



A chance to retreat

by Jeff Parrott



Spiritual retreats help those who struggle with homelessness and addiction move forward.

Denise Vasquez awoke one night in November 2015, slumped over in a chair after drinking at least a gallon of vodka.

She knew she had to either find more alcohol to avoid a withdrawal seizure or quickly seek medical help.

For the first time in years, she wanted to stop drinking.

For the first time in years, she prayed.

“I want to live!” the 43-year-old Denver woman recalls telling God before dialing 911.

Over the next five months a sober Vasquez, having grown up in a church-going family, reconnected with God while living at the Salvation Army’s Denver Adult Rehabilitation Center. After seven years of hard, usually solitary, “blackout” drinking, where she had isolated herself from her family and friends, Vasquez had already made great strides toward regaining control of her life.

But it was an experience outside the center, presented to her and five other homeless women who were recovering from addiction, that Vasquez says gave her the tools to remain sober. The women spent a weekend in April 2016 at the Loretto Spirituality Center in Littleton, Colorado where they participated in an Ignatian Spirituality Project retreat.

“It’s a beautiful environment,” she recalls. “The whole area is so rich in nature, and I connect with nature. It just brings me right back to connecting with God, so the whole experience was so spiritual for me.”

Vasquez says she had no idea where the retreat center would be but arrived there to realize that she had lived in apartments across the street and had grown up only five miles away.

“When I got there it just seemed like God was taking me home, taking me back to my roots, back to a time in my life when my addiction wasn’t controlling my life,” Vasquez says. “Being with the women and interacting, the praying and the singing and the sharing, everything about it was so soul-filling for me.”

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Courtesy of the Ignatian Spirituality Project

The Ignatian Spirituality Project offers ongoing accompaniment after the overnight retreats. Here, homeless men and women gather in Chicago at the May day of reflection.

A spiritual gift

Cofounded in 1998 by Jesuit Father Bill Creed in Chicago, the Ignatian Spirituality Project (ISP) will celebrate its 20th birthday next year. The retreats immerse participants, typically people recovering from addictions and living in transitional housing, in the Spiritual Exercises written by St. Ignatius of Loyola, a Spaniard who founded The Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits, in 1540.

Over the program's first decade, Creed ran it essentially out of his own pocket, says Tom Drexler, the Chicago-based nonprofit's executive director. Creed would call friends in cities, such as Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Baltimore, who he thought would be interested in offering the retreats, and they ran them successfully.

But in 2006 an anonymous Catholic family-run foundation in New York City approached Father Creed and offered him the funding to grow the program nationally. Word spread by mouth, and the ISP office began receiving more calls from transitional housing providers and retreat centers. Over the past 10 years the list of cities with ISP teams has grown from eight to 30.

"The need was finding us," Drexler says. "Usually it was women and men who wanted to reach

the homeless community in a way that it hasn't been reached. That's through the spiritual component that each of us have."

Volunteer teams in each city ask local transitional housing providers to refer retreatants. Typically they have been sober for at least 60 days, and through that process have been working a 12-step recovery program emphasizing the critical role that God must play in helping them achieve and maintain sobriety.

"Obviously we don't deal with people who are opposed to the spiritual life or to opening themselves up to a relationship with God," Drexler notes. "It won't work then."

Drexler acknowledges that an atheist or humanist might believe that a person has intrinsic value, and that belief might motivate them to obtain the sobriety needed to escape homelessness.

"That might be effective," he says. "We know that it's effective, though, through the spiritual experience of a retreat. Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) said you have to get a spiritual program. If not, sobriety's not going to work. There's a recognition in AA and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) that there's a higher power

out there, and it's that higher power that's going to provide me with the grace I need to move forward."

Drexler says that Bernard Lonergan, the Canadian Jesuit philosopher, said that transformation "begins with a spark. We really believe that spark is felt on these Ignatian retreats."

Indeed, the ISP extends the spiritual focus well beyond the 12 steps. The weekend begins with the Ignatian Daily Examen, which asks the retreatant to reflect on their day, identifying ways in which God was both present and not present. There's an emphasis on finding God within the person's experiences.

"You're looking at the beauty of your life and the trouble of your life, and you're locating God in that," Drexler says. "You're experiencing the unconditional love of God in that, the trouble and the beauty, which can bring a tremendous sense of hope."

That reflection, teaching retreatants how to identify God in their own lives, is a key to helping them feel a sense of self-worth, which frees them from their addictions, says Eileen Meinert, ISP's volunteer city coordinator in Houston.

