

# IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY PROJECT: A SAFE PLACE TO CONNECT WITH GOD

By Becky Sindelar



*Ignatian Spirituality Project leaders gathered for a retreat at the Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House in Barrington, Illinois, in fall 2022.*

After escaping an abusive marriage, Leslie and her daughter first stayed with a friend, then in a hotel; when the money ran out, they ended up in a women's shelter in the San Diego area. Attending a retreat was the last thing on her mind. When she and her daughter were invited to an Ignatian Spirituality Project (ISP) retreat, her motivation was practical: They were told they'd get to sleep in beds, rather than the cots they were on at the shelter.

That's how she and her daughter ended up at an ISP women's overnight retreat in 2018 at St. Luis Rey Mission in Oceanside, California. The retreat proved to be more than just a better night's rest.

"My experience was of overwhelming gratitude and awe," recalls Leslie, who asked that we protect her privacy by not including her last name in this story. "I remember just how peaceful it was walking through the grounds and smelling the flowers and just taking in the sheer beauty. It was so different from what I considered ground zero of homelessness in downtown San Diego.

"What I got out of the program—and what I am still getting out of the program—is the message of hope and the acceptance of who you are. ISP doesn't give you a solution to your problems. But it does offer a safe place to connect to God or your higher power, and it provides a loving and caring environment where you can share your journey and connect with people who want to share the love of God without judgement."

## **25 Years of Spiritual Accompaniment**

The Ignatian Spirituality Project was born 25 years ago in Chicago when Father Bill Creed, SJ, and his friend Ed Shurna, former executive director of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, were both seeking a way to care for the spiritual life of people recovering from homelessness and addiction.

The overnight retreat they created combined the 500-year-old tradition of Ignatian spirituality and many of the principles of the 12-step recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The goal was to offer hope and belonging in the face of despair and isolation.

"There's no preaching or advice given on an ISP retreat," Fr. Creed says. "Our retreat model centers on personal witness—the sharing of our stories and experiences in an atmosphere of trust and sacred listening."

A quarter century later, ISP has had 15,000 participants, and there are 22 affiliate regions in the network, including three in the Jesuits West Province: San Diego, Orange County and the Bay Area.

Ivette Valenzuela serves as the regional director of ISP for the West. She began the role in August 2022, after many years as a director of faith formation, first at her local parish and then at the Diocese of Orange. To better serve her community, she went back for her master's in pastoral

theology from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, where she was inspired by Ignatian spirituality.

Ms. Valenzuela was attracted to this new role at ISP because the work is grounded in faith in action, she says. "I wanted my ministry to make a direct impact, do something concrete."

### **Growing a Network of Hope**

Today ISP offers overnight retreats, day programs and ongoing spiritual reflection groups, which are open to people of all faiths—or no faith background. A recent addition to their programming is a mobile app, ISP Journey, which offers one-hour spiritual reflections. "It's a way people can continue to be part of the ISP community without being physically present," says Ms. Valenzuela, such as if they move on from the shelter. It was also a great way for participants to continue to do spiritual reflection with ISP during pandemic lockdowns.

The impact ISP programs have on participants is evident in the fact that many come back to volunteer, often by being a witness and sharing their story at a retreat. Leslie is just one of the many former ISP participants who is now a volunteer. "ISP has helped me grow as a person. In the midst of my own pain, I've found that I'm still valuable and have something to offer of myself through volunteering."



*Ivette Valenzuela, ISP regional director for the West*

There's also a formal program, Ambassadors of Hope, in which a pair trains as a team in a two-year formation program to become ISP program leaders. Usually, at least one person on the team is a former ISP retreat participant, and sometimes both are former participants.

"Former participants have so much wisdom in their lived experiences; the perspective they share is a message of healing. These success stories of ISP are the backbone of what we do: They're a reminder of hope for everyone who comes into ISP," says Ms. Valenzuela.



