



INSTITUTE FOR
DIACONAL STUDIES

Five Days with the Lord

Self-Directed Discernment Retreat

Introduction

Let's take a step back with our Lord. Let's relax in God's holy presence to pray, reflect – to enter the silence. We are here because the Holy Spirit is providing the gentle nudge to discern God's call – God's personal invitation to you to fulfill your baptismal promise and, possibly, be more involved in God's Church.

- Is our Lord asking me to revitalize my family life?
- Does God desire that I learn new skills to be more productive as a lay minister in my parish or beyond?

Does our loving God have a plan for me as an ordained deacon?

These five days will afford a unique time to be present with God: To get to know Jesus as our companion and the Holy Spirit as our guide and inspiration. Welcome to an exciting moment to be challenged, prodded and directed by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul reminds us that we are to discern spirits and the benevolent Holy Spirit will truly guide us to morally right decisions.

Before we begin... let's remember that our retreat is good for the soul. It is also good for our general well-being and good health – and body, mind and soul are entwined. As we spiritually retreat these five days, let's also consider our physical health. Spiritual retreats afford wonderful opportunities for us to also complement our spirituality by paying close attention to our bodies. Consider fasting beyond the suggestions in this retreat. Eat a healthier diet these five days, rest more and include exercise, especially walking. As always, be aware of your limitations and follow your doctor's orders regarding diet and an exercise regimen.

It is highly encouraged that you write a journal for the various questions presented.

Now, let's move forward slowly and confidently.



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Day 1 – My Story

Today we begin at the beginning – our story. Prayer is a relationship with God and this day we focus on our personal life in relation to God and, especially, in relationship with Jesus.

Slowly – and prayerfully – we recall that we were born and raised in a particular place and moment in history. Recall the memories and the images. But let’s allow the Lord to show us our lives – Who is there? What occurred? How was I transformed in each of these moments? Were they moments of conversion? ...of hope? ...of love?

- My parents were...
- School meant this to me...
- My closest friends were... and, we used to...

- Dating brought this emotion and structure into my life...
- Post-school and my early days seeking a job were...
- I was married and had children. They mean this to me...

- My friends changed... and, I changed...
- My career has developed in this way...
- Life has thrown me some curves in the road – like the time...

- I have hopes and dreams and they begin with...
- God was present when I...
- God appeared absent to me when...

- There is a crossroads now present in my life – and it manifests itself in this way...
- I wish...

Loving God, help me to view my life through your eyes. Where have I aided your church? Where have I failed? Where have I grown? Where have I shown leadership? Guide me in understanding the precious moments of my life and grant me the grace to know that they are stepping stones to being fully alive and being fully Christian. Be by my side as I uncover the mystery of where I am going on the journey – help me to reconcile my past as I put on the new. I pray in your Son’s name, Jesus.



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This day...

I will *fast from breakfast* (Remember, follow your doctor's orders when it comes to diet and exercise – be sure to hydrate and have small, nutritional snacks).

I will *set aside alms for the poor* (that I will deliver to my parish's poor box at the end of the week).

I will *enter into silence for 10 minutes* in a special place.

I will open my bible and *pray Psalm 113* slowly...and then pray it again even...slower.

A question to ponder this day...

Do I consider a personal relationship with God an important part of my life?

My Morning Meditation

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts. (Psalm 95:8)

One of the most powerful and necessary foundations for effectiveness, in any field, is commitment. Commitment implies that our aims, energies, and time will be aligned with each other. We won't be scattering our personal or material resources. Everything moves in the same direction.

Today Jesus warns us against the opposite of commitment: being divided inside ourselves. Riding the fence of life, not knowing what we are about, brings deep weakness in our character, even – or especially – in the spiritual realm. If our energies are scattered, when big challenges come, Jesus says, we will collapse.

Many of us are aligned with our true values some of the time. For example, we try to spend daily time in prayer, but then a chance for an early outdoor day trip comes along. What do we do?

Here's a good practice. Inquire of yourself: Is every part of my life aligned up effectively behind what I really believe in? Do I want to live a committed life? Do I want that kind of power in my life?