"It's really about the movement," Meinert explains. "We're not focusing on the problem. We're focusing on the spiritual solution: that God wants you to be free. The Ignatian Spirituality Project can help you move toward that freedom, to help you become who God wants you to be."

In addition to being clean and sober for 60 days, transitional housing providers are asked to refer retreatants who are open to not only listening to others but also to sharing their own experiences.

"They have to be not only able to receive from the retreat but to contribute also," Meinert says. "This is all about being a companion."

Some retreatants, including Vasquez, are trained to return later as facilitators or witnesses.

"There's a tremendous sense of isolation with homelessness," Drexler says. "So to find a community of similar folk and to see tangible signs of people who have moved forward with their lives, that's powerful."

Saintly inspiration

Unlike Vasquez, ISP retreatant Rene Petaway didn't feel quite like she was near death in 2009, but she was an alcoholic who suddenly found herself homeless for the first time in her life. After retiring from her job of 20 years as a teacher, Petaway, then 60, moved from Connecticut to Washington, D.C. to live with her daughter and her daughter's husband, both attorneys. The plan was that she would

live in their basement and watch their baby, allowing her daughter to return to work.

But the couple quickly grew tired of her drinking. They didn't want her driving the children after drinking, so they asked her to leave.

"I wasn't familiar with being homeless," Petaway says. For four months she slept in her car or at various hotels and at rooming houses. "It was horrible."

Her daughter helped her get into N Street Village, a homeless shelter for women in Washington.

"I just couldn't believe it had gotten to that point," she says.

There, a woman named Joyce invited her to an ISP retreat.

"I told her I would go to support her, but I wasn't interested in anybody preaching to me about what I needed to do in my life," Petaway says.

At the retreat she listened to the other women's stories, and at first she couldn't relate to them. But then she heard Joyce talk about the difficult relationship she'd had with her mother, and she immediately identified with that story. Petaway's mother, she says, had left her at the hospital after she was born.

Then Petaway heard other retreatants talk about broken marriages and poor relationships with their children, and she realized she had a lot in common with them.

"I thought my drinking was really minor because I could stop, but then I realized, 'Yeah, you can stop, but you can't stay stopped,'" she says.

Petaway also found the entire retreat environment conducive to reflection and meditation. At the homeless shelter, she had been sharing a dorm room with nine other women. She had measured it, and their cots were eight and a half inches apart.

At the retreat house in Maryland, she had her own room, a half-bathroom in her room, and the food was good.

"Just the privacy alone was uplifting," she recalls. "It was just beautiful."

She also felt drawn to the story of St. Ignatius. He had been a soldier who was injured by a cannonball in the Battle of Pamplona, and his reflection during that time led to his conversion to Christianity and a mission to serve others. But before the battle he had been a vain womanizer who cared mostly about himself and longed for personal honor and fame.

"We're focusing on the spiritual solution: that God wants you to be free."

“He seemed like he was a regular dude, a real cool brother who had gone through some things but God forgave him,” she says. “I didn’t look at him as a priest or a preacher or anything like that. He had gone through life and experienced life, on the real side, and was able to come out on the other side.”

On her second retreat Petaway went as a witness and was asked to tell her story. At that time she was at the stage of her recovery where she was working on the steps. She found that by participating in the ISP retreats and follow-up meetings, it helped her stay sober “one day at a time.”

“Above all, it taught me how to find a God of my understanding,” she says. “A major thing was learning how to meditate and pray. All my prayers had all been foxhole prayers. God get me out of this, God help me get this, God I want this, instead of being grateful and thankful for what I do have.”

For the past eight years Petaway has been a volunteer ISP team member, helping other women on the retreats.

A new growth model

Over the past decade the Ignatian Spirituality Project has been adding about two cities a year that host retreats. But at some point maintaining that growth rate would require adding more staff than the Chicago network office can afford, Drexler says. As a result the ISP board of directors

has developed a four-year strategic plan calling for more institutional affiliates, such as Catholic parishes, that can provide local accountability, structure, and funding for the teams.

“We want to let people know that this type of partnership is available to parishes and other organizations,” Drexler says, noting that some existing city affiliates are aligning themselves with institutions in their communities.

“We think it could be exciting for parishes, for retreat houses, potentially for Catholic Charities,” Drexler says. “They run all sorts of shelters, they have feeding programs, they have job training programs. Do they want to add to their array of ministries, an overnight retreat?”

