECT

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- ▶ Review your own notes from previous meetings.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ Retreatants may have come to some serious introspection. You may note a subtle shifting in the retreatant's prayer with a deeper experience of the dignity of God and of self.
- ▶ You might expect retreatants to be opening toward an active God. You may note a sense of ongoing journey and perhaps some freeing from constraints that counter a vibrant relationship.
- ▶ A few retreatants may begin to associate the interior life with what they do, the habits being formed speak of the faith they hold.
- ▶ There can arise in group settings a tendency for members to address 'problems' and attempt to 'fix' each other. Instead, keep the group's focus on the experience of the one sharing.
- ▶ The Holy Spirit will challenge retreatants through this prayer and the materials. Refraining from limiting the work of the Spirit is a grace.
- ▶ The prayer of the retreat moves the retreatant toward desires of the heart given by God. Some retreatants may begin to parse through their own desiring, others will not. Some may experience confusion with the term 'desire' in the spiritual life.
- ▶ You may note among retreatants a sense of being part of an ongoing project. One retreatant reported the experience in this way, "I saw puzzle pieces that fit together. I may or may not see how they fit together, yet God gives us a glimpse of Him. He wants to partner with us, which is unimaginable, really."
- ▶ The prayer of the retreat may open a greater comfort level of 'not knowing all the answers'.
- ▶ Retreatants may begin to embrace the reality of an ongoing relationship with the Triune God, discovering a maturing responsibility toward the relationship. Some may begin asking themselves "What keeps my light shining? What burns in my heart when I am with Jesus?"

## WEEK FOUR: OUT OF CHAOS INTO HIS IMAGE

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- ▶ Review your own notes from previous meetings.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ It takes time to settle into the process of the retreat. The guide will listen to determine if each retreatant is accepting the prayer given them.
- ▶ The grace of this week is intimate. A desire to seek holiness will also open the unholiness one lives.
- ▶ Freedom is interior. Listen for a sense of opening, growing, new awareness, and desires to align habits and attitudes to a life lived out in faith.
- ▶ Retreatants will be challenged by the prayer and work of the retreat. The guide might anticipate some resistance to the self-opening toward chaos and letting go of one's own rigid order. Assuring retreatants that Jesus can be trusted to give order helps.
- ▶ You will always do well to direct retreatants back to their own prayer. Encouragement to seek, ask, and rely on the Lord to come to them helps growth.
- ▶ Growth, and the desire for it, inherently implies that one is willing to accept the waiting required to grow. Trusting helps you recognize that you may not know the difference between wheat and weeds at first glance, but time and space helps you grow clear.
- ▶ Retreatants may explore temptations and how they come to us, recognizing that temptations tend to come when one is unaware. And they may be very subtle.
- ▶ Some retreatants will feel deeply encouraged that God allows temptations but also gives comfort. Others may note that 'laws' can help or hinder. It is one's interior attitude shaped by the Holy Spirit that informs and gives meaning to the 'law'.
- ▶ Spiritual sharing establishes a special connection even when retreatants do not know much about each other's personal lives. You might expect the group to become more intimate by this point in the retreat.
- ▶ You will want to decide about sharing your own personal prayer, careful of balance and mindful of the influence you have in the group.

## WEEK FIVE: SIN IN THE WORLD, SIN IN ME

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- ▶ Review your own notes from previous meetings.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ Retreatants may be more quiet, reflective, and interior. Praying about sin tends to take one to deeper places and experiences.
- ▶ Allowing longer silences builds trust and increases awareness that it is the Lord at work here rather more than what we are doing or saying.
- ▶ You will listen to discover if the retreatant is getting at sin in some way, finding their own way to pray about sin.
- ▶ It is important for the retreatant to hold on to God's love while looking at their own brokenness and sin. Be aware that when we think about our sin, we too easily concentrate mainly on self. If you hear this going on, you might remind the group that sin is too big for us, but it is not too big for God.
- ▶ There may be retreatants who manage to keep sin outside of themselves, easily recognizing sin-in-the-world, but not so easily accepting there is sin-in-me. A brief reminder that living in a particular culture also means that the culture lives in us may be of some help.
- ▶ It is an experience of the grace of the week to feel rendered helpless, broken, and powerless by sin. Some will feel it as confusion, others as sadness, others as a sense of frustration that "I can't get anything done."
- ▶ It may be of some help to enlarge the retreatant's perspective to include the grief the Lord feels, but unlike us the Lord is not helpless or powerless to do anything against sin.
- ▶ You do well to encourage a sense of gratitude among retreatants. One man said, "Pharaoh thought people belonged to him. Moses knew they belonged to God. God is choosing us, too." The Lord does not leave us wallowing but comes and leads us out of our grief.

## WEEK SIX: MY SIN, GOD'S MERCY

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- ▶ This is mid-way through the retreat. Take a little time reviewing where you began and where you are now. What challenges have you encountered? How can you mark the growth of the group?

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ Retreatants will be more aware of sin and their own sinning. Naming one's own sin is a particular grace of this week. You will listen for the act of naming sin rather than the sharing of particulars, which should not be expected.
- ▶ Some retreatants may feel mired in sin. You will listen for the grace that God does not leave them there. If the retreatant is stuck, you may help focus the prayer on what God is doing with sin, rather than what we do with it.
- ▶ You may note a growing desire among retreatants to respond to God's mercy by loving God more.
- ▶ You may note a difference from the previous week with retreatants moving from the weight and burden of sin toward receiving the love and mercy of God. As one retreatant noted, "You can't fake joy."
- ▶ You hope that the retreatants will embrace God's loving mercy. You may find this is coupled with a sense that one's sin does not prohibit God from inviting a person to join in what God wants done.

