



IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY PROJECT

Finding God on the Road to Recovery

BY MICHAEL O'LOUGHLIN



As the United States continues to confront twin crises of homelessness and substance use addiction, the Ignatian Spirituality Project, a national Jesuit ministry, accompanies individuals facing both challenges, leveraging the gift of Ignatian spirituality to help light the path of recovery.

In Washington, D.C., Susan S. volunteers for the Ignatian Spirituality Project (ISP) women's team, helping to lead overnight retreats and spiritual reflection circles for women in recovery who are striving to rebuild their lives.

Susan said that even though she is not Catholic, she was drawn to Ignatian Spirituality because friends had mentioned how the Spiritual Exercises had helped them navigate life's challenges. This led Susan to seek a spiritual director at Holy Trinity Catholic Church, a Jesuit parish in Georgetown, and to attend an Ignatian retreat.

When she stepped back from practicing tax law a few years ago, Susan searched for volunteer opportunities. She was ultimately drawn to ISP because she knew firsthand how important a strong spiritual foundation was for recovery.

"My spiritual experience has been primarily through 12 Step spirituality, and now with doing the Exercises, it has been enhanced," she said.

There are a litany of churches, nonprofits, and governmental programs aimed at addressing material needs for people facing addiction and homelessness. But when it

comes to the spiritual component, "it's one need that doesn't get fulfilled," Susan said. "And it's critical to any kind of recovery process."

Research seems to bear that out. A study from the American Psychological Association found "that higher religious faith and spirituality are associated with increased positive coping, greater resilience to stress, an optimistic life orientation, greater perceived social support, and lower levels of anxiety."

Through her volunteering with ISP, Susan accompanies others who are eager to incorporate spiritual practices into their lives in the midst of significant challenges. As a professional, middle-class woman, when Susan decided she needed help getting sober, there were individuals and networks available to her, she said. Many of the women she has met at ISP retreats, however, have lacked access to those kinds of resources, and, in addition to addiction and homelessness, many of them also grapple with wounds stemming from abuse, racism, and poverty.

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— Susan S., Volunteer

As part of an ISP retreat, participants pray together around a bonfire.



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— Christine Curran, Executive Director



Members of the Ambassadors of Hope celebrate at their opening retreat.

Susan said. “During the retreats, I can tell that it's a very important experience for them.”

Founded 25 years ago by Fr. Bill Creed, SJ, and his friend Ed Shurna, ISP began offering overnight retreats to homeless men in Chicago. Within a few years, this grew to include a women's program and then over the years expanded to more than two dozen cities across the United States, Canada, and Ireland. In the USA East Province, ISP currently has active teams in Boston, Mass., Providence, R.I., Ridgewood, N.J., and Atlanta, Ga.

Today, in addition to retreats, ISP volunteer teams provide thousands of spiritual reflection circles at partner homeless service agencies and recovery homes. These one-hour sessions are supported by the ISP Journey mobile app, a platform connecting more than 600 volunteers, including formerly homeless ISP alumni who have stepped up to become facilitators and leaders in the organization.

The mission of ISP is to invite people

recovering from addiction and homelessness “to encounter God's love, hope, and healing through spiritual companionship that transforms lives.” Overnight retreats and spiritual reflection circles offer an opportunity for participants to share their stories in a safe, supportive environment.

“At ISP, we say that everyone has a sacred story,” said Christine Curran, the group's executive director. “For those of us familiar with Ignatian Spirituality or the 12 Steps, we know the importance of our own story. Because it's in our life experiences where God meets us—and it's from this place that we're invited to grow and change.”

She added, “It's by sharing our own struggles and joys around the circle that we can begin to heal, find new meaning, and reframe the narrative.” In doing their own personal work, ISP team members “become people who learn how to walk with others.”

Prioritizing the lived experience of alumni volunteers who can relate to the commu-



Women gather with their prayer shawls at the end of an ISP overnight retreat.

nities they serve, and advocating for an end to homelessness more broadly, has fueled ISP's growth over the last 25 years. This year, the ministry will serve more than 5,000 individuals, and it counts more than 20,000 people as alums.

Among them is Joe C., an ISP alum who today volunteers to lead retreats and spiritual reflection circles in Boston. When Joe C. first met ISP, he was newly sober, overcoming an addiction to heroin that had challenged him most of his adult life. He was living in a Boston shelter and was confident that he was on the road to recovery. But his journey didn't feel complete.

“There was a piece of the puzzle missing, and I had no clue what it was,” he recalled in a recent interview.

During a stint in a detox program, desperate for it to take, Joe broke down and tried something he hadn't previously thought would help.

Joe hadn't been connected to religion in a long time, and he wasn't necessarily looking for God. He wasn't even sure he believed. But he had heard others say how prayer and a belief in a higher power had

helped them on their road to recovery, so he figured he had nothing to lose.

“I got down on my knees and I prayed to God to remove the desire and release the compulsion and obsession to use [drugs],” he said.

Shortly after, his curiosity was piqued when a local ISP team member visited the home where he was living and extended an invitation. “Come check us out,” Joe remembers hearing. “We have people who understand where you have been and can accompany you on your journey.”

Joe, along with another man living at the shelter, accepted the invitation. They attended a “spiritual tune-up,” an ISP spiritual reflection circle. After that, Joe made a retreat, where he was able to connect with others who had faced similar challenges in life.

“It just opened my eyes, and I just felt the presence of God like I had never felt before,” he said.

Joe is now a Boston team leader and an ISP Ambassador of Hope, a national alumni leadership program launched in 2018. When he encounters someone who might benefit from the resources offered by ISP, he first lets them know the programming is not religious.

There's no preaching or evangelizing or moralizing.

“Religion can scare people, myself included, especially if you're newly sober,” he said.

Instead, he talks about spirituality, which many people haven't considered could be an important part of recovery.

“You know, I didn't want any part of God, or any religion,” Joe said of his early involvement with ISP.

But by focusing on his spiritual life, by being connected to others who have been there before and having the space to ask questions and go at his own pace, Joe found a connection with God and to a community that has helped him stay sober. He's been paying it forward for more than a decade.

Michael J. O'Loughlin is the national correspondent for *America*, the author of *Hidden Mercy: AIDS, Catholics, and the Untold Stories of Compassion in the Face of Fear*, and a board member for ISP.



Fr. Bill Creed, SJ, leads a reflection at a men's shelter.

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To learn more or for opportunities to get involved, contact Matt Meyers, ISP director of programs, at mmeyers@ispretreats.org. Gifts to support ISP's work can be made at www.ispretreats.org.

