

FIRST BELONG TO  
**GOD**

ON RETREAT  
*with*  
POPE FRANCIS

AUSTEN IVEREIGH

Foreword by Pope Francis



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Pope Francis waving in Saint Peter's square at the Vatican, Rome, Lazio, Italy, Europe

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*For Diego Fares, SJ,  
in memoriam.*

Sample

## **Other Books by Austen Ivereigh**

*The Great Reformer*

*Wounded Shepherd*

and,

co-authored with Pope Francis,

*Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future.*

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# Foreword

*by Pope Francis*

Precisely because of his life experience, St. Ignatius of Loyola saw with great clarity that every Christian is involved in a battle that defines his or her life. It is a struggle to overcome the temptation of closing in on ourselves, so that the love of the Father can make its home in us. When we make room for the Lord who rescues us from our self-sufficiency, we open up to all of creation and every creature. We become channels of the Father's life and love. Only then do we realize what life truly is: a gift of the Father who loves us deeply and desires that we belong to him and to each other.

This battle has already been won for us by Jesus through his ignominious death on the Cross and his Resurrection. In this way, the Father revealed definitively and for all time that his love is stronger than all the powers of this world. But even so it remains a struggle to embrace and make real that victory: We continue to be tempted to close ourselves to that grace, to live in a worldly way, in the illusion that we are sovereign and self-sufficient. All the life-threatening crises that beset us around the world, from the ecological crisis to the wars, the injustices against the poor and vulnerable, have their roots in this rejection of our belonging to God and to each other.

The Church helps us in many ways to struggle against that temptation. Its traditions and teachings, its practices of prayer and confession and the regular celebration of the Eucharist are “channels of grace” that open us to receive the gifts that the Father wishes to pour out on us.

Among those traditions are spiritual retreats, and among those are the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Because of the relentless pressures and tensions of an obsessively competitive society, retreats to “recharge our batteries” have become very popular. But a Christian retreat is very different from a “wellness” holiday. The center of attention is not us but God, the Good Shepherd, who, instead of treating us like machines, responds to our deepest needs as his beloved children.

The retreat is a time for the Creator to speak directly to his creatures, inflaming our souls with his “love and praise” so that we might “better serve God in the future,” in the words of St. Ignatius (SE 15). Love and service: these are the two great themes of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Jesus comes out to meet us, breaking our chains that we might walk with him as his disciples and companions.

When I think of the fruits of the *Exercises*, I see Jesus saying to the paralytic by the pool of Beth-zatha: “Stand up, take your mat and walk!” (John 5:1–16). It is an order that needs to be obeyed and is, at the same time, his most gentle and loving invitation.

The man was internally paralyzed. He felt a failure in a world of rivals and competitors. Resentful and bitter at what he felt he had been denied, he was trapped in the logic of self-sufficiency, convinced that everything depended on him and his own strength. And as the others are stronger and faster than he is, he has fallen into despair. But it is there that Jesus came out to meet him with his mercy and calls him out of himself. Once he opens to Jesus’ healing power, his paralysis, both inner and outer, is cured. He can get up to walk ahead, praising God and working for his Kingdom, freed from the myth of self-sufficiency and learning each day to depend more on his grace. In this way the man becomes a disciple, able to face better not only the challenges of this world, but also to challenge the world to operate according to the logic of gift and love.

As Pope, I have wanted to encourage our belonging “first” to God, and then to creation and to our fellow human beings, especially to those who cry out to us. This is why I have wanted to keep in view the

two great crises of our age: the deterioration of our common home and the mass migration and displacement of people. Both are symptoms of the “crisis of non-belonging” described in these pages. For the same reason I have wanted to encourage the Church to rediscover the gift of its own tradition of synodality, for when it opens to the Spirit that speaks in the People of God, the whole Church gets up and walks ahead, praising God and helping to bring about his Kingdom.

I am glad to see these themes so present in *First Belong to God*, tied to the contemplations of St. Ignatius that have shaped me over the years. Austen Ivereigh has done a great service in bringing together the retreat talks I gave many decades ago with my teachings as Pope. In this way, he allows both to illuminate, and be illuminated by, St. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*.

