



PACEM in TERRIS

HERMITAGE RETREAT CENTER

A THREE-DAY SELF-DIRECTED SILENT RETREAT

The Servant Is Not Greater Than the Master

FOR PASTORS, PRIESTS, CLERGY, RELIGIOUS, & CHURCH
LEADERS

A retreat for those who preach, teach, shepherd, and lead the people of God — who pour themselves out for others and who must, from time to time, return to the One who called them, to be filled again.



Sacred Paths Retreat Series · Drawing from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of
Loyola

Before You Begin

Who this retreat is for · The particular burden of leadership · How to use this guide

You have given homilies on rest while running on empty. You have offered the sacraments of healing while carrying wounds you have told no one about. You have preached on the love of God while quietly wondering whether you have felt it lately. You have led others to the still waters while standing parched at the edge.

This retreat is for you. Not the role. Not the office. Not the collar, the habit, the title, or the vestments. You. The person beneath the vocation who also needs to be shepherded, forgiven, restored, and sent.

WHO THIS RETREAT IS FOR

A broad welcome

This retreat is written for pastors and associate pastors, priests and deacons, bishops and archbishops, religious sisters and brothers, abbots and abbesses, youth ministers and campus ministers, hospital and prison chaplains, parish administrators and directors of religious education, and any person in formal church leadership who is responsible for the spiritual formation of others.

Whatever your tradition, whatever your title, whatever your current relationship to the institution you serve — if you have been called to shepherd, this retreat is for you.

“A servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.”

— John 13:16

THE PARTICULAR BURDEN

What no one tells you about church leadership

Leading God’s people is among the most demanding and spiritually complex forms of human work. It asks you to be simultaneously human and a sign of the transcendent. It places you at the center of the community’s joy and its grief. It exposes you to an unrelenting stream of human need. It can produce in even the most gifted leaders a slow, quiet depletion that is easily mistaken for holiness.

Ignatius of Loyola understood this terrain. His Spiritual Exercises were not designed for the spiritually comfortable. They were forged in the crucible of a man who had given everything to God and needed, regularly, to return to the source. These three days follow that same path.

THREE MOVEMENTS

The shape of this retreat

Day One: Stripped — Setting aside the role and standing before God as a person, not an office. The honest interior state of your vocation right now.

Day Two: Poured Out & Filled — The spirituality of self-gift. What it costs to serve others, and where the cost is paid. Finding God in the specific texture of your ministry.

Day Three: Recommissioned — The sending of a shepherd renewed. Not a return to the same exhaustion, but a return as one who has been met, forgiven, and re-sent with purpose.

AN HONEST BEGINNING

Before your first prayer period

Find a quiet place. Sit down. Remove, if you are able, whatever physical marker of your role you normally carry. Take ten slow breaths. Then write in your journal, without editing, for five minutes:

- What is the honest state of my soul right now — not the state I report in homilies or spiritual direction, but the actual interior weather?
- When did I last feel genuinely met by God, rather than simply busy in his service?
- What am I most afraid this retreat might surface?

“Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.”

— Mark 6:31

Day One: Stripped

Theme: Beneath the role · Standing before God as a person, not an office

The role of church leader carries enormous weight — not only the institutional and pastoral weight, but the theological weight of representing Christ to his people. That weight can be a gift. It can also become a hiding place: a way of remaining perpetually busy in God’s service without ever being genuinely present to God himself.

Today we strip the role away — gently, respectfully, but honestly. We stand before God not as pastor, priest, deacon, or sister, but as the person he called before he called us to any office. Today we are simply the beloved.

MORNING PRAYER · 30 MIN

The voice before the vocation

Read Matthew 3:13–17 — the baptism of Jesus. Before his public ministry. Before any sermon, any healing, any confrontation with the religious authorities. The Father speaks: ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’

Ignatius calls this the preparatory grace: to know that we are loved before we are useful. Sit with the baptism for twenty minutes. Then ask, honestly: Do I believe God is pleased with me — not with my ministry, not with my homilies, not with my parish or congregation numbers — but with me?

“And behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

— Matthew 3:17

Journal prompt

When did ministry begin to feel more like an identity than a calling? Is there a version of you that exists before and beneath the role — and when did you last spend time with that person?

FIRST PRAYER PERIOD · 45 MIN

Moses at the burning bush: the reluctant leader

Read Exodus 3:1–12. Moses is not in the temple. He is in the wilderness, tending someone else’s flock, apparently forgotten. And it is precisely here — in the unremarkable middle of an ordinary day — that God appears.

