

Catholic Retreats in Primary School

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Children live in a fast-paced world. They have access to technology that allows them to communicate instantaneously with others around the world. Not many people could have foreseen this happening 15 or 20 years ago, so the questions must be asked:

“What can a Catholic school offer young people to match the thrill of these experiences?”

and,

“Are school experiences running the risk of becoming meaningless if they do not match the needs of students?”

For the first time in the history of childhood and children’s development, young people as young as seven or eight are proving to be more technologically-savvy than parents, grandparents and even some teachers. The lines that once clearly saw children progress to teenagers and then to adulthood have been blurred. Parents and grandparents, once the source of knowledge, have had to grapple and come to terms with the different world in which the young live. They are two, distinct and very separate worlds for many families.



Catholic schools are often the go-between. It is in their interest to understand the needs of the young and they have opportunities to enable growth to happen in areas other than technology, such as the social skills of how to get along with others, problem solving, artistic expression, physical skills and religious experience. Catholic schools not only recognise the culture of the young on all these levels, but try to provide them with experiences that cannot be had only through technology.

The retreat in primary and secondary school is one such experience; a time to change the pace of ordinary school life and explore different aspects of life with others. Community building is an important element in all retreats as well as locating the experience in God, but how this is done depends on what methods teachers use to create the right atmosphere. I hope to provide those teachers who are interested in Catholic primary school retreats with some ideas on how to achieve this.

Retreats in primary school have become more popular in recent times. They have been around in Catholic senior secondary schools for well over 50 years and have been considered a successful aspect of Catholic education. The following questions may be conversation starters for those investigating retreats in their primary school:

- How can primary schools introduce retreats into the curriculum?
- Are retreats suitable for all year levels?
- Should primary schools adapt secondary retreats?

- How does one design effective retreat-like experiences for younger students?
- Who decides on introducing retreats in primary schools?

What is a retreat?

Firstly, it is important to say that retreats are not camps. Sometimes, teachers assume that the retreat is a form of camp. Retreats are not excursions either. Therefore, it is very important to have a clear understanding of the purpose and nature of a retreat for all concerned.

Retreats have a religious flavour, but this does not mean they are an extended religion lesson. Ordinary school routine is suspended for a while. Retreats draw upon the building up of community through enjoyment and getting to know others better. It is through this experience that retreats begin to lay the foundations of the Kingdom of God... how we could and should be as God's children away from routine and stereotypical behaviour.

Where did retreats come from?

The background of the retreat is interesting. Two thousand years ago, men and women, known as desert fathers and mothers, left their homes and familiar surroundings to live simple lives in the remote desert, relying on the providence of God for survival. They 'retreated' into the desert where they could be free from the distractions of a busy life and seek God in this solitude. Rather than live in the desert for short amounts of time and then return to their homes, desert fathers and mothers lived their whole lives as one continuous retreat.

School retreats have been around for a long time. The traditional senior school retreat is modelled on that of early Christian desert fathers and mothers. It tends to consist of a three-day and two-night, live-in experience, away from family and school environments, and there is great variation even in this from school to school. Older students tend to appreciate this amount of time away as a reprieve from pressures associated with school and home.

However, this length of time for retreats is not advisable with primary-aged students as the focus and content of the senior retreats are very different to what primary retreats should be. Primary school students should have significantly modified models of the senior secondary school retreat. The time away from school for students in upper primary should be limited to a day.

An overview of Primary school retreats

When considering retreats for primary school children, it is important to remember their different levels of physical, emotional and social development. Senior primary retreats and middle primary retreats need to be different because of this. I do not recommend retreats for junior primary children as classroom liturgies work best for them.

Senior primary retreats

At this level, older children need to experience a retreat as a **reflection day** away from the school environment. The emphasis on 'reflection day' is more accurate than describing this experience as a traditional retreat.

It can be argued that upper primary students are 'retreating' from their school routine, but really, they are not experiencing the popular senior secondary school model of going away for an overnight, extended period of time. A reflection day is a gentle introduction to senior retreats which students will experience later on. This kind of day tends to gather students together as a taste of things to come in their secondary years. In reality, the foundations for future retreats are laid in the primary years.



Planning a primary reflection day as a retreat experience

Planning a primary reflection day begins with an outcome in mind.

- What do you want your students to focus on?
- Are you trying to prepare them for the responsibilities of senior primary?
- Or are you preparing them for the journey towards high school, such as a graduation focus?

There are many themes that can be touched on, but the most common theme for this year level is 'change'.

Some students tend to be genuinely overwhelmed by the changes in their lives. The reflection day should be a special time to build up their resilience through the use of community, enjoyment and inspiration. Inviting suitable speakers to the reflection day provides students with the ability to see that change can be positive and that others have faced the same issues and have overcome them. Reflection days need to be engendered with hope. And this hope is found in the inspiration of others and in reflecting on God's love for us through others. So the theology of a reflection day in upper primary is one of hope.

The practicalities of organising such a day lies in the following:

- Spending time at staff meetings explaining the purpose and nature of the reflection day. (In the past, reflection days have often been confused with other curricular activities.)
- Sharing this information and other practicalities with students and their families.
- Organising guest speakers.
- Organising suitable helpers to assist with the activities on the day.

Teachers who try to conduct reflection days by themselves sometimes feel stressed and think twice about doing it again in the future. Support from others is important, whether it be the principal, other members of administration or parents. Community building activities and student discussions need support from a team who understand what is trying to be achieved. Therefore, having others on hand to support the day is very important.

