

## Learning to *Live* as a Jesuit

### THE JESUIT NOVITIATE

by *George Kearney*

Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ, a Jesuit priest and poet (1844–1889), may have described the significance of the Jesuit novitiate best when he said, “He is so great that all things give him glory if you mean they should. So then, my brethren, live.” The novitiate is a place where novices learn, as Hopkins suggests, to live in this world as Jesuits.

St. Ignatius long ago declared the novitiate a period of “probation,” a time of experiment in which the Society considers its new members and the new members consider whether or not they can sustain a lifelong commitment to a religious vocation. The novitiate serves, essentially, as a two-year introductory course to all things Jesuit. As the bulk of every Jesuit’s time is spent working and praying, the novitiate too tends to focus largely on learning to work and pray. The keystone of the period is a thirty-day Ignatian retreat.

**T**he novitiate is comprised of three main elements: studies, prayer, and ministry. Studies take the form of classes, usually offered in the fall or over the summer in subjects ranging from the history of the Society and its current mission, to language training, to elementary liturgical techniques. Each novice also makes the full thirty-day Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, and is expected to devote roughly two hours a day to prayer. Each novice also completes three “experiments,” i.e., experiences in pastoral ministries and apostolates.

“Both the highs and the lows of the novitiate are about what I’d expected,” says Bill Blazek, who completes his first year of novitiate this

“I need that hour of prayer in the morning. I feel off balance if I don’t pray, and I notice that my relationship with God suffers when I’m not attentive to prayer,” says Bill Blazek who has just completed his first year in the novitiate.

summer, “but the intensity and variety of the experiences has been surprising.” A year into the novitiate experience, Bill feels he’s in the right life, and has made the right decisions, and he welcomes the prayerful life of the novice. “The Spiritual Exercises were even more than I expected. They were moving and powerful.” Bill has since channeled that experience and power into his

daily prayer life, rising hours before he begins his work to pray. “I need that hour in the morning,” he says. “I feel off balance if I don’t pray, and I notice that my relationship with God suffers when I’m not attentive to my prayer.”

The ministry or work component consists of three experiments. The first of these, “the hospital experiment” takes place at state-funded nursing homes in Detroit and at Colombiere, the Jesuit health care facility in Clarkston, MI. Every novice participates during the fall and early spring of his first year. “I’m amazed at how God has put me in a place where I never would have imagined being,” says Matt Couture, a first year novice. “The hospital experiment helped me come to a mutually accepting relationship with people whom I might not otherwise have met or accepted.”

In the latter half of the first spring each novice also completes a “short experiment,” individually tailored to give the novice an opportunity to experience something new and to grow in his understanding of himself. Chris Dierkes, a first-year novice, completed his “short experiment” this past spring at Covenant House, a center for lost and abandoned youth in New Orleans, LA. “With this experiment and my work at the nursing home in Detroit I am being challenged on two levels simultaneously,” Chris says of his novitiate ex-



perience. “One, I have contact with a different culture, in this case the African-American culture, which has made me wake up to assumptions in my own upbringing. Two, I’m learning how to listen, how to empathize with another, and how to be instead of how to do.”

Mike Shawver, another first-year novice, recently completed his short experiment at Providence Hospice of Seattle. “I was very nervous about working with people with terminal illnesses when I started this experiment,” Mike says. He adds that, over time, “through God’s grace, I have overcome my fears and have felt very comfortable talking to the dying and being a listening ear for people in such a fragile time in their lives.”



Patrick McGrath, a second year novice preparing to take his first vows, recently completed his long experiment at the Jesuit Conference offices in Washington, DC, where he drafted a report detailing the sponsorship of Cristo Rey and Nativity model schools. “Until you actually experience the novitiate, nothing else can prepare you for it,” McGrath quips. He’s quick to add that working at the Jesuit Conference and living in community with fifteen Jesuits has been both valuable and enjoyable, and has given him a greater sense of what it means to be a contemplative in action. “The long experiment is a great reminder that there is life outside the novitiate. At the novitiate we learn to be contemplatives, and we spend a significant amount

Matt Couture worked with infants during his short experiment at “Children’s Village,” a Catholic Charities day care center at St. Joseph Village, in California.

(Below) Pat McGrath drafted a report on Nativity and Cristo Rey Model Schools during his long experiment at the Jesuit Conference in Washington, DC, where he worked alongside former Chicago Provincial and current president of the Jesuit Conference Fr. Bradley Schaeffer, SJ (right), and Fr. Jim Hug, SJ (left), director of the Center for Concern, a social policy think tank in Washington DC.



FR. JOHN QUINN, SJ

of time learning how to pray. In the long experiment, each Jesuit works and is tested to see if he can live as a part of a larger working Jesuit community while remaining contemplative and prayerful.” Pat, who is weeks away from completing the novitiate and formalizing his commitment to the Society by taking first vows says, “Everything I’ve been doing has confirmed my vocation and assured me that I am in the right place.” ■

## Chronology of the Novitiate

### Year 1

**September–March:** “Hospital Experiment” which involves work in inner-city nursing homes and Jesuit infirmary

**September–March:** Novitiate classes in the Documents of the Society of Jesus, Homiletics, and Religious Life

**January:** Thirty-day Spiritual Exercises

**March:** Vocation tour in province high schools

**April–June:** Short Experiment, which is individually tailored to provide novice with a new experience

**Summer:** Language training in Peru\*; two-week vacation

**August:** Celebration of vows for second year novices

### Year 2

**September–December:** Our Mission Today: Program of classes and ministry projects focused directly on Jesuit mission to promote faith that does justice

**January–May:** Long experiment, also individually tailored, but designed to give novice experience of working in one of the Society’s apostolates

**Summer:** Six-week intensive course in the history of the Society at Regis University in Denver, CO.\*

**August:** Profession of first vows

\*The history course in Denver and the language training in Peru rotate on a yearly basis. In either his first or second year, every novice completes both programs.

