

# THE COVENANT RETREAT

A DISCERNMENT EXPERIENCE FOR HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

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## THE COVENANT RETREAT:

A DISCERNMENT EXPERIENCE FOR HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

### WHY THE NAME COVENANT RETREAT?

We are all in a covenant relationship with God. The question we have to face is: how readily are we living that covenant? Here, the relationship to which God calls us is referred to as our "covenant." *The Covenant Retreat* is designed to help your seniors identify their covenant with God and better understand how to value and live that covenant. The heart of covenant is trusting God and being open to God's grace. Such trust and openness are rooted in the conviction that God wants only what is ultimately good for us and will guide us to our own deepest happiness if we let him. *Covenant* also implies openness to what other people have to offer us and what they might need from us. And it means allowing room for our own growth. *The Covenant Retreat* allows room for that growth by using the time-tested model of the retreat experience in an innovative manner.

### ↳ PREMISE

God has called all the teens before us to a covenant relationship that not only deepens their relationship with him but also heightens their awareness of their own gifts and gives them the grace to share those gifts with others. As Catholic school educators, we have many hopes for teenagers today. As they leave our Catholic high schools, we hope we have trained them in ways that will enable them to pray, to make good decisions, to serve others, to be an active part of a faith community, to feel God's love for them, and to know about the Catholic Tradition and its Scriptures. Others have planted some seeds. We have watered them and planted some more. The growth will occur long after our students have left our desks and hallways.

With this in mind, welcome to *The Covenant Retreat*. Over the course of the retreat, participants will begin to develop a clearer picture of their personal covenant relationship with God and how this covenant affects their relationships, career, and education choices, as well as the practice of their faith. This is not a how-to retreat—it won't tell your students how to choose the right college or how to deal with roommate problems. Rather, it focuses on helping students discern the sacred relationship, the covenant, to which God calls them and on how that call might shape the path of their life.

Discerning their covenant is about discovering who they truly are and about determining, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who they want to become as they grow into adulthood and beyond. This process can help students make choices for living out their unique talents, energies, and potentials as fully as possible. This retreat offers the best wisdom of the Catholic Tradition to guide that discernment.

*The Covenant Retreat* provides the structure and time for seniors to contemplate their lives in the context of their growing adult relationship with God. This leader's guide places in your hands a step-by-step process for implementing the retreat from beginning to end. The accompanying student textbook is *Answering God's Call to Covenant: Which Way to the Rest of Your Life?* It provides your seniors with a deeper exploration of the topics covered or introduced during the retreat and makes the retreat part of the process rather than the end. The last year of high school is important for teens in discerning how God is calling them and in deciding how to respond to God's offer of a covenant relationship. This retreat assists you in preparing your seniors to respond to God's invitation to relationship.

## ↳ UNIQUE ASPECTS AND GOALS OF THE PROGRAM

### UNIQUE ASPECTS

What makes *The Covenant Retreat* unique? What about this retreat is different from what schools are currently doing? How will this retreat benefit your school and your students? These are all questions you might ask when considering implementing *The Covenant Retreat*. Several things set this retreat apart from others:

- ▣ The retreat experience is not limited to the few days the students are away at a retreat center.
- ▣ Material is provided to incorporate retreat preparation into your classes in an unobtrusive manner for the two weeks leading up to the retreat and for postretreat reflection for several weeks afterward.
- ▣ Detailed directions are provided for implementing the retreat, complete with handouts, pointers for talks, and prayer experiences.
- ▣ Material is available for using the student text following the retreat, including suggestions on incorporating retreat follow-up activities into your existing curriculum in an unobtrusive manner.
- ▣ Liturgical celebrations are described that you can use to bring closure to the retreat experience, as well as suggestions on how to celebrate the retreat with the entire school through graduation and other activities.

### UNIQUE GOALS

*The Covenant Retreat* is designed for a specific audience; namely, high school seniors. For this reason, the retreat experience outlined in this leader's guide achieves several goals over the course of the preretreat, retreat, and postretreat experience:

- ▣ It provides students with a deeper exploration of what they want from life.
- ▣ It guides students in connecting to the relationship to which God calls them.
- ▣ It assists students in shaping their life mission in union with their relationship with God.
- ▣ It moves students to develop a covenant statement that will guide their decisions and actions in the coming years.
- ▣ It provides students with a continuation of the retreat experience.
- ▣ It assists students in applying retreat lessons to their lives.
- ▣ It allows students to revisit and strengthen their reflections from the retreat experience.

