

# THE CHANGING NATURE OF RETREATS

By John Burnes

Recognizing societal changes and a stigma that goes with “old school” retreats as being out of touch with today’s world, The Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos and Loyola Institute for Spirituality are finding fresh ways to bring Ignatian spirituality to contemporary Christians.

Attorney Claire Kalia of Los Gatos had a powerful moment of being near God when she was co-directing a meditation and centering prayer retreat in April 2013. “I went outside The Jesuit Retreat Center with many of the other retreatants to practice walking meditation,” she says. “I had my newborn baby strapped to my front, the sun was warming my face, and the air was fragrant with spring flowers. My gaze met the statue of the Virgin Mary with her baby, looking down at all of us with peace and love. At that moment I felt utterly content, and God felt so very near. It was a beautiful experience.”

Mary Margaret Flynn, a retired psychiatrist from San Carlos, experienced God anew on her retreat on Ash Wednesday 2014 while walking a labyrinth constructed by volunteers at the retreat center. “I scanned the horizon ahead, heard birds singing, the squirrels scampering about...then I saw beautiful trees with new spring leaves, the hearty bushes, green grass, brown dirt, hills, and

the falcons soaring above,” she remembers. “I felt called to enter more deeply into the mystery of faith, seeking to do God’s will.”

Both Kalia and Flynn experienced God deeply, which is the goal of a Jesuit retreat. They were led to their experiences with fresh programming nearly unheard of 20 years ago at any Jesuit retreat center. Their powerful experiences show the promise and challenge of The Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos (JRC) and the Loyola Institute for Spirituality (LIS) in Orange – as they adapt to a changing society.

“The world is immensely more complicated than just a few decades ago,” says Tom Powers, executive director of The JRC and holder of a doctorate in sacred theology. “We are called to meet the needs and desires of the Christian people of the 21st century.”

## Changing Needs, Changing Approaches The Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos

“The Jesuit Retreat Center is working to name the needs of contemporary Catholics, and then to provide the opportunities for these needs to be met,” Powers said. “It’s always been about finding God in all things, which is inherent in the spirituality of Ignatius. But times are different. Now we must do that in an expanding list of ways – finding God in literature and film, in chronic illness, in struggles with faith when you see people dying, or in being young and not being able to talk about your faith. Where do



you find God in all of that? That's what we're trying to do – making sure there are as many opportunities as possible to help people discover the presence of God."

The old model where a parish would automatically send a group of men or, later, women, to a retreat center – like it or not, no questions asked – is waning in many parts of the country, and the ramifications are clear: Jesuit retreat centers in other provinces have been forced to close due to declining numbers of retreatants.

"What do contemporary Christians need?" Powers asks. "How can we touch them? Where are the faith lives that we can encourage or even rekindle? We're reaching out in different ways now to appeal to new audiences."

Examples of new programming include retreats with subjects ranging from Pope Francis, faith in film and literature, meditation, and the works of Thomas Merton. The JRC, popularly known as *El Retiro San Inigo*, is marketing effectively to target retreats for affinity groups, including lawyers, physicians, those in recovery, those suffering chronic illness, Jesuit alumni, Kairos retreat alumni, university students, women's retreats (led by women), gays and lesbians, young adults, and married couples. The JRC's summer 30-Day Spiritual Exercises and 8-Day retreats also hold great appeal to international retreatants.

Other changes are occurring: *El Retiro* is modifying the manner in which the retreats are led – silent retreats are being reduced, while shorter silent periods are being introduced into otherwise talking retreats so retreatants can unplug. The decrease in the number of Jesuits means retreat centers are reaching out to lay retreat leaders. And, The JRC continues to appeal beyond Catholicism.

A recent weekend of activity reflects these trends and prompted the following message from The JRC: "Busy weekend at the Retreat Center! Today we are happy to welcome Palo Alto University board members for an off-site meeting; 56 retreatants from First Congregational Church of Palo Alto for their weekend women's retreat; and all those attending our 'From Grief to Healing' retreat, kicking off today. We wish you all rewarding and productive experiences here with us!"

