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**Retreat at Casa Maria of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word**  
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**“Enrolling in the School of the Saints”**

**Introduction**

1. The purpose of a retreat is to encounter the Lord Jesus.
  - a. Like with the first disciples, he wishes to take us away for a while to rest with him (Mk 6:31).
  - b. But the point is not merely to “waste” time with him, as one spiritual writer said. It’s not merely to “sit at his feet,” as if that itself is the end.
  - c. His presence is never a static one. He wants to transform us through a loving union with him.
2. This retreat is entitled “Enrolling in the School of the Saints.”
  - a. This means not so much the school the saints run but the one they’ve all attended and in which they’ve excelled.
  - b. The school of the saints is ultimately run by God, in which he seeks to transform us into his own image. “Be holy, as I the Lord, your God, am holy” (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Pet 1:16).
  - c. We have been placed on earth, as St. John of the Cross said, for no other purpose than to become a saint.
  - d. We have been made by God in his own image, and, after the Fall, we’re called to grow once more into his holy likeness.
  - e. “This is God’s will for you,” St. Paul wrote the Thessalonians, “your sanctification” (1 Thess 4:3). If the Lord wills it, we know that he wills the means, if only we take advantage of them.
  - f. By our baptism, we have been enrolled in this school, but many of us have not been up until now the best of students.
  - g. This retreat is an occasion during which, God-willing, that will change. God knew from all eternity that each of us would be here, this weekend, making this retreat, and he made an appointment to be here with us. So many graces are in store for us if only we receive them and respond to them.
  - h. To enroll in the school of the saints means to enroll in the Way of Jesus, the path that leads to “graduation” into eternal life.
3. Original idea
  - a. When the sisters asked me months ago for a title for this retreat, I chose “Enrolling in the School of the Saints” because I was originally intending to structure the retreat by focusing on 5-6 saints of different ages, sexes and states of life, who teach us how to excel in the gift of life.
  - b. One of my responsibilities is my diocesan newspaper and every week, in addition to the editorial, I write a column entitled “Putting into the Deep” in which I focus on those who have, like St. Peter, trusted in the Lord’s words and put his nets out into the deep water against all human convention for a catch, boldly giving themselves over for the Lord and for others. Most weeks, I write on those who have been canonized saints.
  - c. I have gotten a lot of feedback for that series and some of it has surprised me. Several very intelligent Catholics, who have spent at least 12 years in Catholic schools, have said that before the series they never knew that the saints were given to us so that we might imitate them. They had thought that saints were those to whom basically we prayed for help. The fact that they are given to us as examples was new to them.
  - d. My original intention was to try to do here what I’ve done in that series, to lift up some of these examples for you in the hope that you might be inspired to follow in their footsteps following the Lord all the way to heaven.
4. New idea
  - a. But a few weeks ago, as I was praying for you one morning — as I have for months, in anticipation of meeting you — the Lord helped me to see that structure was inadequate. Even if the examples were well-chosen and you were very moved by their stories and witness, even if you left here totally inspired to seek to follow their example, you might not really have a strong idea of how to make their experience your own, to translate their example into your own circumstances.

