

## **The Importance of the Retreat Movement in Nova Scotia**

BY  
EVANGELINE McNEIL

The Rev. Edward Garesche in his book, *Retreat Readings*, states: "Any Christian work needs the powerful assistance of prayer. The retreat movement is a movement of prayer. The idea of the retreat, in its essential elements, dates from the very beginning of the Catholic Church and may be found even in the lives of the Saints and of the prophets of the Old Testament. The Holy Men of old used to seek in solitude, penance and prayer, the strength which they needed to perform their holy mission. Who does not remember the long and solitary vigils of the prophet Elias during which he communed with God? Our Lord himself at the very beginning of His public life, made a retreat of forty days in the desert, during which He prayed and fasted to give us an example that we should, from time to time, retire into solitude and refresh our souls with holy reflections and communion with God."

In the life of the early Church hermits and monks of the desert imitated the example of Christ by retiring altogether from the world and living in solitude. The Fathers of the Church, in their homilies to the faithful, advised them to withdraw from the world from time to time, at least for a few days, and to give themselves to holy thoughts and prayers. Thus the practice of making retreats is as old as the Christian Church.

Some of the pioneers of retreats were St. Vincent de Paul; the founder of the Oratory, M. de Berulle; and M. Olier, the founder of Saint Sulpice. As the result of these efforts the making of retreats by the clergy, from time to time, became an established custom.

Toward the middle of the 17th century the founding of houses of retreat for laymen began to be actively undertaken in France. Such houses were erected at Vannes, Brittany, Rennes, Nantes, Rouen, Paris, Dijon, Nancy and in the most of the other large cities of France. Quite often retreat houses for women were erected nearby and a special society called the Congregation of the Ladies of Retreat was formed to promote retreats for women. Houses were established at Rome, Perugia, Ancona and Milan; in Sicily, at Palermo, Mazzara, Messina, Termini and other places; in Spain at Barcelona and Gerona; in Germany at Munich and Prague; in Poland at Vilna; In Mexico at Mexico City and Pueblo; and in China, Canada, Chile.

In South America one of the most extraordinary developments of the retreat movement was the work of a woman in Argentina and Paraguay, Marie Antonia de San-José de La Paz. Through her efforts, aided by various religious orders, and the secular clergy, she succeeded in having retreats given to nearly a hundred thousand persons.

During the last thirty or forty years the retreat movement for laymen has spread widely. Many retreat houses have been built and a number of schools

and seminaries have thrown open their doors in summer to retreat makers. The religious orders and congregations of men – Franciscans, Dominicans, Passionists, Redemptorists, Carthusians, Cistercians, Lazarists, Eudists, Brothers of Mary, Fathers of the Divine Word, Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul and Brothers of the Christian Schools, not to mention others have been active in promoting retreats. By the year 1901 the Jesuits were conducting twelve houses of retreat in French territory. By 1911, they had seven houses in Belgium, others in Spain, Austria, Italy, England, Canada, Holland, Columbia, Chile and the United States, as well as Australia, India, Ceylon, China and Madagascar.

One of the great promoters of retreat programs was the Rev. Arnold Janssen, the founder of the Society of the Divine Word. He established the Mission House of St. Michael at Steyl in Holland, and from 1877 to 1914 about forty-four thousand laymen and six thousand seven hundred priests made retreats there, while in a second retreat house in the same city, in the Convent of the Sisters Servants of the Holy Ghost, fifty thousand women made retreats from the year 1893 to the outbreak of the Great War.

The German Jesuits established a fringe of retreat houses in Southern Holland from 1894 to 1919. Two thousand five hundred seventy-five retreats were given to one hundred twenty-eight thousand seven hundred fifty persons of all grades of society. From 1896 to 1921 the retreat house at Feldkirch accommodated thirty-five thousand one hundred eighty-five men among whom Pope Pious XI was numbered on three separate occasions when he made retreats while he was Monsignor A. Ratti. Retreat houses for women were established at Trier in 1889 and 1901. The Sisters of St. Joseph and the Dominican Nuns established one in 1892. A famous place of pilgrimage in honor of Our Blessed Mother at Allotting is known for its retreat house conducted by Capuchin Fathers and multitudes of men and women made retreats there.

