

A HELP TO RETREAT

(Mathews Barnabas Metropolitan)

Our annual conference is an opportunity to get relaxed from the day to day routine, to have entertainments, to concentrate on spiritual life and plan the future. Primary importance is to be given to the spiritual retreat. The aim of the retreat is a root and branch change in life as far as possible.

Our Lord said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (St. Jn. 10:10). What is abundant life? It is the freedom from all sins and sufferings, and fullness of virtues. When can we have it? When we can love everyone and everyone loves us.

How can we love others sincerely? When we try to see them as the children of God and as fellow beings like ourselves, and identify ourselves with them. When we realize the countless blessings of God showered upon us in spite of our unworthiness, we can be thankful to God and love Him. When we love God, we have to love His children also.

Should we not love God's children? No sensible man would say, that we and the world in which we live came into existence by mere chance. There is a mathematical mind behind this mathematical universe, working as the creator and sustainer. Moreover God is protecting us from many possible calamities. Whenever He allows sufferings to come, He will try to bring good out of sufferings. It is said about our Lord "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered." (Heb. 5:8).

If we love God, we have to love His children also. There is a saying "Love me, love my child." The resurrected Lord asked St. Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (St. Jn. 21:15). Our Lord asked this question three times. When Peter answered in the affirmation, our Lord said, "Feed My lambs. Tend My sheep. Feed My sheep." Our love for the Lord should be expressed through our love for His children. Then there cannot be any limit for our love.

There is a story of a nurse who took much pains in serving the patients. One day she was dressing a patient's ulcer that stank. No one could stand nearby because of the foul odor. But she did not seem to mind it. She took a lot of pains and time to complete it well. A visitor who happened to see this asked the nurse, whether the patient was her relative. The nurse answered, "No". The visitor then asked: "How then could you be so attentive to the dressing of the ulcer?" And he added: "I would not do it even if a thousand dollars were offered to me." The nurse replied: "It cannot be done for money at all. This patient is a child of God. Should we not love and care for God's children? If indeed we love, we can help, forgive, respect, obey and fill everyone with joy.

If there is real love we will be able to forgive the sins of people. Then people will try to forgive us our sins. When we respect people, speaking all good things about them, they will try to respect us speaking all good things about us.

Another way to cultivate love for others is to visualize them as fellow-beings like ourselves. That is what the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches. The Good Samaritan identified himself with the man who had been attacked and wounded by thieves. The wounded

man was not in any way related to the Samaritan. But he took pity on the bleeding man, and gave him the necessary first-aid ignoring the risk of possible attack by the thieves. After that he took the man to an inn, and gave money to the innkeeper to take care of him. He also promised to reimburse any extra money that would be spent on him. (St. Lk. 10:30-37) When we identify ourselves with others, we will readily sacrifice our time, talents and resources for their sake. If we follow this way, we will be able to develop real love for the undeserving also.

When we love people whole-heartedly, we can help them sacrificially, forgive them whole-heartedly and respect them counting them as better than ourselves.

It is noteworthy what the children of a loving family said in my presence. The question was asked whether they had heard Daddy scolding Mummy at any time. They said "No." It was also asked whether Mommy had spoken anything blaming Daddy. The answer was the same "No."

The aim of confession is to create real sorrow for sins and a root and branch change in life. Here is a story of a parishioner who told me his story when I was a Vicar of a parish. At home that person had a bitter quarrel with his father. He said all nasty things against his father. The father did not say anything in reply. At about 12 am the following night, when everyone else was asleep, the son woke up and heard someone crying. He listened. It was his father who was crying. He thought that it must be on account of the quarrel they had earlier that day, and that the father might be cursing him. But to his surprise, he heard the father pleading with God to have mercy on his son. Thereupon, he rushed to the father, caught hold of his feet and

began to weep, earnestly pleading for forgiveness and promising that he would never repeat such nasty behavior. He kept his word for years till he told me his story.

Similarly, God too is weeping over our sins of commission and omission. Since God is love, He must be identifying Himself with every sinner, and crying over him/her. Since God is love, He identifies Himself with everyone. He experiences the ruin of everyone as His own. Our Lord's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane illustrates it. Our Lord said: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." (St. Mt. 26:38) At that time Judas Iscariot was on his way to the Garden of Gethsemane, along with soldiers and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, to betray Him. (St. Jn. 18:3).