This is not a time to hunker down and lock our doors. I see clearly that the Lord is calling us out of ourselves, to get up and walk. He asks us not to turn away from the pains and cries of our age, but to enter into them, opening channels of his grace. Each of us is that channel by virtue of our baptism. The question is to open it and keep it open.

May these eight days of enjoying his love help you to hear the Lord’s call to become a source of life, hope, and grace for others, and so discover the true joy of your life. May you find the *magis* that St. Ignatius speaks of, that “more,” which calls us to discover the depths of God’s love in the greater giving of ourselves.

And please, whenever you remember, don’t forget to pray for me, that I may help us always belong first to God.

*Franciscus*

Vatican City, October 12, 2023  
Feast Day of Mary of the Pillar





*We are born, beloved creatures of our Creator,  
God of love, into a world that has lived long before us.*

*We belong to God and to one another, and we are  
part of creation. And from this understanding,  
grasped by the heart, must flow our love for each other,  
a love not earned or bought because all we are  
and have is unearned gift.*

—Pope Francis

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*Only on the basis of God's gift, freely accepted and  
humbly received, can we cooperate by our own efforts in  
our progressive transformation. We must first belong to  
God, offering ourselves to him who was there first, and  
entrusting to him our abilities, our efforts, our struggle  
against evil, and our creativity, so that his free gift  
may grow and develop within us.*

—Pope Francis

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# Introduction

*First Belong to God* grew out of an eight-day *Spiritual Exercises* that I was asked to lead in July 2020 for the British Province of the Jesuits. We were due to meet at St. Beuno's, the Jesuit spirituality center in North Wales, but by then the UK, along with much of the world, was in and out of coronavirus pandemic lockdowns. With St. Beuno's closed to visitors, we went ahead anyway, online, dispersed in our gathering but linked by screens and fellowship and the vulnerability we were feeling at that time.

At that moment it was still not clear how bad it would get and how many might die. For the past three months it had felt as if humanity were being sifted; this was a hinge moment, a threshold. There were so many stories of death and loss and sadness, but also of courage and compassion and new insight. As Pope Francis had told us repeatedly over Easter 2020, a crisis was a time of choosing, and from a time of crisis like COVID, the choices would be decisive. You might come out of it better or worse, he said, but you couldn't come out the same.

It was a good moment, you might say, for a retreat.

Propitious, too, was the theme I had chosen long before the virus struck: the joy of belonging. It was the invitation Francis had been making throughout his pontificate, but felt now with a new urgency. COVID brought terrible, often fatal, isolation, when people felt invisible and hopeless. The suffering of our peripheries—migrant centers, prisons, elderly care homes—was brutal, and suddenly more visible. Institutions were pushed to the brink, and basics we took for granted suddenly scarce. But it was also a time to discover new kinds of belonging, as people looked out for one another, using technology

to create networks of solidarity. We also reconnected with the created world and rediscovered our interior lives. Getting vaccinated and staying at home for the sake of the elderly and vulnerable reminded us that there is a common good that comes before our own interests. As an organizing principle, liberal individualism suddenly seemed not just inadequate but also criminally negligent.

It was as if humanity had been given a time of trial in order to test the very proposition of belonging, to awaken society to what had been forgotten. In his lockdown *Urbi et Orbi* homily on the night of March 27, 2020, when he spoke to the world from a dark, wet, St. Peter's Square, Francis put it memorably: "Amid this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about appearances, has fallen away, revealing once more the ineluctable and blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another."

At the time I gave the retreat for the Jesuits and their collaborators, I had begun to work with Francis on what would be, when it came out later that year, a special little book. *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* was intended for a broad readership without any particular spiritual formation. But it was packed with Francis's wisdom on how humanity could emerge better from the pandemic, born of insights into the way God's grace operates in times of tribulation. This had been something of a special topic for Jorge Mario Bergoglio since long before he became Pope. He had a unique capacity to navigate tempests and bring the boat safely into harbor. It was why the Jesuits in Argentina used to call him the "storm pilot." They must have smiled that night of the *Urbi et Orbi*, when Francis said we had been caught off guard by a sudden storm, and needed now to row together.