The first suggestion of Diocesan retreats came from Holland. With two and one quarter million Catholics living in a small territory eleven retreat houses existed. It is said that between sixteen and seventeen thousand men and eleven thousand and fifteen thousand women made retreats. Parish clergy promoted them with the encouragement and direction of the bishops. The Bishop of Munster drew plans for regular recruiting of retreats and established parish funds so that the poor might go and make retreats.

In the United States today there are numerous retreat houses and new ones are added to cities of large populations every year. The Jesuits, Redemptorists, Dominicans and secular clergy, and others, carry on retreat work. The Cenacle Nuns and Sisters of the Atonement are regarded highly for this work. Retreat activities are carried on by the laity and Washington, D. C., has a very active association under the direction of the Rev. John Spence.

The people of Canada may well be proud of their efforts in the retreat field. The Archbishop of Ottawa, the Most Reverend Alexandre Vachon, H-A, wrote in the Proceedings of the First Canadian Retreat Congress in Ottawa, August 15-17, 1941: "It is most heartening for the pastor of a diocese to see a group of women animated by the love of God, take from their spare time a casual day to go apart in a quiet place where in prayer and meditation and intercourse with Our Dear Lord and His Blessed Mother, they work first for their own sanctification so as to be able to spread around them a good odor

of Christ filled with a new zeal to re-Christianize the world."

In replying to letters about the Retreat Movement, in Nova Scotia the Rev. Dr. Curran quoted the words of a pamphlet written as a Souvenir Booklet of St. Patrick's Church, Digby, Nova Scotia, and said:

"Among diocesan works in Halifax few have been so productive of consoling fruit as the Closed Retreats for men and women. Whilst part-time retreats were in existence in the diocese for many years, the year 1925 witnessed the inauguration of three official Closed Retreat Groups. In Halifax St. Patrick's Alumnae Association sponsored a retreat during Holy Week of 1925. During the summer of the same year the first organized group meeting at the Convent of the Sacred Heart went through its series of Spiritual Exercises and about the same time Father McMahon, S.J., was preaching the first men's retreat at the Holy Heart Seminary. Thus three distinct retreat bodies came into existence at Halifax and have been conducting annual retreats ever since.

Mother Flora McDonnell will be remembered as the religious who inaugurated the Closed Retreat Movement at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. After a beginning with retreats for working girls, provision is now made at the convent for retreats for High School girls, nurses and teachers and for Catholic women generally. The convent retreats led to the formation of the St. Madeline Sophie Retreat Association. This association has its own officers and a simple set of rules. It exists for the purpose of promoting and sustaining interest in the Closed Retreat Movement.

St. Patrick's Girl's Alumnae began the Retreat Movement under the able leadership of Sister Mary Michael, then stationed at St. Patrick's Convent, Halifax, in the year 1925. At that time the retreats were held during Holy Week but now they take place around Labor Day week end. Whilst under the auspices of St. Patrick's Girls' Alumnae this second unit of women's retreats is diocesan in scope, any Catholic girl or woman being heartily welcome. These retreats are held at beautiful Mount St. Vincent, overlooking the cool waters of Bedford Basin. Miss Hide Burke will long be remembered as an efficient secretary of the St. Patrick's group. In 1939, retreatants accustomed to meet at Mount St. Vincent were organized into the Mount St. Vincent Retreat Association.

The third retreat body is that of the men. The late Rt. Rev William Foley was actively instrumental in the launching of closed retreats for laymen in Halifax. With the kind approval of Archbishop McCarthy the first retreat for men was held at the spacious quarters of Holy Heart Seminary during the summer of 1925. From that year closed retreats for men have gone on uninterruptedly. Beginning with one retreat a year, branching later on into two retreats; now each summer three retreats are held regularly, one of these being principally for young men.

During the course of a retreat conducted by the Rev. John Knox the Halifax Layman's Retreat Association was formed. The late Judge Wallace was appointed its first President. At his demand Judge Carrol succeeded to that post. The genial Judge has held this office ever since (for 15 years).

The Halifax Layman's Retreat Association has been faithful to its objective, meeting regularly in Advent and early in May. This Retreat

Association, in large measure through its energetic secretaries, has kept the retreat spirit alive until today the Halifax group of men's retreats is one of the most active in Eastern Canada. Men who have distinguished themselves as secretaries of the association are the late Frederick Cummings, Frank Wallace, John A. Walker, Dr. E. Genister, the late Gerald Hayes, Harold Bartlow, Harold Coleman, John Dickie and William Power.

