

Retreat on the Dignity of Women



Composed by the NCCW Spirituality Commission March 2018

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Based on the *APOSTOLIC LETTER, MULIERIS DIGNITATEM, OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF JOHN PAUL II ON THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE MARIAN YEAR, 1988*

What is the dignity of woman?

The Church reveals that the dignity of a woman lies in her creation in the image and likeness of her Creator. God created man and woman equal in dignity but complementary in nature. What does that mean for women today? Can a woman be truly Catholic, truly feminine, and truly fulfilled?

True femininity and the dignity of women are so misunderstood in our society. The current feminist movement would have us believe that a woman's dignity lies in her reproductive rights.

We have the Church, herself – the bride of Christ – as our model. Pope Francis describes the Church: “she is Church, she is spouse, she is Mother.”¹ Pope Francis defended the dignity of women by saying; “...Church without women is like the Apostolic College without Mary. The role of women in the Church is not only maternity, the mother of the family, but it is stronger; it is, in fact, the icon of the Virgin, Our Lady, the one who helps the Church grow... A profound theology must be made of woman.” Pope Francis called women to enter more deeply into the dignity of their vocation: “A woman's role in the Church must not end only as mother, as worker, limited. No!” He challenged women to contribute to their communities and the Church through formation, prayer, and service for the greater glory of God. We all must open our hearts to our Lord through a relationship of prayer, so we can live out our God-chosen vocation. We realize our dignity as daughters of our Father. And, we turn to Mary our Mother, who gives us an amazing example of dignity, humility and total obedience to the will of the Father. The Lord is inviting each woman to live her feminine dignity to the Glory of God!

It is impossible to read the New Testament without seeing that Jesus had a special ministry to women. Despite Jewish law and custom of the day, Jesus consistently treated women as equals. He understood their unique needs in a way men of that time did not. With compassion, Jesus met women at the point of their need and ministered to them. He violated numerous Old Testament regulations, which specified gender inequality. He refused to follow the established behavioral rules. Jesus ministered not only to individual women, but to women as a whole. He treated human beings with all the dignity imbued to them by God. To Jesus, women were equal in dignity to men.

¹July 29, 2013 Pope Francis Press Conference following World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Retreat Intention

This material has been brought to you based on the *APOSTOLIC LETTER, MULIERIS DIGNITATEM, OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF JOHN PAUL II ON THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE MARIAN YEAR, 1988* stressing the importance of women in our Church.

We hope that this will be a way for all who use this retreat to grow closer in our faith, understand more of who we are as women in the Church, and also open up some dialogue about things happening in society today.

Our committee has prayed that the work of this retreat will be a blessing for all who use it.

Many Blessings to you,

2018 NCCW Spirituality Commission Committee

Opening Prayer:

Dear Lord, today we gather together as women of faith to retreat into our minds, hearts, and souls to contemplate the Dignity of Women. May we be open to hear You, the Great Teacher. May the Holy Spirit guide us this day in wisdom and understanding. Grant us the strength to fulfill what Pope St. John Paul II states is our destiny.

**“...women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling”.
(MD I: 1 [1])**

“...it is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity”. (MD I: 1 [8])

All references to MD are to the document: APOSTOLIC LETTER, *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM*, OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF JOHN PAUL II ON THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE MARIAN YEAR, 1988

(MD I: 1 [1]) [1] The Council's Message to Women (December 8, 1965); AAS 58 (1966), 13-14.

(MD I: 1 [8]) [8] Paul VI, *Address to participants at the National Meeting of the Centro Italiano Femminile* (December 6, 1976): "*Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*," XIV (1976), 1017.

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For your information, when citing papal documents, the entire paragraph must be cited. Numbers at the beginning of the paragraphs refer to the paragraphs as presented in the documents, numbers in parentheses refer to foot notes included in the footers at the bottom of each page and are presented here with approval of © *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*

I: INTRODUCTION

Reflection: Woman holds a special place in Christianity because she is beautiful, pure of heart, merciful, and an advocate for the vulnerable. Woman can live life to the fullest through prayer, support, and being treated with dignity.

Mary - the "woman" of the Bible (cf. *Gen 3:15; Jn 2:4; 19:16*) - intimately belongs to the salvific mystery of Christ, and is therefore also present in a special way in the mystery of the Church. Since "the Church is in Christ as a sacrament... of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race",^[10] the special presence of the Mother of God in the mystery of the Church makes us think of the exceptional link between this "woman" and the whole human family. (*MD I: 2 [10]*)

Questions:

1. What are the attributes of our Blessed Mother and how can we be more like her?
2. How can we use Mary as a model in our own lives?
3. How are we like or unlike Mary?

