

## **SECURING THE FUTURE OF LIVE-IN RETREATS IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS: PART 2 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL ISSUES RELATED TO THE NATURE, PURPOSES AND CONDUCT OF RETREATS**

### **Abstract**

This is the second of two articles reporting the conclusions drawn from a doctoral research study on teachers' understandings of the nature, purposes and conduct of live-in retreats for senior secondary students in Catholic schools (Tullio, 2009; Tullio & Rossiter, 2009). It discusses critical issues for the future of retreats, in both theory and practice, referenced to the psychological and spiritual issues raised by the sample of teachers in the study. Of special significance is the personal and community dimension, and how this in turn underpins the potential of retreats to enhance young people's spirituality and personal faith. While the extent to which these issues are pertinent to Catholic school retreats across the country is yet to be determined, and while there will remain different estimates of retreats depending on the perspective taken on youth spirituality, the article should contribute as a stimulus to ongoing debate and research on school retreats.

### **Introduction**

In his national review of religious education in Australian schools, Rossiter (1981, p. 110) considered that "the prominent place given to retreats or religious camps is a distinctive feature of religious education programs in Catholic secondary schools". Since its relatively humble beginnings in Adelaide in 1964, the live-in communitarian retreat has developed from an isolated, grass roots teacher innovation to a valued fixture in the religious life and educational program of Catholic schools.

Research on the views of year 12 students has long shown that young people in Catholic schools have enjoyed their retreats and considered that they made a valued contribution to their spiritual development (Flynn, 1985, 1993; Flynn & Mok, 2002; Maroney, 2008). Nevertheless, despite their success, it is surprising that little is said about retreats in diocesan documents on Catholic schooling and religious education (Tullio, 2009). Similarly, apart from some retreat manuals produced in the United States, some small local Australian resources, and a few articles in journals, little has been published about the nature, purposes and practices of retreats (Firman, 1968; Rossiter, 1975, 1978, 1997; Harrison, 1989; Tullio & Rossiter, 2009).

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of student views of retreats has been their popularity as enjoyable experiences. However, it is unlikely that Catholic schools could continue to justify the sacrifice of valuable year 12 class time, the retreat costs, as well as significant senior school staff resources, if the retreats were just about giving students a 'good experience'. Explanations of the spiritual and religious dimension to retreats are not always convincing, especially for school staff not involved in retreats. In a crowded curriculum, with ever increasing pressure on schools to produce the best academic results they can, there is a looming crisis for the place of live-in retreats in Catholic secondary schools.

This is the second of two articles concerned with putting retreats into better perspective, highlighting their psychological and spiritual functions as well as identifying and trying to address problems that can compromise their value. Hopefully, this will stimulate further reflection, debate and research on retreats to help secure their future in Australian Catholic education. The issues considered here were identified by the sample of teachers interviewed in the doctoral research of Tullio (2009). How extensively these issues might apply at a national level is yet to be determined. Nevertheless, they remain significant potential problems for the conduct of retreats, and as such they could well be part of the agenda for any systematic

professional development program for the training of teachers as retreat leaders.

### **Psychological dimensions to the retreat process**

***The place of personalism in the retreat:*** For our purposes, the idea of ‘personalism’ in retreats is regarded as the intentional interest of educators in promoting a personal dimension to the retreat process. This includes a desirable place for the expression of emotion, good feelings and sense of community; it is particularly concerned with achieving a personal level in discussions and in interactions between students, and between students and teachers; it values personal sharing and personal disclosures.

The idea of promoting personalism has a long history in Catholic school religious education in Australia. It was considered to be a distinctive feature in the historical development of Catholic school religious education in the 1960s and 1970s, and especially in the live-in retreat movement (Rossiter, 1981; Rossiter, 1999). Rossiter (1999) considered that some of the attempts to make religious education personal, experiential and relevant to the lives of young people in those times were somewhat misdirected; but he judged that “relevance and personalism are *the* most important issues for Catholic religious education into the next Millennium – much more important now than they ever were in the 1970s.” (p. 9). He was referring specifically to the classroom component of religious education where he believed that an intellectually challenging, academic and content-rich study of religion provided the most favourable context for personal discussion as well for content that students felt had relevance to their search for meaning and purpose in life in a complex and confusing world (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, pp. 392-408). Developing the notions of *content relevance* and *pedagogical relevance* was central to this thinking.

But what was not clarified in this discourse was the place for personalism and relevance in retreats. The context of retreats differs significantly from that of the classroom – with different psychological potential for promoting personal and spiritual development. The latter was specifically geared to a student-centred, academic research-oriented study, with formal content in written, oral, audiovisual and Internet resources, together with specified knowledge/skills outcomes and assessment tasks; the classroom ‘channel’ to personalism and relevance was *academic* and *subject-oriented*. On the other hand, the live-in retreat had a different ‘channel’ to personalism and relevance because it was quite distant from the academic context; it was *informal* and was much more suited to *experiential* activities; also, the discussions on retreats naturally tended to be more *personal* and *narrative* in tone – contrasting with the ‘informed debate’ model that was appropriate for discussion in the religion classroom; the idea of *sharing personal insights* was at home in the discussions on retreats. And it was associated with personal reflection and review of life.

