

## **Caritas Retreats: Discover. Love. Anew.**

### **An Overview**

#### **A. Introduction**

The US Bishops, in their Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults entitled “Sons and Daughters of the Light,” identified four principal hungers among young adults: hunger for healthy personal identity, hunger for intimacy in relationships, hunger for life-giving spirituality, and hunger for meaningful work. They call for ministerial strategies that engage young adults in their hungers and provides a “vision of life based on a faith that calls each of them to holiness, community, and service.”

While there are a growing number of young adult programs in Catholic parishes and dioceses, many young adults have a difficult time connecting with the local Church beyond attending Sunday Masses. They are less engaged in their faith life. Moreover, they seldom have opportunities to seriously reflect on healthy models of love and relationships other than those bombarded by the media.

The Caritas retreat is meant to help young adults engage their hungers for love, God, and meaningful relationships, through an experience of genuine community of faith.

Caritas, Latin for “charity,” is a three-day retreat launched in January 2005 primarily for Vietnamese young adults in their 20’s and 30’s. Since then it has been adapted for people from various cultures in their 30’s, 40’s and 50’s. As a retreat grounded on Ignatian principles, it serves as a stepping stone to encourage people to attend silent Ignatian retreats.

#### **B. Goal**

Caritas retreats aim to provide affective and intellectual growth, namely:

1. *To offer retreatants a heart-felt experience of God’s personal love through a Christian community that is “real”.<sup>1</sup>*
2. *To challenge retreatants’ “operational idea”<sup>2</sup> of love and help each develop an understanding of love and relationships more rooted in God.*

In short, the goal is to form a community of faith that helps everyone experience God’s personal love for them more deeply.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Real” is a slang term describing something that is “concrete”, “tangible”, “genuine”, “personal.” Many participants report that they experience a strong sense of community which helps them be “real” or “sống thật” in their faith.

<sup>2</sup> Whereas a person’s “theoretical idea” of love refers to an understanding of love that is predominantly idealized, his or her “operational idea” of love more directly influences how or she actually relates to others.

C. **Objectives** - it is hoped that the retreat will empower retreatants to:

- See the value of building small Christian community based on trust, love, and service of others.
- Foster skills of self-reflection on their own lives: to reflect on the healthy and unhealthy ways they look for love.
- Articulate their interior experiences and movements such as emotions, feelings, fears, hopes, etc. while seeing these as gateways for genuine encounters with Christ.
- Clarify and deepen their understandings of love and its place in their lives as well as develop realistic criteria for genuine loving.
- Come to a personal, heart-felt awareness of Christ's love for them as they are.
- Nurture and cultivate greater receptivity to the mystery and depth of the Church's sacramental life, specifically through:
  1. the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation
  2. personal and communal prayer

D. **Methodology and Implementation: "The Conversational Word of God"**<sup>3</sup>

The retreat is grounded in Christian incarnational or sacramental theology, namely the belief that God enters deeply into human history and relationships. Specifically, it builds upon the Word as the revelation of God. Where two or three are gathered to speak "in spirit and in truth," Jesus promises to be in their midst. Hence, heartfelt, honest, and vulnerable conversations among participants enable heightened awareness of God's love through human relationships.

The talks by Team members facilitate this conversation by modeling honesty, openness, and vulnerability. The conversations in small groups invite each person to similar heart-to-heart exchanges. Such dialogues engender openness and transparency of heart which makes conversations with God in prayer tangible and meaningful, and vice-versa. It provides an experience that is like a "school of love," learned through the genuine community of growth that is gradually built throughout the retreat days. It serves, in Ignatian terms, as a "school of the heart."<sup>4</sup>

The retreat process is also shaped by principles of group dynamics as modeled by the Team. Specific activities include:

- Group sharing and discussion: small and large group sharing; personal testaments or witnesses of faith, woven into thematic talks.

---

<sup>3</sup> This is Thomas Clancy's name given to the Ignatian practice of "spiritual conversation." See *The Conversational Word of God* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> "Heart" in this context refers primarily to what Saint Ignatius calls "sentir" or "felt knowledge," that is, knowledge which is more than rational and engages the whole person - one's deep affections, attitudes, and commitment.

- Various forms of prayers: group, scriptural, Ignatian guided meditation, prayer before the Eucharist and the Awareness Examen.
- Sacramental experiences: Eucharist and Reconciliation.
- Modeling of a Christian community by the entire retreat Team (small group leaders, E-Team members, and cooking staff).

Thus, three presuppositions undergird the retreat:

1. Human relationships give us clear access to God's love.
2. God's compassion is pregnant, yet hidden in human suffering (especially through relationships).
3. Transparency with others entails honesty in prayer and makes it more "real."

Caritas enables retreatants to live out the Ignatian motto, "finding God in all things," especially through an honest and critical look at their relationships.

#### **E. Topics:**

Each retreat is tailored by the following topics, presented through witness talks, skits, and homilies:

- Journey to Love Trust Walk
- Longing to Love & Be Loved
- Love Chooses me?
- What's Love to me?
- Love Without Condition?
- Love & Sex(uality)
- Love & God's Dream?
- Love & its 10,000 Imitations
- Love & Loneliness
- Love & Justice