

THE IDEA OF A RETREAT

by GILBERT KILPACK

THE idea of a retreat is nothing new in the history of man. The impulse to retire from the confusion of cities, to break away from the anodyne of well-worn habit, to escape from the banality of ordinary life and in a place of seclusion seek a renewal of life has always lain at the heart of man's journey after God and Truth. When Jesus had retired to a solitary place he saw clearly the temptations which fall in the way of all who aspire to inward growth. Augustine, after years of vacillation, finally withdrew to a country dwelling and became grounded in the Love of God. Young Francis of Assisi, publicly disinherited by his father, went out into the mountains to sing, to pray, and to become oriented in God. George Fox in the first pages of his *Journal* tell us ". . . I walked abroad in solitary places many days and often took my Bible, and sat in hollow trees and lonesome places till night came on," and it was then, having left the disputatious assemblies of people, that he made his great experimental discovery: "There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition." This is only to mention four outstanding individuals who have found that we must retreat in order to advance; untold numbers of obscure yet none the less saintly persons have turned aside from the well-worn, broad path into the narrow one of seclusion that they might drive life into a corner and discover experimentally the meaning of human existence.

Now that the world's sorrow is so visibly poignant, the necessity of making a retreat is greater than ever. The aberration of war-mindedness and the complexity of our mechanistic civilization have robbed us of all human steadiness. The war has revealed our inward bankruptcy; to the worldly it has revealed how vapid is our everyday existence; to the religious it has revealed our pretensions, our unwillingness to see that truth must be wrestled with anew in each age. In a world where so much that has been held sacred in the past is now falling apart, some new heroic effort must be made to lay hold of divine certainty; scouting parties must be sent out and experimenters must set to work. It is not that we have no clue for our search, we have it in Jesus of Galilee and in all the saints who have illumined the centuries, and the clue is that Spirit which has been as a spring of life to men in all ages and in all places. But we must let that Spirit find its peculiar incarnations in our century—that is our great adventure. Perhaps we shall discover nothing new, nothing more profound than that the kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, but at least it will be our truth, for through seeking we shall have received the right to claim it.

Is the time ripe for a new generation of seekers? The answer must be that we shall soon be utterly lost without them. The dark valley of despair is at hand for the American people. We have been over long in coming to it, and we must unflinchingly enter in, for it can be a holy despair. It is not the despair of weaklings but rather the despair of those who honestly look at our human predicament. A people which have lived as we have must enter into this dark valley before they can be lifted up to see the dawn.

How have we erred? By having faith in our government of the people, without realizing that people are only people and unless they hold God in awe a people's government becomes as depraved as any tyrant of old; by hope in the earthbound rational intellect of man as the supreme fountain of life while we parade arrogantly before the mystery of God's inward workings; by loving the things of life more than life itself. The holy wisdom of God has told us to become as simple as children and we have become as complex as machines; it has told us to be humble and poor and we have become proud and wealthy; it has told us to love all people as our brothers and we have united in the most awful corporate murder that the God of this good green earth has ever had occasion to look down upon. Such a people will have to enter into a valley of deep despair, despair of making straight the ways of this world apart from life in the presence of God. When we have given up ourselves and bowed in childlike supplication and adoration before our Creator. He will lift us up, wipe away our tears, restore our hearts and minds, and lead us in a new path.

Not all the people of this world will give up to holy despair, not even in the presence of our most awful carnage, but that is more the reason that those who do hear the small voice in the midst of the storm turn and follow in lowly obedience. Yet, having despaired, we know not what to do with ourselves or with the world. That is a crucial moment. We can do little for ourselves or for the world apart from Him who made us for Himself. We must retreat into that Silence where the world of fashion is forgotten and selfish impulses are stilled and become devout pupils in the school of the Inward Teacher.

Everywhere people are feeling the need to make a retreat in the company of a small group of earnest seekers in a place of solitude and rural beauty. Not many are yet articulate concerning the goal of their search and the pattern of group discovery is not yet mapped out, but perhaps the finding of a new holy pattern of retreat is the divine adventure for our dark age.

Surely we can settle upon the most elemental precepts for our search. The first precept of retreat is that God is never far from any one of us. At rare moments we are all of us aware of this power of beauty, but the thievish disposition of modern secular society steals away our days and years in the very presence of our best intentions and we are left with our poor banal selves and a heap of withering possessions. So unless we say to ourselves: "Here, now, in this little speck of time in all eternity I am going to put everything aside except the faith that God is the good end of life for me," and unless we seize upon such moments with joy, desiring nothing so much as standing in the path of truth, our chances of ever truly *living* are slight.

The second precept is simply that we are terribly dependent upon the heritage of our spiritual forebears and upon the comradeship of our contemporaries in making a retreat. Some persons will be led to make individual retreats; others will need the benefits of companions. With the group retreat, the idea is not that a leader should impose his notions upon the participants; the idea is

rather that there is a truth and a power which can never be seized by one individual for another, but which can be received when a fellowship of people are humbled in corporate prayer and seeking. There naturally will be leaders, persons whose experience is more fully developed, but they too will have come to seek and not to lecture or dominate.