Prayer: O Blessed Mother, teach us to be like you. Grace us with a mouth that opens to kindness, a mind that makes room for wisdom, a heart that is faithful through suffering, a whole presence that is full of graciousness, and a strength that speaks to more of God with us than anything. Amen.

(As time permits)

Three Hail Marys

Time for silent reflection

Ask if anyone would like to offer up a prayer?

***MD I: 2 [10]* ^[10] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "*Lumen gentium*" 1.**

II: WOMAN-MOTHER OF GOD

Scripture:

“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” But Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” And the angel said to her in reply, “The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.”
(Luke 1:31-37)

Meditation: Sing hymn- *“Hail Mary-Gentle Woman”* or another Marian hymn
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RERoQ1biLdE>

Reflection: *“...the event at Nazareth highlights a form of union with the living God which can only belong to the “woman”, Mary: the union between mother and son. The Virgin of Nazareth truly becomes the Mother of God.” (MD 4)* Mary was open and willing to serve God, which she did with great faith and dignity. Are we willing to serve God in the same way?

Questions:

1. Are we always willing to “Let go, and Let God into our lives?” Do we have the courage to walk God’s path? What prevents us from listening to God? Can we place our faith and trust in Him?
2. We are all children of God.

“For ‘In him we live and move and have our being,’ as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’” (Acts 17:28)

Being made in His image makes us beautiful and courageous. As women of faith, how do we see God’s image in ourselves and in others?

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Prayer #1-

His mother said to the servers, "Do whatever he tells you." (John 2:5)

At the wedding feast at Cana, O Mother of God, you taught us the ultimate lesson-to listen to your Son, to obey His commandments, and to use the gifts He has given us to the best of our abilities. We know that our talents are unique. Touch our hearts and show us the way.

Prayer #2 –

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38)

O Blessed Mother, you accepted your role without question. We pray that the Holy Spirit guide us in humility to accept His role for us.

Sing: "Here I am, Lord".

III: THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD

Document Summary:

Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God. (MD III: 6) (Gen 2:18-24). The image and likeness of God in man, (in the analogy that can be presumed between Creator and creature (Gen 1:26-27) also expresses the “unity of the two” in a common humanity. This “unity of the two”, which is a sign of interpersonal communion, shows that the creation of man is also marked by a certain likeness to the divine communion. In this regard a statement of the Second Vatican Council is especially significant. "For he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons and the union of God's children in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for its own sake, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self". To say that man is created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist “for” others, to become a gift. In the “unity of the two” man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist “side by side” or “together” but are also to exist mutually one for the other. (MD III: 7)

Reflection:

Having been formed in the image of the Trinity, man and woman are created for a mutual relationship - the man for the woman and the woman for the man.

Questions:

1. As women how do we experience being in a mutual relationship with men?
2. How as a wife do you view yourself in a mutual relationship with your husband?
3. How do you perceive yourself as a mother figure and as an image of the divine Christ?

Prayer: Eternal Father,

It is You who out of pure love created mankind in your image and likeness as man and woman. You freely bestowed on each of us the gifts of wisdom, intellect, and free will allowing us to do what is right and just. Time after time in our humanity we stray from you to pursue what is false and to justify evil yet despite our faults you never abandon us. From that same love that prompted you to create us, you sent your only Son to save us. He is the embodiment of your perfect image and likeness. It is through Him you continually restore us to your image and likeness giving us the courage to use generously our unique talents as opportunities to share your truth and goodness with others. This we pray in Your name with sincere hearts. Amen.

Time Permitting:

Silent Prayer
Memorare

IV: EVE-MARY

Document Summary: As seen in Genesis 3, sin brought about disruption in the mutual relationship between man and woman. Whatever diminishes woman also diminishes man thus both are affected negatively.

Nevertheless, here lies also the good news: Genesis 3 holds God's promise of salvation. Mary assumes in herself and embraces the mystery of the "woman" whose beginning is Eve, **"the mother of all the living... Mary is "the new beginning" of the *dignity and vocation of women, of each and every woman.* (MD IV: 11 [37])**

Reflection: On the day of the creation of the human beings as male and female,

"God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good." (Gen. 1:31)

Questions:

1. In what situations do you see a woman remaining disadvantaged or discriminated against by the fact of her being a woman?
2. How can women be assertive and still own their dignity as women in their vocation?
3. How can we as women be helpmates to man to help them understand the dignity of woman while guiding them on their path to heaven?

