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“I need more silence in my life; God has things to tell me”

A Retreat Experience
for High School Students
in the Middle Years Program

Kevyn Ernest

Most teachers will admit that the classroom can be a noisy environment. Students are constantly interacting — positively and negatively, shuffling papers and playing with pencils, shifting positions in their chairs or walking around. While these noises are not negative in and of themselves, they can distract from the occurrence of occasional deeper, reflective experiences.

Add to this the fact that most students are products of a culture in which technologies have cluttered their day with constant stimulation and movement, to the detriment of stillness and silence, and we have a classroom of students who are increasingly untrained in the discipline of stilling themselves in order to listen to the interior movement of the Spirit.

For those of us who are educators in the Catholic system, it is becoming more difficult to develop an atmosphere and attitude of interior silence in the face of this continuous bombardment of activity and need for constant stimulation. At times, it may feel as if we are accomplishing very little in terms of nurturing our students in the values of our Christian faith.

It is no wonder that many Catholic school teachers and parents have begun to view Catholic education as irrelevant and out of touch with the times.



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Recalling the presence of the Lord

However, even the noise, attractions, and distractions found in contemporary youth culture cannot keep the Holy Spirit silent. This year, I introduced my sixth grade students to an amended form of the Examen, an exercise developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, to review one's day by using memory and imagination to recall the presence of the Lord at work in the encounters, moments and events that comprise the day (see James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*. HarperOne: New York, 2010).

Of course, not being used to such an exercise requiring silence and interiority, some students became fidgety and found

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it difficult to remain still so that they could "hear" in silence. I added some soft instrumental music to ease them into the experience of interior quiet and over time, the Examen during the last 15 minutes of each day became something they anticipated.

We are privileged to have a school administration that places a high value on the nurturing of spirituality and faith and they readily embraced a suggestion that we give students an opportunity for an off-site faith retreat. I initiated our first Christ-Encounter retreat with Grade Seven students in May of 2011. Our second retreat was open to students in the middle-years program (Sixth through Eighth Grades) in May of 2012. We chose as a theme this year, *Encountering the Lord through Different Models of Prayer*.

Beyond the noise of every day

It was at these retreats that something became very clear to me. Many students, while being fully immersed in the conventions and expectations of contemporary culture, strongly desire and seek moments for solitude and silence. I heard from several students that the best part of going on retreat was to be in an environment where they could be quiet and listen to God. Needless to say, I was not only surprised but inspired by such comments, because it confirmed for me that the Spirit of the Lord is already at work within these young people, calling them to a deeper awareness of and involvement in the life that unfolds around them; taking them beyond the distractions and attractions that the world has to offer.

One experience that really spoke of the depth in spirituality that already pervades the lives of these evolving human beings is when we silently and reverently walked the labyrinth at the Retreat Centre that hosted us. I stood in awe as I watched our students walk slowly through the maze of the labyrinth without uttering any words, with hands clasped in a gesture of prayer, and with a regular and calmed rhythm to their movement. One of the facilitators read the Psalms aloud. The students walked and simply listened. I found it remarkable that we didn't have to give them any guidance on this exercise in prayer; it just "emerged" as if it were already intrinsic to them.

While on the retreat, I had one of the student-facilitators guide everyone through the Examen. Since this was not my own classroom of students to whom I had already introduced this wonderful exercise for discerning God's active presence in our lives, I was unsure as to how it would be received. Once again, it was if the students were simply responding to something that was already present within them, inviting them to a deeper experience of prayerful connection with God. Without any preparation on the part

It's about becoming a better person

I am an eighteen-year-old secondary school student hoping to major in psychology at university next year. I have spina bifida.

I did not always attend a Catholic high school. I chose to come to my current high school after Grade 9. People say there's a difference and it's true. I can feel it. There is just a different attitude here. I find people to be very generous and not judgmental. I can talk to anyone. There is just a different perspective — I felt like people were not going to judge me by the way I looked. I felt more welcome.

Throughout my time here I have felt very supported. I feel that the teachers really care about me as an individual. They care about where I am going in the future and they really want me to succeed.

There has been a key group of teachers that has been very important to me. They have taken the time to tell me their own stories, the decisions they made and where they went in their lives. I know that if I ever need anyone to listen to me about any of my concerns for my future, that I will be heard and cared for. Together, we can figure out my future!

Strong relationships make all the difference

For me, I think that the greatest gift of Catholic education has been the relationships I have formed. I have come to realize that it's not just about going to school and getting good grades — it's about

of the facilitators, they were instantly disposed to silence and solitude so that they could hear beyond the noise that often makes up their regular day.

Coming away by ourselves

Such observations and experiences prompted my reflection on the role of silence in the lives of contemporary youth. While we are all products of a culture that speaks (and loudly at that) more than it listens; that trains us to fear being alone and to avoid moments of down-time; that offers us a myriad of attractions to keep us involved and on the move — there remains a simple invitation within us; a simple yearning to “come away by ourselves to a deserted place and rest a while [with me]” (Mark 6:31). It is obvious that the Holy Spirit utters these words of the heart since it appears that the desire of the heart is already present and just needs an environment and opportunity in which to allow it to speak with exuberance and freedom. Perhaps this is the service to which Catholic educators are called and commissioned; simply to facilitate the opportunity for the Spirit to speak freely what is already there in our young people.

“Another retreat next year — please!”

It has been a number of weeks since we encountered Christ together in a variety of prayer forms. Since that time, many

becoming a better person. The strong relationships I have made here at the school have taught me how to make my relationships better outside the school. I have transferred what I have learned and have become a better person for it.

I think that having faith all around me has had an impact. Through relationships with my teachers, I have opened my eyes to see what is around me. I have a religion teacher who is really good at getting me to think about the decisions I make — why I act the way that I do. I don’t realize it when it’s happening, but I have found that faith has often been part of the decisions I’ve made. I would never have realized it unless someone had come to talk to me about it. I would miss that in public school — and would not even realize I had lost anything at all!

I have mentioned that I have learned much from my relationships at school, but I also think that I have a lot to offer to others. I think



... there remains a simple invitation within us, a simple yearning to “come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” (Mark 6:31)

that many students feel the same way, searching for silent and prayerful moments that help them to understand that God has not forsaken them, but invites them to journey on different paths than they are used to.

As a Catholic-school educator, I will continue to nurture silent moments in the classroom, not simply for the sake of discipline and order, but to allow the Spirit to speak to my students and to teach them the disposition and value of listening to the Spirit who reveals much to them as they continue to journey through life. ■

that I offer other students at my school a model of positive attitude. Those who spend time with someone, who some would say is “limited”, begin to see life in a different perspective.

I can teach others to take things as they come, to be positive and to take what they are given in life. A teacher once asked me to stay after class a moment. She told me, “When you come into my class, you make me happy. You make me smile. I wanted you to know that.” That meant so much to me, not only because she thought it, but then took the next step to let me know too. Some people wouldn’t be bothered. That effect on others is a gift that I have to give.

True, I might have some physical challenges, but you will not see me sitting and moping. I have learned to focus on the little things each day that make me smile. If that smile is contagious, all the better!

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students have approached me with the request that we have another retreat next year. When I asked them why they wanted to repeat such an experience, the common response was, “I need more silence in my life; God has things to tell me.”

After a year of so much classroom noise, fidgeting, and distraction, grace was revealed in the simple comments of many students. I’m reminded of the words of Jesus in John 3:8: “The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

I’m convinced that there is a place for silence, solitude, interiority; for creating an environment and modeling an attitude of reverence in prayer; for making counter-cultural choices at times. It is clear to me