

# ORDINATION RETREAT AT AMPLEFORTH

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The first thing is to welcome one another to this time of retreat, and to set this afternoon the tone in which we want to spend the next few days. I want to set out some of the values we seek to experience, and by contemplating them at the beginning, to enable them to happen to us.

## 1. Rest

I am assuming that there is something in all of us that will respond positively to the invitation to rest. I don't think I have never begun a retreat without being reminded of Augustine's words:

You have made us and drawn us to yourself,  
and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.

Recognizing the truth of these words to God, we set our sights on the place of rest that is made for us in the Father, the place prepared by Christ.

This time is to a certain extent sabbatical rather than strenuous. We - that is, all of you, and I too - have all worked very hard to reach this place in our lives. We have had to represent our diaconal course as a series of tasks, of achievements; and so it has been. But the hard work, however necessary it may have been, hasn't been the heart of our coming to the diaconate. In the end, God forms us out of nothing, and sets in our hearts the responses of service, and charity, and wisdom. These gifts of God contain and express our vocation; in these very gifts he is calling us. In this retreat we want to enter into the depths of our life, and in great gratitude find there the gifts that will qualify us to do God's work.

So it is right that the tensions of the life we lead at home melt down and leave us. Whatever worries us and oppresses us in that life will still be there on Friday; but we declare independence from the slavery and drudgery of the everyday, and we catch a glimpse of the resting God, who has a place of rest for us. And in this transient time of rest we shall perhaps come closer to a more permanent gift that is

## 2. Peace

We aren't escaping irresponsibly; the word "retreat" can be misunderstood. We aren't retiring hurt, or running away. It is rather an entrance into peace, a state of serenity that is appropriate *always* to the children of God. The peace we seek is entirely real, indeed it is the ultimate truth about us; and in it we meet our likeness to God. God is always totally at peace, and God has made peace for us in Christ. So *to come to Christ* is to enter into peace, a harmony which will reconcile us so radically that we become ministers of peace, peacemakers for others.

Happy the peacemakers! They are to be called the children of God.

It doesn't matter that we are awash with unanswered questions, unresolved conflicts, unsatisfied desires, and all the other warring elements of our lives. The peace God has made for us undercuts, circumscribes, neutralizes, transcends all that we are in this timebound moment. As Paul says, in the heat of his striving mission:

*we are subjected to every hardship, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems, but never despair; we have been persecuted, but never deserted;*

*knocked down, but never killed; always we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may be always seen in our body.*

The peace we seek lies in wait on every side, beyond our battlefields.

### 3. Acceptance

*The truth has got to be accepted* before we can call our lives peaceful or at rest. We fear the truth, and resist it because we fear it. But our faith tells us that the truth is glorious; and that means that fear is improper for us. One of the most beautiful lines in the Old Testament comes in the psalm of Zephaniah:

*The Lord is king among you, Israel: you have no more evil to fear.*

To know this, and to let it change us, is another purpose of our being here.

One of the things Jesus says in the Fourth Gospel is relevant here:

*I am the Truth.*

This means that we can take anything that can be said of Jesus, and predicate it of the truth. If *Jesus is our way to the Father*, then the truth will bring us there too. If *Jesus is the Resurrection*, then the truth will be our rising to eternal life. If *Jesus is the true bread that comes down from heaven*, it is to heaven that we must look for the truth about us, and when we find it we will be nourished and made strong. And so on. Our regard for truth has to be a religious respect which warms into love; this is a reality which transcends the boundaries of faith-systems and theologies, and which has consequences for our breathing and feeling in every moment of our lives.

I would like to read to you part of the last reflections of Professor Donald Nichol, who taped them whilst dying of cancer.

I've come to see that you can think too much, and that thinking is a sign of imperfection: for if you *know*, you don't have to *think*.

Similarly, for example, if you are in the presence of the loved one, the presence of beauty, you don't have to construct thoughts about beauty, or about the loved one: you just have to gaze. It's like when you are listening to music: you don't keep thinking, you lose yourself in the music. In fact it would be absurd, wouldn't it, to meet the beloved whom you have been longing to meet for ages, and, when you get there, read out to her or to him the thoughts about him or her that you have been having.

That shows the absurdity of imagining that *thought* is the last thing. *Presence*, total presence of one to another, is what is ultimate; so that there comes a time when having come into the presence, you have either to stop thinking, or to lose the awareness of the other. Isn't it true that sometimes one person doesn't even notice the other person, because of being preoccupied with thoughts?

It's inevitable in any act of creation, especially the act of creating life, that there would be a risk. Life means vulnerability...and any kind of thing that goes wrong is a sign that there is something deeply amiss with what has happened in life on

earth and in the human family. So I think of the cancer that is in me at the moment as a part of that whole risk that is inseparable from life, and that part of my job is to accept all that involves; part of it is to join my suffering with the suffering of people throughout the earth. If we accept it that way, instead of being pure malignity, there can be a redemptive quality about it.

Let us establish that concept of *presence* in our minds for this retreat: God present to us, us present to God, totally accepting, totally accepted.

*Truthfulness* isn't a series of actions, but a state of being, achieved by those who have accepted the truth. For us, to be full of truth means to be full of Christ who says: *I am the Truth*. So there are lies, self-deceptions, denials, little or great reservoirs of untruth, which can pack our being against the intruding and redeeming truth which is to set us free and to give us the fullness of life: did not Jesus also say: "I am the Life"?

One of our offences against truth is the fiendish devotion to human realities as the last word. We show this quality in our anxieties, our sureness that without us there is no hope, that everything depends on our presence and our hand on the tiller. We are hyperactive, driven by our self-obsession, convinced that our human deeds are more important than our God-given lives, our activity worth more than our resting. As I speak these words to you, a part of me is feeling the weight of a few Tribunal-cases, the oncoming of a new University year, the concerns of my parish and my family, my addicted need for a motor-car, a computer, a telephone, and a congregation. Behind all this card-carrying virtue, much of which is probably carefully-acquired compulsion, there lurk three spectres: first, that of unbelief: what about the work of God? Whose hand did you say is on the tiller? *Is the arm of the Lord so short?* Second, the spectre of despair: the promises of God have receded, to be replaced by the anxious devices of humanity. Thirdly, the spectre of lovelessness, because amid all the activity we shut out the voice of God who calls us to be loved, to be healed, and to be fed so that the journey be not too long for us. Acceptance is a term for all the holiness that is passive rather than active, and to this we should turn in a retreat. In the end, God is calling all the shots, taking all the initiatives, and our most glittering personal achievements are perhaps only the accidental moments when our hand has slipped, and his Spirit rushes in, eagerly to fill the rare space we have left empty.

Let the healing grace of your love, O Lord, so transform me  
that I may play my part in the transfiguration of this world  
from a place of suffering, death, and corruption  
to a realm of infinite light, joy, and love.

Make me so obedient to your spirit  
that my life may become a living prayer  
and a witness to your unfailing presence.