3 Days in Advent
Drawing closer to Christ during this busy season

The Faith Journey of Parish Leaders:
We must be the first
to deepen our intimacy with Christ.

Three Retreat Exercises leading to deeper communion with Christ and the Church

This resource is meant to be used in addition to our daily prayer and liturgical life. Each exercise flows into the next, so begin with #1 and proceed. Conduct this brief Advent journey during three successive days. As we parish leaders call others to deeper intimacy with Christ, we ourselves become more powerful witnesses when we put aside the time to grow in our own faith. Thank you for following this journey of faith, and thank you for everything which you give to your parish. (You have permission to reprint this for use in your parish.)

To begin...

Take these three important steps to prepare

Where will be your sacred space for thought and prayer?
What chair, room or other place will you normally use?

What obstacles do you foresee to having enough time to give to your own spiritual journey?
Think about your schedule, the demands of the parish, and your own inner angst which may prevent you from allowing silence to well up around you.

What will be your plan for sharing your journey with at least one other person?
Be very specific.
Day One

► Early morning on the first day.
Begin with a quiet moment. Allow the silence to well up around you. Read the reflection.

Morning Prayer. Whether you’re a “one man show” as pastor of a small or rural parish, or part of the ordained, lay or religious staff in a medium or larger parish, there’s always a lot to do. Part of the reason for that is that parish work looks forward. We’re planning for Lent as Christmas winds down. Once we reach Lent, we’re busy getting ready for Triduum. And so it goes.

Take a moment now to turn your heart to Christ in prayer.

We each pray at times and in ways that speak to our own hearts. There are no more nor less correct ways to pray. The key is that each day we pause, turn our hearts toward Christ, and allow the Spirit to speak in us. What are the primary barriers to you having more time for prayer and reflection? List them here by name.

► Midday on the first day.
When you are ready, read this reflection.

Opening our heart to Christ means allowing ourselves to become an earthen vessel. We gradually learn that only through the power of Christ can we do the work to which we’re called. Let this thought well up in your heart here at midday.

When we praise God, one of the things we know is that God does great works through us, even though we know we are not very perfect people. We know our dark spots, our secrets and sins. God knows them, too, and still chooses us.

► Become conscious of what may prevent you from joining your heart to others on your journey of faith. What resistance to this idea do you sense? What seems most appealing about it to you? Here’s a checklist of possibilities:

- I’m too busy
- No one really understands me
- This is all just foolish
- I don’t like to share myself
- Others don’t really care about me
- There isn’t anyone near me whom I like enough to trust
- I’m just not the kind of person who shares him or herself
►Early evening on the first day.
When you’re ready, continue by moving toward prayer. This is the perfect Season for us to grow in our intimacy with Christ. Pray the opening lines of the exercise below. Then continue writing your own thoughts. Allow yourself to be deep, intimate, honest, and personal. No one ever needs to see this if you so choose. The important thing is honesty with God.

From Scripture

Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

(Isaiah 43: 6b-8)

►When you’re ready, continue by setting a realistic strategy for yourself. Take two or three steps toward deeper intimacy with Christ throughout the season.

1. How will you make the time to be with Christ in your daily routine and schedule? Set aside the time in your calendar. Do it now!

2. With whom will you do this? Make a phone call or two and invite others to join you for faith sharing on a regular basis.

►Nighttime on the first day.
As you prepare to sleep, invite the Lord to be with you. If you awaken during the night, let your heart naturally turn toward Christ, the Light. Thank him for this day, for being with you, for continuing to form and choose you, and for the work done through your hands in his name. Rest peacefully tonight. Amen.

My Lord and God,

I turn my heart to you now, weary from my work.
I hear you calling me to do the work to which you have called me.

My response is made within the limits of who I am.
You know my heart, you know all the ways in which I do not measure up.
How could you have chosen me and how can I be of help in building up your Reign?

Continue to pray...
Day Two

►Early morning on the second day.
Begin with a quiet moment. Allow the silence to well up around you. Read the reflection.

Morning prayer today. Sometimes we parish staff people work so hard at our ministry that we fail to be in touch with our own inborn hunger for God. The human heart is filled with hunger. No matter what role we play, from pastor to janitor, from liturgist to educator, that hunger is real. We must find a way to allow Christ to nourish us. Our own communion with Christ must be rich.

In touch. Take a few moments now in the early part of the day to offer yourself to Christ. Let him have your whole heart in love. Let Christ feed and nourish you.

? We feed our hunger in many ways – work, food, sex, TV, the Internet, prayer, sharing, works of mercy and compassion. List here the ways you are fed. Be ruthlessly honest.

Pause to ask yourself

►Midday on the second day.
When you are ready, read this reflection.