There is a literature in the philosophy of education that looks at the emotional dimension to learning (E.g. Carr, 2003; Damasio, 1994). But this is more concerned with learning in the formal classroom curriculum. Similarly, writings on what is called ‘Social, emotional and academic learning’ (SEAL) (E.g. Cefai & Cooper, 2009; Folsom, 2008; Zins *et. al.* 2004.) deal with socially oriented classroom pedagogies and not with the more psychological/spiritually focused learning that is the focus of retreats. The latter is better understood in terms of personal ‘learning’ as described in humanistic psychology (Tullio & Rossiter, 2009) and is explained in Crawford & Rossiter (2006, pp. 283-286).

Understanding the contrasting, yet valuably complementary, places for personalism / relevance in retreats and in classroom religion lessons is important for religious education. It helps show the different emphases and potentials in each context as regards psychological and spiritual dynamics. And it gives a broader picture of how a range of educative processes in schooling can be personal and relevant for pupils.

In his book on retreats, Rossiter (1978) claimed that developing the personal and community dimension to retreats was one of the key purposes of the retreat leaders who first conducted communitarian retreats since the mid-1960s. He considered that while having personal interactions was valuable, there was a need for caution because of the potential for misuse. The comments by teachers in this study confirmed that, 45 years after the introduction of communitarian retreats, the situation remains the same:- personal

interactions and discussions are thought to build a sense of community that enhances the spiritual impact of the retreat; but sometimes there are excesses in personal disclosures that cause emotional difficulties and / or problems with confidentiality.

The sections that follow will discuss some of the potentialities and problems for personalism identified in the study.

***Emotion and euphoria:*** Enjoyment, emotion, good feelings and euphoria have long been known to be prominent in school retreats (Flynn, 1993; Rossiter, 1975, 1978). This can be evident in laughter, smiles and camaraderie with others; and in turn, euphoric feelings can flow into the celebration of liturgy, making it a more tangible expression of a caring, believing community. 'Re-entry' to ordinary life and making adjustments following the emotional high of a retreat have been taken into account by retreat leaders. For example: some students found it difficult to reconcile their happy retreat feelings with the reality of less than happy feelings in their life at home and school; if the retreat euphoria was not identified and explained to some extent, the students may have felt puzzled by it, and perhaps emotionally manipulated by the retreat leaders. But there is evidence that while retreat leaders valued young people's enjoyment of live-in retreats, they did not show that they had a good functional theory for understanding and interpreting the natural place and the educational role of emotion and euphoria within retreat dynamics – and within the broader context of school education.

The scheme of Crawford and Rossiter (2006, pp. 283-286) proposed a theory as to how emotion can be regarded as a useful, ethical and healthy part of students' personal learning. Just having emotional experiences in themselves was not necessarily educational. Appropriate expressions of emotion by pupils in any educational context could be regarded as 'healthy' when they flow naturally out of educative experiences – as normal by-products – and not out of situations that were intentionally devised to stimulate their emotions. The presence of emotion often made a learning experience more holistic (E.g. in studying literature, drama, poetry, art, music, science etc.) One of the useful contributions that school education might make to the development of young people's emotional maturity would be to help them learn how to identify emotional responses (as different from intellectual responses) and to be able to put their emotions into some sort of perspective. In other words, there needed to be the promotion of some *understanding of emotion* and of when and where different expressions of emotion would be acceptable in a community. Also needed would be some understanding of the positive contribution that emotions make to human expression, communication, behaviour and personal maturity. In addition, an educational scheme for healthy emotional education needs to have an accompanying code of teacher ethics to guide retreat leaders (and teachers) in the use of activities that can stimulate emotions (The recommended code of ethics is 'committed impartiality' developed by Hill, 1981, 1982; summarised in Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, pp. 295-298).

When emotion and euphoria flow naturally from fun educative activities on retreats, this enhances the sense of community as individuals experience the joy and exhilaration in developing new friendships and in affirming old friendships; and this includes friendship with the responsible adults. Sometimes there can be valuable personal learnings, first experienced within the favourable and euphoric situation of the retreat, which can then gradually become more of a conviction and commitment after the initial euphoric feelings fade.

