

Back to the Basics 1 – Pursuing Happiness & Holiness

Jon Leonetti

Hey friends, Jon Leonetti here, and I want to thank you for participating in this awesome retreat. This is what I do. I get the great opportunity of being able to travel about 7 months out of the year and give retreats, give parish missions for busy people like yourselves. This is the first time though I've ever done something like this, kind of a virtual retreat, so I think it's pretty awesome, and I'm really glad you're taking advantage of the opportunity to do it. I come to you from Des Moines, Iowa, broadcasting live. Whoo! Right, Des Moines, Iowa. I have a beautiful wife Teresa, and we have 2 children together: our son Joseph Augustine – he's Catholic – and then also her daughter Gianna Luce – she is too – named after Saint Gianna and Blessed Chiara Luce Badano.

I've got a question for you that I want to start this entire talk with, and that is this: What do you think about when you think of happiness? What do you dream about when you dream of a happier life? You know, happiness is kind of a funny word in our day and age, right. So many of us want it, all of us want to be happy, but the problem is, is so very few people are. So very few people are making the claim that they are. I was reading this study a while ago that said that right now, young people are unhappier than they've ever been. That the stress and anxiety in young people is actually at higher levels than even their parents. And I think a lot of that's true, but I don't think that's just the case with them. I think we can also look into our own lives and our own homes, and to be able to see that the struggles, the messiness, the difficulties piles up.

And I think what happens when the weight of life kind of falls on our shoulders is you and I begin to dream. You know, we dream of a better today and a happier tomorrow, late night walks on the beach, hefty 401(k)s, the Cubs winning the World Series, right. We dream of a lot of things that we think are going to make us happy. But the problem is, is even though those are really good things, that they never quite do it for us. They never quite give us what it is that we're looking for. And so we continue to dream. And that's why I think you and I do things like this. That's why you're on this retreat right now, is because you know that all that the world promises will never quite do it for you, will never fully give you what it is that you're looking for in life.

That's, again, why we're here. To discover or rediscover a new dream: a dream that's ever-ancient and ever-new. Except our dream of happiness, friends, isn't a what, it's not a thing or a moment; our dream for happiness is a radical encounter with a person: Jesus, the Christ. God-made man, who made that bold and radical claim 2,017 years ago when He said "I am the way, the truth, and the life." He said "Come onto Me all you who labored and are heavy burdened. I will give you

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rest. Take My yoke upon you,” He says. “I am the light of the world.” You know, Buddha never pointed to himself as the answer, and no other teacher or preacher or activist has ever presented themselves as the answer to your and my ache. Except one man: Jesus Christ.

It’s what got Him nailed to a tree, because it was the greatest and most bold of a move for anyone to be able to make, especially in His day and age. It was a threat. When He looked out to the powers that be and said “You have nothing if it wasn’t for me,” and that’s again why we do this. And that’s not like a half-truth or maybe something that’s kind of true for me and not true for you. That’s a full truth. That’s an absolute, right. I have a good friend of mine, he kind of buys into relativism. Relativism is a pervading ideology in our culture today that says that you and I can believe whatever we want and we can all be right. But we will know that doesn’t even make much sense. It doesn’t stand up to the most basic realms of reason and logic, right. I mean, he followed with that “Jon, there’s no such thing as absolute truth,” and I followed with “Is that absolutely true?” Right, this claim that Jesus the Christ is Lord, the claim that He made – not me, not a cardinal sipping espresso at the Vatican – a claim that He Himself made is either true for all of us, or it’s not true for any of us.

Now, I think you’re probably taking this retreat right now because you’re in on that. You believe Him. You know without a shadow of a doubt that Christ Jesus is Lord. Well the second question, and the one that you’re here trying to figure out with me, is this: Is if that is true, then what is it you and I are doing about it? How does our life change because of Christ Jesus? Because of our encounter with Him? It doesn’t mean you’ve got to be perfect, right. It doesn’t mean that your life kind of all fits in together. That’s, again, why we do things like this. That’s why we go to Mass and receive the Holy Eucharist, and go to confession, because you and I are a mess. I’m a mess, I’m sure you probably are too. My wife was once asked how she stays married to a man who travels 7 months out of the year, and she said “Because he travels 7 months out of the year.” Thanks dear, right. But I’m a mess, and you are too. We don’t do things like this because we have our lives all figured out; we do it because we enter into a hospital. It’s not a museum of saints, you and I, we enter into a hospital for sinners because we know we need to get well.