*Let Us Dream* showed Francis's reading of the moment: The pandemic was a lens through which we could view the many other pandemics humanity faces at this time. Whether the climate emergency, accelerating inequality and insecurity, vast populations on the move across borders, or the rise in authoritarian populism and national rivalries spilling over into war, ours is an extraordinarily turbulent age. The crises may not have a single cause, but it was clear that meeting the challenges they present would take more than new policies and technologies. Nothing less than a conversion in our way of seeing and way of being was called for.

What was lacking was that "blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another," as Francis explained in *Fratelli Tutti* (32). This could be understood only with a spiritual lens. For Francis, the key to our capacity to confront and grow through these crises is a threefold belonging: to God, to creation, and to one another. The loss of our sense of belonging to a single human family that is part of creation has its roots in closing ourselves off from our Creator. The result is that we are uniquely ill-prepared to manage the transition to a better future.

This crisis of nonbelonging is so well documented by sociologists and psychologists that it has become almost a cliché. Especially in the wealthy West, the statistics, whether on social exclusion, suicide among the young, the fall in the birthrate, or mental ill-health linked to a sense of alienation and "ontological homelessness," are sobering. In her book *On Belonging*, Kim Samuel writes of this as "an age of isolation" in which "much of humanity is grappling with myriad forms of alienation, disenfranchisement, and feelings of separation." Marriage and family, the workplace, culture—all are increasingly marked by what the late Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish-born sociologist and philosopher, who met and had great admiration for Francis, famously called "liquid modernity," in which precariousness in economic and

social conditions lead men and women to perceive the world as a container full of disposable objects, objects for one-off use—including other human beings. Restless, anxious, and insecure, people find it hard to build community, seeking security in a common identity designed to keep the other, the stranger, at a distance. We are living in an age both of decomposing bonds and identity fundamentalism.

Francis has addressed this crisis of non-belonging at its roots. You can track the arc in his major teaching documents, as well as in, after 2017, his dialogues with Bauman, who told the Pope that he saw him as “the light at the end of the tunnel.” The loss of belonging to a single human family that is part of creation is addressed in Francis’s two “Franciscan” social encyclicals, *Laudato Si’*, “On the Care of Our Common Home” in 2015, and *Fratelli Tutti*, “On Fraternity and Social Friendship” in 2020. Before either of those was *Evangelii Gaudium*, “On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World,” which came out in his first year, 2013. Both there and in his short but powerful document on holiness, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, “On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World” in 2018, Francis dealt comprehensively with the first and most important kind of belonging, to God our Creator and Father. In that first relationship of mutuality and reciprocity—the belonging we are born into—is what Christianity traditionally calls salvation: freedom and life for us, and for others. It is at the origin of the two other kinds of belonging.

This theme of triple belonging—to our Creator, to creation, and to our fellow creatures—is closely related to what Francis calls *salir de sí*, or “coming out of ourselves.” His teaching has been organized to help us embrace this self-transcendence, and confront its contrary temptation to close in on ourselves in egotistical self-isolation and distrustful self-withholding. This is the lure of what he calls “self-immanence,” the illusion of self-sufficiency or worldliness. In contemporary culture, this goes by various names—individualism, materialism,

egotism—and is described by Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* when he speaks of loss of the sense of belonging to a single human family. “What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference, born of deep disillusionment concealed behind a deceptive illusion: thinking that we are all-powerful, while failing to realize that we are all in the same boat” (FT 30).

For Francis what causes this tendency to isolation and focus on self-interest is not change per se. As with any age, changes in this one are a mix of good and bad, threat and opportunity. While he is deeply troubled by the social fragmentation of liquid modernity, he is not nostalgic for a previous era, and regards the desire to recover the past as a temptation that in Italian he calls *indietrismo*: a backwards-focus that keeps us locked in desolation. Rather, he recognizes that rapid changes and fragmentation trigger anxiety and fear, and with these comes the temptation to distrust God and close in on ourselves. That’s what was happening on the boat in the storm in Mark’s Gospel (see Mark 4:35–41), which Francis spoke of that night in March 2020 in St. Peter’s Square.