There is a need to acknowledge that there is value in students having healthy fun and enjoyment for their own sake. However, this in itself would hardly be a good justification for having a live-in retreat – hence the importance of having a scheme like that referred to above for interpreting emotional education and for informing the use of activities that have emotional potential. The 'emotional potential' of an activity on retreat needs to be appraised before it is tried out on students. If it is likely to trigger an excessive expression of emotion that cannot adequately be dealt with within the normal complement of staff resources at the retreat, then it should be judged inappropriate. Also important would be the skills of retreat leaders in dealing relatively comfortably with students' emotions. Healthy emotional responses

could then be accepted as natural consequences of retreat activities; but it would be questionable to make specific emotional responses the intentional outcomes to be pursued.

This study showed that retreat leaders often associated emotions and euphoria with personal disclosure in group discussions. This question will now be considered in more detail.

***Personal sharing and personal disclosure in small group discussions:*** Most of the retreat leaders who were interviewed considered that *telling your personal story* was a central theme in the dynamics of their retreats. It was expected that adult retreat leaders would disclose something of their own personal story (including beliefs and values) either in whole group inputs, or in small group discussions, as a principal stimulus for getting students to talk about their own personal lives. The idea of *personal sharing* was espoused as particularly valuable, and the success of small group discussions tended to be measured in terms of whether or not they resulted in personal disclosures from students. In turn, such disclosures could develop an 'electric' like atmosphere of emotion in the groups which could lead to strong feelings of empathy, group bonding and sense of group identity; this was not unlike the dynamics in counselling, 'sensitivity' or 'encounter' groups (Rogers, 1961, 1972), even though the retreat was basically an educational activity and not a therapy group. Sometimes this led to crying or even a level of hysteria – we considered this an indication of excessive or inappropriate personal disclosure. Some retreat leaders appeared to think that the revealing of personal issues by students would ease their problems. Underlying this practice was the presumption that this sort of personal disclosure was an important personal development mechanism. Rossiter (1978, pp. 69-71) proposed that the psychological processes of 'personal identification', emotional 'scanning' the group for feelings and ideas, as well as 'rehearsal' and 'trying on' of new ways of thinking and presenting the self were often involved.

Some retreat leaders explained their group leadership role in terms of creating a climate for intimate discussion and personal disclosure; they also used activities they knew would be likely to trigger students' emotions. While group leaders may have felt this situation was desirable, it could be experienced by participants (including teachers) as 'emotionally claustrophobic', where there were few avenues of escape from the psychological pressure of having to contribute at a personal level.

While personal sharing was considered to contribute to a growing sense of community, it remained problematic to decide 'how personal' the discussion needed to be to achieve this. There was a need for criteria for determining what was the appropriate 'depth' for personal revelations by both teachers and students. The advice given to some teachers new to retreat work was to "share only what you feel comfortable with." But this was vague and therefore unhelpful.

Other potential problems stemming from a strong focus on personal stories and disclosure included the following.

- Some personal stories, from teachers and students, were perceived as artificial or 'manufactured for effect' – that is constructed stereotypically to solicit empathy from others.
- Some felt pressure to 'compete' with the stories of others as a way of enhancing group intimacy and identity.
- At times, participants felt they were under unwanted psychological pressure to meet the 'requirement' of personal disclosure.
- The success of retreat discussions was judged in terms of how much of people's personal lives were revealed and how much emotion was generated as a consequence.

What we considered another problem was the policy of telling students on retreat to call the retreat teachers by their first names. While this strategy may have been felt to help promote informality and community, we considered that it made little if any contribution in this direction while it opened up a 'can of worms' of potential problems such as:-

- The intended 'friendship rationale' of using first names was not likely to be understood and accepted by all the retreat teachers or students.
- The strategy could be perceived as artificial and perhaps even manipulative.
- Would the first-name basis be extended to the principal when he/she attended the retreat?
- It could give students the impression that their teachers wanted to be 'one of them' – compromising the normally accepted professional boundaries between students and teachers.
- The practice would create problems back at school. Would it be expected to continue there? How would non-retreat teachers view the practice and how would they be addressed by students? What would students who did not attend the retreat do?
- How would parents judge this practice?
- Would this strategy discourage some teachers from joining retreat teams?

**Confidentiality in discussion groups:** Often group leaders proposed a code of confidentiality for their discussion groups, suggesting that "what is said in the group, stays in the group." But there is no guarantee that this would be respected. Also, stressing group confidentiality could be perceived by students (and teachers) not only as a protection of any confidences they may reveal, but also as a subtle type of invitation implying that self-disclosure was intended as a desirable part of group interaction. This can create unhealthy expectations of the role of small group discussion – as if there ought to be significant self-revelations, most probably about personal problems.

Sometimes retreat teachers may have regretted talking about their personal lives because it was not possible to predict how this information might be used by students either at the retreat or in other settings (such as in texting, emails and comments on FaceBook, MySpace etc.). As far as disclosing personal information is concerned, retreat leaders need to keep to the same standard of professional ethics that would govern their behaviour at school. Thus it is inappropriate for them to disclose personal information that goes beyond the expectations of professional conduct within a teacher-student relationship.

