



•ADORATION•COMMUNITY•THEOLOGY•SERVICE•

RETREAT MANUAL

By ACTS Missions®

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INTRODUCTION: HOW ACTS BEGAN

We are honored to present a firsthand account of the history and current context of ACTS, telling the story of how the Holy Spirit worked through many people from all walks of life to develop a tool that would help souls around the world come to know Jesus Christ. Integral to the mission of ACTS are the three creators: Joseph D. Hayes, Deacon Edward Courtney, and Dr. Martin Sablik, warmly known as Joe, Ed, and Marty. This introduction is a revised edition of an account written by Joe with added details from Ed. ACTS Missions is indebted to these three men for their efforts to make ACTS a reality.

The historical, testimonial account describes the ACTS story as an experience of the Holy Spirit, and therefore to all credit, glory, and honor belong to Him. ACTS was and is a call to action to serve the Church by focusing on parish community. Providing an opportunity for others to share in an experience of God's grace, mercy and love is the legacy we have inherited and carry forth with every ACTS Retreat.

ACTS takes its roots from the *Cursillo* Movement which began in Spain between WWI and WWII. *Cursillo*, a short course on the Catholic faith, soon became widely popular for its positive effect on peoples' spirituality. By the 1980s, *Cursillo* was popular in the Archdiocese of San Antonio.

Around 1982, at Our Lady of Perpetual Help (OLPH) in Selma, Texas, the parish pastor, Monsignor Patrick Cronin, began voicing concerns to his lay leaders about a lack of participation from the parish at large in the parish life. Two of these OLPH lay leaders, Ed and Joe, were also leaders in the local *Cursillo* Movement; Ed was part of the Secretariat (local governing body) and Joe was an Archdiocesan lay director. While *Cursillo* was doing good work for the Archdiocese, Msgr. Cronin challenged his people to focus on their parish, and the seed was planted.

The idea of a parish-based program began to take shape between Ed and Joe, and another member of the Secretariat, Marty, took an interest.

Part of Joe's responsibility with *Cursillo* was to brief Archbishop Patrick Flores (who served as Archbishop of San Antonio from 1979 to 2004) on *Cursillo*, and this was done several times a year. One of his wishes was that *Cursillo* take an ecumenical approach and allow non-Catholics to attend its retreats to share our faith with others. During one of these briefings, Joe took the opportunity to discuss the parish-based program and began gaining the Archbishop's support. Joe also presented the Archbishop's desire for ecumenism to the Secretariat, but unfortunately, it did not pass. As a result, Ed, Marty, Joe, and a few other members resigned from the *Cursillo* Secretariat to focus on the parish-based idea.

A few months later, Ed, Marty, and Joe met at a diner to consider doing a parish retreat. Drawing on their *Cursillo* experiences, they began developing a program led by parishioners that invited parishioners to retreat from the world together to build parish community. Joe, at the time, was also President of the OLPH Pastoral Council and he met with Msgr. Cronin to discuss this new concept. Msgr. Cronin approved of their ideas and directed Joe to bring the matter before the Pastoral Council for approval. Joe asked for permission to meet with Archbishop Flores to formally present the initiative and establish a planning committee upon his approval. The council approved both measures.

Joe met with Archbishop Flores and presented him with the Pastoral Council's approved plans for a parish retreat along with Msgr. Cronin's endorsement. Archbishop Flores gave his permission and blessing for developing a new parish retreat with the condition that non-Catholics be allowed to attend without any pressure to convert to Catholicism. In the archbishop's view, the conversion of non-Catholics should be the work of the Holy Spirit. Also, Archbishop Flores wanted non-Catholics who were married to a Catholic to have a way to: 1) experience both the beauty of the Catholic faith and a sense of parish community; and 2) share in what their spouse experienced on their retreat. This stipulation was agreed upon and Archbishop Flores gave his approval and blessing. He appointed Joe as the Archdiocesan Executive Planning

Council President and requested regular updates on this new program's development.

The Archdiocesan Executive Planning Council was a retreat formation committee with eight members from OLPH, and three members from other parishes who were also interested in these retreats. The council was instructed to have retreat leaders meet with their pastors before forming the team to ensure that the retreat addressed any pastoral needs unique to that parish and pastor. Those first council members were:

Ed Courtney, OLPH
Joe Hayes, OLPH
Marty Sablik, St. Luke
Gene Boone, OLPH
Les Coalson, OLPH
Robert Lee, St. John Neumann
Donna Boone, OLPH
Ruth Ann Wortman, OLPH
Terry Dudley, OLPH
Karen Mansfeldt, Our Lady of Guadalupe
Sue Weaver, OLPH

Archbishop Flores and Msgr. Cronin participated in the process by providing spiritual and theological guidance each step of the way and some amazing things began to occur. During each council meeting, there were discussions and suggestions for a name for this new retreat program; however, the council did not spend a lot of time on this, having faith that a name would come forth during the development process. It didn't take long for the Holy Spirit to choose a devout Catholic from St. John Neumann Parish, Wallace Vaughn, to work through, and a name was revealed.