To “come out of ourselves,” then, is to resist these temptations and to recover our deeper belonging. In receiving God’s mercy and in appreciating that all is gift, we open ourselves to new freedom and possibility. We allow the Spirit to guide us into a better future. We regenerate the bonds of our belonging. New life flows into our lives, and into our Church. This is the invitation of Francis’s teaching, and the hoped-for grace of this retreat.

What follows is what I offered the Jesuits and their collaborators but expanded and updated. It follows the broad pattern of a traditional eight-day “preached” version of the month-long *Spiritual Exercises*, moving through Ignatius’s signature meditations and contemplations. Days One, Two, and Three belong to the first “week”; Days Four through Six belong to the second “week”; Days Seven and Eight belong

to the third and fourth “weeks”. There are four reflections for each day and suggestions for prayer. How the material is structured as well as how it may be used—over longer periods, and in groups, for example—is set out in detail at the back, along with a summary framework, an Overview of the Retreat, which maps each day’s themes and readings.

It is a “retreat with Pope Francis” not just in the sense that it is a way into his teachings but also because it quotes from retreat talks he gave as a Jesuit, and later, as cardinal. These talks, most of which have never been published in English, are a treasure trove and a reminder that, before he was elected the 264th successor of St. Peter, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was a formidable Ignatian spiritual director. It is a joy and privilege—if also an intimidating responsibility—to bottle up this fine wine and make it available to the wider Church.

The path to a better future, the future God desires for us, begins in the human heart, in our yearning to belong. In those desires is the road out of our crises, both our own and those of our world. By regenerating the bonds that bind us, in reoxygenating us to receive the gift that is our life and our world, we need first to know and experience the Giver, who is already here, waiting for us. There is no better manual for this than the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius, and no greater spiritual guide in our time than Francis, the world’s first Jesuit pope.

Having received so many gifts from both, my gift to you is to put you in their hands.

May this be a blessed time for you.

# Note on Acronyms

Documents frequently referred to in these pages are referenced in the text by their acronyms, followed by the paragraph or section number in the case of papal teaching documents and the *Spiritual Exercises*, or the page number in the case of *Let Us Dream*. Thus (SE 140) refers to number 140 of the *Spiritual Exercises*, (LUD 89) refers to page 89 of *Let Us Dream*, and (EG 29) refers to paragraph 29 of *Evangelii Gaudium*.

The following acronyms for papal teachings are used in the text:

- AL = *Amoris Laetitia* (2016)
- DD = *Desiderio Desideravi* (2022)
- EG = *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013)
- FT = *Fratelli Tutti* (2020)
- GE = *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018)
- LS = *Laudato Si'* (2015)
- QA = *Querida Amazonia* (2019)

Also included are the following:

- SE = *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*
- LUD = *Let Us Dream*

To avoid footnote numbers cluttering the page in addition to these references, information on other citations and references are given in the Sources section at the back of the book.





*The goal of our life is to live with God forever.*

*God, who loves us, gave us life.*

*Our own response to love allows God's life  
to flow into us without limit . . . .*

*Our only desire and our one choice should be this:*

*I want and I choose what better leads  
to God's deepening his life in me.*

*—St. Ignatius of Loyola*

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# DAY ONE

## Wonderfully Made

*On Understanding Ourselves as God-Belonging  
Creatures, Made Out of Love for Love*

### Created in Love

There is a moment, like this one at the start of our retreat, that the monk writer Thomas Merton called *le point vierge*, the “virginal point.” It is the place of fresh possibility, the moment when things can begin anew. Many of us know it when we stumble on some beauty, truth, or goodness that opens a new horizon, or sense an inrush of the Holy Spirit while in prayer, silence, or solitude. The virginal point brings a joyful, expectant peace; it is to experience, in relief and joy, our true self. It is the point from where we see “the innocence for which we were created, which we have lost and which we can regain,” in Merton’s words.

