

Setting direction

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I would imagine that by the title of this column most readers of CARIBBEAN BUSINESS would think I was addressing the economy or the workings of government or perhaps political status. But nothing like that. I write this column as the sun sets over Lent, a period of the year that is very special for me, one that since my boyhood days I have used to set direction to my life.

It has been an annual exercise with me for a very long time. Now, if one must annually set direction, it means one must have gone off course during the previous year and that sights must be reset to steer the course toward the home port. Well, that happens, not once nor twice, but on and on. So, one must take time out to see where one is going as opposed to where one wants to go.

During Lent, I habitually take time out to do spiritual exercises. This is my way of resetting direction. There are, of course, other ways. As a law student, I went to Manresa in the mountains of Aibonito to reset direction. I remember going there with Jorge Luis Córdova Díaz, who was my law professor at the University of Puerto Rico, and with many of my classmates. Jorge Luis later was elected under the NPP ticket as resident commissioner when Luis Ferré was elected governor. Partisan differences did not weaken the strong bond of affection that developed between us in class and in the spiritual exercises at Manresa.

In later years, I went to exercises in the spiritual house provided by the Central University of Bayamón. These exercises were conducted under the spiritual method of St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit Order. St Ignatius wrote the exercises for a month-long retreat, but they were compressed into three days for the group with which I attended.

This group was composed of professionals—engineers, lawyers, accountants, doctors, etc.—who had attended the University of Puerto Rico and had a special relationship with the Center of Catholic Services at the Río Piedras Campus. They were of different political persuasions and politics was immaterial to all of us; at least for the time that we were there. The spiritual exercises were usually offered by a Jesuit priest especially invited to Puerto Rico for the occasion, but sometimes it was a local priest who guided the exercises. Father José Angel Borges, a very dear friend who recently passed away, presided over one of them.

After a while, the retreats were moved to the Centro de Servicios Diocesanos in Arecibo. These facilities are in a rural setting on the road going from Arecibo to Lares. There are spacious grounds under shady trees where one can walk and meditate.

Meditation is very important in setting direction, any type of direction, but especially for spiritual direction. The exercises consist of lectures that span from Genesis in the Old Testament to the events in the New Testament that we commemorate during Holy Week: Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. After the lectures, you are on your own for meditation and prayer.

Silence is of the essence in spiritual retreats. It creates the environment conducive to meditation and prayer. Silence is frequently violated with chit chat but a price is paid in the desired fruits of the exercises.

Most recently, I have been attending the spiritual exercises offered during the period of Lent at Palo Blanco, a house for spiritual exercises in Río Grande. These exercises, imparted by Opus Dei, are open to all who would register. They last for three days and are very similar to the ones prescribed by St. Ignatious. Puerto Ricans from all political persuasions attend. For that brief period, one is liberated from the asphyxiating political atmosphere in which we live.

Wherever one may choose to take time out to gain direction during this time of Lent, fundamental priorities become clear to those who place their faith in Christ as the answer to transcendence, the most basic problem in human existence. Nothing else is capable of satisfying the ineradicable aspirations of the human spirit.

Taking time out to hear the word of Christ, to meditate on it and to pray will not resolve one's problems. One will still have to continue to work hard to make ends meet, one will have to bear sickness, one will still have to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. But these matters will have their proper place in life, while we set our sights on going beyond the days allotted—I will say it in Spanish—“*a esa brega*,” to the unending time ushered in by Jesus' resurrection.

Such direction requires making changes in life. It is a constant challenge and that is why one must constantly take time out throughout life to redirect oneself. But as time goes by one begins to see the fruits in reshaping one's character for the better.

As we move forward in the 21st century after Christ, we in Puerto Rico, like others in other parts of the world, experience a crisis of values that has deteriorated the very fabric of our civilization. At the root of this crisis is the loss of direction in our lives. We constantly bemoan this loss of values in endless conversations wherein we set the world right. Well, we can go beyond that in a modest but important way. We can all take time out to meditate on the coherence between the values that we deem necessary for achieving a higher level of civilization and our own conduct, which should reflect such values.

Those of us who are Christians can each take time out in Lent, or whenever we can, to set our sights on the loftier plane that the Crucifixion and the Resurrection set out for humankind. No one said it better than Jesus: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His / [Her] justice and all these things shall be added unto you.”