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## **Lenten retreats offer a desert experience**

Rachelle Sauvageau

I recently had the privilege to pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Of the many sites we visited, some were holy ground that marked events in the life of Christ, while others had significance to the Jewish heritage. Other sites were places of antiquity. One place brought home to me the spiritual meaning of the desert experience, especially as it is related to so often in the book of Psalms.

Near the beginning of our journeying, we took an excursion to Masada, a fortress dating back to late B.C. Masada is built on a mountain top in the Judean Desert overlooking the Dead Sea. It is probably most well known as a safe haven for the Jews during the time of the Roman siege on Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Looking over the desert that surrounds this mountain fortress, I found myself wondering: "Why would anyone want to live here?" There is no plant or animal life visible to the naked eye. It is void of a viable water source. It is total barrenness. It is a place, I thought, that the "world" would never want to go to, or be in, because there is nothing there to satisfy the senses, our human appetites.

And yet, is that precisely why the psalmist would look to the desert as a place of refuge? In Psalm 55, we see the desert described as a place of solace, a shelter from the storms of life: "Oh, that I had wings like a dove to fly away and be at rest. So I would escape far away and take refuge in the desert. I would hasten to find shelter from the raging wind, from the destructive storm, O Lord."

I thought back to my own retreat experiences over the years and how these times away with our Lord had been a desert experience. I found myself in a place away from the world, where it is just Jesus and me.

The Respect Life Office is hosting two retreats this Lent. Both are Ignatian Retreat experiences that allow you to take a few days to be alone with God and yourself. Carried out in an environment of silence, the retreatants are better able to tune out the events of everyday life and allow grace to draw them into an intimate conversation with Christ.

A retreat experience is about a personal encounter with Christ, who desires to reveal himself to us through sacred Scripture. In revealing himself to us, Christ, at the same time, allows us to see ourselves for who we really are and who God is calling us to be.

What can a person expect to happen if they attend an Ignatian Retreat? The retreat is based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. In reflecting on how God had been at work in his own life, and through his experience of guiding others in the spiritual life, Ignatius discovered a process that allows a person to be more attentive to God, to hearing God's voice from among the many other "voices" that want our attention, and then learning how to respond to God's calling in a way that is receptive and active.

During the weekend, retreatants will attend two conferences a day when the retreat master offers guidance on Ignatian methods of prayer, the necessity of silence, not only on retreat

but also in our daily living, and the Rules of Discernment of Spirits. By understanding and practicing the Rules of Discernment, we can come to understand that God is always at work in our lives. God initiates a relationship with us so that he can guide, direct and draw us ever more deeply into living a fully human, happy life.

Learning the Rules of Discernment of Spirits fortifies us in the interior life and gives us the needed tools to discern God's voice from "outside" voices that would want to discourage us, instill fear and move us in the direction of pursuing our own will rather than God's will for us.

Based on our ability to reflect on the ordinary events of life, self-knowledge and awareness of the deepest desires in our heart, we can by grace enter into a prayerful "pondering" of what God is asking of us, of discovering what the desires of God's heart are for us.

Opportunities for spiritual direction are also provided during the retreat to help retreatants discern God's calling for them. The two retreats will be hosted at the St. Francis Convent and Retreat Center in Hankinson. Father Andrew Jasinski will serve as retreat master. Father Jasinski is currently interim director for the diocesan Department for Catholic Education and Formation, and parochial vicar for Holy Cross Church in West Fargo.

The retreats begin Thursday evening and conclude Sunday afternoon. Cost of the retreat is \$250 per person and includes all meals, a private room and a shared bathroom. Registration forms can be downloaded at: [www.fargodiocese.org/news/Events/htm](http://www.fargodiocese.org/news/Events/htm).

The Women's Retreat is Feb. 16-19 and registration deadline is Feb. 10. The Men's Retreat is March 8-11 and registration deadline is March 2. For more information, contact Rachelle at (701) 356-7910 or [rachelle.sauvageau@fargodiocese.org](mailto:rachelle.sauvageau@fargodiocese.org).

*Rachelle Sauvageau is director of the Respect Life Office.*