Attorney Kalia can see the changes. "I co-directed a mindfulness retreat in 2013 at The JRC, and people were pleased that we

were offering teachings on relevant topics that help people slow down and deepen their spiritual lives," she said.

"The retreat for the legal profession was great because I know many of the people who go, and they are often dealing with many of the same personal and professional and spiritual issues that I am."

While many adjustments are being made, Ignatian spirituality remains the bedrock of the retreats: The JRC offers plenty of centuries-old Ignatian programming, including the most traditional – and demanding – of all Ignatian retreats, the 30-day directed Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. The JRC is the only Jesuit retreat center west of the Rocky Mountains – and one of only three Jesuit retreat houses in the United States and Canada – to offer the 30-day version of the Spiritual Exercises. The summer 8-day retreat, rooted in the Spiritual Exercises, continues to be offered at The JRC along with the extended 19th Annotation retreats, which provide the Spiritual Exercises over a 9- to 12-month period.

The fresh approaches are making a difference. "It's encouraging to see the men and women who have been coming here for years, and also so many first-timers and younger adults who represent the future," Powers says.

Susanna Peebles, a high school choir teacher from Sacramento, recently reconnected to the retreat experience through a program for Jesuit alumni. "I missed the retreats I participated in when I was in high school," she says. "I wanted to do some soul-searching, and the way I remembered doing that best was by being on retreats and having to look inside myself and examine my true feelings.

"It was a little counter-cultural, but some of my friends were almost jealous that I got to spend a weekend away from my busy life and do some major thinking."

“For me, retreats provide a much-needed space and a chance to step back and get some perspective on life.”

– Retreatant Claire Kalia



**Reflect and Share:** Retreatants at The Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos may enjoy a stunning view for reflection (page 16) while Loyola Institute for Spirituality offerings include faith sharing through the Ignatian Experience program at local parishes.



“It is a real challenge for the retreat centers of the future to continue doing God’s work, while financially supporting themselves the best they can,” explains Dr. Jason Pyle, physician and medical entrepreneur, and a JRC board member from Campbell. “As the missions of the retreat centers change to support the needs of a changing world, there is opportunity for a more stable financial relationship with the secular world. There’s such immense human, social, and spiritual value in these centers, as a culture and a people. We need to support them.”

## Ignatius in Motion

### Loyola Institute for Spirituality

Another innovative approach to meeting the needs of contemporary Christians involves going to where they are... without the room and board. The Loyola Institute for Spirituality in Orange was created to do just that. LIS, which opened in 1997 after the closure of the traditional, residential Manresa Retreat House in Azusa, offers daytime and evening programming in classrooms and meeting rooms in its facilities leased from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange. But it also offers instructors and programming that are portable, flexible, and adaptive – they can go wherever people are.

“We are growing, but we want to be careful not to grow too fast,” says Fr. Felix Just, SJ, LIS executive director. “In the last two years, we’ve hired more staff. At least half of our programs serve not just the Diocese of Orange, but also Los Angeles, San Diego, and farther away, too.”

While LIS does not offer the 30-day Spiritual Exercises, since it has no overnight facilities, the LIS staff and their associates guide more than 100 people annually through the “Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life,” also called “19th Annotation retreats” – which are completed over a period of nine months.

“We want to offer many more programs not only in English, but also in Spanish and other languages,” Fr. Just says. “We’ve restarted a three-year training program (for spiritual directors) in Spanish, and we also offer the Spiritual Exercises in Chinese and Korean. And we’ve been offering variations of Ignatian retreats to non-Catholics, too.

“Over the past 10 years, more than 100 people – some clergy and religious sisters, but mostly lay people – have graduated from the LIS 3-year Ignatian Spiritual Formation Program. After graduating,

“Where are the faith lives that we can encourage or even rekindle? We’re reaching out in different ways now to appeal to new audiences.”

– Tom Powers  
Executive Director, The Jesuit  
Retreat Center of Los Altos



**Companions on the Journey:** Small-group faith sharing is an integral part of the Catholic Bible Institute (above) and many of the other spiritual, educational, and pastoral programs offered by Loyola Institute for Spirituality.

most of these people become LIS Associates, who then guide other people through the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life and help our small full-time staff in providing many other spiritual and pastoral programs, thereby multiplying our outreach to many more people in different languages," said Fr. Just.