God is always appealing to our hearts with deep sorrow. If the agony of a human mother is more than the suffering of her child, how much more will be the agony of God for the sinful mankind as there is fullness of love and compassion in God?

Real repentance will make a real change in life. Here is a story of a person who admitted his sinfulness and cried. But that sorrow did not make any change in his life. He was so much immersed in his selfishness. When King Saul understood that David had spared his life even when David had the opportunity to kill him, Saul was filled with wonder. He cried and said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. Today you have explained how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the LORD put me into your hands. For who has ever found an enemy, and sent the enemy safely away? So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. Now I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants after

me, and that you will not wipe out my name from my father's house.' So David swore this to Saul. Then Saul went home; but David and his men went up to the stronghold." (1 Sam. 24: 17-22). But strangely enough, King Saul started again to hunt after David. He was not able to see David as a child of God and a fellow-being. Unlike Saul our sorrow for sins should make a drastic change in us.

When I was a deacon, once I took confession before my uncle, Father Paulose. He then asked me one question, whether I was confessing the sins I was trying to overcome. That gave me the sense of a new responsibility. It is not enough to confess all sins without exception. We must try our best in overcoming all sins without exception.

The privacy of sacramental confession

In no circumstance the father confessor will reveal the secrets of confession. This is a covenant between the priest and God. The patient is seeking remedy from the physician with full confidence. In a similar way the penitent can confess his/her sins before the father confessor as the spiritual father, and physician without anxiety and fear. It is the duty of the priest to strengthen his relationship with the congregation so that they may feel free to confess.

Self-examination

Let us see how to conduct self-examination as a preparation for Holy Confession and self correction. Based on the writings of St. Paul, we have to assess how deep and real is our love. (1 Cor. 13:4-7) Do we have such divine love? St. Paul also speaks about the fruit of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness, self-control.” (Gal. 5:22-23) Do we have it? Similarly, do we have the spirit of self-sacrificing love, long suffering, supreme respect and whole-hearted obedience? We have to compare our lives with that of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Only then can we claim that we bring glory to our Lord. (St. Matt. 5:16)

A few more thoughts that will help us to examine and correct ourselves are given below.

- (i) Do we realize that all that we are, and all that we have, are free gifts of God; that they are given in our unworthiness for the common welfare of mankind?
- (ii) Do we love God’s children while being thankful and obedient to God? St. Paul says: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Cor. 10:31) It is the opposite with us. We are often carried away by our inordinate craving for worldly pleasures and luxuries. Should we not be ashamed of it?
- (iii) How far do we care to spend our time, talents and money for the glory of God and the benefit of His children? Do we set apart tithes habitually?
- (iv) Do we sincerely discharge our duties? Are we lazy?
- (v) Do we grumble against those who do not show us honor and respect? Also, do we insult and disgrace others in our pride and arrogance?
- (vi) Do we see others as God’s children like ourselves, and love and respect them accordingly?

- (vii) Are we angry with others regardless of the truth that they are fellow-beings like ourselves? Do we postpone counseling and correcting to some other convenient time in the future?
- (viii) Do we try to control our anger even when there is sufficient reason to get angry?
- (ix) Do we harbor the spirit of revenge without identifying ourselves with those who wrong us?
- (x) Do we feel jealous of others not considering them as fellow-beings? Do we rejoice in their success, and encourage them to do better?
- (xi) Do we try to overcome lust? Our Lord says: "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (St. Matt. 5:28)
This applies to women also. Do we care to remember the Lord's words, and lead a chaste life? Pre-marital sex, homosexuality, sex outside marriage etc. are all abominations in God's sight. Pornography, reading books that arouse sexual feelings must be done away with. Making money through such activities is shameful.
- (xii) Alcoholism, addiction to drugs, smoking and gambling are harmful to one's health. They ruin the finances. They cause crimes and quarrels. Hence, addiction is sinful. Making liquors and selling them are sinful acts.
- (xiii) Stealing, acquiring wealth through illegal means and pilfering things from public institutions are also sinful acts.
 - (xiv) When we fail to do our duty whole-heartedly it is a sin of omission. Laziness and lack of honest work are also sins of omission. When we do not love God and His children sincerely we are in sin.