A more serious problem arises if there is conflict between maintaining confidentiality and mandatory legal reporting when a student discloses instances of personal abuse. Teacher mandatory reporting of those at risk is required under child protection laws; and this is clearly endorsed by diocesan and school authorities. While this law does not apply to individuals who are 18 years and older (Hugo, 2007), legal advice (De Ruvo, 2009) suggested that, irrespective of the legal age of a student, the courts would be interested in determining the 'relationship between the school and the students' and whether this gives rise to a duty of care and the nature and extent of that duty of care; if this were 'active', then the onus was on teachers to report students at risk. Some retreat leaders addressed this potential problem by making it clear to students that their small group discussion was not the place for making vulnerable disclosures of personal problems, and certainly not for revealing child abuse. If there were appropriate safeguards in place, and if there was a significant disclosure of a participant's personal problems, then the staff member and students should acknowledge this revelation with respect, empathy and personal support; this would not preclude mandatory reporting by the teacher if the situation warranted it; and it would merit teacher comments about the need for group confidentiality to protect individuals. But, with a clearly stated purpose of the general educational function of group discussion (which should not be like that of a therapy group), and reinforced by the teacher/leader's role, this situation where personal problems are revealed should be the rare exception to the normal rule.

**Clarification of the role of small group discussion:** On the question of personalism in group discussions on retreats, two things are needed. Firstly, an account of what is regarded as a 'healthy' sharing of personal insights and how this is educationally valuable for students; and secondly, clear policy and guidelines about personal disclosures and confidentiality. Students and parents need to know what the ground rules are.

Precautionary rules for group discussions are needed even where, as recommended, they are not intended to be principally concerned with personal disclosure. Within such a framework, when personal disclosures occur naturally without compulsion, as part of a more general discussion, they are more likely to be healthy

and appreciated by group members; and any resultant emotion would also feel healthy and not forced, and this could be accommodated within the group without problems.

We also think that an excessive emphasis on telling one's personal story, both by retreat leaders and students, is unhealthy because it can be experienced as emotional manipulation; this sort of 'engineering' or 'stage-managing' of emotions fails to respect individuals.

The retreat leaders, as well as the students, have both a duty and a right to privacy. Some things they ought keep to themselves; and they should feel free from any pressure to reveal personal views. Such regulatory principles engender a sense of freedom and safety within group discussions and other retreat interactions; and they tend to promote and enhance authentic, healthy, personal sharing rather than inhibit it.

As noted earlier, it is natural that group discussions on retreat are usually at a more personal level than is the case in school religion lessons. This is in keeping with the idea that reflection on life and some healthy sharing of personal insights would be valuable for personal development. This can be affirmed as appropriate and desirable, as long as the cautions noted above were in place. The problem is not so much in having personal discussions as such in an educational setting, but in the ways they might be prompted and introduced. A healthy personal discussion requires a sense of freedom and comfort on the part of the participants where there is no psychological pressure to reveal personal views.

It is proposed that the best way of fostering an authentic, healthy level of personal sharing in groups is to avoid focusing directly on personal disclosure, and rather to operate with a more general educational focus on questions and issues that are judged to be relevant to young people's lives. Whether or not this will lead to significant personal disclosures is then not relevant. The participants themselves have the power to participate at whatever level they feel comfortable with.

This approach is consistent with the guidelines for the place of personalism in religious education discussions proposed by Crawford and Rossiter (1985, pp. 18-19; 1988, pp. 58-59; 2006, pp. 286-291) – already referred to above in the section on personalism. This same scheme devised for the classroom could be applied in the retreat, together with recognition of the natural differences in context. But the same ethical guidelines and protection of individual freedom and privacy should apply in both contexts.

This approach, with more *content* (but not the same as 'content' for classroom study), is considered healthier than placing too great a reliance on 'telling your personal story' as the dominant theme for discussions. It is recommended that retreat leaders introduce more variety to the strategies that can be used as stimulus activities for group discussions, as appeared to be the case with the earliest communitarian retreats. A number of key issues in contemporary youth identity and spirituality could well figure more prominently as content on retreats for promoting reflection and discussion (c/f the range of issues considered in Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, pp. 131-169; 204-224.)

With criticisms and cautions stated, we consider it important to affirm that the sharing of personal insights and personal story has been, and will continue to be, a valuable dynamic within live-in retreats – as also in regular classroom discussions – when it is not the prime focus, but a healthy, natural 'process by-product' when participants freely choose to communicate at this level.

### **The spiritual / religious dimension to the retreat**

Given that the basic idea of a retreat in Catholic tradition considers it to be primarily a religious experience that enhances the individual's relationship with God, it is likely that both Catholic Church and Catholic education authorities would see the spiritual/religious dimension to retreats as fundamental. