

Suggestions for hosting a retreat:

Length of retreat—over the last few years, I have noticed a trend away from Friday night-Saturday retreats and keeping retreats as an all-day Saturday event. For many people, traveling to and from the event location is simply too much given busy work weeks and childcare so limiting the event to a single day is the most successful schedule.

Sessions and breaks—studies have shown that people can take in new material for about 50 minutes before they need a break for their brain to integrate that information, so I recommend 45 min sessions followed by 15 min of Q&A and then a 10-15 min break. Here is a sample schedule for a Saturday retreat:

9:30-10	Registration
10-11	Session 1, Q&A
11-11:15	Break
11:15-12:15	Session 2, Q&A
12:15-1	Lunch
1-2	Session 3, Q&A
2-2:15	Break
2:15-3	Session 4, followed by Q&A

(note: this last session can have a longer and more informal Q&A if people choose to stay longer or want to ask individual questions)

Liturgical services—A retreat day is a big commitment for most people given their family duties and busy schedules, so keeping liturgical services simple (such as brief morning prayer instead of a full Liturgy) or having them prior to Registration can help more people to participate in the retreat.

Childcare—whenever possible, plan for childcare as this will greatly increase participation. I have also seen retreats in which there is a moms-and-babies area in the back of the retreat where mothers have their children play quietly and only take them out if they are being a disruption. While I am perfectly fine with this, not all speakers are, so make sure to check with your speaker about their preferences.

What about lunch? Here are some of the creative meals I've seen at retreats:

- Taco and burrito bar
- “Main dish salad” style salad bar with several kinds of salads such as chicken curry salad, spinach-goat cheese salad, along with green salads & fruit salads
- Two kinds of hearty soup with salad and bread (very economical)
- Make-your-own sandwiches along with cut veggies and fruit
- Pasta bar with several kinds of pasta, salad, and bread

Most events now label food as to whether it is gluten-free (GF), dairy-free, etc.

Note: if you decided to do the Chocolate Table (see below), then you don't need to plan for dessert!

Should we charge for our retreat? Many retreats are offered free to the participants, but it also acceptable to charge a registration fee to help cover the costs of retreats (if you're concerned about participants with less means, you can make your registration fee an optional donation). If you plan on having your retreat as an annual event that you do *not* charge for, consider adding the expense to your annual parish budget so you can plan early and have access to the best speakers (good speakers are in

high demand and are often booked at least a year ahead). If you do charge a fee, you should consider adding some of the “Extras” listed below to give your event more perceived “value”, especially if you want to make it an annual event.

Extras—

- Gift bags—with a gift bag, it’s the thought that counts, so even a simple gift bag with a wrapped chocolate, a single wrapped tea bag, and icon card can be very welcoming to participants. Find out if anyone in your community can obtain promotional items like pens or notepads from local businesses (dentists, doctors, realtors, etc.). Other ideas for gift bags: small purse mirrors (great for women’s retreats), lip balm, wrapped candy, a small art supply like a gel pen or colored pencil, bookmarks, or something goofy like a glow ring or funny sunglasses. If you have crafty people in your community, see if they would be willing to make something to donate to your gift bags. Pinterest has lots of great ideas for inexpensive gift bags. *Note: put one person in charge of gift bags to lessen the main coordinator’s workload.*
- Décor—it’s important to “set the stage” for participants as they walk through the door. Consider bright-colored paper napkins, colored tablecloths, fresh or potted flowers on the tables, maybe soft music playing through registration (Pinterest has a lot of great ideas for inexpensive table settings). Check your restrooms and make sure they are clean and have nice soap and hand lotion.
- The Chocolate Table: have a table where people can bring special snacks to share, such as their favorite chocolate, candy, or baked good. There’s nothing like a room full of people and a table full of chocolate! And, since this can be either store-bought or home-made, it’s easy for everyone to participate.
- Surprise Raffle: if you want to inject some extra energy into your event, consider having a surprise raffle at some point. This can be as simple as putting a sticker on the underside of a plate at lunch and then announcing that whoever gets that plate gets a prize like the speaker’s book or a small icon. Or, you can have each participant enter a raffle at registration by signing a piece of paper and dropping them into a jar from which you’ll choose the winner later in the day. The surprise raffle gets people laughing and having fun!
- Q&A anonymous questions: you can have a box for anonymous Q&A questions along with paper and pen for participants to ask questions they might feel embarrassed or put on the spot to ask in a general Q&A (have this set up at registration so people have time to think of questions). The speaker can then choose the best time to address these questions.