Lord, you know where I stand now about commitments. Please be with me where I am, and help me grow in strength and purpose. - Marilyn Gustin, Liguori Publications 2003



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My Evening Contemplation

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

If the soul does not free itself by way of the cross it can never be free. It is the tremendous surgical operation which the Father himself carries out on the flesh of his son in order to save him. And it is a dogma of faith that without the cross "there is no forgiveness." A mystery, but it is so. Pain purifies love. It makes it true, real, pure. And in addition it gets rid of what is not really love. It frees love from pleasure which falsifies it like a mask. It makes it a gift freely given.

Jesus, help me to make your prayer my own: "Father, take this cup from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done." - Carlo Carretto, Creative Communications

Before I rest

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you. And I detest all of my sins, not because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all-deserving and worthy of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life.

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled: my own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.

Luke 2: 29-32

Hail, holy queen, mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope. To you do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To you do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us, and after this exile show us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus.

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Day 2 – Living a Balanced Life

Each day we come in contact with men and women who live lives of ordered, purposeful creation. They live in harmony with nature, have meaningful relationships – they are in balance. Our hope is to be inspired by their example and come into harmony with God's creation. God has granted us this beautiful freedom to choose to live purposeful balanced lives.

- When I hear the word indifference it makes me...
- Most of the time my desires and choices are geared toward...
- My friends look at me and say about my life...

Today, I will strive to name and be inspired by people who are models of freedom, giving of themselves in living freely for others.

I will meditate on the words of St. Ignatius:

"We should use God's gifts of creation however they help us in achieving the end for which we were created, and we ought to rid ourselves of whatever gets in the way of our purpose."

Ever-present God, I long for meaning and purpose for my life – a purpose that brings joy and grace to myself and my family and service to your faithful. Most importantly, I ask for the grace to be inspired by those around me and come to the fulfillment of my purpose in being an inspiration to others. May I balance my work, my family and my potentiality in the freedom you grant. I pray in your Son's name, Jesus.

This day...

I will **fast from lunch** (Remember, follow your doctor's orders when it comes to diet and exercise – be sure to hydrate and have small, nutritional snacks).

I will **set aside alms for the poor** (that I will deliver to my parish's poor box at the end of the week).

I will **enter into silence for 15 minutes** in a special place.

I will open my bible and **pray Psalm 40** slowly...and then pray it again even...slower.

A question to ponder this day...

Am I able and willing to talk to others about my faith?



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My Morning Meditation

O that today you would hear God's voice! (Psalm 95:7)

Consider this urgent plea of Psalm 95. Listen this day to God's voice. Now. Today. Etch that word "today" on your mind and heart. You can remember yesterday; you can imagine tomorrow; today alone can you live. It's the supreme importance of the present moment. We are tempted to tolerate the routine or rupture of the present, with an eye to the rapture of the future; it endures today's travail, in hope of tomorrow's ease. Never for a day have I forgotten a framed sign I read decades ago in a convent chapel: "Priest of God, say this Mass as if it were your first Mass, as if it were your last Mass, as if it were your only Mass." Something similar can be said to you each day: "Child of God, live this day as if it were your first day, as if it were your last day, as if it were your only day." - Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., Creative Communications

My Evening Contemplation

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? (Romans 8:31-34)

Many voices ask our attention. There is a voice that says, "Prove that you are a good person." Another voice says, "You'd better be ashamed of yourself." There also is a voice that says, "Nobody really cares about you," and one that says, "Be sure to become popular, successful, and powerful." But underneath all these often very voices is a still, small voice that says, "You are my Beloved, my favor rests on you." That's the voice we need most of all to hear. To hear that voice, however, requires special effort; it requires solitude, silence, and a strong determination to listen.

That's what prayer is. It is listening to the voice that calls us 'my Beloved.'

- Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, 1997



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Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled: my own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.

Luke 2: 29-32

Hail, holy queen, mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope. To you do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To you do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us, and after this exile show us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus.

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Day 3 – God Forgives

Today I wish to taste the mercy of God – to enjoy fully the forgiveness that is God’s gift to me. I can focus, for a moment, on God’s delight in me because I am the beautiful handiwork of creation. I can accept this fact even though my guilt feels overwhelming. I am created in God’s image.

