



REFLECTION ON THE LIVING TRADITION

Lord, Teach Us to Pray: Inviting High School Students into the *Spiritual Exercises*

Dominika Deline and Megan Agliano

Religious Studies Department, Brophy College Preparatory, Phoenix, AZ, USA

Revelation

A lanky, tousle-haired senior stands at the Brophy chapel ambo. The air is calm, the chapel is quiet, but you can tell he's nervous. He takes a deep breath. After a semester of prayer, journaling, and one-on-one spiritual direction in his required Senior Ignatian Capstone class, he will address his peers and invited faculty members and give voice to what the months of prayer have stirred in him. You, his teacher, have seen the slow and patient work of God in him this past semester, but you still don't know what to expect. Although you've encouraged him to be honest and authentic, the social stakes still make you hesitate. Will he falter and resort to an easy and acceptable superficiality in front of friends who might judge? Now, the inner life of this young man will be put out into the world. He speaks, quietly, as if somewhat unsure. "This class helped me recognize a small but important spiritual life I didn't know I had," he begins.

From Synthesis to Encounter

In 2023, we put our long-standing senior theology requirement, Senior Synthesis, on hold. At the heart, the class was an opportunity to lob students big, existential questions. Over the course of the semester, they explored these questions through theological research, reading, and intellectual inquiry. The class culminated with a minimum 20-page paper, and we teachers hoped our

students would carry their newfound insights into their spiritual lives moving forward. Truthfully, we were often skeptical that this was happening.

It was true that students' commitment to an extended intellectual process often felt productive, yet how could we expect them to live out their faith simply by completing a research paper? Even before the paper-writing practice was brought into question by AI, we were already wondering whether it truly fostered long-term spiritual growth.

A related challenge was that students' levels of receptivity to Synthesis often depended on whether they had attended a Kairos retreat—a four-day experience of reflection, prayer, community, and discernment of God's presence in one's life. It was not uncommon for a senior to return from Kairos and desire to rewrite his paper to incorporate newfound insights. This revealed a fundamental limitation: structuring the class around the production of an academic paper left out something essential—experience.

In Synthesis, we asked students to wrestle with existential questions without giving them space for those questions to surface organically. Additionally, the structure was not meeting the needs of students who were eager to deepen a spirituality that was awakened on Kairos. Taken together, this class seldom paved the way for a personal encounter with the living God.

Addressing these concerns felt especially urgent given our cultural reality. Today's students are immersed in a distracted world that prizes hot takes and ephemeral experiences. They often feel more incentive to “mine” Bitcoin rather than their inner life. How can we help students to resist the lure of their algorithm and invite them into freedom through reflection and discernment?

A Return to Ignatian Tradition

Six years ago, in 2020, our school made a commitment to deepen our engagement with the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Since then, 131 members of our community have experienced the 19th Annotation through Brophy's Adult Faith Formation Program, and an impressive 35 have gone on to be trained to serve as spiritual directors for others seeking to make the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Providentially, as our department was discerning a new course of action for this class, two developments emerged. First, Brophy's *Spiritual Exercises* program director,¹ built an 18th Annotation version of the *Exercises* that offers a prayerful introduction to Ignatian Spirituality. Second, our Campus Ministry moved the Kairos retreat from senior to junior year. With students experiencing Kairos earlier, we gained more time to accompany them in their spiritual growth.

1 Bryce Deline, at the time of publication.

We had taken a year off from teaching Synthesis to discern how the Spirit was guiding our desire for change. When we began designing the new senior theology class, a deep encounter of Ignatian Spirituality seemed so obvious. A 500-year-old “curriculum” is hard to improve upon, so why not harness it and offer it to our students?

Inspired by the new 18th Annotation model² offered in our Adult Faith Formation Program, we chose to make it the core class material. The program director developed it using themes from Saint Ignatius’s own “Spiritual Directory for the Mixed Life,” a plan meant to cover the span of a week’s retreat and introduce a retreatant to formative and fundamental spiritual movements. These themes were woven together with scripture passages, material from *The Autobiography of Saint Ignatius*, and instructions for practicing different methods of contemplative prayer.

We, the authors, had both gone through the 19th Annotation Program in previous years: we experienced the Spiritual Exercises, spent a year in dedicated training, and directed retreatants multiple times under supervision. Through this process, we came to appreciate that, as Ignatius wrote in the Second Annotation of the *Exercises*, practical experience is key: “What fills and satisfies the soul comes not from knowing much, but from savoring profoundly.”³

It became clear that if we were going to offer a form of the Spiritual Exercises to our students, then we would also have to reimagine our role as Ignatian educators. How might we help our students “savor profoundly” the experiences that could draw them closer to the God who longs to meet them? Given that today’s technological advancements make information so readily accessible, we came to understand our work in education not so much as “keepers of knowledge,” but rather as partners in discernment. We are now, more than ever, guiding companions rather than experts.

2 The 18th Annotation program at Brophy College Preparatory, created by Bryce Deline, was originally inspired by the “Spiritual Directory for the Mixed Life,” a guide composed either by Ignatius’s secretary Juan de Polanco, or by the Society’s second superior general, Diego Laínez, and can be found in Martin E. Palmer, S.J., *On Giving the Spiritual Exercises: The Early Jesuit Manuscript Directories and the Official Directory of 1599* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009). That manual outlines a week-long program of exercises featuring broad, introductory themes. Deline’s program draws from a variety of texts including St. Ignatius’ *Autobiography* (for an English translation, see Barton T. Geger, S.J., *A Pilgrim’s Testament* [Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2020]); José Ignacio Tellechea Idígoras, *Ignatius of Loyola: Pilgrim Saint* (Loyola University Press, 1994); Michael Hansen, S.J., *The First Spiritual Exercises* (Ave Maria Press, 2013), and Joseph A. Tetlow, S.J., *Choosing Christ in the World* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1999). It also includes original material developed by Deline specifically for the program.

3 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Loyola Press, 1951), introduction, no. 2.

We were compelled to confront our final question: is it possible to emulate the dynamic between a spiritual director and retreatant in a classroom setting? Can a classroom instructor offer spiritual accompaniment? A majority of the teachers in our department were already trained as spiritual directors through the school's program, which made the undertaking seem viable. And so, we decided to go for it.

The Senior Ignatian Capstone

This is our third year offering Senior Ignatian Capstone. Our endeavor continues to be affirmed by Pope Leo's message to Catholic educators. In his recent Apostolic Letter, *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, Pope Leo encourages educational institutions to focus on three priorities.⁴ The first priority highlights the inner spiritual life: "Young people ask for depth; they need spaces for silence, discernment, and dialogue with their conscience and with God."⁵ We believe Pope Leo's call is pressing in our current culture, and we take seriously Karl Rahner's insight that knowing God is more important than knowing about God.

God, you describe a world when it was perfect. There was no sadness, no suffering, no death. Only love and joy. One day, that world will become reality again. I ask you: am I a part of that world? You know me in my entirety. Am I welcome there? Many times, it feels like I'm not, but *I want to hear it from you.*

— Senior 1, Brophy College Prep

Fostering a New Intelligence

When my friends and I talked about religion, we were all quick to defend our own faiths. I felt unable to effectively articulate my Christian beliefs against the criticisms my friends raised. This led me to doubt my own faith, but also motivated me to strengthen my foundation. This class has helped me feel less anxious about not having all the answers. *I noticed that I can discuss challenging subjects with greater composure and a desire to understand rather than to defend.*

— Senior 2, Brophy College Prep

4 See Cindy Wooden, "In New Letter, Pope Leo Shares 3 Priorities for Catholic Education Amid A.I. Revolution," *America*, October 28, 2025, <https://www.americamagazine.org/news/2025/10/28/pope-leo-catholic-education/>.

5 Leo XIV, *Drawing New Maps of Hope* [*Disegnare nuove mappe di speranza*], Apostolic Letter, Holy See, October 27, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_letters/documents/20251027-disegnare-nuove-mappe.html.

It is common to come across students who are very comfortable with the academic pursuit of religion. However, in this new class we are asking them to develop a different skill: to speak less and rest in the uncertainty of their experiences and questions. This is echoed by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet*: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves . . . Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”⁶

Such skills are acquired through more than just intellectual inquiry. Rilke’s wisdom is an example of what Sarah Gallagher calls “mystical intelligence.” In her *America* article, she challenges today’s educators to look beyond a limited focus on academic intelligence in the classroom:

Reason alone is no longer our most powerful guide in complexity. The rational frameworks that served us well now falter. It is time to recover the mystics’ wisdom in valuing attentive presence, wonder and readiness for mystery. These are not relics but tools for navigating what lies ahead.⁷

In our experience, the Senior Ignatian Capstone embodies this call to cultivate a “mystical intelligence” in the classroom. Creating space in our curriculum for prayer and contemplation demanded a different pedagogy than that of a traditional academic classroom. The way we teach a student to engage with their “inner life” is very much how a coach might teach a technique in a sport: it is in the doing that the learning occurs. Non-propositional knowledge, as philosophers might call it. You can’t teach a swimmer to swim by sitting them down at a desk and lecturing them about swimming. Even if they perform well on a paper or quiz, you’d rightly feel apprehensive about throwing them in the literal deep end before taking some time in the pool to get a sense for what it’s like. The same is true of prayer, reflection, and encountering the Divine. You have to start by getting some time in the water with someone who has some experience themselves.

The analogy continues. Schools have dedicated Physical Education curricula to highlight the importance of lifelong fitness while giving the student some tools to use in the future. It is the same with the health of the soul. We have carved out space in our students’ schedule to show them the value of consistent, habitual prayer. Again and again, we hear them voice the desire for a *consistent* relationship with God. In this class we have

6 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Vintage Books, 1986), 34.