This is grace, an irruption of the divine, that reveals to us both that we were created and can again be re-created. Many words are spilled to describe these moments, but they cannot match the experience. “I am about to do a new thing,” says the Lord in Isaiah. “Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19a).

“The characteristic common to God and man is apparently . . . the desire and ability to make things,” observed writer Dorothy L. Sayers. This capacity to make, humans have from God; creativity is one of the ways we image our Creator. The first gift of our Creator is creation

itself, which we are handed at birth. “We are not God,” says Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*. “The earth was here before us and it has been given to us” (LS 67).

Because I have written this book, this book belongs to me (at least, in a different way than the way it belongs to you, who may have bought it or been given it). That might seem a strange claim when you think how much it depends on others: Pope Francis for its content; the publishers for editing it and laying it out and getting it into your hands; and you, for whom it was written. Yet as its *author*, I have *authority* over it: in Latin, *auctor* and *auctoritas* denote an ownership that carries with it a particular responsibility.

Just as this book belongs to me because I created it, so, in a far more important and absolute way, do we belong to God who created us. In a lesser way, we belong to those people and places made by him that have also made and helped to form us. Many of them have had authority over and responsibility for us. As products of the places and people that preceded us—their gifts and hurts, their possibilities and limits—we are their creatures too.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” is how it all starts (Genesis 1:1). Before the beginning was the *point vierge*, when the eternal God chose to love the universe into being, to create time and the seasons, the days and the nights. God is the great Maker, and we come to know God best through what he has made and in the act of making itself. Every time a creature is born or a new day breaks or we pause in prayer or we come on retreat, there is a virginal point we are called to attend to, and in the place of that new possibility we can find again the divine power that flows through the universe and in us, that creates and re-creates us.

We can study God; we can debate ideas and concepts of God, but we *know* God directly through experiencing his creation and his re-creation. When we take time to let God seek us out, as we do here

now, we are opening ourselves to this virginal point. “God moves in our hearts to be experienced and then makes us all to be artists of the kingdom,” as artist Makoto Fujimora puts it.

When we told people we were *making* a retreat, did we grasp what that means?

We make a retreat to know our Maker. On a retreat we create space and time for our Creator to communicate with us, his creatures. The word *creation* means more than just “nature,” says Francis in *Laudato Si’*, for in the Jewish-Christian tradition “it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance” (LS 76). We go on retreat to find, or perhaps discover afresh, God’s plan in the design and purpose of his creation—which includes us.

So much thinking and spirituality today is disincarnate, even gnostic. People seek God outside and above creation, in abstraction and purity and complexity. But the creation story of Genesis, the Incarnation in Luke and Matthew, and the Cross in all the Gospels tell us that the reverse is true: in Francis’s words, God is close and concrete. God creates this world as good and beautiful, wanting all his creatures to thrive. And the place we find God is right here, down here with his creatures, “in all things.”

God made the world *ex nihilo* and *ex amore*, as the ancients put it. “Out of nothing” means that creation serves no need of God; he does not create us because he needs us. “Out of love” means that God created us because it is in God’s nature to create, for the sake of creation itself. And so, like a great work of art or craft, we are “wonderfully made” (Psalm 139). As human creatures created *ex nihilo* and *ex amore*, each of us has an in-built significance, a deep value, and an inherent purpose; we are a means to no one’s end, for we are created *out of love*, *for love*.

The distinction made in the Gospels and in St. Paul between “flesh” and “spirit” is not the dualistic distinction between material world and ethereal heaven but between creation and “new creation,” creation created anew by the rising of Christ. To live by the spirit is not to flee our creaturehood but to participate in that new act of creation: in God’s loving, nurturing, healing power, making us afresh.

In opening each of his creatures up to one another, God helps us to be what we are called to be, like a gardener ensuring that every plant and tree in the garden has what it needs to thrive: not just good light, some warmth, rich soil, and water, but also the right relationship with other plants, through roots and flowers and pollinating insects. “In creating a garden world,” writes Norman Wirzba, “God made it clear that human kinship is to be so broad and deep as to include the animals and all the life of the garden. . . . For people to thrive, they need to know they *belong* in their places and communities, grow out of and are benefited by them . . . and can only fully flower if they make mutual flourishing their central concern.”

