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June 2023 – LCG Retreat

#### CONFERENCE 1: Introduction:

Retreat is not a time for resolutions. It is not a time for objectives and planning, of setting deadlines or taking a spiritual inventory. These are adolescent approaches. It is not a time of trying to be good and mending all broken relationships. Retreat is not a time for looking good in front of God. We are men and women called by Christ to a difficult but grace-filled life. Retreat is really a humbling experience. And it is in this humility that we really will grow. Why humbling? Because we retreat! We back off! We can do nothing that make us look good with God. We are humbled not humiliated because it is not really our effort that we look good in front of God. We are good because God made us good, by nature. We forgot about it!

I believe that is Christian, even human, conviction that we are by nature good - we are not corrupt thru and thru as Luther claimed. This does not mean that I am denying original sin and our capacity to be cruel and unkind. This is not one of those new-age spirituality that denies original sin and personal responsibility. What I am talking about is the nature of a human being Ontologically, to understand a human being in itself. And we say right away that in itself it cannot be understood and so we look for a basis by which it can be understood. A human being is a finite being and therefore can only be understood in relation to an infinite ultimate being from which it gets its being and meaning. This is what a theologian said: To speak about God is to speak about the human creature and to speak about the human creature is to speak about God. To speak about God without mention of human being is speculative theology. It is also gnosticism. In reality and in our life the two are inseparable. Or if you want it in simpler terms familiar to us is the Cistercian spirituality: **we are made into the image and likeness of God.**

I had a priest friend who made a retreat in the monastery and it was his first time to do it in a monastery. After a couple of days I asked him how things are going. And he said, gosh Carlos there is too much God here. We laughed! But after the laughter comes the revelation. There was very little of him! - he seems to be telling me. He worked all his priestly life. Our faith whether we are conservative or liberal is a frantic search for meaning and security. We have already been warned: Not that you loved God first but that God loved you first. Even when you were still in sin. Retreat is a humbling experience and not a humiliating experience. Retreat is getting in touch with our ontological reason for being. Why we are here in this world. Love creates. Maybe we need a retreat to realize that we are no longer creative. We are no longer creative even in meeting our difficulties and trials and disappointments. We meet it with the usual anger, bitterness, despair and refusing to believe anymore. And most of all we are no longer creative in going through life. We have become protective of ourselves by denials and refusals. We have become territorial and so we spend our lives constantly repairing the walls that protect our territory. Retreat is not about destroying those walls. It is simply stopping in putting the next stone. Retreat is really leisure and doing nothing. There is no work. God has a difficult time dealing with very useful people. In retreat there is only relishing. There is leisure. We are invited to rest especially those who labor and are heavily burdened. To be humbled. To say I have to rest from all my efforts in saving myself - from all the forms it takes to save myself. When you are desperately trying to give meaning to your existence - it is the same as saving yourself. To be released of burdens which I thought will be my security in this life and the life to come. To see worship in fresh understanding. That it is not merely an obligation. To see the true meaning behind the rituals of liturgy. To understand that the Church constitutions adapted itself through the centuries that we may be alive and refreshed by the knowledge that we are loved first by God and if we ever do love, we do so because of the joy and strength we get from knowing that we are loved. To bask in the goodness of God is the beginning

of healing and of life. All rituals and worship must be a thanksgiving. They cannot in themselves make us holy. A thankful person is one who knows how to retreat. And because it is a retreat it does not demand goals and timetable. It is an oasis in the desert. Oasis is precisely for resting and quenching one's thirst. So it is precisely saying to us that deserts are always filled with oasis. Desert people know how to pace themselves. This modern era should learn to pace once more. Only people who go into retreat can do this because they are humble. In an oasis you quench your thirst and then you rest. You get ready for the trek, the difficulty of the journey. But you are at peace because you know there is the next oasis. The desert traveler accepts the fact that the desert is a harsh wilderness and yet it has its own beauty. The desert people will never ever dream or wish that the desert disappear. The desert is life for them. You cannot reach your destination without passing through that desert. But because they have accepted the reality of the desert, they became creative in desert survival. They do not conquer the desert. They have a healthy respect for the desert. They leave the desert as it is. For after all there is an oasis. In their journey the desert people together seem to enjoy even the hard trek through the desert. After all the desolateness of the desert accentuates their presence to one another. They really become one with one another. Any misfortune of one is the misfortune of the other. That is why hospitality in the desert is their primary ethics. And at the end of the desert is the lasting city. Oasis are glimpses of the lasting city. This is really a metaphor. I hope by now you know what the desert is. It is you, your story, your humanity. This is a better understanding of ourselves as human beings. We can only arrive at holiness through our own humanity. Not an ideal humanity but a humanity that came into history. Born in Manila, 1942 of hardworking parents, raised a catholic, was lost for a while in the teen years, received a call etc. And that is only the things I can share and there are things which I can never share and even that is my passage to holiness. Retreat time is not a time of judgment of self and others. It is the time to admit that your are tired and you want to rest in the Lord. It is like making an act of faith without even trying. Perhaps we are naive like the disciples of Jesus. We always like to be someone special. We like to seat on the right and on the left of Christ's throne. We want to be the guardian of Jesus. We like to be the greatest. We would like to be different from the rest of the crowd. Eating pork rind does not make you a laborer. Jesus said NO to all this. Holiness is at the end of our life. No one is declared holy until he or she dies. Rightly so, we become fully human when we die. Jesus died to show that He was truly human.