7 Sarah Gallagher, “The Era of Essays and Exams Is Ending. It’s Time to Educate for Mystical Intelligence,” *America*, July 24, 2025, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2025/07/24/mystical-intelligence-education-artificial-intelligence-251098/>.

witnessed students recognize that this desire can be met, but only if they respond with action:

I went to church for the first time on my own last weekend. I did not understand everything, and they do not have the songs or prayers on a projector like at Brophy, but I still tried to immerse myself in God's community.

— Senior 3, Brophy College Prep

Ordering the Heart

Let's return to the quiet chapel and recall the tousle-haired senior's proclamation: "*This class helped me recognize a small but important spiritual life I didn't know I had.*" His statement is a true embodiment of Pope Francis's words in *Dilexit nos* when speaking about the power of the Spiritual Exercises, "something unexpected and hitherto unknown starts to speak in our heart, breaking through our superficial knowledge and calling it into question."⁸ Pope Francis continues:

This is the start of a new process of 'setting our life in order,' beginning with the heart. It is not about intellectual concepts that need to be put into practice in our daily lives, as if affectivity and practice were merely the effects of—and dependent upon—the data of knowledge.⁹

The concept of "proper ordering" deeply resonates with many students. When given the opportunity to reflect on all that occupies their time and attention, they begin to perceive and desire a new way forward:

Recently I've been focusing on God's desires for me instead of what I desire for myself. When I only focus on myself, I grow obsessive. *I realized that God simply wants me to be happy and to love others, something my constant strive for success wasn't achieving.*

— Senior 4, Brophy College Prep

A Curriculum of Encounter

Every Capstone class begins with "The Fourth Day" retreat, designed in partnership with our Campus Ministry. The name alludes to the fourth and final day of the Kairos retreat during which students are encouraged to live out their newly inspired faith in everyday life. Students begin this day of reflection by revisiting the consolations they received on their Kairos: they

8 Francis, *Dilexit nos*, Encyclical, The Holy See, October 24, 2024, §24, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enclica-dilexit-nos.html>.

9 Francis, *Dilexit nos*, §24.

recall the unforgettable feeling of their heart being set on fire with God's love, alongside the realization that feelings are fleeting. The rest of the day frames this semester-long class as an opportunity to live out the "Fourth Day" in true partnership with God.

The daily structure of the class varies depending on the instructor, but always includes several essential elements: quiet time for guided meditations, small group spiritual conversations, opportunities for one-on-one meetings with the instructor as spiritual director, and theological reading to intellectually support their contemplative experiences.

The class format also accommodates interfaith students and Christians of other denominations. While we introduce and reinforce ideas of Catholic, Ignatian Spirituality, the times of prayer are moments of encounter with a student's innermost self, where they can meet God in accord with their own tradition. This is a sacred space that only they have the privilege of navigating:

Though I am Jewish, my family does not practice religion. My father raised us to be suspicious of faith, so I saw religious followers as mind-controlled sheep with no free will. This class changed my view. I now see that our ability to stray from God might be a gift. *If God were to force us into a bond with Him, there would be no love, no loyalty, no respect, only programming. God's giving of a free will, is the greatest signal of true love and trust.*

— Senior 5, Brophy College Prep

The Gentle Work of God

One day, the *Spiritual Exercises* program director overheard a student talking with some friends. In a dull and sarcastic tone, the student said, "I have to stand in front of everyone and talk about how this class changed my life." "Did it?" his friend asked. The student paused. "Yeah," he said, maybe a partial concession to maturity, almost surprised by his own words.

At the end of the semester, students write a final reflection and share a public proclamation about their experience. They stand and offer insights such as the ones we sprinkled throughout this article. They voice their struggles with articulating beliefs, their courage to hear God's voice in unexpected ways, their decision to continue new prayer styles in college, or their growing clarity about holy and disordered desires. What we see is not a series of dramatic "lightning bolt" moments, but rather the gentle, slow work of God in their lives that has been illuminated by, in the words of Walter Burghardt, S.J., a "long, loving look at the real."¹⁰

10 Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," in *Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. George W. Traub, S.J. (Loyola Press, 2008), 89–98.

I've experienced broken relationships and struggled to control disordered desires, but I also found so much peace during this stressful semester. *I started to realize that God speaks to me in silent actions and in stillness.*

— Senior 6, Brophy College Prep

While these student reflections are representative of the class overall, it is important to acknowledge the fact that there is no spiritual silver bullet. Is it possible for a student to simply go through the motions? Yes, of course. Faith is a gift that can only be cultivated in soil that is ready. It does happen that some students don't fully enter the space into which we are inviting them. We pray the seeds planted will grow. But, more often than not, we get to witness the value of prayer and contemplation for hesitant students who stand on the threshold. We hope many students see that even the *desire to desire* God is a movement towards the Divine. And, for any student not yet ready, at the very least, they experience a space of silence in a world that is very loud.

Correspondence:

Dominika Deline, Religious Studies Department, Brophy College Preparatory, Phoenix, AZ, USA;
email: ddeline@brophyprep.org