Not satisfied with the Annual Retreat all three retreat units in Halifax conduct at least two recollection afternoons each year. These recollection periods are in conformity with the best developments of the Closed Retreat Movement in other important centres of Catholicity. On recollection afternoon, invariably on Sunday, the men and women, each group at their respective institutions, go through the exercises of a miniature retreat. Usually from three until five o'clock these recollection reunions take the participants through the exercises of a cross section of an actual retreat. Recitation of the rosary, way of the cross, silent periods for introspection, examination of conscience principally in regard to the keeping of retreat resolutions, preparation for spiritual activities until the next retreat reunion, a special sermon preached by various priests in turn, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament constitute the generality of the exercises. Sometimes a spiritual reading is added.

These recollection afternoons may justly be regarded as one of the happiest flowerings of the Closed Retreat Movement in Halifax. When men and women purposely sacrifice time twice a year for the purpose of returning to the spirit of the annual midsummer retreat it is an evident sign of their sincere desire to aim at fervor in the practice of their religious life. Lay apostles of the highest type may be expected from such earnest men and women.

The late Archbishop Thomas O'Donnell had all three retreat units in Halifax brought under central direction under a Diocesan Director. The Diocesan Director of Catholic Action has been the representative of the Archbishop in charge of all three branches of retreat groups, operating in the Halifax district. It has been the duty of the Director to contact all retreat groups during their annual summer closed retreats and at all of the afternoons of recollection. The aims, principles and means of Catholic Action or the Lay Apostolate under the direction of the Hierarchy form the theme predominating at these contactual talks.

The preachers of the Summer Retreats and the priests speaking at the afternoons of Recollection are all appointed under the supervision of the Diocesan Director.

Thanks to the Closed Retreat Movement hundreds of men and women (in the aggregate over 4,500) in and around Halifax have caught the ideal spirit of the lay apostolate, retiring periodically from the world in order to become impregnated with the higher spirit of personal holiness and to increase the fervor that makes for an energetic apostolate. It is edifying in the extreme to witness the deep religious spirit with which professional men and women and others, leaders in their respective walks of life, make their annual retreat.

The religious in charge of the Monastery of the Good Shepherd, the Convent of the Sacred Heart and Mount St. Vincent permit individual women and girls to make a private closed retreat at any time of the year when other big retreats are not in progress at these institutions.

The Retreat Movement in Halifax will not attain full maturity until permanent Retreat Homes, one for men and the other for women, will have been built. All friends of closed retreats are asked to co-operate so that the day may arrive when a permanent Retreat Home or Retreat Homes will be listed among the social works of the Halifax Archdiocese.

Mother Agnes Donohoe of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Halifax, Nova Scotia, replying for Mother Chisholm who has charge of retreats at the Convent, said:

"Retreat work was taken up by our Mother Foundress shortly after the Society was founded and it is given in our Constitutions as one of four works. At first of course the retreats were for our Children of Mary, and opportunity was given for private retreats. In Halifax retreats were given to the Children of Mary from time to time and to the Sodality of St. Anne (for married women) and to the Consoles of Mary (unmarried women) though the latter were not closed retreats until 1925. From that year on, one or two were given every summer, at first to the Consolers and their friends and later to any who wished to come. On December 12th, 1932, Mother Flora McDonnell initiated "The Saint Madeline Sophie Retreat Association" most of the members being Consolers. There was a flourishing Barat Retreat Association at our Montreal Convent which served in some way as a model for ones. For several years we held a retreat for High School Girls at the end of June but this was dropped later and only two were held, one in August, the other over Labor Day which is the more popular.

Retreats open at 9.30 P.M. and close after supper on the second or third day to give the retreatants time to return punctually to their occupations. An annual retreat is part of the routine of many women now. Newcomers say that they will return the following year and bring others. The members of the Association pledge themselves to make an annual retreat and to urge others to do the same. They hold four recollections afternoons (Sundays) every year and also raise funds to help the carrying on of the work of retreats.

