It was about 12 years ago that I really fell in love with photography. I had gotten some equipment, and decided to head out to the Black Hills to try it out.

My journey took me to a place called Bear Butte, a state park in South Dakota where I got to see rolling clouds over the butte which is a sacred spot to the Cheyenne people. I went through the Badlands and saw big horn sheep, buffalo and western meadowlarks and the sun painted the rocks at sunrise and sunset. I saw animals running around at Custer State Park; got great views on a hike up a mountain called Harney Peak where I struck up a conversation with a Catholic woman who sent me some water she had gotten from Lourdes in exchange for taking her picture, and drove out to Devil's Tower after a stop at a diner in Aladdain, Wyoming where they had home made pie and great meals. The sun set behind me at Devil's Tower, and I happened to be the only one there that night and a deer posed for me as I took a photo.

I guess from that point on thus began a photography obsession, but also something more, and that is a rediscovery for the tranquility of nature. As one of my favorite professors spoke once in class of going to Rome each year to deepen his faith, part of my journey out into nature is a way to deepen my faith too.

Heather Kirk, who is also a photographer and a writer, calls such places "thin places." In her words, the Celtic Christians called such places "thin places" in reference to where the membrane between heaven and earth was thinner than other places. She found hers speeding across the Caribbean Sea, looking at waves reflecting the most amazing blue, against alternating sandy and rocky shores edged with protected, lush green forest. She recalls one moment in her life when she was there and suddenly a combination of joy and peace touched the top of her head, filled her up, and then, with a woosh, pushed out through her sandy toes. It was as if the breath of God had passed through her, or as if she had passed through it. The thought paired with this joy was, she says, "I need to live here."

At the time she was a 44 year old single woman with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue, so the task felt overwhelming. She spent the next six months praying to God to guide her and give her a sign, until it dawned on her that she had just gotten her sign. A much less dramatic, but just as clear inclination led her to move to the capital city of the Dominican Republic where she had one friend. She saw him on the third day of her arrival, then not again for 5 months as he was driving teams of aid workers across the border into Haiti after an earthquake.

Within 2 weeks, she found a place to live, moved in, organized her space, and discovered that she spoke Mexican Spanish, not Dominican Spanish (enough to make life difficult) in a city with 3 million people, yet no geographical concentration of experts. She now found herself very lonely and far away from that "thin place" and God.

She struggled with loneliness and depression, questioning her decision to move. Did she sell her belongings and disrupt her life to lie on a bed, exhausted, staring up at the ceiling fan and wish she could have afforded a room with air conditioning? With

communication problems (both interpersonal and technological), transportation constraints, monetary limits, college students striking nearby (resulting in tear gas wafting into her room), the dangers of traveling alone as a woman, lack of friends, and getting sick whenever she ate out, she felt, to put it bluntly, imprisoned.

From the rooftop of her building, she could see the ocean, too far away for her to walk to until she built up a tolerance for the heat. She could also see groupings of trees here and there. But at ground level, nature disappeared behind buildings and concrete. She saw only locked gates, high walls, roads full of potholes, vehicles pressing into all available space, and visible pollution spouting from tailpipes. She felt crowded in and conspicuous, with her tall, bond head a walking target for deception and men seeking visas to the United States. Her view was closed-in, fearful and limited - “tunnel vision of the heart” is how she called it. Other than gasping sobs of loneliness cried into her pillow, even her breathing became timid and shallow. She had become a different person. The confident, friendly artist she says who arrived was now locked behind her own newly constructed walls.

Finally, with a visit to the Jardin Botanico Nacional de Santo Domingo, she stepped into another world - a surprising paradise of open space, pretty, brick-patterned sidewalks, and sprawling ponds full of blooming water lilies. She unfolded the map more and more, revealing paths to many different botanical worlds waiting to be discovered. She noticed her constricted lung releasing all her pent up sadness and anxiety. She was now safe in a world she understood; flowers and landscapes, color and photographic opportunities. She breathed deeply for the first time in months. She noted that she was standing, per the map, in what was called the “lung of the city,” a large protected area helping to clean the polluted air and provide oxygen to the crowded city.

Later, looking at the photographs she took, she saw her instant transformation in the petals of the water lilies. From being closed up and alone, to feeling the breeze, being caught up in its motion, accepting whatever life has to offer. She saw beauty had always been there, even when her eyes were closed. In the garden, and in the images, she learned it was safe to open up and breathe.

A few days after what she calls her “virtual lung transplant” she sat on an urban park bench a block from her rented room that she had sat on a week before. The park was actually a large, bricked median in the middle of a busy street. Above her head, large maroon and yellow flowers bloomed in columns from hanging vines that previously, she was sure, had been long, dried sticks hanging from a dark sky. She looked up at the immense green canopy above her, spreading from a giant tree, majestic and lush.

How could she have not seen the tree before, she wondered. She confessed she had never seen it’s sprawling roots, but all the green leaves she also never saw before. For the first time since living there, she looked up. She visited the bench often in the months that ensured, as well as walked the side streets where she found balconies with bougainvilleas spilling over their railings and plumeria trees peeking out of walled-in

yards. But the shift of her mindset now placed her inside with the flowers, instead of alone and locked out.

Faith, Heather says, is a strange thing, needed a place in which to rest. She learned she had to take her faith about the decision to move to the Dominican Republic out of a fleeting feeling on a speedboat and into the hands of the God of all creation - otherwise she says she would not emotionally survive the many trials she faced. She could again recall the rush of God's Spirit running through her, from head to foot, and remember to breathe - but this time she promised to find, and hopefully create for others, "thin places" wherever she went.

The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while."

