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In seminary, our director for liturgical formation was a Benedictine monk, and monks have a different sense of time. Each year as the seminarians would go off on retreat, he would say something like, “Oh, you young people with your retreats. So modern. They’ve only been around for five centuries.” And we’d laugh and he’d say, “No, I’m serious. The entire Church used to make one long retreat together every year known as Lent.” As this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday when we begin Lent, I was thinking about Lent, and I think that reflecting on why we go on retreats might help illuminate for us why we do Lent.

Lent consists in prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, which each person chooses to undertake according to their own spiritual discipline, while everyone fasts on two days from food and abstains from meat on Fridays. This is significantly toned down. In the Middle Ages, I found that, “during all 40 days meat, most dairy, and eggs were forbidden, including on Sundays. Some would refrain from having any meal until the hour of 3 PM.” These days, we worry about whether we can have a hot dog at a baseball game on a Friday and then we’re celebrating that we successfully gave up Coke for 40 days, with a break each week on Sunday. Back then, they wouldn’t even consider hosting a sporting event during Lent!

One might get the impression from all this that Catholics used to think things like bacon or cake or sports were bad, but it was not that at all. We fast because Jesus began his Earthly ministry by fasting, and today, we heard in the Gospels, “No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher.” Jesus, as part of his preparations for ministry, had a 40 day fast in the desert. This was the same man who was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he didn’t fast as much as others. People were thinking, “We should follow John the Baptist. This guy can’t be for real.” He did note, though, that his disciples who could see him would fast when they he was no longer with him. When that day came, they would hunger for God.

Now let’s think about the modern retreat. When Saint Ignatius of Loyola was developing his retreat the Spiritual Exercises, he wrote at the beginning what he called the first principle and foundation.

“God created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their souls.

“God created all other things on the face of the earth to help fulfill this purpose. From this it follows that we are to use the things of this world only to the extent that they help us to this end,

and we ought to rid ourselves of the things of this world to the extent that they get in the way of this end.

“For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things as much as we are able, so that we do not necessarily want health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long rather than a short life, and so in all the rest, so that we ultimately desire and choose only what is most conducive for us to the end for which God created us.”

The purpose of the exercises was to help someone see how loved they are, desiring in response to live for God’s greater glory alone, and then to be willing to set aside anything that stands in the way. That means that the person would be willing to choose, if so called, to take a vow of poverty and to become a missionary sent to some far flung place. He would be detached, but not because these things are bad, but because they can obscure our relationship with God if we are attached to them. I actually believe that our attachments are what have created the vocation shortage in our nation, that we don’t take seriously enough these attachments. We think we are free to serve God, but we are not yet free. We fail to see how our hobbies stand in the way of fully pursuing God.

It becomes clear how something stands in the way if it is sin. We actually speak like this all the time. “He was blinded by his greed.” “She was blinded by her anger.” “Why doesn’t he see she is bad for him? He is consumed by lust.” And all sorts of things can literally obscure our thinking, like drinking too excess, getting stoned, etc. In fact, in the Middle Ages, the focus on morality was very different than it is today. It was not about some law we break but about avoiding those things that would obscure the vision of God that Christ always experienced. We want to see him now that he is gone, for God is still at work in the world. Even though it is through a veil, we want to see him. The verse, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God,” was not just freedom from lust but all the other deadly sins, and I would add also from all disordered attachments, like video game addiction.

Lent provides for us an opportunity to set aside the things that have begun to obscure our relationship with God. Let us go back for a moment to what I said the Spiritual Exercises are supposed to do, and that should help us decide what we need to focus on this Lent. Do we know how loved we are, or do we hide behind our shame, our regret, or some hurt? Maybe we need to work on letting God reveal himself to us as our loving Father. Have we come to desire holiness, to respond to God’s love by living for God’s greater glory alone? If not, what is holding us back. Maybe we love our sins because they are comfortable or we fear that God will demand too much of us or we believe we could never be a saint. All of us are sinners, should during Lent we must repent, but whatever it is, maybe our wasted time binging on Netflix, even that has to be

purified. We must be willing to set aside everything, even things which are moral, that stand in the way, if they are not serving God's purpose. I'll give just one example:

The average American teen, says one 2015 study, spends nine hours a day consuming media, whether social media like Snapchat, video media like Netflix, or music media like Youtube. This same group says they find it hard to find time to pray. There is nothing wrong with Netflix, for example, but to lose a third of the day, consumed by constant noise, of course it is hard to find time to pray and then hard to settle the mind when the time comes. Their attachment has obscured their ability to see God.

We are about to enter into a communal 40 day retreat. What is it that God wants us to do this Lent that we might see him more clearly?