Notice Moses’s response to the call: not readiness, but resistance. ‘Who am I that I should go?’ This is not false modesty. It is the honest question of a person who has been broken by previous attempts at greatness and who knows his own limits. God’s answer is not a resume: it is a promise. ‘I will be with you.’

Use Ignatian imaginative contemplation. You are Moses. The flock has wandered. You are alone. The bush is burning. What does God's voice sound like? What does he say to you — not to your congregation, not to your diocese, but to you?

“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘But I will be with you.’”

— Exodus 3:11–12

Journal prompt

Where is your wilderness right now — the place where you feel forgotten, overlooked, or unequal to what is being asked of you? What would it mean to hear ‘I will be with you’ spoken specifically into that place?

SECOND PRAYER PERIOD · 45 MIN

Elijah under the broom tree: the burned-out prophet

Read 1 Kings 19:1–18. Elijah has just won the greatest spiritual victory of his career — and immediately afterward he collapses. He runs into the wilderness, lies down under a broom tree, and asks to die. ‘It is enough, Lord.’

This is one of the most honest portraits of ministerial burnout in all of Scripture. God's response is not a rebuke. It is bread and water. Sleep. More bread and water. More sleep. Then — only then — a still small voice.

Sit with this passage for the full period. Where are you on Elijah's spectrum right now — the victory, the collapse, the wilderness, the sleep, the voice? Which season of this story feels most like your own?

“It is enough, Lord. Take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.’ And he lay down and slept.”

— 1 Kings 19:4–5

Journal prompt

What would you say to God right now if you gave yourself permission to say ‘it is enough’? Write it. He has heard worse, and he has never abandoned a prophet for honesty.

MIDDAY EXAMEN

Five movements at noon

1. Gratitude: Name three things from your ministry for which you are genuinely — not professionally — grateful. Not what you are supposed to be grateful for. What actually moves you.

2. Ask for light: Pray: ‘Lord, show me what you most want me to see about myself today — not about my people, not about my parish or congregation, but about me.’
3. Review the morning: Where in prayer did you feel most drawn toward God? Where did you feel the familiar urge to perform, even in prayer?
4. The wound beneath the work: Name one thing you have been carrying in ministry that you have told no one. You do not have to resolve it. Simply name it to God, here, now.
5. Afternoon intention: Ask for one specific grace for the afternoon — something you genuinely need rather than something you think you should need.

THIRD PRAYER PERIOD · 45 MIN

Peter’s denial: the leader who failed

Read Luke 22:54–62. Peter — the rock, the first among the apostles, the one who said ‘I will never deny you’ — denies Jesus three times before morning. And then the cock crows, and Jesus turns and looks at him.

That look. Luke says Peter ‘went out and wept bitterly.’ Not a pastoral recovery plan. Not a communications strategy. Just tears. The complete collapse of the self-image that had sustained his leadership.

Church leaders carry failures that are rarely named publicly. Pastoral mistakes. Relationships damaged. Things said that cannot be unsaid. Decisions made in exhaustion or fear. Today we bring the failures to the One whose look at Peter was not condemnation — it was recognition, and it was the beginning of restoration.

“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord... And he went out and wept bitterly.”

— Luke 22:61–62

Journal prompt

What is the failure or wound in your ministry life that you most need to bring into the light? Write it here — not for anyone else, but as an act of honest confession before the God who already knows it and who turned and looked at Peter with love, not condemnation.

Evening

Read Psalm 51 — the great psalm of confession and restoration. Read it slowly, as if for the first time, as a person rather than as the leader who may have preached from it. Then read verse 10–12 again and again until it becomes your own prayer.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”

— Psalm 51:10–12

Day Two: Poured Out & Filled

Theme: The cost of self-gift · Finding God in the texture of ministry · The source that does not run dry

Church leadership is a life of continual self-gift — of being poured out for others as a matter of daily routine. The baptisms, the funerals, the late-night phone calls, the counseling sessions, the homilies prepared at midnight, the hospital visits, the administrative burdens, the impossible expectations, the grief of watching people you love make choices that will wound them.

Today we do not pretend this cost is not real. We name it honestly, bring it to God honestly, and then turn to the inexhaustible source from which true ministry flows. The question is not whether you will be poured out. The question is whether you are being filled.

MORNING PRAYER · 30 MIN

The Good Shepherd: what the image demands

Read John 10:1–18 slowly. Jesus does not say the shepherd has an easy life. He says the shepherd knows the sheep by name. The shepherd goes before them. The shepherd lays down his life. This is not an image of comfort — it is an image of a particular kind of love that is costly precisely because it is genuine.

