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Taking time out from the rat race

In her newspaper column, Maria Byrne describes the experience of a weekend retreat at Lismullin Conference Centre in County Meath.

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In Luke 10:41-42, Jesus spoke to Martha: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary." We, like Martha, feel somewhat troubled in recent weeks with the endless bad news stories,

miserable predictions and political turmoil. We can lose sight of the true meaning of life and the fact that, as Christians, our friendship with Christ should be the central focus of our existence. We badly need a break from the rat race and the unrelenting demands on our limited energies to focus on our relationship with God and God's unique plan for each of us.

With this in mind and with thoughts of some time out, I decided to book a retreat in Lismullin Conference Centre (www.lismullin.org) in Co. Meath. Lismullin is an educational venture of the Opus Dei Prelature which as stated in its retreat brochure "helps men and women to follow the Gospel in their daily lives and to direct their ordinary work and family activities to God". In his letter to Ireland, Pope Benedict called for "a new vision" and "a profound renewal" which can only come about if we live our lives conforming ever

more closely to the person of Jesus Christ.

While half my intention in going on retreat was to escape from the sometimes monotonous sameness that everyday life involves, another part of me was eager to deepen my friendship with God and to grow in the spiritual strength needed to deal with the challenges of being a wife, and mother of six children. In his booklet *To Make a Good Retreat*, David Chandler observes that whatever the reasons a person might think he had for coming on retreat, those reasons might be very different to those of God. God's reasons are "vastly" and "infinitely" above our own. God can use the unique circumstances of our lives to draw us closer to him. On retreat, our main aim is to grow in God's love - to seek a personal relationship with Christ, the one person who will never let us down or betray our trust.

What happens on a retreat? The weekend retreat I attended involved several periods of guided prayer in Lismullin's beautiful and tranquil Oratory of the Holy Family, attending Mass and ample opportunity to go to Confession in an atmosphere of serenity and calm, the priest being in no hurry as he administered the sacrament and gave valuable advice and spiritual direction. There were talks on various aspects of living the Faith, time for personal reflection and examination, and recitation of the Rosary, the Way of the Cross and Benediction. In his book, *Furrow*, St Josemaría Escrivá described days on retreat as "times of recollection in order to know God, to know yourself and thus to make progress." He also wrote of "a necessary time for discovering where and how you should change your life." Even two days in the continuous presence of God, praying and reflecting on our

life's direction, gives us a totally fresh outlook.

Chandler put a lot of importance on a well-made retreat as a source of "peace, vitality, and a youthful confidence: a singular regaining of the happiness we knew as children." During these days of silence, we talk intimately with God about the really important things in our lives, developing a new openness to what God chooses to reveal to us. While on the retreat, perhaps during a meditation, talk or while praying, some little story or phrase from the priest can touch us in a very personal way. Some people develop a new clarity or are struck by particular words that seem directed to them personally. It is in these moments that they can be sure that God's grace is working to speak to them through the words they've heard.

The Eucharist, the reading of Scripture, the prayer, the time for reflection and repentance, the spiritual direction, even the routine of an early rise in the morning and retiring to the peace and quiet of one's room at 10pm, gives the participants on the retreat a much needed injection of spiritual energy. Our encounter with God and his outpourings of grace inspire us to begin anew, to return to our families and our work with a new sense of meaning; a sense of the value of what we saw as tedious, of limited value or of little importance in the bigger scheme of things. A retreat is not just a passing high or a transitory emotional experience. The concrete resolutions we make like attending Mass more than once a week, devoting time each day to prayer, frequent recourse to God's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation or incorporating devotion to the Blessed Virgin into

our lives through the daily Rosary or other Marian prayers. These habits of service to God will give a previously ordinary life an extraordinary spiritual dimension. The resolutions from the retreat should lead to a definite plan of action that has a direct influence on our relationship with God and that demonstrates to us in renewed clarity how God intends our life to be. The retreat may provide a welcome rest, but its real purpose is to transform us into the effective, good and even saintly adults that God created us to be.

I highly recommend that every Catholic attends one.

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