Toward that end, one of the new affiliates this year is Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Parish in Ridgewood, New Jersey. Peter Denio, the parish’s pastoral associate for faith formation, says he felt called by Pope Francis’ invitation to all Catholics to

“accompany individuals, especially on the margins, or those we are not in touch with frequently.”

“I kept thinking about how I could volunteer in as many soup kitchens as possible, or put as many sandwich bags together and drop them off, but it’s really modest in how I’m able to get to know an individual or their life experiences,” Denio says.

To explore whether the model could be a good fit for Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Denio in the spring of 2015 attended his first ISP retreat at the Loyola Retreat House in Faulkner, Maryland.

“It was more than what I had imagined it to be, but certainly tremendously powerful and transformative,” Denio says.

One of the first things you do is introduce yourself to another person and how you came to the retreat. The first person Denio spoke with was in his late 50s or early 60s and had been incarcerated for 40 years of his life.

“My first comment was, wow, you know what, you’ve been in jail for most of my life,” Denio recalls.

The man came from a broken home, where he received little support, which led him to risk-taking behaviors and gang involvement. He had been shot, had shot other people, and been on drugs.

“These are not things I see on a day-to-day basis,” Denio says, “nor do I hear somebody who has had that experience and lived to tell about it.”

Denio believes his fellow parishioners cannot only serve others by volunteering in the new ministry but can also grow themselves as Catholics by encountering people they otherwise never would have. He sees that as especially critical at a time when America’s income gap is ever-widening and its politics are so polarized.

That aspect appealed to parishioner Joe Roche, who, along with three others, volunteered to help facilitate the first ISP retreat serving 10 men living at a transitional housing center in nearby Paterson, New Jersey in April.

Roche, a 55-year-old married father of two children in their 20s, also has some personal connections to alcoholism and found the ISP story “very inspiring.”

“While I didn’t know what to expect, or what I could bring to the ministry, I was inspired to step outside my comfort zone,” Roche says.

Roche recalls having had high hopes and anxiety going into the weekend, and he worried that he was doing it just to make himself feel better. In the weeks before the retreat, he says he prayed constantly for the Lord’s guidance.

“That retreat was exactly what I needed, and I was ready for it. Not everybody is ready for it.”



Retreatants from the November Detroit homeless overnight women's retreat continue to share their story during an art activity.

“So I held my breath and I jumped,” Roche says. “Through God’s grace, all of us there were able to connect with each other. Our humanity made us gel. Our honesty allowed us to grow in connection, and the retreat center offered us all a peaceful environment to share our faith in real and open ways.”

Roche says he came away with an entirely new outlook on addiction and homelessness and an eagerness to do more to remedy these problems.

“It is my hope that by starting this ministry at Mount Carmel, we can begin to raise awareness, to bridge the gap and save lives,” Roche says. “These are our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters that are affected.”

Measuring spiritual growth

Those who have participated in the retreats come away refreshed and determined to change their lives. But do they really? Does that commitment last? A DePaul University pilot study, published in 2015, yielded some positive outcomes.

The study, coauthored by Drexler, surveyed 35 women and 23 men on their levels of loneliness and addiction before and then again six months after the retreats. Over time participants reported significant decreases in loneliness, a critical factor in addiction recovery.

While he finds that result encouraging, Drexler says ISP is working with researchers at DePaul and Loyola University to conduct another outcome survey in multiple cities, “over however long a period

of time they would say is needed to show that these changes have taken root.”

“It’s tough to measure spiritual growth, but that’s what we’re trying to do,” he says. “There are scales out there though that measure one’s sense of hope.”

As thrilled as Vasquez, the Denver retreatant, has been with how her ISP retreat experience helped her reconnect with God, she was saddened to see that a friend who attended the retreat with her relapsed nearly seven months later. In late May that friend, who had arrived at the Salvation Army three weeks before she did, overdosed, dying alone in a hotel, Vasquez says.

“I didn’t see that same passion in [her], and I’m not trying to judge it,” she says. “It just wasn’t the same. When she would speak about things, it wasn’t all about God. Today there is nothing in my life minus God. That retreat was exactly what I needed, and I was ready for it. Not everybody is ready for it.”

Vasquez realizes that she also could relapse at any time. Some weeks she attends 12-step meetings every day. She has made new friends, sees a counselor, and makes prayer a daily priority.

“Today I can have a bad day, and I think back to those moments (on the retreat),” she says. “I have letters that I wrote to God during that retreat. I pull those out and I read them, and it connects me to that time, that space with God, where I was . . . remembering those moments and how connected I felt, and what can I do right now to get connected again?” **USC**