Silent reflection

Song- "Hail Mary-Gentle Woman" or another Marian song that is suitable

(MD IV: 11 [37]) [37] Cf. St. Ambrose, "De instit. virg." V, 33: PL 16, 313.

V: JESUS CHRIST

Scripture:

Then the disciples returned home.

“But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. And they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” She thought it was the gardener and said to him, “Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni,” which means Teacher. Jesus said to her, “Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and what he told her. (John 20:10 – 18)

Meditation: What word or phrase touched you in this gospel? What is Jesus saying to you or calling you to do or change?

Document Summary: It is universally admitted - even by people with a critical attitude towards the Christian message - that *in the eyes of his contemporaries Christ became a promotor of women's true dignity* and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity. At times this caused wonder, surprise, often to the point of scandal: "They marvelled that he was talking with a woman" (Jn 4:27), because this behaviour differed from that of his contemporaries. Even Christ's own disciples "marvelled". (MD V: 12)

In this chapter, we see countless examples of Jesus affirming the dignity and vocation of women. There are women suffering in some way - as the widow whose son had died; the woman with hemorrhaging for 18 years - and with compassion, he healed them. There are women who were touched by his message and ministry who not only followed him in his mission spreading the Good News, but also supported him financially. Women are the subject of many parables describing the Kingdom of God: the women searching for the lost coin, the widow who gave two coins -all she had. In all of his teaching, Jesus expresses only respect for the dignity of women – “daughter of Abraham;” “Daughters of Jerusalem;” even women known as public sinners – not only did he not condemn them – quite the contrary, he

appreciated, admired and affirmed their great love –their knowledge of the things of God. Women stood at the foot of the cross and not only were the first witnesses to his resurrection – they were the first to proclaim it.

Gospel “equality”, the “equality” of women and men in regard to the "mighty works of God" - manifested so clearly in the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth - constitutes the most obvious basis for the dignity and vocation of women in the Church and in the world.

Every vocation has a profoundly personal and prophetic meaning. In "vocation" understood in this way, what is personally feminine reaches a new dimension: the dimension of the "mighty works of God", of which the woman becomes the living subject and an irreplaceable witness. (MD V: 16)

Questions:

1. As you recall the gospel stories that include women, what touches you most: Jesus’ healing ministry? His affirmation of women and the fact that counter-culturally they assisted in His mission? The courage that women displayed in approaching Him, following Him, at the cross and then proclaiming the resurrection?
2. What are you called to do as a result of hearing Jesus’ deep, abiding respect and love of you and all other women – and men?

Prayer: You have heard Jesus speak to you with love and admiration, pour out to Him now the deepest groanings of your heart. Maybe you have failed to appreciate your own worth, maybe you’ve allowed others to diminish your worth, maybe there are things you can do now to live and be a beloved daughter and you need to ask Jesus for help, maybe you just need to thank Him for all he has done for you. Whatever it is - treasure in your heart that he is listening as you speak honestly and fervently and bask in His look of unconditional love. Amen.

VI: MOTHERHOOD – VIRGINITY

Scripture: Announcement of the Birth of Jesus:

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

While he was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed." He replied, "Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it." (Luke 11:27-28)

Meditation: We are so familiar with the Annunciation story, maybe less so with the two verses from a later chapter of Luke – but both speak volumes. The second is Jesus' own words. What word or phrase touched you most in these readings? What are you called to do or change as a result?

Document Summary: We must now focus our meditation on virginity and motherhood as two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the female personality. In the light of the Gospel, they acquire their full meaning and value in Mary, who as a Virgin became the Mother of the Son of God. These *two dimensions of the female vocation* were united in her in an exceptional manner, in such a way that one did not exclude the other but wonderfully complemented it. ...*Virginity and motherhood co-exist in her:* they do not mutually exclude each other or place limits on each other. Indeed, the person of the Mother of God helps everyone - especially women - to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other. (MD VI: 17)

In this chapter, Saint Pope John Paul II reflected on the unique role and relationship of women as biological mothers – the epitome of the total gift of self to another and the relationship of marriage uniting to produce new life. In addition, he pointed out the need for women to help men to perceive what total self-gift entails. Because Jesus was born of a woman, both physical and spiritual motherhood are incumbent in women.

“The motherhood of every woman, understood in the light of the Gospel, is similarly not only "of flesh and blood": it expresses a profound "listening to the word of the living God" and a readiness to "safeguard" this Word, which is "the word of eternal life" (cf. Jn 6:68).”(MD VI: 19)

So too, in virginity, in consecrating oneself to God, women once again embody self-gift – the spousal relationship is with God rather than with a husband, but that also leads to the generativity of new life – a new life in Christ.

