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I found my sense of purpose

By Nontobeko Mhlongo

“Lord I need to meet you there”

“River” by Brian Doerksen

In my short time of being a spiritual director and a giver of the *Spiritual Exercises*, I have had the privilege of meeting people of all ages and from all walks of life. These people were in search of their purpose in life, of their identity, of God and of so much more. I was reminded of how I was in the same place a couple of years ago before I made the *Spiritual Exercises* and received training as a spiritual director from the Jesuit Institute South Africa. In these two journeys of discovery, I found my sense of purpose - to help others in their search in life.

I now work at the Retreat Centre in St Lucia Estuary (in KwaZulu-Natal, north of Durban) in the pristine iSimangaliso Wetland Park, declared as South Africa’s first World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The five ecosystems include the second-highest vegetative dune in the world. Lovely forests abound with birds and antelopes. The walks along the beach are awesome, and there is swimming for those who enjoy it. The natural beauty of the marine life offers an encounter with the mystery of the ocean through snorkelling or deep-sea diving.

The town of St Lucia is quiet, providing a perfect environment for the Retreat Centre to host different groups for workshops or guided and preached retreats. It is a haven for those looking for a restoring and peaceful environment. The Retreat Centre is unique. It is set in an unparalleled natural environment that lends itself to communion with God and nature in the spirit of Pope Francis’ encyclical, “*Laudato Si*”. This place is so full of possibilities to “find God in all things”, as St Ignatius puts it.

Over this past year, I have listened to the struggles and burdens that people are experiencing. The exhaustion and stress of living in a pandemic have affected our world, country, community, family and individuals. People also have fears about faith, particularly of going back to church. Yet, they are spiritually starved and in desperate need of spiritual food that will uplift their spirits. We go through so much daily that we feel suffocated and in dire need of ways to break free.

It is amazing what time away in beautiful, quiet surroundings does for people. It is an opportunity to reflect on one’s life experiences. Here in the silence, one may find one’s identity, joy and inner peace. I have realised from working in the St Lucia Retreat Centre that the natural environment contributes a great deal in helping people have profound experiences and encounters with God. It is in the silence of the surroundings that the mind also stills. Then one can have meaningful conversations with God or even with oneself. In these moments spent in silence, we again come to understand what and who we believe in. We discover our true selves, so the silence of our minds and hearts becomes ‘our river’ as Brian puts it, ‘the place where we meet our Lord’.

This river where we are to meet our Lord is the most important place for us all, especially in these times of uncertainty.