I also realize that forgiveness is only a reality when I freely change my behavior and thoughts. Temptations are everywhere – the sights, the sounds, the smells – my addictions to work, play and the computer.

- When I am alone and the television remote control is all mine, I tend to...
- When the house is empty, or all the other workers have gone home, I turn to my computer and...
- When I see my neighbor’s beautiful car I...

- When the children are unwieldy and my spouse is demanding I ...
- When my church asks for help I...

This day I will acknowledge my weakness but dwell on my goodness. I will focus on the forgiveness that has been shown to me by my family, friends and employer. How much greater is God’s love for me.

Forgiving God, I acknowledge that I am a sinner. I long for your mercy and embrace. The thought of your cross brings me to my knees as I contemplate the depth of love you have shown to the repentant sinner. I will praise your name always – I promise to change. I will forgive others as you have forgiven me. I pray in your Son’s name, Jesus.

This day...

I will ***fast from dinner*** (Remember, follow your doctor’s orders when it comes to diet and exercise – be sure to hydrate and have small, nutritional snacks).

I will ***set aside alms for the poor*** (that I will deliver to my parish’s poor box at the end of the week).

I will ***enter into silence for 20 minutes*** in a special place.

I will open my bible and ***pray Psalm 36*** slowly...and then pray it again even...slower.

I will seek out a priest to receive the ***Sacrament of Penance***.



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Two questions to ponder this day...

Do people see me as someone they can approach and talk to?
Do I have healthy relationships with both men and women?

My Morning Meditation

Remember your compassion and love, O Lord; for they are ages old. (Psalm 25: 6)

(One) spring a homeowner on the shores of Lake Michigan woke up hearing the crashing of the waves against the sea wall. He grabbed his morning coffee and moved to the deck to watch the storm. In that moment he heard the sea wall buckle. Quickly the deck on which he was standing began to collapse. He had barely enough time to grab his dog and run out the front door. As he cleared the door, the churning waters ate his house. He had lost everything but was glad to be alive!

..Jesus proclaims that lack of forgiveness is as catastrophic in the spiritual realm as having our house destroyed or our land conquered. The true response to this inner spiritual darkness is forgiveness, forgiveness that is offered freely and often! Let us choose hope and forgiveness as our responses to life.

Lord, you are the key to my life. Open my heart that I may forgive. Cast the darkness of hatreds, grudges, and lack of forgiveness away from me, and give me a heart of love and caring. - Paul Coury, C.S.S.R., Liguori Publications 1999

My Evening Contemplation

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6: 36-37)

We are all wounded people. Who wounds us? Often those whom we love and those who love us. When we feel rejected, abandoned, abused, manipulated, or violated, it is mostly by people very close to us: our parents, our friends, our spouses, our lovers, our children, our neighbors, our teachers, our pastors. Those who love us wound us too. That's the tragedy of our lives. This is what makes forgiveness from the heart so difficult. It is precisely our hearts that are wounded. We cry out, "You, who I expected to be there for me, you have abandoned me. How can I ever forgive you for that?"

Forgiveness often seems impossible, but nothing is impossible for God. The God who lives within us will give us the grace to go beyond our wounded selves and say, "In the name of God you are forgiven."

Lord, help me to forgive all who have hurt me. - Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey, 1997



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Before I rest

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Day 4 – God Prepares the Way

God was certainly patient and faithful in preparing to send Jesus among us. Abram and Sarai had to leave their homeland to begin a new journey. There were births and deaths, Moses exodus and liberation – desert nomads who became a people with a covenant.

God sent judges and prophets to challenge them and there was infidelity among the people and division among nations. There was rebuilding and periods of relative peace. Jesus, however, brought more turmoil. He agitated people and caused them to think and make decisions.

Most importantly, Jesus brought the promise of a kingdom. Anticipation turned to mission and joy – “the day of the Lord comes.” Today we appreciate God’s fidelity and the fulfillment of promise.

- To me God the Father is...
- For me, Jesus is...
- I witness the Holy Spirit when...