Wallace called Joe one morning and told him about a dream he had the previous night. Wallace stated that he had been inspired to read [Chapter 2](#), verses 42-47 of the Acts of the Apostles. Joe, not quite sure what to think, decided to take a leap of faith and read the scripture with Wallace. The passage reads:

“They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need.

Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people.

And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

These verses described the ideals of a Christian community which is what the committee wanted to achieve on the retreat weekend. Wallace added that his experience left him with the impression that the retreat should be called “ACTS.” When Joe brought this to the council, Ruth Ann Wortman stated, “If the Holy Spirit spoke to Wallace, then that is what we should do. We should call it ‘ACTS.’” The council voted unanimously to name the retreat “ACTS.”

Ed was then given the task of discerning the pillars for ACTS. He figured he had a good start with Acts 2:42-47 and the pillars of *Cursillo*: piety, study, and action. He also understood that the committee wanted to emphasize service to the parish as part of discipleship.

One day while Ed was sitting at home mulling this over, he went to his bookshelf, picked up his thesaurus, and started looking for synonyms for piety, study, and action. From piety, he worked his way to *adoration*, and that fit right in with that “A” in ACTS. For study, he thought *theology* made sense, and that fit right in with “T”. Action seemed to fit well with *service*, and that fit right in with “S”. It only made sense for the “C” to be *community*. Thus, Adoration, Community, Theology, and Service became the pillars of the ACTS Retreat.

This was how the Holy Spirit worked through people to develop the ACTS Retreat.

With the name established, the council worked on developing the Talk topics and the roles and responsibilities of a team. In addition, they looked to incorporate sacramentals, address parish needs and explored various aspects of our faith to help cultivate a spiritual experience that invited retreatants to develop a deeper relationship with God. Marty focused on developing retreat schedules, duties of retreat directors and co-directors, and their Talks.

The main goals of the ACTS Retreat were:

- To increase one's relationship with God through prayer life in the *Adoration* Talk.
- To create a spiritual environment in our parish, our family, our workplace, our friends, and demonstrate to all people we meet our good moral values and faith through the *Community* Talk.
- To encourage the study of scripture and our Catholic faith through the *Theology* talk.
- To encourage parishioners to join various parish ministries to meet pastoral needs for our pastor through the *Service* Talk.

The first men's ACTS Retreat took place July 23-26, 1987 at the Omega Retreat Center in Boerne, Texas with Joe as the director and Marty as co-director. Donna Boone was the director of the first women's retreat with Ruth Ann Wortman as the co-director. The women's retreat was held at the Omega Retreat Center on October 1-4, 1987.

This was also the same year that St. John Paul II, the herald of the New Evangelization, visited San Antonio, and for ACTS Missions, this happy coincidence was a providential sign that the Holy Spirit was at work.

Brothers and sisters, in reflecting on our story, we hope to show that there was first a call to address a need for the Church, a response of acceptance, a "gathering of the People" first in Joe, Marty, and Ed and then in the form of a council, and the people working together in community within the framework of the Church. This is the basis for all of us participating in the Church's apostolic mission to "go and make disciples" by building parish community. We do this through ACTS Retreats to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others so that they too might experience His grace, His mercy, and His love.

Chapter 1: FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

“For no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ.” – 1 Corinthians 3:11

The intent of the *ACTS Retreat Manual* is to provide all priests, deacons, and lay ACTS Retreat Team leaders and members with the necessary information to facilitate the ACTS Retreat process in a way that grounds the experience in the invitation to encounter Jesus Christ and be His disciple. [Chapter 1](#) will establish the foundational principles of ACTS that define and give life to ACTS Retreats and ACTS Missions. The remainder of the manual will instruct on the ACTS Retreat process which begins with retreat leadership, moves to Team Formation, is realized with the ACTS Retreat experience, and concludes with the Pentecost Event where retreatants take the next step in going forth. The foundational principles will help parishes faithfully administer the ACTS Retreat process so that retreatants receive an opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ.

DEFINITION OF ACTS

ACTS Missions defines the ACTS Apostolate, commonly referred to as “ACTS,” as an association of lay Catholics dedicated to the advancement of ACTS Retreats. The intent of the retreat is to provide an opportunity for a personal encounter with Jesus Christ with a twofold purpose: promote intentional Christ-centered discipleship and build parish community. ACTS is an acronym for: *Adoration, Community, Theology, and Service*. The apostolate encompasses ACTS Missions, ACTS Missions Chapters, and ACTS Cores.

