

Reflection on Parish Retreat 2023

How wonderful it was to gather once again as a community for a parish retreat on Saturday 18 February. This is something we have not been able to do since the Covid pandemic hit us with a mighty thud in 2020. Some 26 people from the parish came to St Joseph's Conference Centre in Port Melbourne to participate and what a heart-warming experience! Fr John welcomed us with his usual warmth and fervour for what was to be a restorative day. He noted that in some ways calling it a "retreat" was a misnomer as really it was a way for us to come together, to share our gifts, our thoughts and our ideas communally rather than in an individual, introspective way. Indeed, that was certainly the spirit of the day. Jane Sims led the Welcome to Country. Sisters Karen and Emily soon had us singing along to "This is the Day" accompanied by their valiant efforts on the guitar. It set the tone for the spirit of thankfulness that we felt for the blessing of being able to share this day. In prayer, we called on the Holy Spirit to renew us, to "help us to relish what is right" and "always rejoice in the Lord's consolation."

Some "icebreaker/ get to know you" activities followed. We introduced ourselves to one other person and I had the pleasure of meeting one of our Brazilian visitors. We then joined with others to make a larger group to share three things for which we felt grateful. Many of us determined we were grateful for our families, our friends, our good health, our close and hospitable, contemporary parish, our inclusive community, for having the good fortune to live in a peaceful country such as Australia, our Brazilian friends going further to name how grateful they are for the opportunities Australia has given them.

Using the theme / image of the bridge, we were asked in our groups to construct a bridge using some wooden blocks. It was interesting to see the group dynamics and how each group collaborated and synthesised their ideas to form a bridge. Much discussion was had about the bridges as we viewed each group's work. The bridge is a metaphor for much of our human experience - the journey, how we may grapple to get to where we are going in life and the support structures that hold us up as we go. Our group decided to put railings on our bridge as sometimes we need help so we don't fall, sometimes bridges are there for us to stop and ponder, even savour a moment. To that end, some of our participants felt bridges should be free of traffic and given over to communal gathering places, cafes and so on. There were many rich and diverse interpretations of the bridge concept.

Sr Brigid continued the theme sharing with us a poem by Doris Klein called "We Risk a Sacred Journey". The poem highlighted our vulnerability. As we go along in life's journey with our hopes and dreams, we are often gripped by our doubts and fears, but amid this too are moments of light, of joy and knowing (sometimes even not knowing) that we are "companied by a grace-full presence that has held us together and led us on." Sr Brigid shared many images



and musings, words of wisdom and observations. She called on us to consider what we needed to let go of; what risks we were being invited to take; what ways we could be a vibrant, faith community in Elwood/ St Kilda; and how we might continue to flourish while acknowledging the needs of today. These exacting questions brought forth a myriad of responses - too many to mention here. What I can say is that we were challenged yet energised at the same time. Someone mentioned that we stand on the shoulders of those that went before us and for each point in time in our parish history, our forebears would have grappled with challenges and yet delighted in the joys and strength of the faith community.

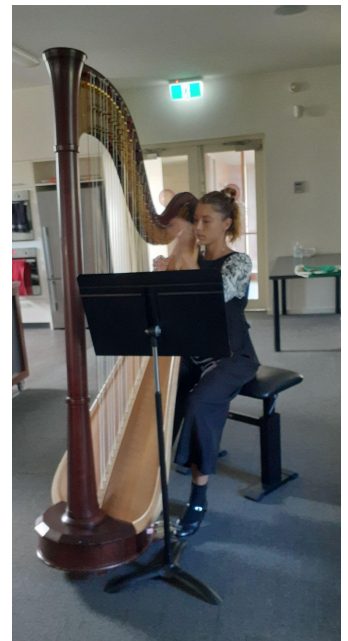


Fiona Lynch led a restful meditation. We loosened our physical bodies, our minds, our impediments and gave ourselves over to the experience of focusing on our breath, turning our imagination to the visual image of the bridge in a country meander. Fiona then generously shared a poem she wrote and an image she designed around the poem, a beautiful keepsake of the day yet one to which I will return to contemplate her evocative words.

We were delighted to have Katia Mestrovic, harpist play for us. The meditative quality of the harp music sustained the relaxation of the afternoon. The very beautiful timbre of the harp had a soothing and peaceful effect; it was easy to let go and appreciate the moment.

As the day drew to a close, Fr John invited us to deliberate on all we had explored in the various activities. In every respect, we found the experience of the retreat valuable. Many of us were happy to share the depth of our understandings and to voice how blessed we felt in being able to share such a time with one another. Fr John left us with the words of Thomas Merton the essence being that even if we are unsure, trust that the Lord God will lead us on the right road.

Thank you to Fr John, Sisters Karen, Emily & Brigid, and Fiona for facilitating such an uplifting day. Thank you to Christine for all her planning, organisation and ensuring that we were well fed throughout. The morning tea was delicious and the lunch plentiful and satisfying. It was lovely to have these breaks in between the activities to chat and mingle while we munched away. Thank you to everyone who came with open hearts and minds and participated fully. Truly I feel blessed to be part of a life-giving community.



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