After reading, sit in silence for fifteen minutes with this question: Is my shepherding of the people in my care still an act of love, or has it become primarily an act of obligation? Be honest. God already knows the answer, and he is not asking in order to condemn you.

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

— John 10:14–15

Journal prompt

Name one person in your ministry — past or present — whom you have genuinely loved in the way a shepherd loves a sheep: knowing them by name, going before them, staying with them in darkness. What did that cost you? What did it give you?

FIRST PRAYER PERIOD · 45 MIN

Paul’s thorn: ministry with unresolved suffering

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10. Paul has a thorn in the flesh — something chronic, something that does not go away despite prayer, something that humiliates him. And God’s response is not healing. It is: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’

This is the spirituality of ministry that no one advertises: that some of our most powerful work happens not in spite of our weakness but through it. That the congregation sometimes receives something genuine from us precisely in the moments when we have nothing left of our own to offer.

Ignatius calls this the grace of the third week: finding God not only in consolation but in the cross. What is the thorn in your ministry? Not the institutional frustrations — the thing you have prayed about, the thing that does not resolve, the place where you are regularly confronted with your own insufficiency.

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

— 2 Corinthians 12:9

Journal prompt

What is the chronic weakness or limitation in your ministry that you have been most tempted to hide? Can you bring it to God today not as a problem to be fixed but as the very place where his power might rest upon you?

MIDDAY EXAMEN

Five movements at noon

6. Gratitude: Name one person in your congregation or community whose life has genuinely changed through your ministry. You may not have witnessed it directly. Name them and give thanks.
7. Consolation & desolation: Where in ministry do you most regularly experience consolation — that deep sense of rightness, aliveness, and nearness to God? Where do you most regularly experience desolation — flatness, going-through-the-motions, spiritual numbness? The pattern of these two is important data about your vocation.
8. The performance beneath the ministry: Is there a way in which your ministry has become, at least in part, a performance — for your congregation, your bishop, your community, yourself? Name it without judgment. It is a nearly universal occupational hazard of public ministry.
9. Where is God in the hardest part of your work? Name the most difficult dimension of your ministry right now. Ask God: ‘Where are you in this?’ Wait. Listen.
10. Afternoon intention: What is one grace you genuinely need for the rest of this retreat?

SECOND PRAYER PERIOD · 45 MIN

The feeding of the five thousand: ministry from scarcity

Read John 6:1–14. The crowd is enormous. The need is real. The disciples’ assessment is accurate: ‘Two hundred denarii would not be enough.’ They are right. The resources are insufficient. The five loaves and two fish are laughably inadequate.

And Jesus takes what is inadequate, gives thanks, and distributes it. There is more left over than they started with.

This is the eucharistic logic of ministry. You will frequently feel that what you have to offer is not enough — not enough wisdom, not enough energy, not enough faith, not enough love. The invitation is not to manufacture sufficiency but to bring what you have, offer it, and watch what God does with it. Journal: Where are you currently trying to produce out of your own resources what only God can multiply?

“Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.”

— John 6:11

THIRD PRAYER PERIOD • 45 MIN

The washing of feet: authority as service

Read John 13:1–17. Jesus, knowing that the Father has given all things into his hands — from that place of complete authority and security — gets up, takes a towel, and washes his disciples’ feet.

The security is what makes the service possible. He does not wash their feet from insecurity, from the need to prove something, from institutional obligation. He washes their feet because he knows who he is and whose he is. ‘If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.’

Ignatius invites us to contemplate this scene using all our senses. You are in the room. The water is cool. Jesus kneels before you. He takes your feet in his hands. What does that feel like? What do you want to say to him? What does he say to you?

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper... and began to wash the disciples’ feet.”

— John 13:3–5

Journal prompt

Is your ministry flowing from security — from a deep, rested knowledge of who you are and whose you are — or from anxiety, obligation, or the need for approval? What would it look like to serve your people from the posture of one who knows the Father has given all things into his hands?

Evening: Lectio Divina

Read Isaiah 40:27–31 using the four movements of Lectio Divina: Lectio (what word draws you?), Meditatio (what does this stir in you personally?), Oratio (respond to God from what has arisen), Contemplatio (rest in silence). You preach this text to weary people. Tonight, receive it yourself.