The use of a nearby hall with an oval, park or beach nearby tends to be the ideal location. In order to simplify the day, students should bring their own recess and lunches, especially if the location is away from shops and cafés.

The program

Once students arrive at their location, it is important to advise them on practicalities, such as recess and lunch times as well as expectations for the day. I would then initiate a fun group game that involves everyone. Often, this raises the energy levels so that they are ready for the next session.

It is often a good idea to settle the children soon after the game to draw out from them what made it enjoyable. This technique often establishes the rules of fair play and the tone for the rest of the day. Often, what is said can be weaved into a Morning Prayer or blessing so that it is owned by the children. Make sure their comments are written down somewhere for all to see and to refer to during the course of the day if you need to.

Narratives are powerful on reflection days. Reading out aloud or telling a good simple story, captures imaginations. By beginning the day with a story, students are introduced to the day's theme imaginatively. Jesus did this many times through the use of parables.

But with this age group, it is not just about hearing a story; this needs to be matched up with a real person who can give witness to the theme. When a guest speaker is not available, teachers decide to share their personal story with children. This sometimes backfires if the teacher is not coached in the parameters of personal sharing. No matter who gives witness, sound preparation and collaboration with the person responsible for the reflection day is important. Boundaries are important in personal storytelling.

Breaks such as recess and lunch times need to be extended on reflection days. This enables a community spirit to develop that may be different to what happens at school.

Around this time, it is good to introduce the 'God of Hope'. Asking students to reflect on a living, loving God who cares deeply about them provides them with another resource in order to develop their personal resilience. Selected psalms can be used to engage students by getting them to identify what the psalmist is upset about and what God is being asked to do to help. Powerpoint presentations can do this very well.

Students also need to be provided with an activity that allows them to process what has been said or shared during the day. It is a 'touch-base' moment that ensures the group is travelling in the same direction. Often, I suggest students be divided up into smaller groups that are not friendship-based. This way, students get to know others on a different level. Be aware of frictions between students when organising these groups.

Artwork is an effective way of discussing and summarising what has been understood, especially when the work is expressed as symbols, words or other images. Students tend to be very interested in seeing what others have created, so a time to 'show and tell' is important. It may well be that changes in attitude are influenced by new insights and the understandings of their peers.

The main focus of the day tends to be accentuated before lunch. Energy levels are high and students are 'switched on'. Activities after lunch require a much slower pace and a concrete personal outcome for each student to reflect on alone. One effective activity is for students to either write down a personal resolution they can refer to during the year. Other teachers may prefer students to write a letter to God about what areas they need help in. Either should be done alone; just as with the desert dwellers, distractions do not allow God's voice to be heard, for God's voice is found in silence. Perhaps some quiet music can be played while this is happening.

Towards the end of the day, choose a suitable DVD that matches the reflection day's theme. This provides students with a bit of 'down-time' in which they can focus on the theme from a spectator's perspective. If there is time, get the students back into their groups so they can respond to some

questions, otherwise teachers can pick up the treads of the movie back at school and relate them to the theme.

A concluding liturgy links the day back to God and to the building up of community. Keeping it simple makes it effective. The use of candles, incense, water, rocks and bright fabric creates a sacred space. If teachers provide students with a collection of symbols and items, a selected number of young people can create their own sacred space for the others.

By introducing primary students to a simple retreat-like format for a day, they become familiar with the focus and direction of retreats in the future.

Middle primary themes

Students begin their journey to independence in the middle primary years. Getting along with others are still 'hit and miss' affairs in the classroom and in the school yard. Therefore, a theme along the lines of 'belonging' or 'getting along' is appropriate.

I suggest that retreat experiences be known as 'activity days' and limited to mornings only at school. If the school has a hall or large activity room, then this is enough for young children. Inviting parents to assist makes it an enjoyable time.

The children in this age group are getting to know more about God and about Jesus. Stories about how God created humanity out of love and how Jesus teaches us to express this love to others are important in helping children discover how to get along. This group is more story and activity-based.

Most activity days begin with a game that is inclusive of everyone – parents included! When children are settled on a mat, the theme for the morning is introduced. Remember, this age group often needs craft to learn and express themselves.

Creative use of hand puppets to tell stories about God and Jesus capture the imagination of children and are simple to make. Puppets are also a safe way to instruct children and, through their own puppets, they can reflect back what they have learned.

Children can then present to the class different stories about God's creative love. Again, suitable songs, DVDs and poems can all highlight the theme.

The use of puppets to guide the children in a closing liturgy is very effective.

A shared recess or BBQ lunch prepared by the parents is a positive way to end the morning.

The advantages of having the activity day at school is that any resources required are at hand. After lunch, the children then learn how to shift from a religious activity to a different mood. This shift is significant in later years when they are older and return home or to school from a senior secondary retreat. In the early years, it teaches them that there is sacred time for God that is set apart from routine life.

These ideas by no means limit the scope of the activity day that teachers may wish to design. Ideas abound with creative teachers!

To sum up

Technology has changed the way young people relate to the world forever. Yet, it will always be important for students to dis-engage from the world's rhythm for a while and explore the world of relationships and the sacred. No other experience will ever replace the need for human contact, community and God. The thrill of being in communion with others or of deepening one's understanding of

themselves, others or God will be powerful and lasting when done well. Whether these experiences are activity days, reflection days or secondary retreats, they need to happen within a community; the students themselves.

The teacher's planning and leading of these days is a significant part of their success and can lead to a better understanding of the retreat experience offered in schools, especially when primary students go on to Catholic secondary schools.