LIS can bring a wide variety of programming to outside groups. In addition to the traditional 19th Annotation and 8-day retreats, programming includes introducing Ignatian spirituality to parishes; giving parish missions (usually three or four evening presentations within one week on a singular theme); providing spiritual formation for deacons, priests, and lay ministers; assisting groups like the Knights of Columbus with retreats; offering days of prayer for groups of teachers; introducing discernment to lay audiences; and more. Some of these are hosted in the LIS facilities, and some are hosted by the requesting group.

Some programs started just recently are blazing new trails at LIS, such as the Contemplative Leaders in Action (CLA). Ken Cachat, a graduate of the LIS spiritual formation program and now lay spiritual director and chairman of the board at LIS, explains, "We're also working with young adult professionals in their 20s, 30s or 40s – that's the CLA – who might have gone to a Jesuit school and want to continue that connection to Jesuit spirituality."

Br. Charlie Jackson, SJ, who spent most of his career teaching in Bay Area Jesuit secondary schools, now teaches Ignatian spirituality at LIS. It has changed his perspective. "As a Jesuit who has really experienced the life-changing qualities of the 30-day Spiritual Exercises, I used to think that the 'retreat in daily life' (the 19th Annotation) was, shall we say, the budget version," he explains. "That was only until I started directing people in that form. In many ways it can be a more profound experience. They integrate it into their lives every day. Something very dramatic happens to retreatants over those nine months."

"I'm really excited about what we are doing here at the Loyola Institute for Spirituality, and I see this as a model of what Jesuit spirituality ministry is going to become."

## Growing in Union with God

Despite changing times, the reason that many people continue to make an Ignatian retreat has remained constant – to grow closer to God. Medical entrepreneur Pyle sees retreats as "an opportunity for spiritual growth, and a time for mental and physical rejuvenation. On one of the retreats last year, Fr. John Cecero, SJ, (newly named provincial of the Eastern Province) told us that we needed to learn how to 'waste time with God.' It's such a great concept. We are so willing to spend leisure time doing entirely unfulfilling things. Spending leisure time with God has been a real net-positive in my life."

"For me, retreats provide a much-needed space and a chance to step back and get some perspective on life," Kalia says. "They help me slow down, reconnect with God and refocus my goals. The retreats have helped me feel closer to God by giving me the peace to listen, and the space to explore."

"There is a real and growing hunger in people to encounter God in their own lives, in their own ways, to open themselves to God, and to deepen their relationship with God," Br. Jackson says. "That's why we're here, to help them do that." 🌸

# Searching for a Retreat that's Right for You?

Not only do The Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos and Loyola Institute for Spirituality offer retreats for individuals or groups, many other Jesuit ministries offer retreats, meetings or other activities designed to help you or your group strengthen your sense of spirituality. No matter your location, there is probably a center, institute, parish or ministry that can offer retreats or other spirituality services near you.

Here are a number of resources for you to consider:

## The Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos

[www.jrclosaltos.org](http://www.jrclosaltos.org)

(650) 917-4000 • [info@jrclosaltos.org](mailto:info@jrclosaltos.org)

## Loyola Institute for Spirituality

[www.loyolainstitute.org](http://www.loyolainstitute.org)

(714) 997-9587 • [office@loyolainstitute.org](mailto:office@loyolainstitute.org)

## Jesuit Retreat Center of the Sierra (facility for hosted retreats)

[www.uccr.org/camp/Jesuit-retreat-center](http://www.uccr.org/camp/Jesuit-retreat-center)

(530) 878-2776

## Christus Ministries

(retreats for young adults)

[www.christusministries.org](http://www.christusministries.org)

For a directory of Jesuit retreat centers across the U.S., please visit: [www.jesuits.org/retreat-centers](http://www.jesuits.org/retreat-centers).

For a directory of Jesuit parishes across the U.S., please visit: [www.jesuits.org/parish-centers](http://www.jesuits.org/parish-centers).