## WEEK SEVEN: THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- ▶ Review your own notes from previous meetings.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ The week focuses prayer experience on God sending His son to a particular time and space with a purpose. The retreatant's prayer experience will open recognition that Jesus Christ is how we know God.
- ▶ Some retreatants may be challenged to embrace the truth that holiness is not only 'spiritual'. We live as whole people and bring our whole self to prayer. God redeems and sanctifies a whole person.
- ▶ Some retreatants will feel a deep encouragement that Jesus wanted to come and dwell in the flesh among us. Embracing Jesus' life as human broadens the previous prayer of God's ongoing creation.
- ▶ The Incarnation reveals in the concrete that humanity can carry a divine nature. Retreatants may experience a feeling a 'kinship' with Jesus, which deepens the dignity and beauty felt for themselves and for others.

## WEEK EIGHT: JESUS OF NAZARETH, OUR MODEL

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- ▶ Review your own notes from previous meetings.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ You may note some fatigue among retreatants. Recognize how far you have come in the retreat.
- ▶ A retreat is not a race. Encouraging retreatants to breathe with both lungs can be restorative. Allowing one's self to be with Jesus is a way of coming to know.
- ▶ You will want to know if retreatants are encountering the humanity of Jesus as well as the divinity. An acceptance of Jesus' humanity is important for the acceptance of our own humanity.
- ▶ A few retreatants may be tempted to feel they must do all the work to model Jesus. The grace of the week is that one *cooperates*. These retreatants can be encouraged to make themselves available, allowing Jesus to form and shape them.
- ▶ Some retreatants may feel confused by some of Jesus' sayings, such as "Treat them as tax collectors!" What helps when this kind of question rises is watching what Jesus *does*. So, how did Jesus treat tax collectors?
- ▶ Some retreatants may begin to note that Jesus wants companions. Others will also note Jesus' way in his relationships. They should think of this as an invitation and be encouraged.

## WEEK NINE: THROUGH DEATH TO GLORY

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- ▶ Review your own notes from previous meetings.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ In general, Catholics readily pray through the Passion of Jesus. We can sometimes use help in accepting the Passion as Jesus doing love. Specifically, Jesus loving me, personally, through his Passion.
- ▶ The group sharing may be more subdued and quiet in this week. Praying through the Passion leads to deeply interior places. Silence among members builds trust.
- ▶ You will listen for the retreatant who stays with Jesus, accompanying Him in His Passion.
- ▶ A few retreatants may tend to focus on their own self or sorrow. You will want to invite them to focus on Jesus and to share His sorrow.
- ▶ The reflections on forgiving may give difficult challenges to some. You can help by noting that the Holy Spirit may challenge in difficult ways but the Lord always provides the necessary grace to meet the challenge.

## WEEK TEN: LIVING ALWAYS IN COMMUNION

### Before the meeting:

- ▶ Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- ▶ Review your own notes from previous meetings.

### A few things to note and consider:

- ▶ The week focuses on the intersection between my relationship with the Lord and my daily living. You listen for how the retreatants are integrating prayer into their day-to-day experience, and vice versa.
- ▶ You may encounter questions regarding desolation and consolation. Be prepared to share your own experience.
- ▶ Retreatants may begin to reveal a sense of 'ownership' for their community and the Church. This is somewhat larger than 'belonging to' in that belonging now includes 'being responsible for and to' those with whom they journey.
- ▶ Some retreatants will begin to look for 'outcomes' or 'purposes' of the retreat. It is a temptation to evaluate the prayer rather than pray. It helps to invite the retreatant to remain focused on the prayer of the retreat and to allow the Holy Spirit to determine outcomes of their experience.

## WEEK ELEVEN: MATURE DISCIPLESHIP

### Before the meeting:

- Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- Review your own notes from previous meetings.

### A few things to note and consider:

- The grace of this week deepens gratitude for relationships, with God and with others. So you tend to listen for expressions of gratitude.
- The mature disciple recognizes that the state of your interior life impacts what happens in your day-to-day living. You encourage the retreatant to accept responsibility for their interior life.
- An important part of the guide's role is to help the retreatants stand on their own two feet. You can help with this by encouraging them to continue prayer and spiritual reading.
- In preparation for the final group meeting next week, you may want to invite retreatants to go back to the beginning and review their notes and experience throughout the retreat. Where might they notice growth or change? Where do challenges and invitations remain?

## WEEK TWELVE: LIVING CHRIST IN THE WORLD

### Before the meeting:

- Note the grace of the week and review TOUCHSTONES at the end of the week.
- Review your own notes from previous meetings.
- Decide whether you have any closing remarks you want to share with the group, perhaps noting their growth or sharing with them a bit of your own experience of listening during the weeks.

### A few things to note and consider:

- You will want to first focus on the prayer of this week before turning to the overview or closing of the retreat.
- You listen for the retreatant's confidence in accepting the gifts given them and opening toward sharing their gifts with others.
- You encourage retreatants, who have now found their way of praying, to keep doing the prayer the Lord is giving them.
- You are sure to receive the question from some retreatants: "What's next?" Perhaps you have a few ideas to share. Yet, it is a better practice to encourage the retreatant to explore their own desires and resources, taking them to prayer. They can ask the Lord, "What next?"
- It is important to thank the retreatants for their prayer, their commitment, their sharing, and their allowing you to journey with them. You want to be a good model of gratitude.



