

Refreshing My Soul, Renewing My Life

by Gina Williams

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Psalm 42: 5



Slav Romanov from Unsplash

In July of 2018, I drove to Wernersville, PA, just west of Reading to the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth for a seven-day directed silent retreat. That's a sentence you don't expect to hear from a former Presbyterian and before that an agnostic. But, in fact there were, among the 20 or so men and women, pastors, and lay leaders of non-Catholic churches, as well as people like me, looking for spiritual renewal. A couple of the women I talked to—we could speak during that first evening at dinner—were church leaders who came every year. But why was I there?

My son, Peter, had died in April of 2015, and two years later my brother, John, died. I was devastated but knew that Peter was with God and prayed that John was also. But I felt increasingly far from God during the year following John's death. I lost my ability and desire for daily contemplation and prayer, while knowing I wanted a reawakening of my faith. I asked a friend, who was a Presbyterian pastor, and he told me of the Jesuit Center where he had participated in a retreat.

I thank and praise God that for me this week was exactly what I needed. One evening as I explored the rather large building that had previously been a seminary for training priests, I wandered into the lovely chapel, empty at the time. In the front, on the sides were two large portraits of Saints Peter and Paul. I sat down in a pew after staring at St. Peter and wept and prayed to the Lord Jesus for relief from my grief. Basically, in a nutshell, what I learned that week was I needed to learn more of Jesus, rather than dwelling on my loss.

I had brought books that I needed to read or reread, and the Center had a library. Each day I read in my room or more often on one of the porches, prayed, took walks around the beautiful and extensive grounds. There was a worship service every day with communion and an hour speaking with my assigned spiritual director.

I also hoped this week would help me find a more sacred attitude during communion in my home church. One of the stumbling blocks for me, at first, and for other non-Catholics is communion, or the Eucharist. Roman Catholics believe the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. We Protestants do not. But the bread and wine are sacred symbols of the Last Supper. I did take communion at the retreat—it was allowed, the Jesuits being less concerned with

who was or wasn't a Roman Catholic. The whole experience of the retreat and my subsequent Ignatian exercises have restored for me the holiness of that sacrament.

My spiritual director, Linda, would give me scripture passages to read, slipping notes under my door earlier, to prompt our discussions. These hours were uplifting and relieving in turn and always too short. Luckily for me, Linda lived close enough in Pennsylvania that I asked her to guide me through eight and a half months of the Ignatian Exercises.

We read the book, *The Ignatian Adventure*, by Kevin O'Brien, SJ. St. Ignatius was born in Loyola, Spain, in 1491. He developed the spiritual exercises from his notes as a pilgrim, talking with people about their faith throughout Spain and Jerusalem. After completing his theological studies, he formed with like-minded priests, the Society of Jesus—dedicated to preaching, giving the Exercises, and helping the people. The Jesuits are a good example for us—dedicated to service to God but, like Jesus, living and working among the people.

Linda and I met every two weeks or so, sometimes by phone, to discuss my progress. That experience along with the retreat led to a truly God-sent spiritual renewal. I am sorry to say that a few years later the retreat center had to close. The large building with that lovely chapel had been a seminary, then as that need dwindled, became the retreat center. I am sure there are similar retreat centers around the area and I hope someday to repeat my journey of spiritual renewal (I'm human, it's what we do—decline and renew.) Join me!

The Suscipe (receive) Prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will.
All I have and call my own.
You have given all to me,
To you, Lord; I return it.
Everything is yours, do with it what you will.

Give me only your love and your grace;
That is enough for me.

That prayer is inspiring for Roman Catholics and non-Catholics, for those who aspire to a life as a cloistered monk or a Reformed Church pastor, and for all the rest of us. Inspiring, yes, but most of us would not pray such a prayer to give all back to the Lord. Or would we?

For He delivered us and saved us and called us with a holy calling [a calling that leads to a consecrated life—a life set apart—a life of purpose], not because of our works [or because of any personal merit—we could do nothing to earn this], but because of His own purpose and grace [His amazing, undeserved favor] which was granted to us in Christ Jesus before the world began.

2 Timothy 1:9 [AMP]

One of our well-known hymns and one of my favorites (#391 in our red hymnal) starts with

“Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.” Verse 5 says,
“Take my will and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine.” The other verses, similarly, give each part of us to God: our hands, our feet, our hearts.

Listen to it here:

[Take My Life and Let It Be](#)