## ↳ COMPONENTS

Now that you know what *The Covenant Retreat* sets out to accomplish and what makes it unique, let's look at the two components of the program and what they include. Two books are part of this program, *The Covenant Retreat* leader's guide and *Answering God's Call to Covenant: Which Way to the Rest of Your Life?* The leader's guide contains all the information, handouts, schedules, and suggestions you need to lead your seniors on a covenant retreat experience. *Answering God's Call to Covenant* is the student text that follows the flow of the retreat and enables your seniors to continue the discernment that begins with the retreat.

### THE COVENANT RETREAT LEADER'S GUIDE

*The Covenant Retreat* leader's guide contains all you need to bring this unique retreat experience to your seniors from start to finish. In the leader's guide, you will find:

- ▣ a suggested timeline for implementing the retreat experience, including a recommended schedule for planning meetings, promotion, preretreat activities, and postretreat follow-up
- ▣ step-by-step planning for:
  - ▣ preretreat activities, including classroom suggestions, handouts, and class prayers
  - ▣ retreat activities for a three-day/two-night retreat that can be adapted for a shorter or longer experience

postretreat activities, including classroom suggestions, possible school liturgies, and teaching guides for the student text

reproducible handouts for use with student retreat leaders, faculty or staff members, and retreat participants

### **ANSWERING GOD’S CALL TO COVENANT: WHICH WAY TO THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?**

The student text, *Answering God’s Call to Covenant*, is a tool for the postretreat experience. It can, however, also be used during the retreat itself. The structure of the student text follows the structure of the retreat, and each chapter corresponds to a session of the retreat. In the student text, the first six chapters lead students through a process of reflecting on a focus question facing seniors as they prepare for life after high school. In the seventh chapter, the students are directed in writing a covenant statement, an explanation of the way they are uniquely called to live out Jesus’s command to love God, others, and self. That statement should be succinct but also respond comprehensively to all the questions presented in the text. We encourage you to invite your students to add a creative element through art, poetry, music, or another gift.

#### **WHY ASK STUDENTS TO WRITE A COVENANT STATEMENT?**

Covenant statements are important because they offer ways to do the following:

- change the life script; students need to know they can challenge the values they have been living by or the way they have been seeing things
- find and assess direction
- take charge; we are all tempted simply to drift in life rather than make free, conscious choices

The final covenant statement also enables students to summarize the most important insights and concepts they encounter throughout the retreat experience and to reflect on all of them at once. Students can bring the covenant statement with them into their future and use it as a model of discernment in the important years ahead.

#### **GUIDING QUESTIONS AND THEMES IN THE STUDENT TEXT**

The student text addresses the following questions and themes. They are also the guiding topics for each session over the course of the retreat experience. Through following the process of answering each question, the retreat participants will be in a position to write a meaningful and well-informed personal covenant statement.

- “How Will I Respond to Change?” Theme: Trusting in God during times of great change
- “Who Do I Want to Be?” Theme: Developing character and making moral decisions
- “How Will I Find Happiness?” Theme: Finding happiness in the Kingdom of God
- “How Will I Find Love and Friendship?” Themes: Finding love by loving others; obeying Jesus’s commandment to love; discovering the role of community, Church, and the communion of saints
- “What Will I Take with Me?” Theme: Discovering key Christian values that, in a more specific way, unfold the commandment to love
- “What Path Will I Choose?” Theme: Practicing discernment and discovering vocation
- “Which Way to the Rest of My Life?” Theme: Synthesizing learning in a covenant statement

Through the process of reflecting on and answering these questions, your seniors will begin to discern their own covenant, not only in terms of their lives as individuals, but also in relation to the community of believers. This covenant will not only help them in the immediate future following high school; it also will help guide their actions for the rest of their lives. *The Covenant Retreat* is your opportunity to give your graduating seniors a gift that will serve them for years to come.

### **↳ GETTING STARTED**

Now comes the fun part—getting started. The first step is to familiarize yourself with the material in this leader’s guide and the student text. Reflect on what your school is currently doing for a senior retreat; note what is working and where you would like to improve. One of the strengths of *The Covenant Retreat* is that you can adapt it and add to it to meet the specific needs of your senior community. As you begin the process of implementing *The Covenant Retreat* at your school, remember that you are striving to provide your students with an experience that may affect them for years to come. The goal is for each student to truly enter into a covenant relationship with God and the community.