Questions:

1. How have you experienced motherhood? Has the spiritual dimension of motherhood been apparent to you in the physical dimension?
2. All women experience times of virginity in their lives – before marriage and for many - after marriage – have you been more aware of your spiritual generativity in those times?
3. Does this gospel and reflection call you to another way of motherhood?

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Prayer:

And Mary said:

***“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.***

***For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness;
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.***

***The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.***

***His mercy is from age to age
to those who fear him.***

***He has shown might with his arm,
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.***

***He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones
but lifted up the lowly.***

***The hungry he has filled with good things;
the rich he has sent away empty.***

***He has helped Israel his servant,
remembering his mercy,***

***according to his promise to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”***

(Luke 1: 46-55)

VII: THE CHURCH-THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

Scripture:

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So [also] husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

*“For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.”*

*This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.
(Ephesians 5: 21-32)*

Document Summary: In this Letter (to the Ephesians) the author expresses the truth about the Church as the bride of Christ, and also indicates how this truth is *rooted in the biblical reality of the creation of the human being as male and female*. Created in the image and likeness of God as a "unity of the two", both have been called to a spousal love. Following the description of creation in the Book of Genesis (2:18-25), one can also say that this fundamental call appears in the creation of woman, and is inscribed by the Creator in the institution of marriage, which, according to Genesis 2:24, has the character of a union of persons ("*communio personarum*") from the very beginning. Although not directly, the very description of the "beginning" (cf. *Gen 1:27; 2:24*) shows that the whole "ethos" of mutual relations between men and women has to correspond to the personal truth of their being. (MD VII: 23)

Reflection: Christ loves the Church which is all people just as a husband loves his wife. Each give love to the other and the people and the wife receive that love and offer it. Just as a husband and wife love each other and would do anything for one another, Christ loves us the same and died for all of us, so that we would have eternity in heaven with God.

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Questions:

1. How can I show my love for Christ at church and to others?
2. Married or Single, how should I show my family my love for them?
3. Being a woman is it easier or harder to share our love of Christ with others through actions and in how we speak?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus, into my life. Help me to always remain close to Him and share His love with those I meet. Amen.

Play some sort of music for meditation.

VIII: “THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE”

Scripture:

If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13: 1-13)

Reflection: The dignity of woman is measured by the order love. A woman’s dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return. The truth about the person and about love is thus confirmed.

When we really see what the meaning of love is, we understand that love is everything. It is not just a moment of feeling in love. It is wanting the best for someone; having the love of Christ with you to share with someone; being willing to die for someone. Through all, we remain faithful in God and in ourselves; we hope through faith in God and we hope for what will be; and we are full of love for each other and those in our lives and in the world as God’s creations.

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Questions:

1. When we are married, are we happy because of the feeling of being in love or is it that we are seeing and receiving the love that is being given to us and giving that back?
2. Reflect on how Christ promoted women's true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity?

Prayer: Lord, we come to you asking you to bless us with an abundance of love in one another in our lives. We know we are created in love, through love and most importantly for love. We want to share this love with our family, church family and all we meet. Send us the graces to desire this love more fully so that the more we have, the more we can give away. Help us to always bring your love to our neighbor. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.

IX: CONCLUSION

Document Summary:

Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10)

Jesus says to the Samaritan woman during one of those remarkable conversations which show his great esteem for the dignity of women and for the vocation which enables them to share in his messianic mission.

The present reflections, now at an end, have sought to recognize, within the "gift of God", what He, as Creator and Redeemer, entrusts to women, to every woman. In the Spirit of Christ, in fact, women can discover the entire meaning of their femininity and thus be disposed to making a "sincere gift of self" to others, thereby finding themselves.

The Church gives thanks for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by a great social responsibility; for "perfect" women and for "weak" women - for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love; as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal "homeland" of all people and is transformed sometimes into a "valley of tears"; as they assume, together with men, a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity according to daily necessities and according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself, in the bosom of the ineffable Trinity. (MD IX: 31)

Prayer: Dear Blessed Mother, you are our model of dignity for the Church. You are full of faith and grace and are the mother of Jesus Christ. We ask your guidance in all we do with our vocations and ask you to guide us as our mother with the grace and faith for all of your children. We ask all of this through God the Father, Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

We suggest ending the retreat with a rosary, adoration or confession.