

On Saturday, March 1, 2014, the Staten Island and Central Jersey area hosted a pre-Lenten retreat at St. Mary's Orthodox Church, Staten Island, New York. The idea of a "pre-Lenten retreat" was brand new to the area, and many of the youth members did not know what to expect from this unique retreat. However, the retreat was definitely a blessing for those who attended. The youth members dwelled on the theme, "Let Go and Let God", taken from John 14:8 "If God is all you have, you have all you need." The theme definitely touched the hearts of all the youth members, who were of various ages. It was a relatable topic, one which could illuminate our paths during difficult times and especially during the lenten season, where we learn to "let go" of the worldly pressures and lead a more humble life filled with fasting and prayer.

The retreat began with morning prayers, led by Rev. Fr. T. A. Thomas. Afterwards there was a morning session led by Seminarian Alex G. Abraham. Together, we discussed the meaning of a "retreat" and how to redirect our lives during the Lent season. To "retreat" is to "fall back" or withdraw yourself from the world and reconnect with your spirituality. This is an important concept, especially during Lent; it helped all the youth members, including myself, understand the meaning of a retreat, how to "retreat" from the world, and how to come closer to God. We discussed how to restore ourselves, and how not to conform to society but to reform the way we follow our faith. Finding God helps us escape the world and all its temptations. Letting go and letting God allows us to reconnect with our spirituality, become stronger in faith, and become better Christians. We also discussed the importance of fasting and prostration during Lent, both of which teaches us to become humble and submit ourselves to God. Through prayer and God's word, we are nourished. Prayer, fasting, and prostration are all important keys that help mold us into better Christians. Through these key factors, we understand that "If God is all you have, you have all you need" and that this key message can help us all redirect our lives towards a brighter path filled with prosperity and happiness.

Following lunch and prayer, there was a second session, conducted by Rev. Fr. Vijay Thomas. Achen spoke to us about the importance of confession, and he taught us the acronym 'SICK', where we Set our minds to confession, Investigate our lives and compare ourselves to Jesus, Clean ourselves, and Keep a promise. This acronym helps us all remember the steps involved in Holy Confession. We learned to reflect upon ourselves and confess our sins in order to become closer to God and to grow spiritually. All the youth members had the opportunity to repent their sins and confess during this time. It was wonderful to see all the youth participate during both sessions and during confession, especially the younger children. Taking part in confession right before lent allowed us to have a fresh start, so we can begin lent without our sins weighing us down. It was a different approach, because all the youth members were used to confess towards the end of Lent; however, it was definitely beneficial, and it allowed us to leave the retreat feeling cleaner and closer to God.

This retreat allowed all the participants to begin the lent with a fresh start. It also helped everyone develop goals to reach during, and after lent. Having this retreat at the beginning of lent gives everyone the time to make changes and fully participate in lent, in its entirety. The lent retreat was definitely a success, and I was able to leave the retreat feeling prepared to take part in this year's lent season with a new vision in mind.

-Sharon Thomas

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