 **“What Path Will I Choose?”** Theme: Practicing discernment and discovering vocation

In the section of this leader’s guide dealing with the retreat are detailed instructions for talks, activities, and prayers centered on these topics, as well as key points and suggestions for a successful retreat.

## POSTRETREAT

The postretreat, like the preretreat, is an aspect of this retreat that makes it truly unique. After addressing the first six questions, the postretreat deals with the most important question your students face:

 **“Which Way to the Rest of My Life?”** Theme: Synthesizing learning in a covenant statement






The primary focus of the postretreat is the seventh question, “Which way to the rest of my life?” It also is an opportunity to have your students look in more depth at the questions presented during the retreat. The postretreat can be as long or brief as you like. What is important is taking time for this seventh question. In the section of this leader’s guide dealing with the postretreat, you will find suggested activities for directing your students in writing their covenant statements, tools for guiding the students in reflecting on the retreat process, and options for bringing closure to the process, including liturgical options.


## SUGGESTED TIMELINE

The following is a suggested timeline you can follow when implementing *The Covenant Retreat*. In it, you will find an outline of general times when addressing various issues in implementing this retreat would be appropriate.




### PRERETREAT

Before school or several months before you plan to hold the retreat, do the following:




-  Evaluate your current retreat format.
-  Familiarize yourself with *The Covenant Retreat*.
-  Develop a schedule for when your seniors will start the preretreat activities, attend the retreat, and engage in the postretreat work.
-  Explain the new format to faculty and staff.
-  Review the classroom portions with the theology department.

 Begin gathering a retreat team of adults and youth. (See appendix A, “Preparing Your Retreat Team and Small Groups.”)



Three months prior to the retreat, do the following:

-  Finish gathering a retreat team (students, faculty or staff, and parents).
-  Provide an overview of the retreat.
-  Take time in prayer with the team.




Two months prior to the retreat, do the following:

-  Take time in prayer with the team.
-  Decide areas of responsibility for the retreat with the team (sessions, talks, environment, prayer and liturgy, and so on).
-  Set up meeting times with teams working on different areas and with team members giving talks.


One month prior to the retreat, do the following:

-  Gather your team to walk through the retreat and ensure that all areas of responsibility are addressed.
-  Evaluate and arrange for needed supplies.

Two weeks prior to the retreat, do the following:



-  Distribute the student booklet (reproducible handouts from the leader’s guide) if applicable.
-  Distribute classroom prayers. (See appendix B, “Preretreat Prayers”.)
-  Ensure that all permission forms, retreat center payment, and other needed paperwork have been arranged for.

### RETREAT

 The retreat is based on a three-day/two-night retreat (for example: Wednesday evening through Friday afternoon).

 There are six sessions.

Each session includes:

-  session overview and goals
-  talk points for talks given by leaders (See appendix C, “*The Covenant Retreat* Talk Sheets”)



- small-group discussion questions if applicable
- three to four activity suggestions to illustrate or illuminate the purpose of the session
- handouts if applicable

**RETREAT SCHEDULE**

**DAY ONE**

Welcome and Opening Prayer

Session One: "How Will I Respond to Change?" and "Who Do I Want to Be?"

Activity: Into the Future: A Timeline

Evening Prayer Experience (and Evening Optional Guided Meditation)

**DAY TWO**

Session Two: "How Will I Find Happiness?"

Activity: Best and Worst

Session Three: "How Will I Find Love and Friendship?"

Activity One: Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships

Activity Two: The Top Ten Characteristics of Friendship

Optional Downtime Activity: Offering Thanks for Friends

Session Four: "What Will I Take with Me?"

Activity: Packing Your Own Suitcase

Evening Prayer Experience

**DAY THREE**

Session Five: "What Path Will I Choose?"

Activity: A Prayer for Discernment

Session Six: "Which Way to the Rest of My Life?"

**CLOSING LITURGY**

**POSTRETREAT**

After the retreat, do the following with students:

- Debrief the students.
- Help the students reflect on chapters 3 through 6 of the student text.
- Do the follow-up directions and activities.
- Provide detailed directions for writing the covenant statement.

RETREAT NOTES

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COVENANT

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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