

Tabgha
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 6:30-34)

At the height of his public ministry, Jesus was busy from morning until evening without time even to eat (Mk 6:31b). Crowds flocked to him by the thousands due to his miracles. This popularity was amplified by the recent sending of the apostles into towns and villages preparing for the Kingdom. Upon their return, Jesus recognizes the need to take a break and find some time to rest and reflect. Jesus tells them, “*Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while*” (Mk 6:31a).

They get into a boat and cross the lake from Capernaum to an area that has no villages nearby, a nice little place of shaded trees and springs where a stream enters the Sea of Galilee, flowing down from the grassy slopes of the hills to the west. This was a favorite place of Jesus, to which he often came; it was the same place he met the disciples and commissioned Peter after the Resurrection (Jn 21). And even though on this occasion they were not able to rest because the people ran ahead along the shore and arrived before him – a crowd which eventually swelled to 5000 men, not counting women and children (Mk 6:44, cf. Mt 14:21) – Jesus finally escaped into the mountains that night to pray and be alone (Mk 6:46).

There is an important spiritual lesson in those words of Jesus: “*Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.*” It is an essential part of the spiritual life to “retreat” from the business of the world in this way, even when that busy-ness involves doing the work of God.

There are three important pillars of a strong spiritual relationship with God. First is keeping Sunday holy by attending Mass and receiving the Eucharist, which the Church declares the “source and summit” of the whole spiritual life (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium 11*; *Catechism 1324*). Second is the daily life of prayer, including morning offering, evening thanksgiving, and prayer throughout the day such as the Holy Rosary.

The third pillar is the periodic retreat, by which one takes a break from the regular routine, including the people one serves, and travelling to a quiet, restful place far away. There are many way to accomplish this aspect of the spiritual call.

Retreats. The Church has developed a wide variety of formal “Retreats” that provide the faithful the opportunity to fulfill Jesus’ words. Some are highly programmatic weekends such as the Cursillo retreat, whose goal is to evangelize and reintroduce one to the person of Christ in a group context. Others are designed for personal solitude and silence over an extended period of days. Almost all monasteries and religious institutes – which include as a formal part of their

constitution the command of the Lord in today's Gospel – provide opportunities for laity to make retreats with their communities.

Spiritual Vacation. Every family needs to take occasional “vacations.” For Catholics, vacation time should always seek to incorporate the dimension of spiritual renewal. Parents should take care to work into the vacation the regular obligation of prayer and Mass, but should take it a step further and seek out a place to meet the Lord in a special way while travelling, for instance, by visiting a shrine or holy place, the tomb of a saint, a monastery, etc. A vacation that seeks only worldly entertainment remains empty and unfulfilling.

Personal Recreation. It is important to find in one's life a relaxing and enjoyable activity that connects with nature in some way and thus is able to nourish the spirit. For instance, gardening or fishing, hiking, etc. Whether it is a regular hobby or occasional activity, alone or with a select group, such times are an invitation from the Lord to enter more deeply into the spiritual life; they are necessary.

Eremitic Vocation. Not to be ruled out is the possibility of a calling from God to live out one's entire life in the context of the words: “*Come away by yourselves to a deserted place.*” This is the life of the hermit or monk. Since the early Church – for instance the thousands of desert fathers during the 3rd-5th centuries – many Christians have been blessed with the calling to live apart from the world, in the intimate rest of Christ.

Pilgrimage. Unlike a vacation, the pilgrimage is a religious and spiritual activity from beginning to end, whose goal is some important shrine of the Church. And among pilgrimages none is as important as the one to the Holy Land, to the shrines made holy by the Lord's own presence and miracles. It is amazing to realize that even 2000 years later, Christians are able to respond to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel *literally*, actually travelling with the Lord today to the very place he brought his apostles while on earth, to Tabgha on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Hearing today's Gospel, let us seek to implement the command of the Lord fully in our spiritual lives, filling out our sacramental and prayer life with this other important command, to come away by yourselves for a while to a deserted place, and rest in the company of the Lord.