

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MARY MASON

Sacred Spaces and Ignatius Spirituality Centre, Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

I am a Roman Catholic lay woman from Britain. I am a retired High School teacher and I am now working as a Retreat Director at Loyola House. For the last 30 years I have been drawn by God's spirit into deeper and deeper prayer. It is my life blood and I have been privileged to share my prayer experiences with many others. I have had prayer groups in my home and also helped others who have come to me to learn to pray. This has led me to eventually train as a Spiritual Director and to my present ministry; this, in my retirement, is my second career and it is the most fulfilling work/ ministry I have ever done in all my life; I am 64 years of age. I am privileged to journey with people, help them explore their relationship with God and so help give meaning to their everyday lives.

There are two important aspects to my personal prayer. First there is the awareness that it is I who must respond to the Holy Spirit's call to prayer and this response takes the form of setting aside prime time and finding a suitable place, which then becomes sacred, and also preparing well beforehand. But prayer acknowledges first and foremost that it is the Spirit who does the praying. As a creature I am graced by the creator God and it is this Grace, this Spirit who permits me to be present to God and to be aware of God's presence for me. So there is a surrender to the process of prayer that accepts that whatever happens once the decision to pray is made is God's work. On a daily basis, in my life as a full time teacher, determining the next day's time for prayer the night before and creating the space for prayer were essential and still are today. The space is made ready with whatever helps me to become aware of God's presence

and the space chosen is blessed by God in God's generosity and becomes sacred because God and God's praying creature are present to one another in that space. But the sacredness of praying space once it is in the public domain is more than a personal matter of prayer; I shall return to this below.

Prayer as I try to practise it acknowledges that there is a creator God who is a loving, compassionate presence in all creation and that as creature all that I have and am is gift – and possibly the greatest gift is to be a creature and to acknowledge this and surrender to it; to acknowledge and surrender to that knowing of grace or the Spirit which gives my life meaning. The meaning given is that all of creation is precious because all of creation has its source of life in God and so prayer deepens constantly my awareness of the unity of creation, of the inherent dignity and worth of each human being. As this becomes an understanding that goes beyond head knowledge – that is it becomes part of my very being – so I am aware of becoming less needy for the status and goods that the world would value and for which we as humans are apparently prepared to go to war, exploit the poor and destroy environments. Creation is fractured and broken as those who can, do and so marginalize those who cannot. Yet the earth and its fullness belong to God and to God alone and it is salutatory to remember that it is human greed that causes war, poverty and environmental disasters. It is in prayer that I am able to recognise my own poverty as creature, I am made aware of my ego and its needy selfish and destructive possessiveness and how I as an individual impact the world and society around me. And most importantly it is in prayer that I receive the Grace or the Spirit which constantly brings me to that place of surrender, need and love and acceptance of my place in creation.

But none of this would have been possible without the prayer and guiding spirit of other people as each year I seek a place of retreat where I can pray and be helped to give meaning to that prayer in terms of relationship with God and my daily life. Such retreats are an acknowledgement that we are community creatures and that on our own our journeys can be perilous. It is not irrelevant that these retreats have taken place in locations that we would call sacred and are sacred because people come apart to seek God and be present to God in a special way. But it is also not irrelevant that these places which are sacred and in the public domain are all in locations where the environment is one of quiet and tranquility. Such places in the UK where I have been nourished in prayer are St Buenos Retreat House, in St Asaph's, North Wales; Noddfa Retreat House in Peanmaenmawr also in North Wales, Massingham St Mary's in Norfolk; Buckfast Abbey in Devon and many others. If a similar list were to be made of retreat houses in Canada or the USA they would for the most part have that one thing in common – quiet, tranquil and away from intrusive human made noise. I would suggest that they cannot all be wrong; they know that this tranquility and apartness is part of the human need to nurture spirit mind and body. ¹

There are therefore for me two reasons why I would suggest that the Ignatian Spirituality Centre is a sacred place whose innate characteristic of peace and quiet is fundamental to the work of the retreat house - that is fundamental to the well being of those who seek to come to pray and be nourished by that prayer. And so implicit in this is the understanding that external

¹ And it is also significant that if we desire to get away from it all for a holiday the thing that we seek is refuge from the daily busy life; hotels and resorts offer this seclusion and quiet knowing that relaxation and peace are a basic human need. It is not only those who desire to pray who seek quiet and tranquility.

noise of the commercial kind infringes and intrudes upon the very essence of this sacred place.

