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| A 2013 Advent Retreat by Fr. Larry Gillick, S.J. |

**A Ministry of the** [**Collaborative Ministry Office**](http://onlineministries.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/cmo.html) **at Creighton University  
Fr. Larry Gillick, S.J. gave this retreat at the Demontreville Jesuit Retreat House,   
Lake Elmo, Minnesota, November 14-17, 2013.**

First Talk

In Psalm 122, a very familiar Psalm (?? :04). “Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord. I rejoice because they said we will go up to the house of the Lord.” I was wondering at the beginning of prayer time, or liturgy, or retreats, if that is actually a rejoicing time. For many believers, to go to a holy place, so to, there to be, to think about praying or reflecting or retreating, going to a liturgy. My image might be, say, a first day of football practice and a particular player has not done any exercise or training or preparing and now he’s saying, let us go and rejoice because we are going to practice, and we are going to meet the coach, and the coach is going to see very quickly, that I am in a negative position. Many believers go to a holy place, in a similar self-attitude, that I haven’t been all that I said I would be or all that I was desiring to do, or all that was expected of me. I’m in a negative position, and I’m afraid and less excited because there’s going to be some reckoning, and evaluation and so that to pray, to begin to pray, is likely to be embarrassing or going to comprom (?? 3:02) some rearranging of my furniture that I’m not sure I want to do. So we begin, if its important, it is important, how are you at the beginning of this prayer time? Is it a positive thing, or as we begin, is it a joyful thing or a oh well, there’s gonna be some jurastic changes, and the likely hood is that prayer wont do any good anyway and I’m always gonna be in this negative position. But maybe that’s a negative way of looking at prayer time. We have to, and we’re going to, this retreat, examine how we live our theology. Now theology is one of those frightening words. Theology is mysterious and complicated and has many big words that are hard to translate and hard to understand. And we’re gonna try to keep theology, what our concept of God is, we are gonna try to keep this alive and operative and understand, as much as possible. I’ve said often, living with our theology is what spirituality is. How does that influence my life? We have in our country a political system called democracy and while that’s the operating system, our individual and even communal responses to democracy rely on our belief in democracy. That is, we don’t live our political system perfectly, and we criticize each other for our views of democracy and government. Our theology is like that, we can say one thing, and not just do another, but find it hard to relate with a God once we say this is what we believe God is. Now, here’s the funny part, any time we talk about, we are in fact in heresy, because we have an unknowable god, incomprehensible, infinitely mysterious. And yet we say we know God well because we’ve seen Jesus and Jesus said to have seen me is to have seen the Father. So all we have to do is know Jesus, and then you know God. That would mean that God is comprehensible, God is not mysterious, is not infinite mystery. So where are, well, to have seen Jesus is to have seen the father in as much as you can take in. Our minds are like a little sand pail and inside of an ocean and we are trying to put the ocean in the sand pail, you cant do it. You can put some in, in so much as we can carry. We can know God. So that, is that a burden or not? Is that a freedom or not? And then, how do we relate with mystery? Relating is, we learn, what are the relational patterns of the person with whom we are going to relate? So our neighbors, spouse, relatives, that you relate differently. One of the relatives comes in and is very polite and cool and distant (?? 8:08) and then in comes Uncle Charlie, and slap on the back and “Do you want a beer?” and you relate differently according to how you have learned to relate with that person. So how do you relate with God? That’s the question. How do you pray, how do you pray with God? What does God expect? Because that’s how we relate. What do you expect of me? We know in relationships, whats the pattern, what are the usual activities and Ill conform to that. You wanna just talk about the weather and sports and okay that’s what we’ll do, you don’t wanna talk about anything more serious than that, fine. That’s how we’re gonna relate. We find out the expectational patterns in relationships. But what does God expect? That’s the question. Will I rejoice when I go up to the house of the Lord? Or not? What does God expect of you? And you would say, God expects perfection. Or God expects tremendous effort. God expects that I be merciful, and generous, and just. And with those kind of expectations, I would say and how are you doing with those. Well, not very well. My general opinion of myself is that I fall short. And I call that spirituality, I call that religion. And many people leave spirituality, and leave religion because it makes people feel bad. No I don’t think so. I think we make ourselves feel bad because of our misinterpretation of theology, spirituality, and religion. So it’s very easy to start in a negative position. We have, well its true, you have a lot of scuffs on your shoes, and dust, and scrapes, that according to some pattern you have not lived perfectly. And of course if you are discouraged, or negative about yourself and your behavior then certainly God who is infinitely aware, God is disappointed, or cool toward you because that’s how you are towards you. Well, what kind of God are we dealing with when we pray? Does this God know you? Not just your activities but your whole demeanor. There is an author, a Jewish Rabbi, Abraham Heshaw, that I highly recommend reading. Its very kind of poetic (?? 12:00) , you don’t read a couple sentences very quickly. For instance, you can’t read through it.(?? 12:15). A tremendous book called The Sabbath, a little book, to understand the Sabbath, to understand silence, to understand prayer time. It says “To pray, is too take notice, of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all things. That is the divine margin in attainment; prayer is our humble answer to the incomprehensible surprise of living. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living.” And it goes on, but, we’re going to pray (?? 12:26), and what are we gonna do, and we’re gonna be under the influence of the little book of Saint Ignatius, los ecercicios (??), the exercises. Is prayer something that you do to entertain God, render God helplessly benevolent towards you, because of your intense devotion and your amount of words and good feelings, do we pray to get something? One of the worries I have about liberty is that people come into a room but do not form community; they form a group of people who are praying for something they want. And there’s some pulling together, they’re together in a room, but they’re not together as a people of God, they’re more together as a people of need. And I often, I have great imaginations of what’s going on in the congregation, in mass in the Catholic Church. And what are people doing. Often in my homily I like to say “Stop! What were you just daydreaming about?” “Just check it out, where was your mind, even though I’m giving this quick, brilliant, homily.” “What are you worried about?” What are you, just, I like to do that three or four times during a three or four minute homily because that’s how quickly we flip. And mainly, I’d like to know, what are you praying for? Is that even a good term? What are you praying for? Which is to say, what, or what are you asking God? Are you here to render God kindly, and what are you doing? Are you asking God to change and be more God? Our theology is that God is already benevolent towards you. Are you praying that you will be more benevolent towards yourself, or towards God? Are you praying for something that is good for you and not necessarily good for anybody else? What I’m getting at is, I rejoice because they said to I’m going up to the house of God, And I’m going to remain self-centered because of my prayer, because my prayer is all about God and me. Is there, is there any, any way, that I let God be God in and call that prayer?