Adoration

In the *Introduction*, the creators of ACTS described Adoration as, “increasing one’s relationship with God through a life of prayer,” because, as they understand it, a relationship with God cannot exist apart from a prayer life. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) describes adoration as thus: “To adore God is to acknowledge him as God, as the Creator and Savior, the Lord and Master of everything that exists...Lifting up the mind toward God is an expression of our adoration of God: prayer of praise and thanksgiving, intercession and petition.”¹

First, adoration begins with *humility*. Humility allows one to realize that God is God and more importantly that we are not. God is the Creator and we are the created. (*cf.* CCC 2628) Humility helps us to consider our motivation and to remember that it’s not about us. Second, adoration is expressed with *respectful silence* (*cf.* CCC 2628) that shows our deference to God’s authority. Silence also allows us to listen to God’s call. Rather than filling downtime with activity, teams allow time for silent reflection to help retreatants discern where and how God may be calling them. Third, adoration is a *response*. God initiates the relationship and calls us each by name (*cf.* Is 43:1), drawing us closer to Him. In Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), he invites “all Christians everywhere at this very moment to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ...No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since ‘no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.’”² The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Finally, adoration requires *surrender*. As we freely choose to surrender our own wants or desires to God’s will, we express our adoration. This surrender enables each person to respond to His call because it is only in Him that we find true purpose and meaning.

God calls and we respond. In the ACTS Retreat, we put ourselves in God’s presence, a sacred space, to hear Him, to come to know Him, and thereby recognize His unfailing presence in our lives. Therefore, *Adoration* is responding through prayer and worship to receiving God’s gifts of grace, mercy, and love. This captures the essence of the Gospel and

Church teaching and provides the basis for retreatants to consider if and how God is calling them and give their own response.

Community

Without the context that ACTS was created in response to a pastoral need to *build parish community*, one might generalize or oversimplify *Community* as increasing parishioners or ministry participants. Even though these functions are necessary and important, the aim of community for ACTS Retreats is rooted in the Catholic teaching of the People of God united by their faith in Jesus Christ. (*cf.* CCC 805) Since the beginning of the Christian Church, belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God who resurrected from the dead was and is the thread that tied otherwise separate and distinct groups of people together as “the body of Christ.” (1 Cor 12:27) This helped foster the realization of the Church’s universal nature as the People of God who serve the world through missionary activities to bring Christ to others. ACTS is one such missionary activity and finds its niche as a new method of evangelization for local Catholic parishes. Pope Francis asks us to practice the “art of accompaniment” (EG 169) which always begins and flourishes in the context of service to others and the mission of evangelization. The ACTS Retreat process focuses on parish community and gives parishioners opportunities to serve one another by offering a witness of faith. As building parish community is the focus, *Community* is living and participating in the one Body of Christ beginning in the parish.

Theology

Theology means the study of God. Study includes asking questions and exploring the essence of faith to better understand what one believes. In Vatican II, the Church expressed a desire that all faithful engage and grow in the faith to defend it and witness to it.³ In this context, ACTS seeks to make theology more accessible through the personal testimonies of people who have deepened their relationship with God through prayer and study. Personal testimonies empower people to humbly share their

faith journeys and show how they have come to better understand God's will for their lives.

Talking about God begins with talking to God. Doing *Theology* prayerfully helps us seek God and His will for us as disciples. As such, the "T" in ACTS is about having a relationship with God by means of studying scripture in prayer, discerning His will for discipleship, and living out our baptismal call.

Service

The Introduction told the story of how ACTS was the response to a parish pastor's call to action for his lay leaders to encourage discipleship among parishioners. One result from the ACTS Retreat experience is the conversion that inspires one to discipleship, the desire to serve God in response to experiencing His grace. Pope Francis describes these types of people as "spirit-filled evangelizers" who "pray and work." (EG 262) According to the Holy Father, true discipleship is service "beyond all our own preferences and interests, our knowledge and motivations...for the greater glory of the Father who loves us." (EG 267) *Service* is following the model that Jesus gave us in washing the Apostles' feet and finding opportunities to do this for others. Service can begin at the parish as the parish is a safe place to learn how to serve in a Christian community. Of course, the Spirit may move one to discipleship in many ways by calling one to serve family, neighbors, repurposing one's profession, or even pursuing a different ministry. Pope Francis reminds us that, "each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel." (EG 20) For ACTS Missions, serving in the parish community is a beginning, and our hope is that service transcends all aspects of one's life as the Lord sees fit.

