

You will soon complete the three-year Ignatian Spiritual Formation Program at LIS. You have already acquired the basic skills of a spiritual director and are in the process of acquiring the basic skills of a retreat director, and, with God's grace and your own efforts, you will continue to develop those skills. But spiritual ministry is not limited to just retreat direction and spiritual direction. In time, you may be asked to give a retreat talk.

The primary goal of a retreat talk – and here I include talks given at Ignatian Mornings, parish missions, and days of recollection – is to touch the hearts of the listeners. As a basic norm, the talk should adhere to the theme chosen for the retreat and employ a scripture passage to focus and develop the theme. It has been my experience, however, that a talk that connects best with its audience is always woven around a story from the speaker's own life. I would like to describe how to develop such a talk.

It is important to begin planning the talk immediately, but you should not start writing the talk until you are reasonably clear about what you want to say. There are three factors to consider in planning the talk: (1) the talk's theme, (2) a scripture passage that focuses and develops the theme, and (3) a story from your life that expresses the theme. The theme is a given; the scripture passage and the story will need to be identified. It is best to begin planning with the retreat's theme: What does the theme actually mean? If "compassion" was the theme chosen, a dictionary will tell you that compassion is defined as "sorrow for the sufferings of others, accompanied by an urge to help." Before doing anything else, you should thoroughly ponder the definition. In this case, you may note that the sufferings of others give rise to an affective response – sorrow – which, in turn, gives rise to another affective response – a desire to help. A good talk will develop this point. Of the two remaining factors – (1) a scripture passage that focuses and develops the theme, and (2) a story from your life that expresses the theme – I suggest that you first identify an appropriate story from your own life, since this is usually an easier task.

If no story comes immediately to mind, use a thesaurus to find synonyms for "compassion." Thus you will find words such as empathy, solicitude, kindness, selflessness, and thoughtfulness – each of which expresses some facet of compassion and which may, in turn, enrich your talk. The story from your own life should highlight some individual who acted with compassion, empathy, solicitude, kindness, selflessness, and/or thoughtfulness toward you and, in doing so, changed your life: a teacher who directed you to your career path; a stranger who was instrumental in your escaping from Vietnam; a coach who became for you an exemplar of the person you wanted to be and ultimately a life-long friend; a friend who was instrumental in your overcoming alcoholism; and so on. After identifying this person, you then need to tell the story of that person and the role he/she played in your life in some depth. You will need to describe (1) yourself before meeting him/her, (2) the person himself/herself, (3) how you met him/her, (4) how your relationship with him/her developed, and lastly (5) what he/she means to you.

The story you have chosen will point you toward an appropriate scripture passage. If your story focuses on a person, the scripture passage should do the same. Thus, you could highlight a call to follow (God's call of Jeremiah: Jeremiah 1:4-8; Jesus' invitation to "come and see": John 1:35-39; Jesus' call of Peter: Luke 5:1-11; Christ's call of Saul/Paul: Acts 9:1-19), a healing (one leper: Mark 1:40-42; the ten lepers: Luke 17:11-19; the woman with a hemorrhage: Luke 8:43-48; Zacchaeus: Luke 19:1-10), a parable (the lost son: Luke 15:11-32; the good Samaritan: Luke 10:25-37), and so on. It is important to recognize that any of these scripture passages could be used to focus and develop not only compassion, but also almost any other theme as well. It is really not the passage itself that is important, but how you wish to use it and develop it. After you have identified a scripture passage you deem suitable for what you wish to say, I suggest that you search for an image depicting some scene from the story the passage tells that may help develop your talk. (I will address how to do this at the end of this paper.)

The next step is to express the scripture passage in your own words. Remember, this is not a scholarly presentation; it is a retreat talk. It is important to recognize that, with the possible exception of Simon/Peter, we know almost nothing about the people we encounter in the Bible. This means that we can be creative in our storytelling. For example, I believe that none of the Twelve was older than the mid-late 20s. I also believe that John, Andrew, and possibly others, were still in their teens – and I feel that it is permissible to depict them that way. I also feel that it is permissible to slightly embellish the qualities of a biblical person so as to develop the story you wish to tell. I thus like to imagine that Zacchaeus was rich, but terribly lonely and, like all of us, yearned to be understood and accepted and loved – which can make his encounter with Jesus so compelling. Moreover, since parables are just stories told by Jesus, I feel it is permissible to slightly embellish some facet of a parable or to put yourself into the story as you express it in your own words.

An important aspect of creatively telling a biblical story is to begin, not with the biblical story itself, but with what may in your imagination have preceded it. Thus, if you are telling the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar (Mark 10:46-52), you should imaginatively introduce him, describe how he became blind (unless he was born blind), and what a typical day was for him as he sat by the roadside in Jericho. If, on the other hand, you are telling the story of the woman with a hemorrhage, it would be important to point out that the nature of her hemorrhage – a flow of blood – would make her and anyone coming into physical contact with her ritually unclean and, in that warm climate, smelly as well. She would thus be an utter outcast from society, on a plane not unlike that of a leper. Moreover, it would also be important to point out that she couldn't ask Jesus to cure her; she would be too embarrassed. In other words, you need to describe the setting for the biblical story before moving on to the biblical story itself (but in both cases, be imaginative!).

The possibilities for combining your chosen scripture passage and the story from your life to create your talk are endless. You could begin with a brief story about yourself (establishing your personal history), move on to your creative retelling of the biblical story (which sets the stage for the story from your own life), and then conclude with the story from your own life. You could also interweave the biblical story with the story from your own life. The retreat talk itself should run approximately 20-25 minutes. Since a typed page using single-line spacing, a 12-point font, and 1" margins takes about 5 minutes to read, the retreat talk of 20-25 minutes would require 4-5 pages. I suggest typing and editing the text of your talk using 12-point font with single-line spacing. Then, for the talk, change the font-size to 16 point and the line-spacing to 1.5 lines, and print the pages. The result is easier to read and allows you to look more often at your audience (without losing your place). Unless a prayer has preceded your talk, I suggest introducing your talk with a brief prayer.¹

Note: In order to find and save an image in Windows: Access Google (www.google.com) and enter a description of the image you want (e.g., Zacchaeus); it may be necessary to modify your search to find the image you want (e.g., Zacchaeus art). On finding the image, double-click on it; when a larger image pops up, right click on it; when a list of options pops up, click on "Save Image As", locate the "Pictures" directory, enter a filename, and press Save.

1 Two favorites are: In this moment, O God, we turn to you. May the ebb and flow of our thinking settle into stillness; may each burden we carry be released into your love; may the cycles of our breathing restore a spaciousness within, and may we listen gently enough to touch the hem of your presence. Amen. – and – Beloved Lord, breathe calm into our minds, peace into our hearts and silence into our souls. In the silence let us hear your voice; in the peace let us see your face, and in the calm let us know your love. Amen.