

Contemplative leisure helps us put things in order

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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While visiting patients as a volunteer hospital chaplain, a man told me he used to be Catholic but he was not anymore, because the Church had all this money and was all about money. And, outraged, he gave me the example of seeing two nuns sitting in the best front row seats at an NBA game. Fortunately, I had not identified myself as a nun!

But it took me back in time to a discussion among us nuns about whether vacations were against our vow of poverty. You see, years ago we did not have real vacations, or go to expensive events like stage plays or concerts — or NBA games. Vacations, now a taken-for-granted part of life even for nuns, are a good topic to reflect on at this time of year!

Vacations still do give me pause because they epitomize the disparity of wealth in our nation and world. Even in the U.S. there is a whole underclass of people who cannot afford to take a vacation. You won't see them at resorts, on cruises or on airplanes or at expensive theme parks, or even at weekend Church services — because they are working two or three jobs just to make ends meet. The average annual vacation expense per person in the United States is \$1,145, or \$4,580 for a family of four. And vacations become even more unthinkable for most people in the many poor countries of our world. So if we are sensitive to this issue, do we give up vacations?

Vacations are an exercise of leisure. Leisure is freedom from necessary work (our jobs) and other necessary obligations (mowing lawns, etc). Centuries ago the Church insisted that landowners give their serfs at least one day (Sunday) to rest. In later centuries the Church was instrumental in supporting legislation that instituted the 40-hour work week. But free time is not the same as leisure. A workaholic will quickly fill free time with work. Leisure is what happens in that free time, activities that people choose to do without being coerced, activity that uses their abilities and resources in a fulfilling way. Leisure activity may mean the same thing as pleasure, play, and fun. Or it may mean the pursuit of a serious activity like climbing Mt. Everest, training for a sport, doing a genealogical project.

There is, however, another deeper aspect of leisure that our souls need, an aspect that goes beyond rest, pleasure, play, fun, and the

exercise of our gifts and talents.

A German Catholic philosopher named Josef Pieper (d 1997) said that the deep heart of leisure is contemplation. By that he did not mean some kind of prayer, although extra prayer during our leisure time is great! By contemplation Pieper meant the inner space to put our lives in order, the undistracted time needed to let the mind relax and wander and wonder. Contemplative leisure is meant to help us make connections between our self and others and our world. It is free time we use to sort out what is important from what is not, what is going well from what is a dead end. It is a time to ponder and think, a time to be grateful and to be in awe of the beauty of the world given us. It is even a time to feel regrets and look at missteps. In an article called "Absent from our Own Lives" (Oct. 1992) Father Ron Rolheiser, OFM, wrote: "Perhaps it sounds strange to suggest that we can be absent from our own lives, but in fact it is rare that we are present to what's actually there and taking place within our lives... we all generally look everywhere else rather than to our own actual lives for love and delight; and it's why we are perennially so deeply restless... This restlessness cannot be stilled by a journey outward. It's inward that we need to go... Inside of our own actual lives."

Contemplative leisure gets us ready to "go back home," back to our "selves," a little differently from where we started, not only refreshed from work but with refreshed, more peaceful and purposeful souls.

Whether or not we have the resources to vacation, we need to try for some contemplative leisure time. It may only be possible in those few minutes when we walk the dog or drink a cup of coffee on the porch. I think of those moments as micro vacations! Inviting contemplative leisure into our lives does mean turning off for a time the things that distract us from contemplation — the computer games and phone text messages and Facebook and the like. And if we are so fortunate to have a true vacation, perhaps in addition to planning fun and pleasure and play, we might plan some free time empty for contemplative leisure.

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