Silence is another precept for retreat. It is not a rigid *rule* of silence that is desired but rather the *spirit* of silence which is so deep that it may continue even as we speak. It is necessary that retreatants come prepared to enter into times of silence when such seem necessary to the individual or the group. For some it is a burden to be silent and for others it is a burden to speak; let each person carry his own burden.

Retreat is a time to lay aside thoughts of business and personal care, not because they have no rightful demand upon us, but because we ordinarily permit them to consume the whole of life, and they must be deliberately laid aside at times if we are to discover our spiritually true selves, if we are to lay hold of the Source of life. "The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Little have we found in the creation of God that is ours by the ownership of experience.

Retreat is a time to lay aside our argumentative and reasoning mind and become a lowly seeker, believing that if we seek we shall find, that if we ask we shall receive, and if we knock it shall be opened. Rationality and even argumentation may have a place in the religious life, but Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the philosophers" or, "Blessed are the reasoners." He said:

"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the poor"—for they symbolize an interior simplicity and poverty of pride which is necessary to inherit the Kingdom of God.

Retreat is a time to ask oneself the most elementary of questions. Who am I and what am I? Is there any point in my life and would anything be lost if it now came to an end? How much of my life is being consumed by the illusions of the "practical world"? What is the meaning of life anyway? How can I order my life so that prayer will become as spontaneous as eating at noonday and as sleep at night? How can I lead the life of contemplation and interior certitude in the midst of a society of outward conflict and commotion? What is the world's true need? To some it will seem puerile or useless to ask the meaning of life and death, good and evil, but to the seeker the quest of these is this world's true food and shelter.

Retreat is a time for spiritual honesty with oneself. This is the hardest thing of all. It is such an easy step from *feeling* religious to the assumption that one really is. It is so tempting to come to a quick settlement with the eternal and decide that "I have gone as far as my limited nature will allow." Augustine speaks of those who "love truth when she enlightens, they hate her when she reproves"—and that is the catch in spiritual honesty. We love to be the discoverers of truth but we hate to be discovered by her; yet those momentary flashes of absolute honesty which cleave the darkness of our lives and reveal our petty pretensions are necessary to clear the ground for growth.

Retreat is a time for worship. It is not through self-inspection or even perfect honesty that the miracle of human transformation is finally achieved, but

through times of worship, when the evil in us is cast down and the good raised up and the love of God comes in as a great invasion. God's love for man is all-embracing, it is all that counts—that is the summit of worship, and if it is not the great reality of life the fault lies not in our frail human constitution, nor in our environment, nor in our limited knowledge, but simply in our unwillingness to respond to His everlasting concern for us. He is ever near and we are ever far; we flee Him down the nights and down the years, but with intrepid pace He follows close. Retreat is an attempt to restore the balance of life by putting worship at the centre. We must seek to know ourselves, to understand what strange creatures we are and why. Still, when all our self-analysis is done, we find that most human problems are not solved but outgrown. We can outgrow our old selves only as we discover a great Object of worship.

Retreat is a time for discussion; not the feverish discussion of the political arena nor the expoundings of the pulpit, but rather the quiet discussion of travelers who have come from afar to learn from one another of the way. We are travelers in search of St. Truth; some of us have heard of him, some have seen him afar, and others have touched the hem of his garment. We can learn much from one another if we will attune ourselves to the corporate mind of search.

Retreat is a time to study the ways and laws of spiritual discipline. There is no set formula for living the Christian life, there is only the Inward Teacher. But there is a great heritage of deep counsel which has been forged out in the lives of numberless poets, saints, and seers of all ages and it will assist us in bringing our lives under the divine control. The retreat is an occasion to study some of this disciplinary lore.

Retreat is a time for vision of the world re-created in the likeness of God. George Fox made a retreat on Pendle Hill, and there he was given a vision of a mighty throng of people gathered together into the new kingdom of God on earth. We must be open to the vision of service, but, strangely enough, we must be served before we can serve. Simon Peter was willing to humble himself by kneeling and bathing his Lord's feet, but he was not willing to permit that awful humiliation of seeing his Lord kneel to bathe his feet. Some of us are valiant to serve the Christ but are not patient enough to let the Christ serve us. To serve without being served is the awful heresy of our age. We must be humbled and brought low and filled with the truth before we can be trusted to serve the wide world. The world must be reformed, but the reform must start from within—within ourselves.

Of course none of us has time to make a retreat, no time to adventure—no time to live. Sooner or later, if we are really to live and not just exist, we will discover that the lesser must be robbed to serve the greater. Those moments when we enter into the life of the Spirit and the whole world becomes suddenly luminous are the moments when we really live and the destiny of human life enters into its true fulfillment, and then we know that those years spent treading the busy round of feverish activity are not years of life at all but years of death. Thus it is that Charles Péguy says, "When a man lies dying, he does not die from disease alone. He dies from his whole life." The only tragedy of death is the tragedy of having never lived. The call to make a retreat is a call to live, a call to know God through love, through worship, and through silence.