The apostles in the Gospel re-join Jesus, and they are tired and hungry from their first experience of mission. And note how Jesus responds to their needs. Jesus will feed them, and right after this passage is the feeding of the five thousand from the loaves and fishes. But first comes rest. Jesus then begins to teach them. Then they are fed. (Notice a little of the pattern of our Mass there too?).

Rest is worth thinking about, because sometimes we don't think about it as much as we should.

Perhaps like Heather when she made this career and life change you are stressed and ruminating about things. Maybe you are a bit overwhelmed between the job, the volunteering, the kids sports leagues and the household chores. Maybe the kids are a bit overwhelmed too. And this is while it's important to work, we also have to think about rest too, and with that a Christian sense of rest.

Rest in and of itself is quite important. Our brains are actually designed to have regular rest periods. Scientists divide our brain into two modes of processing. There's action-oriented, where we process data and we use this while working, watching TV, scrolling on our phones, etc. And there's what's called the default mode network or DMN, and this is the mode we are on when the mind takes a break to wander inward. For instance maybe you're reading a book and realize I didn't capture much of what I just read because I was thinking about tomorrow or dinner or vacation, or as a seminary buddy said during a homily from some preachers at seminary he didn't remember it because his mind was in his "happy place," that's the DMN part of our brains. (Surely this doesn't happen at Saint Joe's though right?). The point is that more restive mode of our brain is important; it gives us time to sort things out. According to Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a professor of education, psychology and neuroscience, "it creates rejuvenation in the brain, when you can chew on or consolidate information and make meaning out of what's going on in your life" and we need to use this mode daily. So what that looks like in action is what Heather was doing in the garden, but began doing daily on the bench. When we contemplate and rest and are reflective, we think about our life, our plans for

the future, our problems. It also helps us form memories; memories of my time in nature for instance, or just sitting with Kirby or Emmett my beloved dogs, or from childhood of using my imagination with my grandfather, these I carry with me and can give me strength. So it's so important to have a rest period daily, even throughout the day. Playing a game or watching a program you like is all well and fine, but consider some truly quiet time in your yard or going for a walk or just having some silence for reflection. This goes for kids too; many parents are well aware of how kids can become addicted to their phones (sort of like us adults). Simple things like encouraging kids to get outside and play, or putting away the phone while the family has a meal and converses, or going on nature hikes together can really do a lot and are important.

However, with that, we'd end there if this were a self-help group. Jesus also wants to journey with us on our restful periods.

For Heather, she heard God through being alone in nature. As she put it, the spirit of God filled her. Noise is all around us. So how do we sit with God is a good question. Contemplation is when we raise the mind to God and to the things of God; not as a problem to be solved or something to necessarily figure out but as a gift. Contemplation allows us to think about things more deeply, and to hear the voice of God. I try to find silent moments in many different ways; from being up at sunrise to take pictures in a national park; to being in the woods and looking at a bird; to sitting alone in the church and praying and looking at the tabernacle and stained glass; to sitting alone on my couch next to my golden retriever friend Emmett. In these moments we can hear God speaking to us. Like Heather in that garden, we can gain clarity. So find your space and enter into it as much as you can. Sometimes that might be a vacation at a peaceful place, but it can occur daily too even if just for a few moments when the household is quiet early and late in the day. We need these times to let our Lord speak to us.

Resting and listening though also can entail activity with others that brings enjoyment. Part of the horror of the lockdowns during the height of Covid was how they isolated people. This is why things like a family dinner are important. Why the State Fair is important, and our Harvest Festival are important. When humans come together at events and talk and spend time together, we are able to step outside of our worlds for a bit and truly connect with others. For instance I meet up with a friend at the State Fair every year, and am out there about 10 hours and carry those memories with me all winter. How much do we learn from looking at someone's face and listening to their story? How are our lives lifted from the memory of being at a sporting event with loved ones or having a meal with them away from technology and listening to how their day was? These events are important pauses in our lives that allow us to relax but also to connect more deeply both with family and other people.

And lastly through it all, balance. Jesus goes with the disciples to the deserted place, but people find out where He is and rather than ignore them, Jesus ministers to them. In our lives we need that balance for ourselves and our families. On the one hand we avoid sloth; sitting around the house all day watching Netflix or playing video games and getting to work to our jobs and our tasks or taking care of the house. On the other hand,

a little time for entertainment and then also silence and contemplation and rest is equally important. So here, just looking at yourself and your family and being honest if you're overextended. Not feeling guilty if you put away the phone or the kids' phone (or even refrain from letting your kid have a phone, somehow we survived!), or making sure there's time in you and your family's schedule for simply resting. When we have that balance, our mental and spiritual tanks aren't empty and we can live out our vocations better.

Information and technology surrounds us, but unfortunately I think there's also sometimes this sense in some of us to always be doing and going, going, going. When we do that and fail to find deserted places, what we'll find is a higher stress level and we also won't be able to do our other tasks to the best of our ability. Small wonder sometimes adults and kids and families can be under such stress. So while we all will have more work to do, let's open our eyes to see the goodness of creation that surrounds us. Let's listen to God and one another. Let's not feel guilty for taking time for rest in our lives to strengthen our souls. Momentarily we will come to be with Jesus at this altar. As we receive Him, let's also strive to find Him and hear Him in different ways, remembering that sometimes in the silence, our Lord speaks the loudest. Listening to Him, maybe we'll hear Him say to us where to apply for the job, when to propose for marriage or enter the seminary, or just a gentle reminder that we are blessed and not alone. Life is busy, and sometimes we forget our Lord is right there to strengthen and feed us and help us. So on our part let's make sure to take the time to hear both Him and one another, never forgetting we all need to take seriously the words He tells his friends, "come away," for when we do we can return with greater strength to complete our mission.