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Spiritual "Breathing Spell" The Laymen's Retreat

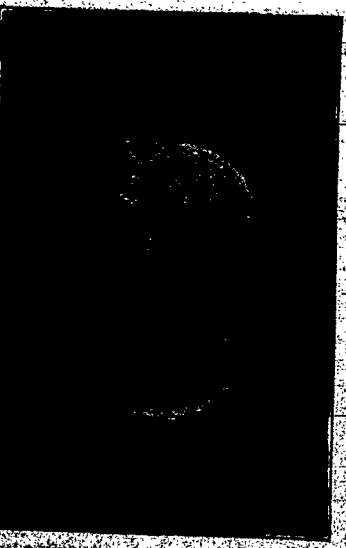
by William I. Lonergan, S. J.

It is always dangerous to judge cohorts of Catholic Action polished in superlatives. However, it may be stated with little fear of contradiction that in the forefront of contemporary Catholic activities is the lay retreat movement. It gets its significance not only from the fact that it is in the mind of the Holy Father it is the basis of all that genuine and effective Catholic Action around which today the energies of the Church are being centered in its Divine mission of spreading the kingdom of Christ. Time and again the present Sovereign Pontiff has made clear what he thinks of the movement. Apart from an encyclical letter (Mens Nostra) devoted to encouraging the retreats, he issued at the very outset of his pontificate an Apostolic Constitution proclaiming St. Ignatius as a heavenly patron of retreat work. On that occasion he said: "We earnestly wish that the making of these Spiritual Exercises should daily spread wider and wider abroad; and that those houses of devotion into which men withdraw for a month or for eight days or for fewer days to put themselves under training for the perfect Christian life, may come into being and flourish everywhere more and more numerous."

In the Encyclical already referred to (and it might be noted that Encyclicals are confined to matters of supreme and universal importance), the Pope, discussing modern world problems and their remedy, writes: "The most grave disease by which our age is oppressed and at the same time the fruitful source of all the evils deplored by every man of good heart, is that levity and thoughtlessness which every man inherits and thence through serious ways. Hence comes the constant and passionate absorption in external things; hence, the insatiable thirst for riches and pleasures that gradually extinguishes and weakens in the minds of men the desire for more excellent goods, and so entangles them in outward and fleeting things that it forbids them to think of eternal truths. . . . Now if we would cure this sickness from which human society suffers so sorely, what healing remedy could we devise more appropriate for our purpose than that of calling these enervated souls so neglectful of eternal things, to the recollection of spiritual exercises!"

"With no less care, Venerable Brethren, would we have manifold

Retreat Master



WILLIAM IGNATIUS LONERGAN, S. J., was named by many of our country as the Retreat Master of the year. . . .

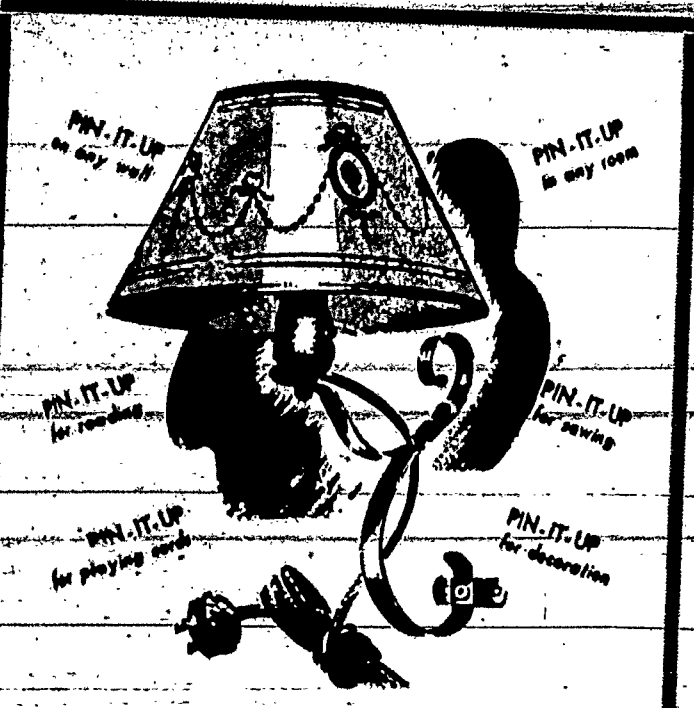
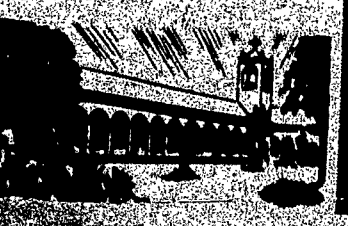
Briefly, a retreat may be described as a series of systematic religious exercises designed to build up one's Christian life to the fullest of the Christian ideal. In a few days of retirement and recollection (for we are speaking of "closed" retreats, not those sometimes conducted in the soul, under the guidance of a spiritual director, the retreatant is taught how to rid himself of whatever may be amiss in his conduct, and is put in the way of finding God's holy will in every phase of his individual life. By illuminating the mind, strengthening the will, and inflaming the heart, the retreat exercises not only give one a true philosophy of life, but show him how it can be made practical amid his daily occupations and in the particular environment in which he finds himself. They are the secret to both happiness and holiness.

A retreat is not, as some who have never made one think, a series of devotional exercises or a lecture course in Catholic apologetics; nor do those who go to retreat houses pass their time in a sort of pietistic sentimentalism. Its chief feature is the meditation period which, judiciously directed, one thinks for himself about the great fundamental truths, and applies them to his own individual needs. It is essentially a man's job—a serious-minded, man's job. It takes character to make a retreat even while the retreat itself fortifies that character.

Through a retreat one comes to know and appreciate his Faith better. From this springs greater earnestness in measuring up to one's personal religious obligations. One gets to have a keener Catholic sense, to think more in harmony with the spirit of the Church. A clearer consciousness of one's relation to the Mystical Body of Christ is developed, together with an apostolic spirit that makes a man eager to share in Catholic Action according to his means and opportunities. Automatically there results a fuller participation in Catholic parochial life. Under the inspiration of a retreat as under no other influence, one experiences the thrill and the joy of being a thorough-going, practical living Catholic. Indeed, retreat houses are admittedly schools for training the lay leaders of which the Church, especially in this country, stands so much in need. The day is past when the layman who is regular at Mass and the Sacraments or generous in alms-deeds, praiseworthy as these things are, can be called "outstanding" or "prominent."

The new characteristics of Catholic leadership unquestionably include a high ideal about personal sanctification, an intense practical love for Christ, and energetic interest in zeal for Catholic Action, normally fostered, as the Pope tells us, only through periodic retreats.

One highly valuable motive for making a retreat if a man has not yet enjoyed the experience, is the exceptional opportunity it offers to get



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