And so friends, this is what all of this is about. And it’s precisely the very reason why you and I are here, is to get right with God. That’s the entire purpose of your and my life. I know without a shadow of a doubt it’s why I’m here and all of this exists: to be a saint. There’s nothing else in the world that matters. There’s nothing else than to have an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus. And when we die, be in heaven with Him forever. And that’s the cool part, is that relationship isn’t just kind of a one-time thing, it’s not something just for our lives right now, it’s something for the afterlife as well. That for all eternity we

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have a God, if we so choose, who will pour Himself out into us. And He wants for nothing more than to do that for you in your life, right now and forever in heaven.

And again, I'm going to say it again, because I think we've got to hear it – that's why we're here. You and I are here to be saints. No other reason. You and I are here to be saints. Not to make a ton of money, not to accumulate popularity and fame. Alright, you can't take anything else with you. In the end, it's just our souls, right. I mean, have you ever seen a U-Haul attached to a hearse? I haven't. We take nothing with us. Nothing, except for what we've done in our lives. So the question is: Are you and I going to choose it? As we enter into this giant saint-making machine which is the universe, are we going to choose Christ Jesus, the one happiness, and be able to allow that then to have an effect on our entire lives? Our families, our workplaces, the decisions we make, big and small, the way we raise our kids. Is that what's going to take over my life?

I'm so inspired by the lives of the saints. I'm so inspired by them. I'm inspired by many of the different saints that were martyrs, that were killed for the faith. I'm inspired by the people like Saint Teresa of Calcutta. I mean, if you know me, you know I've got a deep relationship with her. That woman was incredible, and the way in which she lived her life only for God, constantly telling people around her to give God permission too, like she did in her life. The darkness, and the struggles, and the difficulties of Mother, but she would constantly remind us that we too can enter into that relationship. It's not just for the select few, right. To be a saint, you don't have to start a religious order with 4,400 active religious sisters right now in over 130 countries like Mother Teresa. You don't have to tackle communism, or be the third longest-reigning pope in history, like Saint John Paul II, right. You just have to be, but you have to be you and be holy.

That's why you and I are here, and that's what we're going to talk about right now. I want to... when we talk about the saints, it's kind of easy to share their stories a little bit, and then just kind of leave them there. But I want to instead share with you a story of someone that has kind of changed my life. His name is Brother Andre, and he just started out as Andre. And some of you have maybe heard of Saint Brother Andre. He didn't really do anything that special in his life. And when I say that, I mean like anything that would get anyone's attention.

Andre, and I'll just give you the short version of it, Andre was a... he was a kid that really wanted to be a priest. In fact, that's why he knew he was put on this earth. There was nothing more he wanted than to be a priest. But Andre wasn't very smart. And so when Andre went to take the test to get into the seminaries, they all rejected him. They knew he couldn't do it. I mean, he would beg and he would plea, he'd go to religious order to religious order, do anything he could just to be a priest. He even once said that he wouldn't... they didn't have to let him preach, or hear confessions. They didn't want people like him that would be in error, they were worried about it. But he said "I just want to be a priest, and I just want to give people Holy Eucharist."

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Well no one did, but there was one order that let him in, one order that let Saint Brother Andre in. But they told him upon entering that he'll never be ordained a priest. But they gave him the habit and they made him a brother, and they told him for 25 years, 25 years he would be the doorkeeper, and that's how long he did it for. 25 years he sat at the door and opened it. When people would ask him how many times people came in, or how many people came in, he would say "Jesus came in 50 times today. Jesus came in 75 times today." He was a brother that did his work, but did it in such a holy way he was so in love with God.

And wouldn't know it, that after a while, people weren't coming to see the priests there, they would come to see the doorkeeper, Brother Andre. Brother Andre, when he died, there were thousands of people that showed up, and they held a candlelight vigil all around him, all around where he was in the order. Andre did what he did, something so small, something that didn't get any notice in the world, but he did it in a beautifully holy way. And I don't know, maybe you don't feel like you have a lot to give. Maybe you don't feel all that special. What I have to tell you is that's okay. And in the end, whatever gifts you've been given, even if they're small, you've been given them to give back to God out of love. That's, again, why we're here.

