

Young Hispanics retreat to pray in silence

It is frequently noticed that the Hispanic community prefers religious and prayer practices filled with lively songs and prayers where, in common, people respond, repeat or acclaim in unison, such as, for example, it is seen in the charismatic prayer groups. This has caused that the media identify this participating and festive style as the peculiar way of Hispanic religiosity.

However, it may well be noticed that along with this practice there are also taking place other types of spiritual experiences. Such is the case of the St. Ignatius retreats, in complete silence, that the Institute of Migration Culture and Ministries of the Jesuit fathers, with headquarters in Baltimore, is offering for leaders of the Hispanic communities of the area. This initiative started four years ago with a group of 14 Hispanic ministers, nearly all adults who went on retreat for three days to Loyola retreat house located in Faulkner. The following year the number increased to 16 and later it was 20 and so on. Each year in the second weekend of January, a group of Hispanic leaders requests to participate in the event.

The capacity is limited to 20 people because the kind of Spiritual Exercises practiced supposes that at least twice a day the participant confronts his prayer with a Spiritual Director. Another characteristic of these retreats is that the participant is led to practice the meditation and contemplation techniques appropriate to the Exercises of St. Ignatius, in complete silence.

At first the organizing team doubted that this would be well received but, experience has shown us that Hispanics respond to, as well as request, this type of spiritual experience. More surprisingly, it has been confirmed that nearly the totality of participants in the last two years have been young adults between 18 and 30 years old.

Silence, as taught by spiritual masters, is the ideal kind of prayer inasmuch as we have to renounce to all speech except that which we want to address to God so as to be prepared to listen to what He wishes to reveal to us. At the same time, this type

of prayer is sometimes the hardest because we tend to become distracted with our own thoughts or feelings. This is why many believe that silent prayer is a technique reserved for masters advanced in prayer. However, it has been pleasing to confirm that, adhering to the techniques left by Ignatius Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises, these young people have been able, like truly spiritual masters, to practice and enjoy the richness of deep prayer.

In their retreat assessments, these young people happily revealed that through silent meditations they were able to better experience the presence of Jesus, who spoke to them through sacred Scripture or the subject of their meditation. In the same manner, many revealed having had the occasion to know themselves better and to recognize the true forces or secret intentions that were moving their lives. As fruits of the retreat, they went back to their communities and apostolic groups with great peace in their hearts and renewed encouragement to better serve their fellow men. Given the fact that they are leaders, many have started practicing with their groups the type of prayer they learned in these retreats.

Some of them have even registered a second time in order to partake of the same experience, and all have requested to be invited to the next level of Silent Exercises that the organizing team offers every fall. On their own, the offices of promotion of the youth pastoral of the Baltimore Diocese as well as that of Arlington, where all of the young people who took part in the latest retreats belong, given the results seen in the participants, they have committed to continue financially supporting the young leaders who wish to have this experience.

There is nothing left but to confirm once more that the Spirit moves his church by various means and that the Ignatian Spirituality is one which is also leaving its mark among our leaders.

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