A retreat makes space for God to issue this invitation through what he has wonderfully made, and that includes our thoughts, feelings, insights, and dreams. When we think of creation, we often ignore this “invisible” dimension. Yet the Church’s ancient profession of belief, the Nicene Creed, declares that God is maker “of all that is, seen and unseen.” Both physical creation and the realm of the spirits (angels both good and fallen) are *created*. Knowing and interpreting the spirits as manifested in thoughts and feelings is the ancient means by which we come to know God and receive his gifts and guidance. It is also the place we discover false or distracting spirits that can block us from receiving those gifts and guidance. In the Church’s tradition, the practice of this very deep kind of wisdom is called *discernment of spirits*.

A unique aid for entering into this consciousness of God and discerning his loving call to us are the *Spiritual Exercises* (SE) of Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), which hereafter I’ll just call “the *Exercises*.” For five centuries, using silent prayer and imaginative contemplations, this little retreat manual has helped people encounter and follow Christ more deeply. Now we have a Jesuit pope deeply formed by those same *Exercises*.

In his notes at the start of the *Exercises*, Ignatius takes it for granted—for this was his experience—that the Creator communicates directly with the creature, who opens herself to him, by inflaming her soul “with His love and praise” and disposing her toward the ways in which she might “better serve God in the future” (SE 15). God communicates to us, says Ignatius, through what God has created, both the created visible and the created invisible.

We make a retreat to return to our place in the God-created garden world, to receive good things from our Creator, to hear what he has to tell us, and to receive his guidance to become more deeply *the thing for which we were made*.

We pray, at the start of this retreat, for the grace to desire what God desires for us when he looks at us. We pray for an attitude of grateful receptivity. For it is only by “coming out of ourselves”—the fruit of the Spirit’s action in us, to which we open in trust—that we allow God’s life to flow in and through us, and out to others, and so become co-creators with him of a new creation.

## POINT FOR REFLECTION

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In what ways am I already aware that God speaks to me through his creation? What other ways might I be open to?

## SPIRITUAL EXERCISES, DAY 1 (WEEK I)

### The Principle and Foundation (SE 23)

- *Review your belonging:* Make brief lists (don't analyze) under two headings: (1) *Where* do I belong? To whom, to what? (2) *How well* do I belong?
- *Prepare for prayer:* Consider "that God our Lord beholds me" (SE 75) and ask for grace "that all my intentions, actions, and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of His Divine Majesty" (SE 46). Note the word *purely*!
- *Consider:* "The Gospel of Creation" (chapter 2 of *Laudato Si'*) and Psalms (e.g., 17, 23, 34, 42, 63, 131). Allow yourself to feel God's faithful love for you, and the strength of your ties to him.
- *Contemplate:* Jesus at the start of the Gospel of John (1:35–38), after Jesus returns from his trial in the desert. John the Baptist releases you and another disciple to follow behind Jesus, who turns to ask, "What do you want?" You ask him: "Where do you live?" Jesus invites you to *come and see*. Spend the rest of the day with him; see how he belongs to God, to creation, and to creatures. Hear Jesus ask you what it is that you want.

### Contemplate-Discern-Propose

- *Contemplate:* Chapter 11 of the book of Tobit, about the homecoming of a young man who left to find a cure for his father's blindness. Tobit, who is accompanied by an angel (God's grace) and a dog, carries a cure for his father that comes from the natural world. Allow yourself to enter into the joy of belonging, and to contemplate the times in your life (past and/or present) in which you felt or still feel this belonging most deeply.
- *Discern:* What inhibits your belonging? What attitudes or temptations (in yourself, in the culture around you) erode your belonging? Consider the three dimensions of belonging: to God, to creation, to one another.
- *Propose:* What might you be called to consider at the start of this retreat? Is there something in particular you wish to hold before God during this time?