First there is the silence itself. The house is always silent during retreats; people do not speak at any time except when they meet with the Retreat Director. Implicit in this is the knowing that in silence we become vulnerable and open to the presence of God and so we learn to “hear” what the Spirit has to say. External noise detracts from the process of “hearing the voice of God” within one’s own spirit. Retreatants who come to Loyola House and all such similar places come because that is what they desire and need for spiritual renewal; the removal of all extraneous noise so that the inner voice can be heard. The staff at Loyola House works hard at creating this ambience and it is much appreciated by the retreatants.

But there is a second factor; this silence is created in an area of 600 acres of beautiful land. I know from own retreat experience when doing the Forty Day Institute in Loyola House here in Guelph, ² my walks on the land nurtured me. They slowed me down; they brought me back to the sense of my place in creation. I watched and heard the earth gradually go to sleep; the crickets stopped their “cricketing”; the grass hoppers gradually disappeared; the trees bloomed in glorious technicolour before they too let go of their autumn beauty and the birds migrated or prepared to weather out the cold winter. Such experiences of being nourished gave me a sense of my place in creation and how I am no more and no less important but just part of it; a beloved part but not a part that has a right to impose my needs on it to its detriment. But I need to experience this to make me aware of it. And it became evident, as I directed retreatants on a similar 40 day retreat the following May, that they too experienced a nurturing through the reawakening of the land. To hear creation as well as to see it is an essential part of the experience

² A retreat lasting 40 days

which promotes the sense of oneness with it - the plop of the turtles as they dropped into the pond from the logs where they had been basking in the sun; to see and hear the geese raise their goslings, to hear the other birds return to nest and the bull frogs mating in the wetlands – these are a few of the joys and healings of the spring forty day institute.

As a retreat director I can testify to the intrinsic role that the land plays in the retreats. It becomes a daily routine for most retreatants to walk each day and to make their walk a prayer journey with God. A prayer that has few external noises except that which comes from the noise of the water in the river Speed, the breeze in the trees, the mallards on the river; the geese on the pond, the bull frogs in the wetlands in summer, the crackle of snow and ice in winter, the chatter of birds, even the scream of alarm from the squirrels. In this environment people become less hurried, have more time to see themselves as God sees them, that is as creatures and so become increasingly aware of the need for human beings to try to live in harmony with all of creation.

Most people have only one time in a year to have such experiences and they are aware when they come, of the sanctity of this land which has been prayed on for almost 100 years by the present community and which has nurtured the spiritual, emotional and physical lives of thousands of people. Many retreatants are also very aware of and use the cemeteries on the adjoining land and accept implicitly the sacredness of these locations as well.

People who desire to seek God and to seek their own spirituality have long sought the quiet places; the desert, the woodland monasteries, mountain top hermitages and such sacred places are now becoming increasingly hard to find as man made structures and surfaces invade

the landscape. These maybe necessary for us to sustain our standards of living but where land is not at a premium as here in Canada (I speak as a European) I do not comprehend why the tranquility and sacredness of this land is threatened when there are other sites that could be used for commercial purposes. This sacred land along Highway 6 is in the public domain; it is accessible to all who wish to walk on it and use its nourishing qualities to find their own spirits. This land has been made sacred by God who has invited so many to spend time with God's Spirit on it and by the very prayer and reflection that ordinary people have done on it. The commercialization of the plot on 6/7 would intrude on the intrinsic quality of sacredness of this land.