- b. Instead I began to see that it would be wiser to give you a much more concrete “path” or “program” or “curriculum” for holiness that these saints all committed themselves to, and that you yourself can commit to. I could focus the attention on these areas and use the lives and witness of the saints to illustrate these points. That way, upon leaving, you would have a clear sense of what you need to do, with the example of these saints to show you that it can be done.
  - c. That’s what I’ve decided to do.
5. Curriculum or plan of holiness
- a. For that curriculum or plan of holiness, I have decided to stand on the shoulders of not only someone whom we all believe will, in short time, be canonized, but someone who was guided by the Holy Spirit in all his teaching: Pope John Paul II.
  - b. In his pastoral plan for the Third Christian Millennium, called *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, he said that the principal purpose of the Church is to be a school of holiness. Then he gave the “core curriculum” of that school, the essential practices for a “training in holiness.”
  - c. I’m going to focus in subsequent sessions on those essential “courses.” In this conference, I just want to set the stage by concentrating on what he said about holiness.
6. Everything in relation to holiness:
- a. ***First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness.***
    - i. Everything the Church does must be in relation to this goal of helping us and others to become God’s holy likeness.
    - ii. Everything, from Catholic schools and universities, to hospitals, to the celebration of the sacraments, to charitable work, to retreat programs like this, is meant to have as its ultimate goal the sanctity of people giving and receiving.
  - b. ***Stressing holiness remains more than ever an urgent pastoral task***
    - i. It’s urgent precisely because we don’t have all the time in the world to get this right and many people have gotten it wrong.
  - c. ***It is necessary therefore to rediscover the full practical significance of Chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium, dedicated to the "universal call to holiness".***
    - i. All people are called to holiness, not just priests, nuns, hermits and widowed great-grandmothers.
    - ii. St. Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, was accused of heresy by various priests and theologians in the late 1920s and early 30s, for teaching that God calls everyone to be holy, including plumbers and nurses, bus drivers and housewives, politicians, generals, hairdressers, married or single persons.
    - iii. By our baptism we have been called to real spiritual greatness, to sanctity, no matter our state of life, no matter our honest profession.
  - d. ***The Council Fathers laid such stress on this point, not just to embellish ecclesiology with a kind of spiritual veneer, but to make the call to holiness an intrinsic and essential aspect of their teaching on the Church.***
    - i. In other words, holiness is not just an “ideal” that sounds good, but what the Church really is supposed to be.
    - ii. The greatest cause for atheism, according to GS, was the bad example of believers.
    - iii. We know how much people have suffered because of the terrible deeds and example of some priests and bishops with regard to the sexual abuse of minors. But we can also point to the example of ordinary Catholics who don’t practice what the Church preaches.
  - e. ***The rediscovery of the Church as "mystery", or as a people "gathered together by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit", was bound to bring with it a rediscovery of the Church's "holiness", understood in the basic sense of belonging to him who is in essence the Holy One, the "thrice Holy" (cf. Is 6:3).***

- i. This is the closest thing that JP II gives to a definition of holiness: “belonging to God who is holy, holy, holy.”
- ii. “Whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:8).
- iii. Indwelling of the Holy Trinity
  - 1. John 14:23 Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and **we will come** to him and make our home with him
  - 2. John 15:4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. . . . 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. . . . 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.
- iv. We could define a saint as someone who is suffused with the love of God, who loves God with 100% of his mind, heart, soul and strength and loves others as God has loved him. We could define a saint as someone who always says “yes” to God.
- v. JP II here, however, defines it as being wholly possessed by God, being one with him with his taking the lead.
- vi. Last week I was in Pittsburgh for their diocesan men’s conference. We were talking about holiness, specifically the indwelling of the Holy Trinity and our cooperating with what he wishes to do in us, just like the Blessed Virgin Mary allowed God to reign within her. Life is a tandem with God. As I was leaving to fly back to my parish in Massachusetts, a man stepped onto the elevator to give me his own take. “Father,” he said in a comment revealing his age, “I’ve always thought of holiness as like watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing,” effortless, graceful. I said that the analogy might work provided that God is understood to be like Fred! There is one who leads and the other follows, but we are called to be a couple with dynamism.
- f. **To profess the Church as holy means to point to her as the Bride of Christ, for whom he gave himself precisely in order to make her holy (cf. Eph 5:25-26). This as it were objective gift of holiness is offered to all the baptized.**
  - i. The Church is holy because of Christ, purified by his blood.
  - ii. But the Lord didn’t do this for an “it,” he did it for each of us in the Church.
  - iii. This is an “objective gift” given to the baptized. We just need to preserve it and help that gift to grow.
  - iv. See Ezekiel 47, water flowing from the side of the temple signifies the water and blood flowing from the side of Christ. We’re called to let it grow and overflow.
- g. **But the gift in turn becomes a task, which must shape the whole of Christian life: "This is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Th 4:3). It is a duty which concerns not only certain Christians: "All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity".**
  - i. We have a responsibility with respect to the gift. We remember the parable of the talents. The Lord wants us to invest the gift and bear him interest. We are not supposed to bury it in the ground.
  - ii. Holiness is supposed to share the whole of Christian life. We cannot compartmentalize our faith, with our relationship with God only being part of it, alongside family and work and our hobbies. God must be the center of who we are and what we do.
  - iii. And this goes for everyone. This is one of the second Vatican Council’s, and JP II’s, biggest points. It’s not just for priests and religious to have holiness shape the whole of our life, but each one of us, of whatever rank.
  - iv. Here we get a second and third definition of holiness:

