

Why every mom and dad needs to make a retreat (and how to make it happen)

As the stay-at-home dad of four (now five) kids, I always thought I didn't have time for retreats. Who would watch the kids? How would they get by without me? I would miss the kids too much. And besides, we couldn't afford it.

And so I muddled along as best I could, moving from day to day, from one chore or crisis to the next, without spending much (or any) time to regroup, gather my wits, and refuel in God's presence. Sure, we did family prayer . . . with kids. Sure, we did Sunday Mass . . . with kids. And any parent knows how difficult it is to really step back and reconnect with kids when you're, say, trying to prevent one kid from strangling another with his/her rosary, or when your preschooler is practicing her gymnastics on the kneeler. Even if I did get a quiet moment, it was often spent with my mind buzzing and spinning with everything that I wasn't able to process while focused on the kids.

And so I muddled along. I couldn't afford a retreat, I thought . . . until I went on one.

It was a very simple setup, nothing more than a few days in a hermitage at Solitude Ridge on the grounds of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration retirement facility in St. Joseph, Wisconsin. (No, you've never heard of it. I don't think it's even incorporated, but it's near La Crosse, Wisconsin, if you know where that is.) We did not shell out the extra \$50 a day for spiritual direction, since we are both cheap and broke.

The sisters host three hermitages at Solitude Ridge—basically one-room cabins in the woods, a short walk away from the

assisted living retirement facility. The first thing I did upon arriving was to read my Bible, then pray a whole rosary before taking a long walk in the woods, during which I sang hymns of praise to God like St. Francis.

No, no—actually, the first thing I did was to collapse on the single bed and sleep. For several hours. After which I got up, went on a walk, and then went back to sleep for another few hours.

Hey, recovering from the exhaustion you never even knew you had is the foundation of a good retreat!

Since that first retreat about five years ago, my wife and I have made it a point to each get away for a few days at least once a year. If we manage to squeeze in more retreats than that, we do. Often we go back to Solitude Ridge.

And what we've found is that sleep is often the first priority for both of us; day one is basically "recovery" from our crazy hectic sleep-deprived schedule. After that, we typically do a mix of walking in the woods, spiritual reading, sleeping, praying, going to Mass, writing/journaling, and sleeping. (Did I mention about the sleeping? It's so quiet out there!)

Other times we have done more formal group retreats. This past spring, I attended a very popular men's silent retreat run by the Jesuits at the Demontreville Retreat House in Lake Elmo, Minnesota. They feed you very well, let you sleep, and fill your days with spiritual talks, prayer, and Mass. Plus, you sit in overstuffed easy chairs for the talks!

Regardless of what form our retreats have taken, we've always found them to be worth the sacrifice (in terms of time and money) we had to make to get away. We come back refreshed. We come back relaxed. Most importantly, we come back with a wider horizon in which to place the day-to-day drama of our household—heaven's horizon, which, if you hold your gaze on it, will help put your day-to-day problems into their proper

perspective. Sometimes we even come back having discerned something really important about our lives, along with a commitment to a new practice or direction.

It is simply difficult for these things to happen outside of an intentional retreat setting.

Jesus frequently went off by himself to pray, away from the crowds and the disciples and his usual routine. Think about that: This is the Son of God, a guy with the most important mission in the world. And yet, even he took time to retreat from that mission.

If Jesus made it a priority to retreat from his active ministry, doesn't that kind of nail shut the case for even busy parents to do the same?

And that points to another important reason for parents to go on retreat on a regular basis: By doing so, you're actively modeling for your children a more healthy, balanced Christian life. Besides providing them with an example by taking time out for God yourself, as your kids get older, encourage them to go on retreats themselves. A retreat experience would make a great gift for their graduation, Confirmation, or another time of transition into adulthood.

Making a retreat happen

How do you make a retreat happen? Oftentimes, the first step is to overcome obstacles such as the following:

- **We can't afford it.** Many retreat centers offer affordable rates; some even ask for nothing more than a freewill offering. Another possibility: Approach the retreat center and simply ask for a financial break, or a payment plan. Explain that you're a Catholic mom (or dad)
- **I don't have time to get away.** Imagine this: What would happen if you had to be hospitalized for a weekend?

Would things completely fall apart, or would your spouse, neighbors, and friends step in to help? If things would fall apart, then maybe you truly don't have time to get away! More likely, though, you just need to make it a priority and creatively marshal your resources to make it happen.

- **I don't have the support of my spouse.** This is probably the most common reason I heard in more than ten years of talking with stay-at-home moms. My suggestion? Insist on going. You deserve it; you need it; and even if they don't realize it, your family needs you to do this. I know one woman who, after hitting the wall, simply announced she was leaving for the weekend. She booked a hotel and crashed for three days. Clearly, she had some confidence in the strength of her relationship with her husband!

Retreats come in all shapes and sizes. Here are some ideas to consider:

Retreat once a year. Try to get away on a retreat at least once a year. If possible, go on retreat with your spouse; otherwise, take turns (one goes on retreat while the other takes care of the kids).

Make it a retreat, not a vacation. What's the difference between a retreat and a vacation? The focus of a retreat is your encounter with God. Generally, this requires spending some time being quiet, still, and receptive to God's presence. A good retreat is about more than relaxing (or sleeping)—it's about encountering God, and allowing God to work in you during that encounter.

Check out local retreat centers. Find a retreat center near your home. Retreat centers usually offer group retreats (mixing talks and group reflection with individual quiet time) as well as individual directed or self-directed retreats. Directed retreats involve meeting with a spiritual director;

self-directed retreats are done on one's own, perhaps with the guidance of a retreat book. Retreat centers usually offer simple but quiet accommodations, a place to pray, and a beautiful natural environment, at an affordable cost.

Check out different kinds of retreats to see what helps you the most. Retreats come in all flavors, which means that you might need to look around a little to find the kind of retreat that will help you out the most. If you begin by going on a directed group retreat and have a bad experience, don't give up. Try an individual directed retreat, or find another retreat center.

Go on retreat with your parish. Participate in retreats sponsored by your parish, and encourage your teens to participate as well.

Go on retreat as a family. If you have older children or teens, consider going on a family retreat. A handful of Catholic retreat centers offer retreats designed for families; you'll find links to some of them below.

Retreat at home. Alternatively, you can do a family retreat at home using any of the many books offering guidance for self-directed retreats; search "busy person's retreat" or "daily retreat" online.

To sum up: If you're a Catholic parent, you absolutely need to go on retreat. Jesus did it—probably because he needed the time alone with his Father, but perhaps also because he knew that we need it, too. Once you go on retreat, you'll be thankful you did—and so will your family.

Resources

CatholicRetreats.net

A state-by-state listing of Catholic retreat opportunities in the United States and Canada.

[Ignatian Retreat Centers in the United States](#)

An interactive map of Ignatian retreat centers.

[Catholic Retreats at Retreat Finder](#)

Catholic retreat opportunities worldwide, organized by location and religious community.

Finding retreats for Catholic families

There are a surprising number of retreat centers that specialize in retreats for Catholic families; rather than list individual centers here, though, your best bet is going to be to search for “Catholic family retreat” along with the name of your state or nearby states. You might also try searching for “Catholic family camp.”