Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality



The author is pictured on a hike along the Dunmore East Cliff Walk in County Waterford, Ireland, during her annual retreat in August 2022. (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)



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Summer is "retreat season" for many religious, at least those of us in the Northern Hemisphere. And as you read this, I'll be away on retreat. Making an annual retreat is written into our constitutions (Rule of Life) and is one of the greatest treasures of religious life. Sure, I made retreats "BC" (before the convent), but never with the frequency and duration (annually for six days) that came with entering religious life.

To the modern world, a silent retreat is equal parts genius and madness. Genius in that we know how quiet and time away helps us recharge and recalibrate. Madness because the world wants to keep us wired in and connected to the 24-hour news cycle.

More than anything, I treasure my days of retreat as the sustenance for the year ahead. The challenge afterward is to tap into the retreat well all year long. Thankfully, my community has a monthly day of prayer, in addition to communal and personal prayer, which helps me stay connected to God. My annual retreat would have far less impact without the regular prayer routine. But similarly, I can't imagine a prayer life that didn't culminate in a deep dive once a year.

About a decade ago, our local convent attended a diocesan day of prayer for religious. The Jesuit guiding us that day spoke of a practice he'd learned in formation of speaking a prayer and imagining Jesus saying those words to you (as opposed to you saying the words to him). It was fairly soon after that talk that I decided to give it a try and found the perfect prayer — a self-offering:

> All for you, my Love, my greatest good,
> all that I may suffer, think, or say.
> With every breath and with every beat of my heart
> I intend, my Love, to give you my life
> and to consecrate to you my heart.

(In the original prayer, the words "my Love" are first "my God" and then "dear Lord.")

This was a prayer I learned early in formation, and it came easily to mind. Now, at this priest's encouragement, each day before receiving Jesus in the Blessed

Sacrament, I would hear him say this prayer to me. And upon receiving him, I would renew my vows to him in response. (Renewing our vows after holy Communion is a tradition in my community.)

In subsequent years, I've expanded this practice also to include song lyrics. One year on retreat, I immersed myself in praise and worship music. Since then, I always imagine Hillsong's "Broken Vessels (Amazing Grace)" as a duet where I sing the verses, and Jesus sings the chorus.

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This idea of turning prayers around was hardly the speaker's main point. Indeed, it was just a passing comment, and it has radically transformed my prayer life. A second passing comment came from a sister in my own community during a talk on the vows (her focus that day was on chastity). All she did was simply add a word to a common prayer:

> Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place my trust in you.
> (Because) Sacred Heart of Jesus, I believe in your love for me.

This word cut me straight to the heart! Radical trust and radical love! Since that day, I've become more and more sensitive to the idea of adding a word to a prayer. I had already been to Italy and heard our sisters start their Hail Mary with "Ave O Maria." I inquired about this extra "O" simply to be told it was a tender sign of affection to Our Lady.

Then I came to Ireland, and they, too, added words! "O Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in you" — as if Jesus didn't already know that I struggle with trust. Now he's asking me to give him all of it!

It is beautiful. It is as if a comfortable, sometimes worn-out prayer is somehow refreshed when I turn it inside out. We all need to start afresh from time to time. This is, after all, one of the main reasons I'm away on retreat right now.

Consider revisiting a prayer that once brought you comfort (or stung with challenge) when you last prayed it. Take some time to imagine Jesus offering these words of blessing over you. Ask yourself what silent additions, just a word here or there,

would deepen the meaning behind your prayers.

Ordinary Time stretches out before us for weeks … months still. May it be a time of abundant growth and spiritual flourishing … one word at a time.