1. Before it was to belong totally to the Triune God.
  2. Now it's the fullness of the Christian life — this is the path to real fulfillment and happiness!
  3. It is also perfection of love — both our being loved by God and our loving him and others in response. This is why it's the fullness of Christian life because we were made in the image of God who is love precisely to love as he loves.
7. Can holiness be planned?
- a. **At first glance, it might seem almost impractical to recall this elementary truth as the foundation of the pastoral planning in which we are involved at the start of the new millennium. Can holiness ever be "planned"? What might the word "holiness" mean in the context of a pastoral plan?**
    - i. How can we make holiness the center of the whole of our life and the Church's life? It seems that saints are born, not made, right?
    - ii. The Holy Father is going to say, rather, that saints are reborn and constantly made, through God's work in us and our receptivity.
    - iii. We need to ground everything we do in terms of the growth in holiness, belonging to God and perfecting our love. We'll have more on this later, as it affects our family life, our work, our study.
  - b. **In fact, to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity. To ask catechumens: "Do you wish to receive Baptism?" means at the same time to ask them: "Do you wish to become holy?" It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).**
    - i. We're called to spiritual greatness through humility, not mediocrity. Jesus wishes us to be great among others by truly serving the rest.
    - ii. This idea still has to penetrate.
    - iii. Many Catholics seem happy with mediocrity, with getting a D on the gift of life if it means that they will still get to heaven.
    - iv. Pope Benedict says in *Spe Salvi* that this is based on a false eschatology, in which people think that, unlike Jesus' saying we need to strive to enter through the narrow gate, many think getting to heaven is easy and that we basically have to be like Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Jack the Ripper, or a public smoker not to make it.
    - v. But we know that in school, those who strive and work for D's often end up not making it, whereas those who really work for A's seldom flunk.
    - vi. It's the same way in the spiritual life. If we're really striving to give God the greater glory, to please him in every way, the odds that we'll fail in that are slim, because his graces are there. But if we only want to please him "enough," then that's when we'll be in danger.
    - vii. Said in another way, the Christian life is all about love. When we truly love someone, we want to give the best we have and we are to that person. Think about those who fall in love: they'd climb any mountain for each other. It's only when their love is tepid that they become satisfied with less than the best than they can give.
      1. As a high school chaplain, I was often asked the question, "How far can I go, Father, without committing a mortal sin?"
      2. That's totally the wrong question.
      3. When we start with the love of God, we'd never ask a question because we don't desire the least infidelity. We'd never ask, "How far can I risk being unfaithful to my husband/my wife?" To do so is to show they're really in love with each other. It's the same way in our relationship with God.

- viii. JP II summarizes the session by reiterating that this is the task of us all:
- ix. **As the Council itself explained, this ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few "uncommon heroes" of holiness.** The ways of holiness are many, according to the **vocation of each individual**. I thank the Lord that in these years he has enabled me to beatify and canonize a large number of Christians, and among them many lay people who attained holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life. The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone **this high standard of ordinary Christian living: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction.**
1. Holiness is supposed to be a Christian's ordinary existence.
  2. It's still heroic, but it's a "common heroism." To be a saint is to have heroic virtue. We're called to be heroes in ordinary life. God always gives the graces that correspond to a call.
  3. He calls us to a "high standard of ordinary Christian living" in our Churches and in our homes. The time for the low standard is over. This retreat in a particular way is meant to help us first adopt this high standard and the second become aware of, and choose, the means.
- x. That requires what JP II calls a "training in holiness."
- xi. It is also clear however that the paths to holiness are personal and **call for a genuine "training in holiness," adapted to people's needs. This training must integrate the resources offered to everyone with both the traditional forms of individual and group assistance, as well as the more recent forms of support offered in associations and movements recognized by the Church.**
1. Like athletes, or singers, or people beginning a new profession, we need training. We need a teacher and a set of practices so that we can become heroically virtuous, grow in the perfection of charity, grow in consciousness of our belonging to the Lord.
  2. The great saints have followed these principal "courses" in the curriculum of sanctity.
  3. Each of the "subjects" needs to be adapted, JP II says, according to people's needs, but we'd call them "mandatory subjects."
  4. JP II doesn't presume that what he names is necessarily an exhaustive list, but he does imply that these are the real pillars for someone living a holy life.
  5. He mentions first the "resources offered to everyone."
    - a. These are what are offered in the parishes, sacraments, Eucharistic adoration, the Bible, the Catechism, the documents of the Magisterium, etc.
  6. Then the "traditional forms of individual and group assistance"
    - a. Retreats like this and days of recollection
    - b. Pilgrimages
    - c. Spiritual Direction
    - d. Spiritual counseling in Confession
  7. Finally the "more recent forms of support offered in associations and movements"
    - a. Charismatic Renewal
    - b. Focolare, Communion and Liberation, Regnum Christi, Opus Dei, Neocatechumenal way, third orders, etc.
  8. All of these are called to be integrated in a real training.
- xii. JP II focuses on five main practices as the real foundations of a training in holiness.
1. Prayer
  2. Mass, especially on Sunday
  3. Confession
  4. Listening to the Word of God