*A quiet moment of prayer during an ISP retreat*

### **ISP in the West**

Currently, the ISP West region is focused on increasing the number of volunteers and strengthening relationships with the local community after the pandemic. The program relies on volunteers to run the retreats and on shelters to help find participants and host spiritual reflections.

Ms. Valenzuela is also working on elevating ISP's profile by creating networks with local faith communities, including parishes and Catholic Charities. She's also leveraging the Jesuit network in the region.

The first ISP affiliate in the West began in Orange County in 2014 in collaboration with the Loyola Institute for Spirituality in Orange, California. The Jesuits in Orange County, including Father Allan Deck, SJ, founder of the institute, "were the pioneers who paved the way for a lot of the spiritual programs there," says Ms. Valenzuela.

She is also in conversation to find ways to collaborate with Loyola Marymount University; St. Ignatius and St. Agnes, the Jesuit parishes in San Francisco; and the Ignatian Volunteer Corps in San Diego.

### **Ignatian Spirituality for All**

As ISP celebrates 25 years, Ms. Valenzuela is looking to the future. One of her priorities for the next five years is to increase ISP's visibility and make more people aware of it. "We're looking to build a movement, and we're also supporting two of the Society of Jesus' Universal Apostolic Preferences: walking with the excluded and showing the way to God."

"Spiritual direction, Ignatian spirituality and courses for formation are often available for those who are in parishes and work in ministry, but our brothers and sisters who are

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## Ignatian Spirituality Project *continues*



*An ISP retreat for men in Orange County, California*

unsheltered, they might not even think about it—it might seem beyond their reach or they don't even know about Ignatian spirituality—so it's a great gift to provide that opportunity for them to experience Ignatian spirituality."

ISP provides a sacred space to accompany each other in the challenges of life and puts everyone at the same level, Ms. Valenzuela says. "It is giving the gift of Ignatian

spirituality to all people, from different walks of life and faith traditions."

"ISP has helped me to understand that we are all experiencing life," says Leslie. "There are people dealing with health issues, marital problems, overcoming substance abuse, you name it. But we are not alone in our walk and ISP shows us this.

"My life when I first learned about ISP was so fear-based," says Leslie, who now works in healthcare and lives with her daughter in San Diego. "I worried constantly and doubted where I stood with God. I was angry with him but really afraid to acknowledge that anger. I would love to say that my life has been a fairy tale since getting involved with ISP, but it hasn't. However, I can say that my problems are not all consuming, and I am aware that this too shall pass. I have a beautiful support system with my ISP team members. I have their encouragement and prayers and an unshakeable hope for a better tomorrow. ISP has taught me to hope and to find that peace—that surpasses all understanding—in God's presence." ■

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## New School Offers Hope to Seattle Students *continues*

"Archbishop Paul Etienne discerned that this was the right time for our school to come to life," said Mr. Orem. "He recognized that Seattle, despite its wealth, also has tremendous poverty. There are 17,000 high school students south of Seattle who qualify for free or reduced lunch. The need for this school is off the charts."

Support from the Jesuits West Province also proved essential. "From the start, the past and current provincials and their teams have been fully engaged and supportive of this new school," said Mr. Orem. "They were our constant companions and made this a Jesuit-infused work from the beginning."

The final piece of the puzzle came together when the school's board hired Paul Hogan, who served as principal of Portland's Jesuit High School, where he had worked for 27 years, as the school's founding president. "Students today feel little agency or hope for themselves, especially coming out of the pandemic. We know they will find hope at Cristo Rey Jesuit Seattle."



*Paul Hogan, founding president, Cristo Rey Jesuit Seattle*

When Mr. Hogan first heard about this job, he knew that Cristo Rey Jesuit Seattle "is where I want to spend my last professional decade living out the Jesuit mission of offering a preferential option for the poor. The young people we will serve are at the center of our mission to preach Jesus's good news to those at the margins of society. We'll work to ensure that we're offering both the Gospel message and practical skills, as Cristo Rey schools are where the Gospel meets the American dream, where lives are transformed." ■