The invitation to respond to God’s mission in new and bold ways lies before me. God has prepared me for this moment and will continue to prepare me. But I need to make the decision to love and respond.

Jesus, it’s hard to comprehend just how privileged I am. You have chosen me for a special purpose. My mind is becoming clearer. My heart is becoming willing. I ask you this day to move the gentle nudge of the Holy Spirit one step further. Guide me as I move forward to follow your will. I pray in your Son’s name, Jesus.

This day...

I will ***extend my fast to more than one meal*** (Remember, follow your doctor’s orders when it comes to diet and exercise – be sure to hydrate and have small, nutritional snacks).

I will ***set aside alms for the poor*** (that I will deliver to my parish’s poor box at the end of the week).

I will ***enter into silence for 25 minutes*** in a special place.

I will open my bible and ***pray Psalm 99*** slowly...and then pray it again even...slower.



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Questions to ponder this day...

Do I enjoy life and people?

Do I have a sense of humor?

Can I work with people of all ages?

My Morning Meditation

Your friends make known, O Lord, the glorious splendor of your kingdom. (Psalm 145: 12)

A slogan for a well-known brand of wristwatches used to be, "It takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'." Similarly, St. Paul must have been one tough fellow. Stoned, flogged, imprisoned, and ridiculed, he kept on going. Nothing seemed to stop Paul from preaching the Good News.

Very few of us will suffer physical assaults for the sake of the Gospel, but we often have to suffer misunderstanding, ridicule, or worse yet, indifference to our faith. We are often dismissed as "out of touch," unrealistic," or "irrelevant" to our twenty-first century world. This is why a strong faith community and a vibrant connection to that community is so essential in nurturing and supporting our faith. This is why so many renewal programs in the Church emphasize the importance of being linked to a group of people who meet regularly to share faith and to pray. These bonds of community nurture our bond with God. - Robert Roddy, OFM CONV, Liguori Publications

My Evening Contemplation

Do unto others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6: 31)

Do you want to know the secret of true happiness? Of deep and genuine peace? Do you want to solve at a blow all your difficulties in relations with your neighbor, bring all polemic to an end, avoid all dissension?

Well, decide here and now to love things and people as Jesus loved them, that is, to the point of self-sacrifice. Don't bother with the bookkeeping of love; love without keeping accounts. If you know someone who is decent or likeable, love him, but if someone else is very unlikeable, love him just the same.

If someone greets you and smiles, greet him and smile back, but if someone treads on your feet, smile just the same. If someone does you a good turn, thank the Lord for it, but if someone else slanders you, persecutes you, curses you, strikes you, thank him and carry on. Do not say: "I'm right and he's wrong." Say: "I must love him as myself." This is the kind of love Jesus taught: a love which transforms, vivifies, enriches, brings peace. - Carlo Carretto, Creative Communications



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Day 5 – God Announces the Way

God has been with me this week. I feel God's presence. I realize this may be just the beginning to a decision. Discernment does not occur overnight. I will remember the words spoken to Mary by the angel that "nothing is impossible with God." This moment cries out for simplicity and silence. It begs for a humble person. God rejoices at a committed heart.

- Do I need to bring my thoughts to a spiritual director?
- I need my pastor's support. Should I get to know him better – maybe, take him to dinner?
- Is this the right time to begin study and formation?
- My family's support and consent are necessary. Am I certain my family is 100% behind me?
- Lay ministry? Ordained deacon? Do I remain in the pew? All are good and holy decisions. I believe the Lord is asking me to...

I will now offer a spontaneous prayer to Jesus. "Lord...

This day...

I will *choose how and when to fast* (Remember, follow your doctor's orders when it comes to diet and exercise – be sure to hydrate and have small, nutritional snacks).

I will *generously set aside alms for the poor* (Please return all of your alms offerings to your parish's poor box).

I will *enter into silence for 30 minutes* in a special place.

I will open my bible and *pray Psalm 132* slowly...and then pray it again even...slower.

I will *write a letter to my God* expressing my desire, my openness, my deliberation, my humility – my decision.

The question to ponder this day...