5. Proclaiming the Word of God
- xiii. To some, these ways these may seem straightforward, obvious, almost ho-hum.
  1. But these practices are all meant to set off, to use an image that Pope Benedict XVI often returns to, a “nuclear explosion” in us, something that takes over our life.
  2. Many even good Catholics take these principal fonts of holiness for granted. We look for something bigger, better, “sexier,” more challenging, more specialized. But remember Naaman the Syrian’s being healed of leprosy by the simple waters of the Jordan.
  3. These are the principal ways that the Lord wants to make us saints.
  4. I think that for many of us, these great gifts, given to train us in holiness, are barely activated in our lives. We may be getting 5% of what we should be receiving from God in our prayer, 10% from the Mass, 1% from confession, 0.5% from listening to the Word of God and proclaiming it. Our percentages may be higher or lower in particular areas, but each of these has the power to really transform us more and more into the likeness of God.
  5. This retreat, helped by the example and intercession of the saints, is meant to help us learn anew these fundamental courses in the training of holiness in the school of sanctity.

## 8. Grace

- a. Two last points. The first involves something Pope John Paul II calls the “primacy of grace.”
  - i. We can often think that holiness is our work, that as long as we pray more and better, attend Mass devoutly, confess regularly, listen to and live the word of God attentively, then that’s all we’d need to do to become saints.
  - ii. If that’s what we believe then we would be Pelagian heretics!
  - iii. The Pelagians were the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century Christians who thought that they could become holy by their own efforts. St. Augustine, Pope Benedict XVI’s great spiritual mentor, spent much of his life fighting them.
  - iv. No, we cannot be saved on our own.
  - v. The work of our becoming holy is principally God’s work. We need to let him act.
    1. That’s why the pillars that Pope John Paul II describes are so important, because it’s in prayer, it’s in the sacraments we can receive over-and-over again because the Lord knew we’d need to, it’s in listening to the Word of God, and allowing the Holy Spirit to live in us so that we might live the Gospel and thereby proclaim it, that the work of our sanctification occurs.
- b. John Paul II refers to this in NMI 38:
  - i. **“There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan.**
  - ii. **“God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that ‘without Christ we can do nothing’ (cf. Jn 15:5).”**
  - iii. Anticipating what we’ll discuss tomorrow morning about prayer, he continues: **“It is prayer which roots us in this truth. It constantly reminds us of the primacy of Christ and, in union with him, the primacy of the interior life and of holiness.**
  - iv. **“When this principle is not respected, is it any wonder that pastoral plans come to nothing and leave us with a disheartening sense of frustration? We then share the experience of the disciples in the Gospel story of the miraculous catch of fish: ‘We have toiled all night and caught nothing’ (Lk 5:5).**
  - v. **“This is the moment of faith, of prayer, of conversation with God, in order to open our hearts to the tide of grace and allow the word of Christ to pass through us in all its power: Duc in altum! On that occasion, it was Peter who spoke the word of faith: ‘At your word I will let down the nets’ (ibid.).”**

- c. At the beginning of the third millennium, John Paul II invited the whole Church to make this act of faith.
  - d. At the beginning of this retreat, I'm asking you to make it along with me.
9. In summary, the Lord is calling you to holiness.
- a. That may seem like a very high mountain, but know that to get up to the summit, you need to take one step at a time.
  - b. This retreat is to help us review those central courses in the school of life to bring us on toward the only graduation that really matters. It's meant to help us to focus on those concrete steps by which the Lord wants to guide each of us by name up that mountain, if only we grasp hold of his gloriously scarred right hand — wounded out of love for us — and allow him to guide us to the summit.
  - c. Let's grasp on, get up and go!