*“He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength...
They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with
wings like eagles.”*

— Isaiah 40:29, 31

Day Three: Recommissioned

Theme: The shepherd renewed · Released from outcomes · Sent again with freedom

The final movement of the Ignatian Exercises is not rest. It is sending. Ignatius's Contemplation to Attain Love concludes with an offering — the *Suscipe* — in which the retreatant places everything back into God's hands. Not in resignation, but in freedom.

For church leaders, this is perhaps the most difficult movement of all. We have spent our ministries trying to build, to grow, to protect, to preserve. The invitation today is to hold all of it loosely — to return the congregation, the community, the institution, the outcomes — and to receive in exchange the only thing that makes ministry possible: the love and the grace of God.

MORNING PRAYER · 30 MIN

Review and receive

Begin by reading slowly through your journal from Days One and Two. Do not analyze — simply notice. What recurring words, images, or movements appear? Where did God seem most present? Where did you feel the most resistance or the most freedom?

After reading, sit in silence for ten minutes and hold this question without rushing to answer it: 'What is the one thing God most wants me to carry back into my ministry?'

FIRST PRAYER PERIOD · 45 MIN

Do you love me? The restoration of Peter

Read John 21:1–17 — the entire passage, slowly. Peter has denied Jesus three times. Now, on the beach at dawn, over a charcoal fire — the same kind of fire at which he denied him — Jesus asks him three times: 'Do you love me?'

This is the recommissioning. Not a performance review. Not a list of areas for improvement. Not a new job description. Just the question, three times, as many times as the denial: Do you love me?

Notice what Jesus does not ask. He does not ask: Are you ready? Are you qualified? Have you resolved your interior struggles? Do you feel sufficiently recovered? He asks only one thing. And on the basis of that one answer, he sends Peter back: 'Feed my sheep.'

Sit with Jesus's question for the full period. Let it land not as interrogation but as invitation. Do you love me? Answer honestly. Then listen for what follows.

"He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' ... Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'"

— John 21:17

Journal prompt

Is love still the primary motive of your ministry — love of God, love of the people entrusted to you? Or has it been quietly displaced by duty, habit, institutional loyalty, or the fear of failure? Write your honest answer. Then write what you want the answer to be.

SECOND PRAYER PERIOD • 45 MIN

The Contemplation to Attain Love: God in the ministry

Ignatius's great concluding prayer asks us to see God's love laboring everywhere in creation. Today we bring that contemplation into the specific world of your ministry.

Close your eyes and imagine your church, chapel, office, or the community you serve. Look slowly around. The faces of the people who come to you. The ones who are faithful and the ones who have stopped coming. The difficult conversations. The surprising moments of grace. The child you baptized. The person you buried. The couple you married.

Where is God at work in this community that has nothing to do with your effort or skill? What is God doing in these people that you may have been too tired or too busy to notice? Sit in this contemplation for the full period. Then journal what you see.

THE SUSCIPE — Adapted for Church Leaders



*Lord, take and receive this ministry —
the people I love and the ones who exhaust me,
the successes I have claimed and the failures I have hidden,
the sermons that landed and the ones that fell flat,
the expectations of the institution and the whispers of my own ambition.
You called me into this. To you, Lord, I return it.
Do with it what you will. Build what I cannot build.
Reach whom I cannot reach. Heal what I cannot heal.
Give me only your love and your grace.
That is enough to walk back into any room,
stand behind any pulpit,
and say with freedom: I was sent.*

— After St. Ignatius of Loyola

THIRD PRAYER PERIOD • 45 MIN

Paul's farewell: the charge to a church leader

Read Acts 20:17–35 — Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders. He is not sure he will see them again. He is reviewing his ministry not for their applause but for their formation. Notice what he emphasizes: not his successes, but his faithfulness. Not the crowds, but the individual households. Not the institutional metrics, but the testimony of a clear conscience.

‘I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.’ And then, remarkably: ‘I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities.’

Sit with Paul’s account of his own ministry. What would your honest account look like? Not the version you would give at a diocesan meeting or a pastoral review, but the account you would give on your knees at the end of your life, to the people you actually loved?

“But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

— Acts 20:24

FINAL EXAMEN · 30 MIN

What I am leaving with

- 11.** Review: Read slowly through your entire journal from all three days. What one word or image gathers everything you have received?
- 12.** Name your graces: Write three specific things God gave you in these three days. These are yours to keep, and yours to return to when the depletion comes back.
- 13.** One resolution: What is one specific, sustainable change you will make in your ministry rhythm when you return — something that will protect your ability to be filled as well as to pour out?
- 14.** Name your people: Write the names of three people in your care for whom you will intercede specifically when you return. Not the congregation in general — three actual names. Pray for them now.
- 15.** Write a letter to yourself: A letter to be opened at the lowest point of your next difficult season — when the desolation returns, when the work feels pointless, when the love has gone quiet. What do you want to say to that version of yourself from this place?