Am I able and willing to make a decision about a vocation?



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My Morning Meditation

Rejoice! We must boldly proclaim the mystery of Christ!

Every disciple of Christ is responsible in his own measure for the spread of the faith, but Christ the Lord is always calling from among his followers those whom he wills, so that they may be with him and be sent by him to preach to the nations.

Through the Holy Spirit, who distributes gifts as he wills for the good of all, Christ implants in the hearts of individuals the vocation to be a missionary, and at the same time he raises up in the Church (ministries) which make their own task of spreading the gospel that belongs to the whole church.

A special vocation marks out those who are prepared to undertake the missionary task, and have the right natural disposition for it, with suitable gifts and talents. Sent by lawful authority, they go out in obedience and faith to those who are far from Christ. They have been set apart for the task to which they have been called as ministers of the gospel, *to make Gentiles an acceptable offering, sanctified in the Holy Spirit.*

Those whom God calls must answer his call in such a way that, without regard for purely human counsel, they may devote themselves wholly to the work of the Gospel. This response cannot be given except with the inspiration and strength of the Holy Spirit.

The person who is sent enters into the life and mission of him who *emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave*. He must be ready therefore to be true to his vocation for life, to deny himself, renouncing all that he had before, and to become all things to all men.

In preaching the Gospel to the nations he must boldly proclaim the mystery of Christ, whose ambassador he is, so that in Christ he may have the courage to speak as he ought, and not be ashamed of the scandal of the cross. He must follow in the footsteps of his Master, who was gentle and humble of heart, and to reveal to others that his yoke is easy and his burden light.

By a life that is truly according to the Gospel, by much endurance, by forbearance, by kindness and sincere love, he must bear witness to the Lord.

He will pray to God for strength and courage. - From the decree on the missionary activity of the Church of the Second Vatican Council



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My Evening Contemplation

The fact that I am always searching for God, always struggling to discover the fullness of Love, always yearning for the complete truth, tells me that I have already been given a taste of God, of Love and of Truth. I can only look for something that I have, to some degree, already found. How can I search for beauty and truth unless that beauty and truth are already known to me in the depth of my heart? It seems that we have deep inner memories of the paradise that we have lost. Maybe the word “innocence” is better than the word “paradise.” We are innocent before we started feeling guilty; we were in the light before we entered the darkness; we were at home before we started to search for a home. Deep in the recesses of our minds and hearts lies hidden the treasure we seek. We know its preciousness, and we know that it holds the gift we most desire: a life stronger than death. - Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, 1997

Before I rest

These precious moments of retreat now come to their conclusion. Please review the statements below on successful discernment. Open your heart. Pray to make a decision blessed and encouraged by God.

Lord, thank you for forgiving me and enlightening me.

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled: my own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.

Luke 2: 29-32

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen

May the all-powerful Lord grant us a restful night and a peaceful death. Amen.



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As we move forward with our inquiry, let's remember the keys to successful discernment...

We *overcome the instability of our emotions*. Christian life becomes a matter of conviction and love.

The attraction of riches and pleasures of this life are not pursued nor minimized – *we don't reject our humanity* – but we do know their proper place and perspective.

The Word of God finds '*good soil*' when it is incorporated in our soul.

We possess *honest and pure motivation* and our attitude is that of Christ.

We stop thinking about our gifts and ourselves and *concentrate on others*.

We are *willing to pray* for enlightenment.

We *desire self-knowledge* and we accept the objectivity of outsiders.

We possess a desire for the committed life. It is not short-term in its nature but *a lifetime commitment*.

We possess a willingness to assess our life and we are *authentic and sincere in pursuing holiness*. We not only strive to be a 'saint' but we endeavor to lead others to a saintly existence.

We realize that our faith is growing and we *desire to be consumed for the Lord*.

We open ourselves to a *growing sensitivity to the needs of people* and to learning to lead people to Jesus Christ.

We acquire in a spirit of humility and virtuous living *a growing sense that God has something great and special planned for us*.

May God be at your side as you step back to discern God's call. May Jesus hold your hand. May the Holy Spirit guide and direct you.

Blessed be the Trinity and undivided Unity.