



Revelations and Reevaluations on Jesuit Retreat in Oshkosh

By MICHAEL J. DWYER

As I write this, I have returned to the hustle and bustle of my normal life. But not so long ago, I was engrossed in a Silent Retreat at the Jesuit Retreat House in Oshkosh, Wis. Time will tell how I put the lessons I learned there to work. But I share my experiences now, in the hope that you, too, will consider making an Ignatian silent retreat.

There can be no doubt that the days spent on this retreat were among the most enjoyable and worthwhile I have spent on anything – personal or professional – in a long time. I gradually wore away doubts and reservations that I had harbored, even unawares. I realized how attached I was to the dried up nuggets of rationalization, which I had been passing off as a spiritual life. I was surprised at how the conference addressed each of my objections and qualifications in a well-ordered sequence.

I gradually realized is that I had become a Catholic without a relationship with Christ – through a slow process of attrition. The retreat revealed to me the many flaws in such an approach, and the rich spiritual world that it ignores. The conferences gave me concrete suggestions to address the deficiencies.

I had more time to consider the New Testament than I had since high school. I realized the richness and complexity of the scriptures in a way I never had before. For example, I read both Mark and John's Gospels. I found John more interested in politics and law, which better suited my lawyer sensibilities, than Mark's focus on miracles. I learned many additional things about my faith, life, and relationship with God and Jesus. Many findings and realizations were quite surprising, yet still clear and simple.

Sunsets on the beautiful grounds of the Jesuit Retreat House in Oshkosh, Wis. aid people in energy, spirituality and relationship with God.

It turned out to be very easy and liberating. For me, it was a great help in separating from my normal ways of thinking and acting.

It was just my second retreat since graduating from Marquette University High School in the '60s, and my first in more than 20 years. I went for many reasons. Most significantly, my spiritual life – which still included regular Sunday Mass – was otherwise in a very poor state of repair. My initial inspiration was a work friend who had recently returned from a multi-day

silent retreat. I thought, "If he did it, I can do it."

The clincher was when I learned that Fr. Ron Bieganowski was directing a retreat in the glorious month of September at the beautiful facility on the shores of Lake Winnebago. I met Ron when he was a scholastic before being ordained and a teacher at MUHS. He officiated at my wedding in the '70s, and we have stayed in touch since. I rejected the idea of a counselor, which another friend had suggested as an alternative, because I was sure that I could figure out what I needed by myself in the context of the retreat. So I signed up.

I was not too apprehensive on the drive up. While I recall my high school retreat experiences fondly, it was not for their spiritual qualities. I brought along a bagful of books to read, both recreational and somewhat spiritual (if an autobiography of Dorothy Day can be said to be spiritual). I was sure that I could fill any free time, if the attempt to reconnect with my spiritual life did not go well.

The retreat started with dinner at 7:15 on Thursday and concluded after lunch on Sunday. As I drove through the gates of the Retreat House, my first sensation was calm. Although it was dusk, I could recognize the lush green lawns of the grounds on the shore of Lake Winnebago.

At dinner, I marveled at the Jesuits' abundant and delicious food. I knew I was going to like the food while I was there. After the meal, I checked out my Spartan yet adequate room. It had everything necessary for comfort, but nothing excessive. Everything was clean and in perfect working order.

It occurred to me that the three full days ahead were vastly more time to reflect than

ARE YOU READY?

Jesuit Journeys is holding several reservations for the Sept. 17-20 Men's Retreat at the Jesuit Retreat House in Oshkosh, Wis. If you would like to join our group, you can drop a note to editor@jesuitwisprov.org.

You can also view the year's full retreat schedule, find information and testimonials by visiting: www.jesuitretreathouse.org. For specific questions, feel free to contact the Retreat House's director, Fr. John Schwantes, SJ at jschwantes@jesuitretreathouse.org.

I had in literally decades. I was going to have plenty of space to pursue what is important.

The silence was imposed after the first meal. It turned out to be very easy and liberating. For me, it was a great help in separating from my normal ways of thinking and acting.

After dinner Fr. Ron delivered the first of the retreat conferences. His tone and message were perfect. He assured us that God always takes the initiative. It was enough that we were present, waiting and calm. Quiet and trust were all that were required of us. I was confident that I could meet those minimal expectations, though I have never been very good at waiting for anything. After spending time trying to describe my current state of being in a notebook I had brought along for that purpose, I retired earlier than I ever do at home and enjoyed a deep, restful sleep.

I rose early on Friday without an alarm and walked the grounds as the sun rose. We enjoyed a perfect Jesuit breakfast, then began work in earnest. The retreat includes 10 conferences – four on Thursday, four on Friday, and two on Sunday – where Fr. Ron speaks to the entire group, generally on Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.

Friday evening, a communal penance service was celebrated, followed by a healing service on Saturday. Daily Mass was celebrated throughout, and there were opportunities to meet individually with the retreat director, and the other Religious who permanently staff the center.

I am sure that the retreat process is unique to each retreatant. We all came for different reasons. Many of the men with me were seasoned veterans from a Rockford, Ill., group. After my initial uncertainty wore off, I found it encouraging and comforting to be surrounded by men more retreat-savvy and experienced than I.

At the closing ceremony, we were asked if we planned to



The Jesuit Retreat House in Oshkosh.

attend next year. I was hesitant to commit. I wondered then if I would need it, given how much I learned and how much I had to work on. Now that I have been home for a few days, I see the difficulty of maintaining the retreat's momentum and spirit.