In liturgy, I used to, when I was a young person, I thought it was a very good liturgy if I could get three rosaries in, during the time of mass. And it was easy because mass was in Latin and it was done up there, and my interpretation of the Psalm, I rejoice because they said now we are going home from the house of God. We’re getting to leave church, and that’s the best part of going to church, because the preacher didn’t lay a glove on you at all. With his fancy words, the word of God (?? 18:18), and I got three rosaries in and I felt good about it. And I did something! I prayed! Well, we come to retreat, in some ways, as a liturgy. Because as you know, Jesus, the disciples, came to form us into what we are. The family, the children of God, the believers. The community of action. And so even though I pray and I am in silence, and I take time away from everybody else. The work of the, this is theology now, the work of the spirit, this is, this is very important though, the work of the spirit is incarnation. What does that mean? That’s almost too theological? The work of the spirit is to bring about the body of Christ. That’s what we’re preparing for. Celebrating the movement from creation, to annunciation, to birth, to redemption. Throughout the history of what God does. But (??20:00), that spirit is to always bring about infleshment, or liveliness, or visibility, or revelation, or whatever you want to call it. My prayer, is never just for me, if you want a little cue thing, that the spirit always moves me to be a “we”. That my prayer is never just for me. So, I pray with my (??20:40-50), in a strange way. That I pray that I can be more of my truth, then I can be less of my self involvement, of my self gratification. That I can be more available for the continuation of creation. The spirit is always working. So in individual prayer, that we are beginning on this retreat, is to be aware of myself, and all these things, to be honest, but to free me from my own self imposed confinements, to be more available to be a blessing in the continuation of Christs creation of this world. That freedom, or being religious, people, or spiritual people, is always about how I continue Christ’s recreation of this world. So, there’s always a social side of private prayer. So you might get three rosaries in and feel good that you did something religious, but unless you’re doing something religious beyond yourself, you were just entertaining yourself. 22:28 Involving yourself to have a good feeling, and so you can come on your feet and come to your individual prayer time and feel good that you’re doing something religious. But the object of religion is revelation. That’s what Im saying.