Don’t avoid your inner sense of emptiness and hunger. Instead, dwell with it here during this time and become aware of all that it may give you. No one likes to feel the ache of need and loneliness. We look for satisfaction anywhere we can find it, even in ways that are not good for us. This is a time to refresh your heart and restock the “spiritual cupboard” from which we are being fed. Use the “inventory of myths” below to focus this for yourself, and stay with this exercise for a day or two.

►Become conscious of what needs you have on your journey of faith. What resistance to this do you sense? What seems most appealing about it to you?
Here’s a checklist of possibilities:

➢ For parish ministers, it’s all right to suppress and ignore our hunger – for the sake of the parish!
➢ The parish is “my community.” It’s all I need.
➢ I’m fed by my ministry. I don’t have any personal needs.
➢ I’m really too busy to take care of myself.
➢ I’ll just let God take care of me.
➢ I don’t have any hungers at all.
Still at midday prayer.
When you’re ready, continue by moving toward prayer with the question of your inborn hungers. Pray the opening lines of the exercise below. Then continue writing your own thoughts. Allow yourself to be deep, intimate, honest, and personal. No one ever needs to see this if you so choose. The important thing is honesty with God.

My Lord and God,

Help me to open my heart to you now in prayer...to be truly honest with myself. You have created within me a restless soul, searching for comfort, for satisfaction, for companionship.

I have given my life to you and your church. Now I come to you with my whole self, asking you to teach me how to take care of myself so I may take care of others well.

Continue to pray...

Early evening on the second day.
When you’re ready to pray, turn your heart to Christ and open it to the Spirit. Even in a busy time of year, this time you have with God is your very lifeblood!

From Scripture

Oh God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night.

(Psalm 63: 1,5-6)

When you’re ready, pray in these or similar words: I know you are with me here and thank you for that. I am amazed and in awe to have been chosen by you for this work, but I know you are working through me now. Continue your prayer...

When you are finished, pause to allow the Light to fill you.

Nighttime on the second day.
Tonight we ask for God’s peace in our sleep. Busy days can produce restless nights. Let the Spirit fill you with peace and gratitude for the day just ended. In wordless prayer, dwell with God as you drift off to sleep.

Rest peacefully tonight. Amen.
Day Three

► Morning prayer on the third day.
Begin with a quiet moment. Allow the silence to well up around you. Read the reflection.

Asking for Grace. The grace we ask of God today is for the silence of our hearts and the quiet in our lives. This allows us to see God in all the divine beauty and gracefulness. We invite you to simply pause – wherever you can – and allow the Spirit of God to fill you. Sense the peace, power, and awesome beauty of God.

Prayer. Take time now to turn your heart back to Christ again. Do you see the pattern in this? Our daily pauses, during which we spend time with God, become the axis on which our whole life and ministry is based.

¿ List below the ways in which God is present in your life.

Pause to ask yourself

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► Midday prayer on the third day.
When you are ready, read this reflection.

God touches us in ways we often don’t see. During this time, become more aware of those ways, and then let them drive your devotion to Christ, to the Spirit, to Mary & the Saints, and to God the Father of us all. We praise God because of all the great ways in which we are empowered and led.

► Become conscious of the ways God touches you in your life and ministry. What are they? What resistance do you sense? What seems most appealing about it to you? Here’s a check list of possibilities:

- A strong sense of vocation – to priesthood, religious life, friendship or marriage.
- And a strong sense of vocation to the particular ministry given to me.
- In nature
- In the voices of people who call for help
- In the words and actions of the liturgy of the church
- In my private, quiet prayer time
- In the voice of those whom I most love in life.
- In the night when I awaken, my heart turns to thoughts of Christ.
- Other ways:
Evening prayer on the third day.
When you’re ready, continue by moving toward prayer with the goal of contemplating the beauty and power of Christ. Pray the opening lines of the exercise below, and then continue writing your own thoughts. Allow yourself to be deep, intimate, honest, and personal. No one ever needs to see this if you so choose. The important thing is honesty with God.

My Lord and God,
I give my heart to you now and become aware of all the many ways in which you touch and enter my life. I’m not aware of them all, so I pray for the consciousness needed to really see you fully.

In particular now, I pray...
Continue to pray...

Night prayer on the third day.
When you are ready for bed, take a moment to read this text:

From Scripture

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.” And he went through Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues...

(Mark 1:35-39)

“Everyone is searching for you!” Don’t you feel that way sometimes yourself? And yet, there is a time for rest. We end our day and our three days of intense divine presence with hearts full of thanks. Simple thanks.

What have been your most significant spiritual gains during this retreat? What new spiritual idea arose in your heart?

As you nestle into bed tonight, ready for sleep, take Christ with you. If you’re married, single, or celibate, it does not matter. Fall asleep with your heart attuned to the energy of love, of God, and of those whom you love – and with whom you may be sleeping at this very moment. Let the love in your heart be like a deep hum in your soul, lulling you into peaceful sleep, aware that God is with you tonight – and in all things. Amen.