I blocked a weekend off next September. I will be ready to do it again, by then.

How about you? 



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Michael Dwyer is a Milwaukee County Circuit Court Judge, currently serving in Family Court. He and his wife, Debra, have five children. He is a 1968 graduate of Marquette University High School, where three sons also attended. His daughter graduated from Marquette University.

Fr. Ron Bieganski, SJ leads men during sessions of prayer and reflection.



Of God, grace and grandsons

BY RORY GILLESPIE

A Jesuit Silent Retreat may not be perfect for everyone. But then again, not everyone has been blessed with the world's cutest baby as a grandson.

Before you go jumping to the conclusion that these reflections are nothing more than a shameless ploy



to get a picture of my grandson (Jack, 8 lbs. 4 oz.; 21 1/2 inches; looks just like me) into the publication,

these are thoughts on the fantastic grace that saw life, nature, faith and spirituality collide.

In days leading to the retreat, I was apprehensive about all the silence. As Wisconsin Provincial Fr. Tom Krettek, SJ told me, "Listening can be hard work."

But as that silence settled over the beautiful Lake Winnebago grounds, I decided to check my phone (locked in

"Imagine you are with Christ and He is at your elbow and you are thumbing through a family album."

THE RETREAT MISSION

Jesuit Retreat House, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, fosters Spiritual enrichment rooted in the Gospels, the Catholic tradition and the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Our ministry is dedicated to creating a rich variety of retreat experiences and providing an atmosphere of quiet, peace and prayer in which men and women of all faiths are encouraged to discover and respond generously to God's personal invitation to wholeness and holiness.

the car's glove box) one final time. A text told me of Jack's arrival. The time and weather – with moonlight lapping at the shores – were perfect to bask in the news. I was charged with thoughts and prayers of gratitude.

Fr. Ron Bieganowski, SJ set the tone and pace for sessions, with the theme "Ask for the grace of trust, and confidence in God's love." Through reflections, Scripture and stories, he enlivened our journey with several stories.

"I was conducting a retreat once," Fr. Bieganowski said early on, "and one of the men told me, 'I don't know if I am getting much from your talks. All I want to do is pray the 23rd Psalm.' Well, I told him that was great. This was his time to spend with God, and he should spend it how he best felt God was calling him." Fr. Bieganowski then explained that he was there only to aid us in hearing God's voice.

One session focused on the Gospel of Mark, and Fr. Bieganowski



encouraged us to read the passages ahead of time. But, this was like no other “homework” I had been assigned.

“Read Mark tonight as if Christ was sitting there with you,” he intoned. “Imagine you are with Christ and He is at your elbow and you are thumbing through a family album.”

During my 16 years of Catholic education, I had been encouraged, and often even tested on Scripture, but no one had ever asked me to share it with Christ. It was a rewarding and effective experience.

But so were Fr. Bieganowski’s stories, which he gracefully interspersed with his talks.

“Three priests – a Dominican, a Franciscan and a Jesuit – all died at the same time and were at the gates of heaven,” Fr. Ron said. “Since these holy men all died at the same time, St. Peter allowed them a gift. They could go back to any moment in time and experience it themselves.

“The three picked the birth of Jesus. The Dominican went up to the manger and knelt in adoration. He rose, bowed to Mary and Joseph and offered an eloquent soliloquy of praise and thanks. The Franciscan went up to the manger and he too knelt in adoration. Then he rose and bowed to Mary and Joseph, then fed the livestock some hay.

“The Jesuit approached the manger, and knelt in adoration. Then he rose and went over to Mary and Joseph and whispered, ‘It’s a fine son. Have you thought about where you might be sending him to school?’”

Making leaps in faith – through silence, reflection and reading Scripture with Jesus – helped me push a little further. I took advantage of talks with spiritual directors, who set aside chunks of time to chat and explore.



Retreatants finish the Rosary at the shrine to Mary on the grounds at Oshkosh.

Sr. Kerry Larkin, OSM was able to share with me the joy of Jack’s birth and the miracle of new life. We also had a lively conversation and she smiled at my notion that God could only hear one prayer from me at a time. She encouraged me to trust God’s listening skills more, and gently guided me to books by Fr. Henri Nouwen to help me on my journey.

Leaps and challenges were becoming commonplace. At the evening’s penance service, great emphasis was placed on the parable of the prodigal son. I have battled this story within myself and often with my wife and others. Had the retreat staff set this whole session up just to teach me about the prodigal parable? The next morning I marched in for a session with Fr. Bob Dufford, SJ and told him all that was wrong with that father-son relationship.

Fr. Dufford laughed. “You are one of those strong Midwestern guys,” he said. “You are going to work at your faith and keep working at it,” he smiled. “Your faith is not a job. It is not something you can work at. You have to be open and listen to Christ and know that He wants a relationship with you.”

Returning home, I was finally able to talk with my son who shared the joy and wonder of Jack’s birth with me. Grandsons, and sons for that matter, are miracles, and illuminate our lives.

Maybe it doesn’t take miracles like grandsons to move us forward in our journeys with faith. Maybe it only takes a little quiet time, a place and people who care. I have a new journey ahead of me and I am thankful for these graces to help me as, like Jack, I take my first steps. III



The staff at the Jesuit Retreat House in Oshkosh (from left) Fr. John Schwantes, Fr. Bob Dufford, Fr. Gene Donahue and Sr. Kerry Larkin foster a welcoming environment.