Mother Flora McDonnell was born at Chatham, Ontario, in 1871, and entered our Society in 1893. In 1903 she came to Halifax, where she worked until her death, June 3, 1933. She taught the First Grade in College Street School, and was Art teacher at the Convent where she frequently taught a Religion class. She instructed a large number of convents. In a suburb of Boston there were thirty Catholic families who owed the Faith to her as she instructed the mothers. She was very zealous, thoughtful and considerate with a great deal of self sacrifice and a power of organization. Mother McDonnell died after a short illness in 1933. A Grotto of our Lady of Lourdes has been erected on the grounds of the Sacred Heart Convent to the memory of Mother McDonnell in recognition of her invaluable work for the retreat movement.

Dr. Curran, the Director of the Retreat Movement in Halifax, never fails to come to each retreat to address the ladies and encourage them.

Sister Margaret Theresa, in charge of retreat work at the College of Mount St. Vincent, Rockingham, Halifax Co., Nova Scotia, said:

"The closed Retreat Movement for the Laity began in Halifax at Mount Saint Vincent when the Alumnae of Saint Patrick's Girls' High School held a retreat at the Mount from Holy Thursday until Easter Sunday. There was an attendance of over one hundred. This became an annual affair but for various reasons the time was changed to the late summer, over the Labor Day week end. In 1935 these retreats originally for Alumnae were open to all women of the diocese, or even from further points, who wished to make a retreat. In 1934 a second retreat was held for girls of high school age. This has proven quite a success. The combined average attendance at the retreats yearly is about one hundred and twenty. In 1939 The Saint Vincent Retreat Association was established. Its members were to be those who made retreats at Mount Saint Vincent. A meeting is held in the spring, one in midsummer to set the campaign underway, and two Recollection Periods, fall and spring complete the year's programme.

Retreatants are usually from Halifax and its suburbs, but frequently several came from a greater distance. Women in the Services, from various parts of Canada, are glad to have the opportunity of making a retreat.

Our retreats are usually three days. For the past two years we have been obliged to shorten them to two days, but this is not to be a permanent arrangement. This year we shall hold our nineteenth retreat. I am sorry I have not more statistics right on hand but would be safe in saying that over two thousand have had the spiritual benefits which only a retreat can give."

Mother St., Thomas, Superior Mount St. Bernard's College, Antigonish, said:

"Lay retreats have been held in the diocese of Antigonish during the past two years and are well attended. They are under the auspices of the C.Y.O. of which organization Rev. M. A. McLellan of the staff of St. Francis Xavier University is the diocesan director.

The men's retreats have been conducted by the former Pastor of Antigonish who is now the Most Rev. J. R. McDonald, Bishop of Peterborough, and by Rev. W. Roberts, P. P. of Tracadie, N. S.

The girls' retreats have been held at Mount St. Bernard College, and were conducted by Rev. M. A. McLellan and Rev. P. J. Nicholson, both of the staff of St. Francis Xavier University.

The Most Reverend P. A. Bray, Bishop of Saint John, New Brunswick, kindly asked the Reverend J. Burns to make a reply on the Retreat Movement in his diocese. Father Burns sent the following article about the Retreat Movement at Torryburn, New Brunswick:

NEARLY 3,000 HAVE ATTENDED THE 126 RETREATS  
HELD AT VILLA MADONNA

Since July 10, 1931, when the Retreat House at Torryburn was opened, 126 Retreats have been made with an attendance of 2898. Six Days of

Recollection were held also with an attendance of 165.

Among the groups sponsoring Retreats were the Catholic Women's League, Knights of Columbus, Holy Name Societies, teachers, nurses, Legion of Mary, Catholic Youth Organization, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, high school graduates, business and professional men and business and professional women, as well as the more general classes for men and women.

The Archbishop of Halifax, the Most Rev. J. T. McNally, expressed so beautifully the success of the movement in a Nova Scotia diocese:

"Your request for a few words from me outlining my "impressions of a retreat" would scarcely call for a panegyric on the closed retreat movement, for that is the special purpose of your own paper for the Catholic Historical Society; nor yet for the working of that movement in Nova Scotia, since you tell me that Very Reverend Dr. C.F. Curran has fully informed you upon that.

It can mean only an expression of approval and encouragement, and that I am more than willing to give. So greatly do I appreciate the work of closed retreats that I have been elaborating plans for a building adapted to that purpose, which plans I hope to put into effect in connection with other building schemes now awaiting the possibility of realization after the world's present troubles find surcease.

