

# The Online Retreat

*Ignatius Could Not Have Imagined, nor Did We*

By Maureen McCann Waldron



In 1998, when the World Wide Web was only nine years old, Creighton University's Online Ministries was born. The ministry was started at a time when many people still considered the internet a toy and few understood how it would change our reading, travel, shopping, learning, our prayer – and our lives. We certainly could not have predicted that our adaptation of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola would become a worldwide ministry available in nine languages, audio files, and a book.

The 450-year-old series of prayer experiences in the Spiritual Exercises came from Ignatius's own life struggles and his deep desire to find out what God wanted for his life. His keen understanding of human nature and his experience of having a personal relationship with God – and discovering how to “speak to the Lord as you would a friend” – have changed the lives of countless people. But St. Ignatius could not have imagined his much-adapted Exercises on the internet, and neither did we.

In the spring of 1998 we used the internet as an easy way to distribute scripture readings to our colleagues making the annual six-week Lent retreat. We recruited people on campus to help us write a few paragraphs of reflection each day. We saw it as Creighton colleagues ministering to other colleagues on campus, and we thought it was a nice Lent project.

When we heard from a Maryland woman who had heard about our website from a priest she met in Hong Kong, we began to suspect the power of the internet was beyond

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Lwena, Angola. Women often lose limbs to unexploded land mines when attempting to plant their gardens. Although the civil war ended years ago, danger still exists because of the millions of landmines left behind.

Left: Omaha, Nebraska. Mother and child – 1983

Photo credit: Don Doll, S.J. The photography of Creighton's Father Doll also helped stir retreatants' imagination.



Creighton's campus and our imagining. We sensed that people wanted something more in their relationship with God.

We knew from our own very busy lives that daily prayer times were important, but not everyone was able to find the time for it. It was Ignatius himself who first began adapting his Exercises from the full 30-day immersion in prayer. We wondered whether we could possibly create a new adaptation of the Exercises.

As spiritual directors, my colleague Fr. Andy Alexander, S.J., and I both knew that this long tradition had been handed down generation after generation, person to person in the director/retreatant relationship, and we both understood the power of that. Yet we heard from people who lacked access to a director or retreat house. We spent the summer of 1998 in prayer and discernment and decided humbly, if boldly, that Ignatius would approve of what we envisioned.

Ignatius recommended 90 minutes of prayer each day for those doing the Exercises in daily life, but we knew this would discourage some people. Our idea was to offer five to ten minutes of retreat material each week but not give the retreatant a set time to pray. Ignatius tells us to ask for the grace we want to receive when we begin to pray. We suggested asking for that grace continually during each day: at the moment we awaken, while brushing teeth or showering, while walking across campus to a meeting, while doing laundry or going to work.

Guided by the Exercises, we outlined the retreat for 34 weeks. We launched the retreat website in mid September, 1998. We created a guide or overview of each week, along with a "Getting Started" page with points for prayer and a little more explanation for those who wanted that. We used simple language because the reader would not have anyone to ask for clarification.

Our colleague, Larry Gillick, S.J., added an encouragement column for each week of the retreat.

**A**nother Creighton colleague, renowned photographer, Don Doll, S.J., generously offered 34 photos from his vast archives to use for each week of the retreat. We added a line of scripture to each photo so people could pray with those. We realized that we could add another dimension to the retreat by teaching people to set that photo as the background on their desktops each week – an ever-changing reminder of the grace to pray for that week.

The early retreatants asked for printable versions and then audio versions, which we added. They asked for and we added guidelines for using the retreat in a group and suggestions if they were alone. (In 2009, Loyola Press published the Online Retreat in a book, *Retreat in the Real World*.)

We added a sharing link, where people could send in their anonymous reflections on a particular retreat week. Over the years tens of thousands of sharings have been added. Those in the retreat often read the sharing week by week and have the sense of a worldwide community all praying this experience together.

We wrote the retreat imagining someone making the retreat alone, without access to a spiritual director. How to deal with the sin of the first week without all of the personal cues a director watches for? We wrote it carefully, with cautions about guilt and depression and tried to keep the focus not on our sin but on God's love for us; yet clearly we could not delve as deeply into sin as if we were accompanying someone in person.

We were surprised how many people took the retreat to their own spiritual director or were led to it by a director. Parishes, small faith communities, spouses, groups gathering in coffee shops, or brothers sharing a phone call made the retreat together.

The Online Retreat is not for everyone. We found that many times people began the retreat but drifted away. For some, it did not feel like a "real" retreat if they were not asked to pray an hour a day. Others did not want to pray alone and needed an organized group. There was early resistance to "praying at a computer." Some objected to our adaptation of the Exercises saying it was not authentic, did not use the proper language, did not require enough prayer, and did not continue the traditional relationship with a spiritual director.

In the ending weeks of the retreat, we asked retreatants about their experiences and were overwhelmed at the responses. We heard from many who could not have made the retreat any other way: a rancher 70 miles from town; a dying woman in Scotland; a woman whose husband's work had taken them to Saudi Arabia, where Christian faith is prohibited; and a quadriplegic man who made the retreat at his computer, using a pencil in his mouth.

Retreatants rejoiced in their new relationship with God and in their ability to talk to Jesus heart-to-heart in the shower or grocery store. One wrote movingly, "I returned to the Church and joined the little prayer group there – tears of joy!!"

An RCIA director used some of the material in her work saying, "It enriched my reflections and let me be more spontaneous in prayer experiences."

From a minister: "I was given the support of a loving Christ to look at some difficult areas of life – and then with the help of a wise confessor identify the resistances, the sin – and find reconciliation, forgiveness and freedom that I have not experienced before."

Another wrote: "The background for the week was always in my mind, and I thought of it often. I am growing with each week. One of my biggest graces is the warmth I feel toward my relationship with God."

The Online Ministries website has grown to 9,000 pages which received nearly 25 million hits last year from 143 countries. But beyond our deep love and belief in the power of Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises, we did not understand the impact of our small website when we launched it in 1998. Our experience of a pastoral and loving God is one we have been humbled to share with others. ■