



Q & A

Offering Spirituality to those least served

An Interview with Fr. William Creed, SJ



Fr. William Creed, SJ, has been a retreat director and a trainer of spiritual directors for almost 30 years. Currently he is directing retreats for homeless people based on the Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius. The results of this Chicago Province endeavor have been astounding.

Q Could you please explain your Ignatian Spirituality Project?

A St. Ignatius said in his Spiritual Exercises that all spiritual activity has two goals: union with God and freedom from “inordinate attachments.” We have found, through our work with those living in shelters and in many cases struggling with drug addiction, that the same two goals apply. Homeless peoples’ lives are brought down by the same saboteurs that affect us all: negative thinking, loneliness, worry, frustration, discouragement, anger, and fear. Through our retreats with them, homeless people are given a chance to recognize these “inner saboteurs,” to learn about their “inordinate attachments” and to reach out to people who can help them act with courage and confidence to change their lives.

These spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius can be presented over a 30-day period of solitude and silence, as our seminarians experience them, or they can be presented slowly over the lifetime of a person busy in the world, or

they can be presented in an adapted form as we are doing in the Ignatian Spirituality Project. We have found over the course of two years and 18 retreats that the exercises are very appropriate and helpful for these people with special needs.

Q Why, how, and where did this project begin?

A It all began with a call from the Provincial, Richard J. Baumann, SJ, to develop a program using the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius for the economically disadvantaged, for those who are homeless, HIV-positive, drug-addicted or prostituting themselves on the streets.

Making the Spiritual Exercises widely available is part of our apostolic priorities. Likewise, it has become a priority to have some solidarity with the poor, to choose to be with the poor in lifestyle and for the poor in mission, locally and globally.

In response to these priorities, I visited shelters and spoke with the leaders about the idea of overnight re-

treats for those needing such shelter. I rent retreat space wherever it is available in the area, and we accept no more than 20 people per retreat due to the length of time it takes each person to relate his or her personal narratives. After doing 18 such retreats, the shelter leaders no longer need explanations of the project, but rather, they have waiting lists of people wanting to make the retreats. They have been extremely successful.

Q How have the Spiritual Exercises been adapted for discussion/instruction/conversation with people in transition, living in shelters and recovering from addictions?

A Fundamentally the Spiritual Exercises are the same as the ones introduced by St. Ignatius. In our retreats with the homeless we focus on the telling of each person’s personal narrative. The retreatant deals directly with God and God deals directly with the retreatant through the telling of these personal stories. This process is



the same whether one is homeless or not. We have found that the Spiritual Exercises are so fundamental that they cut through all barriers. We have more in common with the homeless than we have barriers that separate us.

Q *How are retreats offered in the Ignatian Spirituality Project different from those at Milford or Bellarmine, the Jesuit Retreat Houses?*

A Retreats offered at these Jesuit Retreat Houses are more formally presented, and the participants listen in silence. The retreats we offer follow more closely the raw ideas that St. Ignatius had in mind—the idea of the personal narrative, working together in groups and allowing the Lord to deal directly with the person on retreat by focusing on each one’s history, dreams, and experiences.

Q *Who has assisted you with this project?*

A I work with various teams to plan and facilitate the actual retreats. Brother Mike O’Grady, SJ, has worked about 10 retreats with me, as have members of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH). Ed Smurna of CCH has also worked closely on this project and teams of three or four run each retreat.

Q *Could you tell us a few stories about the recipients of this ministry?*

A The people we have worked with have spoken with such honesty and have posed such questions to themselves, that I have been humbled by the experience. Their examples have pushed me to be less evasive in my own life, to be more honest about myself and my vulnerability. I have never been moved so quickly and so deeply as I have by these retreatants.

“Everett” wrote his thoughts in the quiet reflection time after one of the

guided meditations on hidden treasure. “When I am dishonest and not truthful, I am comparable to a used car salesman selling a car which he claims is durable and dependable but really deceives the purchaser. The truth is that it’s just fancy framework with an engine that has not been cared for properly. This car will not function well unless the inner working of the car is examined. During that examination by one who cares for the car and its engine, questions must be asked: Are you willing to have your car examined by the one who knows cars? Am I willing to look at myself honestly?”

A surprising gift came to me and two of our Jesuit seminarians on one of the retreats when one 28-year-old man found out that “you guys don’t have a family do you?” He pondered. Then he spoke, “If you guys can give up sex, then maybe I *can* give up cocaine!”

Many of our retreatants have worked through months in formal recovery programs. They are now receiving job training or are employed part-time. They attend 12-step programs almost daily, and they are building a network of healthy relationships. Interestingly, the ones I hear from find that it is faith in God that is fueling their desire for recovery.

Q *How do you see the Ignatian Spirituality Project developing in the future?*

A Of course I see the number of retreats growing in the Chicago area. I also hope to go to other cities within the Province and within other provinces as well. Another province has already sent a generous donation for an expansion of the program. We hope to go nationwide eventually.

I gave a talk about this type of work recently and I had as many as 50 retreat directors ask me how to work with the homeless through the Spiritual Exercises. I get many e-mails asking for assistance to expand this type of work. I have certainly chal-

lenged retreat directors to think of spirituality as something that is not the exclusive property of white, middle-class people. I have come to realize that it is not true that the homeless have no time to listen to God. It is God who fuels their progress, and they are most willing to listen.

Q *What would you like the benefactors of the province to know about this exciting apostolic work?*

A I’d like them to know what it was that Wayne, one of my star pupils, said about the Project. He was homeless in his 40s, on the streets, had left his wife and child. He attended one of the retreats to get his life together. As I was visiting one of the shelters a week ago to check up on some of my retreatants, there was Wayne, presenting a two-and-a-half hour life skills class to a group of homeless men. He has been sober for 12 months and is an employee of The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. Someone asked him who I was, and he explained that he met me at a retreat. He told the men that he would never have thought he would be sober and up there presenting a life skills class, but it was a retreat that turned his life around. “I found that if I trust in God I can be sober. The more I let God in my life the more I am able to do!”

Q *How are the expenses paid for the Ignatian Spirituality Project?*

A Our costs in running one retreat (rental of the retreat house, meals, etc.) for about 20 homeless persons range from \$1,000 to \$1,600. Generosity from benefactors to the Chicago Province Jesuit Partnership make this ministry possible. Also, I most recently received a donation from a person who comes to me for spiritual direction. I had no idea he was able to provide such a welcome gift. My deepest gratitude to anyone being so kind as to assist with the Ignatian Spirituality Project! ■

