

"Behold, I will do a new thing; now shall it spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert." Isaiah 43:19. Earlier this month the Philadelphia MGOCSM hosted its annual Lenten retreat for the area and it was a very "new thing", indeed. Instead of having a main speaker, as is usual in our conferences, this retreat did not feature any speakers. Rather, after Morning Prayer, the attendees were broken up into FOCUS-lead discussion groups based on their ages. Each group also had an Achen to help lead the discussions: 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> had Rev. Fr. Shibu Mathai, 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> had Fr. Gheevarghese John, and college students had Rev. Fr. Bitty Mathew. Another different take on the usual MGOCSM conference was the Music Ministry. Instead of having a Praise and Worship team lead us in Christian devotionals, two acolytes taught us the [Shimmo] prayers/hymns and their meanings in English. It was a very refreshing change of pace and truly blessed session. Group sessions were finished by having participants address letters to themselves to open on Easter. The day concluded with noon prayer and lunch for everyone.

As part of the college student group, I gained so much more than I thought I would. We started by writing down any fears we had. Then, if we felt comfortable, we could share those fears out loud. Every person in the circle opened up and it was incredible to see that many of the struggles they held close, were also troubling me. I think I can speak on behalf of the group that day when I say that sharing those intimate feelings created a strong fellowship in the room. In terms of addressing those fears, the theme of being bold isn't exclusively implicative to your faith or Christianity. To be bold is also to have faith that you can conquer your personal fears through God. Our leaders were careful to tell us, however, not to pray or fast out of fear (whether fear of those struggles or of God punishing us) as Pharaoh did in Exodus 10. Instead, we pray and fast as ways to change our behavior, maneuver things that distract us from God, and shift our focus to Him. Fr. Bitty taught us the word "asceticism" which means training. This term describes what our behavior should be during the Lenten season: a practice of piety or spiritual exercises to accomplish genuine repentance and confession. It is only through these genuine actions that we are able to find the way to our souls' salvation.

Many of the fears read aloud in the group, while legitimate, were mainly concerned with our futures after college or undergraduate school. Our leaders encouraged us to think instead about our future with God. Are we making heaven and hell our realities or putting them on the back burner? Again, the point is not to instill fear, but rather change our focus to attaining the Kingdom of God. By taking the Lent, sometimes that focus turns into how difficult it is to give something up. Does God want us to be suffering? As St. Paul repeatedly says in his epistles, there is joy in suffering! God takes no pleasure in the pain of His children, but we must remember that this pain we feel from having given something up can be filled with Him. We don't need that materialistic thing to carry on, only His love, His forgiveness, Him. This Lenten season, let us remember that His words are a healing power, for all pains, sufferings, and fears.