If you want to be a saint though friends, we've got to do what they did. Right, we've got to do what they did. Because, of course, I think it's probably the simplest way. You know, we try, I think, as Catholics a lot of times to reinvent the wheel, you know what I mean? Sometimes we get so creative, but really when it comes down to it, the saints, many of them just kind of followed the same prescription. Number one, they prayed. Prayer was the most important thing to every single saint. No matter what they did, if they were a pope or a doorkeeper, they prayed every day, and they had an intimate relationship with Jesus.

What's your prayer life like right now? And again, that's why we're doing this, a retreat, to be able to challenge each other, right. I'm challenged on this question by my spiritual director all the time. What's your prayer life like right now? If I was to open up your pocketbook, right, or maybe I was to open up your calendar, and I was to see all the different things that you have in there, where would I find the time with prayer? That's how prayer is spelled by the way, "time." Where would I find that time that you have every day with God? You know, I think one thing that we do a lot of times is make excuses for our prayer. That we're too busy and too tired, and I love that one, the one people say "Well, I'm just too tired sometimes to pray. Or I fall asleep when I pray." And I say "Well stop praying laying down, right."

We say and sometimes talk ourselves out of it, and I think the reason for that is we're scared. I think a lot of us are scared, because we know that a prayer life changes everything. A prayer life reorders the disorder in our life, lives of sins sometimes, refocuses us on Him. That's what prayer is. Saint Therese of Lisieux said it's a surge of the heart, it's an embrace with God. What's your prayer life

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like? Now, I know you may be sitting here right now and thinking “Oh boy, I don’t really have one.” That’s fine. In fact, that might even be good news, is because now you can start. Now, for the first time in your life, and I don’t care how old you are, you can begin a prayer life. And it doesn’t have to be so difficult, because in the end, friends, faith without prayer is a hobby. If we don’t do this, then all of this, even what we’re doing right here, is just a hobby, and it’s just something that we do. Faith, friends, is a radical encounter with a person, with Jesus the Christ, as we spoke about before. It gives a whole new meaning to your and my life. But that doesn’t happen, that encounter won’t happen if we don’t avail ourselves to the heart of God in prayer. If we don’t make time.

In my studying of the saints, one of the things I always notice is the saints always had a prayer time. And it was pretty specific. And that didn’t mean that it didn’t change once in a while, it didn’t mean that maybe they forgot or struggled in it, but they always had a time with God. Many of the saints started right away early in the morning. Many of the saints maybe ended their day with it, and most of them did both, right. But we have to set that time too. As I’ve said before, prayer is spelled “time.” So one of the things that I want you to do right now, I want you to take out your calendar, I’ll wait. Go on, take it out, and I want you to find in your calendar – and maybe it’s on your phone, or maybe it’s a written one – I want you to find a time that you can give God tomorrow.

What is a time tomorrow that you can give God? I’m not talking about an hour and a half or 2 hours – you’re probably not cloistered religious, right. Maybe 10 minutes. If you’re a beginner, why don’t you start with 10 minutes of prayer. If you’re a little bit more advanced, maybe kind of 10 minutes or 15 minutes, you’re already doing that. Try to up it a little bit. 20, 25 minutes. If you’re at a holy hour every day, awesome, right. You know, you can maybe kind of tune some of this stuff out, because you’ve got it, and you know how important it is. But nonetheless, you’ve got to find that time.

And here’s the deal: I don’t want you to give, I don’t want you to give your worse time to God. I think a lot of times we just give God the leftovers, do you know what I mean? Kind of give God the time that we’re most tired, or the time that we’re most angry, most frustrated or anxious or stressed. What about giving God your best? That doesn’t mean that we’re not going to go to Him in all those other times as well, but what about giving God our best time of day, you know, when we’re most alive. My prayer time, friends, my prayer times does not happen before I have a cup of coffee, right. It just doesn’t, because I’m grouchy, I’m still kind of groggy. I always go get that cup of coffee, and then I’ll begin my prayer. But we have to pray every day. We’ve got to give God the best time of our day. But we can’t just think that this all is going to work in the end. It starts now. And the good news is, is when we take Christ Jesus on in our lives, we become happier. We become more filled with Joy, even amidst all the messiness and the struggles that you and I experience on a regular basis.