Go, Beloved Shepherd

You entered this retreat as one who leads. You leave as one who has been led — by the Good Shepherd who knows your name, who meets you in the wilderness, who washes your feet and asks only whether you love him. The people waiting for you do not need a perfect leader. They need a shepherded one — someone who has been to the source and carries the water back. Go and give them what you have received.

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

— Numbers 6:24–26

Core Practices & Extra Scripture

Ignatian methods for church leaders · Sustainable rhythms · A treasury of passages

IGNATIAN METHOD

Consolation & Desolation for Ministry Leaders

Consolation in ministry: the sense that what you are doing is genuinely animated by God — the homily that came from somewhere deeper than your preparation, the pastoral encounter that surprised you with grace, the moment of prayer that felt like arrival rather than obligation.

Desolation in ministry: going through the motions, preaching words that feel hollow, administering sacraments with a sense of distance, the Sunday after Sunday that begins to blur.

Ignatius's counsel: in desolation, do not change major course. Do not resign, restructure, or make sweeping decisions from the flatlands. Hold the course, increase small acts of devotion, and wait. Desolation is not the truth about your vocation. It is a season. The consolation will return.

PRACTICE

The daily examen for church leaders

At the end of each day — before the evening news, before the phone, before the next preparation: five minutes. One moment of genuine gratitude from today's ministry. One place God seemed present. One place you felt most yourself in the work. One thing you are releasing rather than carrying into tomorrow. One prayer for the person who most challenged or exhausted you today.

This practice, sustained over months, changes what you notice. And what you notice changes what you do.

PRACTICE

The protected hour

Ignatius believed that the leader who cannot find time for prayer has already told us something important about their ministry: they have become the source rather than the channel. Choose one hour each week — non-negotiable, protected from pastoral interruptions — that belongs entirely to your own prayer and formation. Not sermon preparation. Not spiritual reading for others. Your hour. The congregation will receive what grows there.

PRACTICE

Spiritual direction

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius were always meant to be made with a guide. For church leaders especially, who are expected to be the guide for everyone else, the discipline of having a spiritual director is not a luxury — it is a structural necessity. If you do not

currently have a spiritual director, consider finding one within the next thirty days. You cannot give what you are not receiving.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

When ministry produces desolation

- Return to the scripture or prayer moment in this retreat where God felt most real. Repetition is the Ignatian method — go back to where he met you.
- Resist the urge to produce more activity as an antidote to spiritual dryness. The cure for desolation is rarely more ministry. It is usually more prayer.
- Tell one trusted person the truth about your interior state. The isolation of church leadership is one of its most dangerous features. You were not meant to carry this alone.
- Read the psalms of lament — 22, 42, 88 — as the honest prayers of a leader who has not abandoned faith but is not pretending either.
- Remember: the desolation of Elijah preceded the still small voice. The darkness before the dawn is still before the dawn.

FOR THE JOURNEY BACK

Sustaining what was received

- Share one insight from this retreat with a trusted colleague or spiritual director within the first week.
- Schedule a half-day of prayer each quarter. Put it in the calendar now, before you return to the demands.
- Open the letter you wrote to yourself at the lowest point of your next difficult season.
- Return to this retreat guide annually. You will be a different minister. The texts will say different things.

EXTRA SCRIPTURE

A treasury for church leaders

- Jeremiah 20:7–9 — ‘You deceived me, Lord’ — the prophet’s honest complaint
- Ezekiel 34:1–16 — God’s rebuke of negligent shepherds and his promise to shepherd himself
- Matthew 20:25–28 — Not so among you: authority as service
- Luke 15:1–7 — The shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine
- Romans 8:26–27 — The Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words
- 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 — God chose the foolish things of the world
- 2 Corinthians 4:7–9 — Treasure in jars of clay
- Galatians 6:9 — Let us not grow weary of doing good
- Ephesians 4:11–13 — Equipping the saints for the work of ministry
- 1 Peter 5:1–4 — Shepherd the flock of God that is among you
- Revelation 2:1–4 — You have abandoned the love you had at first
- Psalm 23 — Read it tonight as a sheep, not as the shepherd

“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

— Philipians 1:6

© 2026, Pacem in Terris Hermitage Retreat Center, 26399 Highway 47 NW, Isanti, MN 55040