

Unification Theological Seminary Retreat for All Students at Barrytown Campus

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Group photo: Compliments of Muriel Itularde (picture taken by Joy Theriot)

The day was October 26, 2019, Saturday, that all the students from the Unification Theological Seminary were invited to attend a full-day retreat at its original Barrytown Campus in upstate New York.

The two-hour drive from the NY main seminary to Barrytown is beautiful this time of the year, where trees whose leaves were gracefully swaying in an ensemble of colorful shades of mustard yellow, pink, fading greens and brownish hues, dancing playfully as if bowing to its final performance before exiting to its slumber. Inside the car, three middle-aged Theology students and a doting driver, who was also the husband of a seminary student, were on their way to a retreat, a first among the activities of the UTS Student Council affairs, propagated by its president, Bishop Rene Ballenas.

Upon arrival, we were greeted by Marjorie, a student with a big smile as she extended a wide palm, saying, "Your contribution, please?" We all laughed at such a comment and proceeded to dish out our obligations. The attendees all arrived at about the same time, and after situating ourselves in the "Colloquial Room" as we call it, we got down to "business."

Bishop Rene started with a prayer after which he explained the theme for the retreat, "Ways to Affirm and Achieve My Calling." Ms. Joy Theriot, who organized the event, gave a warm welcome and thanked everyone for being present. She then introduced our distinguished speaker and facilitator for the day in the person of no less than the UTS president, Dr. Thomas Ward. We were greatly honored and appreciative that he took time off to impart some valuable information and have fellowship with the students, and that we will always remember.

Earlier, Ms. Joy had informed the attendees to bring laptops and our resumes. We learned the reason for this instruction when Dr. Ward gave each student a questionnaire that led us to an exercise of sorts. The laptop was used to write our individual answers so we could refer back to it at some future time.

The exercises were very simple yet important, as they guided us to insights and acknowledgement of our strengths and weaknesses. It made us realize the importance of having a written plan and the difference between those who write down their plan and those who only think about a wish or goal.

One of the exercises that I truly enjoyed was the "Elevator Speech" wherein you had to deliver a comprehensive message to an anonymous person who you think can help you in the advancement of your career. But the simple task of your concern must be relayed within the time you and the object of your encounter are still in the elevator. It was challenging but nonetheless enjoyable as it demanded our creativity into getting our messages across within a limited time. Dr. Ward gave us some pointers and although the task was difficult at first, we later understood the challenge by conquering our weaknesses and mastering our strengths.

The morning session was disrupted by a call to lunch. Our ever loyal and generous "theologie estudiante" Chef Elena prepared a sumptuous meal of two kinds of grilled fish, assorted veggies, a delicious pancit and rice. I brought to share stewed chorizo with green olives and a simple macaroni salad to pair with.

While gorging on our meals, Robin James Graham and former UTS Director of Communication, explained his career path and how he organized his Non-Government Organization by using sports (football) as a tool for his platform in promulgating peace. The PEACE CLUB commenced as a necessity to alleviate peoples' lives from dependency and adversities experienced as caused by addiction of sorts. Its main goal was taking out from its addiction and add the missing components such as to present a life of quality over convenience, innovation over convention, and people over profits. The organization's projects and services had spread its wings and was able to reach about 140 countries all over the world and continues to do so. Kudos to Robin James Graham for being an inspiration and an epitome of an expression to a worthy calling.



Photo with Bishop Rene Ballenas, Robin James Graham and Ute Delaney

After lunch, we resumed our exercise and listened to some students who were not able to share their experiences in the first session. Continuing on, we were tasked to share some revelations about ourselves that other people would be surprised to know. It was indeed a great exercise because it made us realize that outside of a person's physical appearances lies something sentimentally deep, heartwarmingly sincere, and devoutly passionate. As a result, the realization of getting to know a person makes us appreciate the individual's uniqueness and with an insightful encounter of the other makes it all the more meaningful.

During our afternoon break, Dr. Ward gave us a quick tour around Barrytown Campus where he explained its history, pertinent stories of student life and concerns, and relevant structures with its meanings such as how the building was constructed and was home to members of the Livingston clan, which included President Theodore Roosevelt and his niece, future First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Theodore Roosevelt himself spent an entire month at Barrytown in his childhood. No afternoon is complete without group pictures and tremendous selfies as the scene is breathtakingly captivating.

The final session by Dr. Ward was the best as he gave us tips and suggestions; his messages to us were "en pointe" and relevant to its application in the present. His suggestions on internships and the like are but some of the ways to be adept in the future of our chosen careers. Educating and equipping ourselves will prepare us in the battle of life, and the confidence in mastering our own true self is the best that we can offer back to the world.

The sessions ended with some activity and fellowship, which was followed by an early dinner before going back to the city. The relaxed atmosphere of student camaraderie and sharing of experiences boosted student solidarity and teamship. For not only did we accomplish what we came for we conquered the RETREAT.

The definition of RETREAT, as stated in meaning could be a withdrawal or a step to move back....But to me, my interpretation of the word is a definition in two syllables. RE (meaning again) and TREAT (prescription/snack/cure/treat). Ergo, my retreat is another move towards a better path which is a prescription for a better understanding of life – therefore a better one -- a meaningful one. IN my simple terms – RETREAT is "Receiving another treat." And true enough, all us that afternoon felt fulfilled – body and soul.

As Noel, an attendee said, "This is the best retreat ever. I learned a lot." And my answer was I CONCUR.