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Alright, so you've found your time, right. You've got that time, nothing's going to come in the way tomorrow, and I want you to schedule that out. And not just for a week or 2 weeks, every day. It's just like brushing your teeth, it's just like taking a shower, it's what you do. It's just like eating lunch or eating dinner, this is what you do every single day in the life of Catholicism. You've got your time. Now, I want you to find a place. I want you to find a place, and I want you to make it holy. Maybe for you, you can stop by a local adoration chapel. Maybe you can do so for 10 minutes every day. That'd be something. Maybe a church, maybe a walk to a chapel, maybe you work downtown somewhere and the cathedral's nearby, and you're able to go stop in for 10 minutes before work, or maybe during a coffee break. Maybe it's at your home. You know, if I could turn this around, I'd show you my prayer corner. Maybe it's your home, a place where you're comfortable, that you can make sacred.

You know, we have a priest come and bless our prayer space. Whenever we move or wherever we are, it's important to us, because that's the place that we have the encounter with God every single day in the most intimate of moments of our time with Him alone. So I want you to find that place. And again, make it sacred. And that doesn't mean you can't switch it up once in a while, no. But I think it's important to us. The saints had a favorite place to pray. They all had their places of prayer. I just got back from reading the pilgrimage to Rome, and it was incredible, and we walked like an hour and a half to Mother Teresa's religious house there, where she... there's like 15 of her nuns.

And I wanted to go and to see where she stayed whenever she went to Rome, and I knocked on the Convent door and they let us in, and they brought us into her little room. And it was just like she left it, right. And then they brought us into her chapel, and she would always pray, the sister told me, right in the middle of the chapel. That was her prayer spot. That was her place where she would pray. She would walk in, she would go, and she would get on her knees right there in the middle of the chapel and begin her relationship. It was like clockwork, the sister said, when she was anywhere. She had her place. And for her, she travelled so much she had to switch it up. But even when she would go to Rome, even in different places, she knew the spot that she was going to pray.

I want you to find that too. And it makes it a lot easier, friends, it makes our prayer time so much easier, because you don't have to think "Well, now where am I going to go? And how am I going to do this?" Right. You just do it. It's like clockwork every day. Alright, so you've got your time, you've got your space, the saints did. Now the dreaded question: "What do I say?" You start with nothing. What do you think? Benedict XVI said that silence is the language of God, right. Silence is the language of God. Jesus says "Don't be like the Pharisees, who think that they're heard because of their many words," right. Oftentimes, we think God is like the cosmic complaint box, or the vending machine, just kind of throwing

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all this stuff at Him and then hoping to get something back, right. What about just being with Him?

You know, I went on my date with my wife a while ago, and I remember afterwards I said “Honey, you know, we didn’t really talk a lot during this date.” And she looked at me and she said “I know, wasn’t it great?” I was like “Hmm, thanks dear.” Right. But she said “Jon, sometimes it’s just good to be with you. It’s just good to be in each other’s presence,” she said. And I thought how true that is with God. You know, God just wants to be with us. He just wants to sit with us. He just wants us to reach to Him, so that He then can reach to us. Love isn’t forced, and He would never force that on us because He loves us. I didn’t get down on my knee to my wife and say “You’re going to marry me whether you like it or not.” That would not have worked out very well for me. I proposed my love for her. And that’s what God does to us, is He proposes that.

It doesn’t have to be just a relationship where we’re just kind of throwing all these things at Him, but what about just resting with Him? Sometimes, my prayer consists of just saying the holy name of Jesus over and over again. Other times, my prayer consists of a simple prayer of “Come Holy Spirit, fill my heart, and kindle in me the fire of Your divine love.” I’ll say that for 15, 20 minutes over and over again. Sometimes it’s listening to my favorite praise and worship song, and sometimes it’s just sitting there in total silence, being with God, opening my hands, and asking God to do with me what it is that He wants. In fact, I think that’s probably one of the most important prayers. But prayer is where we’ve got to start. Without it, all of this is a hobby.