In its operation I should like to see the retreat house open and available to all, even the poorest of our people, fulfilling the last and highest of the claims of Christianity, as its Founder had them related to His precursor, "the poor have the them": I say this, because most of my relations well-to-do retreatants, through your varied experiences may have gone beyond that.

As to the good effects of retreats I have the fullest conviction based on ample observation, Union with the Divine Lover, of all spiritual wealth comes most intimately when we imitate His example of periods of silence, solitude and heavenly contemplation.

A devoted and assiduous frequenter of retreats is often in my memory as an example of their effect. He was a friend of mine in Germany who made at least three retreats during the year. Often have I seen the tears trickle down his bearded cheeks when he described to me the wickedness of the Nazi rulers of his unfortunate country.

I fear I have far exceeded the scope of your wishes in this contribution to your paper. May I in conclusion apply to the closed retreat the lines of Richard Cracow:

"It is an armoury of flight;  
Let constant use but keep it bright,  
You'll find it yields  
To holy hands and humble hearts  
More swords and shields  
Than sin hath snares, or hell hath darts."

The Encyclical *Mete Nostra* of Pius XI was published at the end of the special Holy Year proclaimed on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the late Holy Father's ordination to the priesthood and it impressed the world that to

reflect on man's relation to God and sanctification of his immortal soul is the chief necessity in life.

We appreciate great things in life especially when we are in the danger of losing them. Dr. Hall in the Proceedings of the first Canadian Laywomen's Retreat Congress expressed well the need of Closed Retreats for our country. The threat of Nazi aggression has awakened the virtue of patriotism in all of us. Our public leaders in the past year or so have made unexampled declarations to the effect that the British Empire and the democracies are fighting not only for economic preservation, not only for political independence and liberty but also for greater stakes; that we are fighting for that way of life which recognizes not only the dignity of man, but also the immeasurable value of Christianity. We are engaged in a life and death struggle with violent men who wish to forcibly impose a pagan system of life on the whole world. Prayer and the Closed Retreat will be a safe weapon to use during this struggle. Closed Retreats offer the opportunity to bring home to all Canadians that the Retreat Movement contains the seed of all that will safeguard the Christian and democratic ideals for which we are fighting today. These words were said by His Excellency Bishop Nelligan who is now Brigadier in His Majesty's Service and Principal Chaplain to the Canadian Forces.

In 1939 there were seventy-nine Retreat Houses for men in the United States, twenty-three for women, and eighteen Seasonal Houses. Now there are a few more. "Let all prayers of the United Nations be offered each day that the day may arrive in this fair country of ours when one or more permanent Retreat Houses will arise as citadels of prayer in every diocese from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from these lay seminaries will graduate men and women famous for their love of God and noted for their spirit of apostolate". A Retreatant, after a three-day Retreat, wrote and dedicated this poem to His Excellency Bishop Cody of Victoria:

#### CLOSED RETREAT

Three hallowed days,  
Three days of ne'er to be forgotten peace,  
Of worldly cares and petty strife, surcease,  
And senseless craze.

Subdued by will,  
The spirit was in quietude serene;  
And incense sweet suffused the silent scene  
As time stood still.

Beneath that roof  
Living was praying and to pray was life,  
The Sacred Presence in the very air was rife  
With profound proof  
Of in the day,  
The Bishop spoke of Love, and Truth, and Grace,  
The earnest zeal illumed his shining face  
For the souls' sway.



Ah ! then, too soon,  
The rarest moment of that hour had passed,  
The knee was bent, the head bowed for the last,  
The final boon.

The heart so blest  
Went forth, eyes bright with unshed tears,  
The hymns of praise still ringing in its ears,  
Amid unrest.

It stepped again  
Into the garish streets' disturbing glare,  
The rush, the clamour, and the cheap fanfare  
Of heedless men.

"O Lord !" it cried,  
"If this be life, then send me far away,  
Where peace and happiness remain, always  
Let me abide."

The yearning soul  
Turned in a silent lane, it knew not why;  
A steeple cross ascending to the sky  
Did it console.

A tear fell, then  
The ruby glimmer of the lonely vigil light  
That heart distressed, within, it did invite  
To peace again.