INTENT AND PURPOSE OF ACTS RETREATS

The intent of the retreat is to provide an opportunity for a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

The purpose of the retreat is two-fold:

1. Promote intentional Christ-centered discipleship; and
2. Build parish community.

The ACTS Retreat offers retreatants the opportunity to experience God's love by retreating from the world and its distractions. A sacred space invites them to turn their attention and focus on their relationship with God. Rather than scripting or instructing how the retreatants should experience God, the team surrenders themselves to be instruments of the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to work and speak through them so that the retreatants might experience God's love in a way that encounters the retreatants where they are in their own personal journeys. In this way, the ACTS Retreat fosters an encounter with one another and, through this experience, an encounter with the living God.

Discipleship is fostered through this encounter, and God's love causes a conversion of heart that inspires each person to serve in loving response to what they have received and experienced. The team's service and testimonies show the retreatants what life can be like after an encounter with and in service to Christ. While this is shown in the ACTS Retreat, the team members' discipleship should extend to different parts of the parish's life. Their service demonstrates to the retreatants a life of discipleship, not a superficial concept or short-lived calling reduced to ACTS.

The choice of discipleship is what builds parish community because the reason for this choice is Jesus Christ. The encounter with Christ during the ACTS Retreat serves to unify the attendees because of a shared experience. The team and retreatants come from the parish. They depart from there to begin their spiritual journey and return as participants in the Body of Christ at Sunday Mass. The parish is what has made the ACTS Retreat possible. The parish is where the retreatants can gather after the ACTS Retreat to encounter Christ in community, in liturgy, and in the sacramental life. The parish is the place where they are spiritually nourished and fed, where discipleship is celebrated and matured, and

where they are empowered to go forth and witness to the Gospel by their lives.

KEY CONCEPTS

Parish-Based

The parish-based component is where ACTS finds its place in the life of the Church and how it honors the intent of the creators to build parish community. It is common to think of parishes as a building or campus of buildings that make up a local church. However, the Church teaches that parish is the People of God in a geographical region that come together to worship and celebrate the Eucharist. (CCC 2179) Led by the parish pastor, the people serve one another in community and go forth to be living witnesses to the Gospel. ACTS is a tool that invites parishioners to love one another by offering a living witness of service and testimony. Parishioners are selected to lead the ACTS Retreat and to serve on the ACTS Retreat Team. The parish pastor shepherds the process in a way that allows the laity to grow as leaders and engage their faith, while guiding them spiritually and theologically. The focus of every activity is to serve the retreatants who will attend the upcoming retreat. Service fosters community among the parishioners through an encounter with Jesus Christ which, while deeply personal, is also part of this shared, communal experience.

Lay-Led

ACTS cultivates lay leadership and participation in the life of the Church. The ACTS Retreat is both an invitation and an example of this effort. Retreatants see their peers in a new type of leadership role oriented in service and are inspired to join in this activity. The team formation process helps team members develop into servant leaders by giving them faith-based tasks meant to benefit others. Retreat leaders are tasked with helping team members grow to that end. All are called to step beyond the

retreat environment to exercise this service and leadership in the life of the parish. Lay parishioners fulfill the leadership role as stewards of ACTS. Stewardship indicates a responsibility to care for something received versus a sense of ownership that ACTS is exclusive to the laity. The lay-led retreat activity occurs as part of the parish community and always with the consent of the parish pastor. The parish pastor remains the legal and canonical agent of the parish and, as such, should be kept informed about all parish activities including ACTS. The parish assumes liability for team formation and retreat activities. Leadership in ACTS is not a means to its own end but rather to build parish community in collaboration with the parish pastor.

Catholic

Every component of ACTS is rooted in the Catholic faith, beginning with Sacred Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the Second Vatican Council. It is expressed in rituals, practices, the celebration of liturgy and sacraments, and devotions incorporated into the ACTS Retreat. Teams must familiarize themselves with what is appropriate for each component, how it conforms to the instruction given by the Church and get guidance from their pastor or his liaison as needed.

Given the universal nature of the Church and the international presence of ACTS, ACTS Missions also accounts for the diverse expression of the faith. Each parish's unique experience should be celebrated in the different cultures, customs, and traditions that makeup local churches. When discerning an authentic local expression of the Catholic elements used in the ACTS Retreat, ACTS Missions reminds all to do so in a way that is simple and reverent so that the parish may express its local charism while respecting the global integrity of ACTS. As the *Introduction* recounted, one of the reasons ACTS was created was to extend an ecumenical invitation to "come and see" (Jn 1:39) the beauty of the Catholic faith through the ACTS Retreat experience. When making this invitation, ACTS Missions recommends that parishes respectfully explain to non-Catholic retreat attendees that ACTS is Catholic in its expression and identity and that the goal of the retreat is to build parish community.

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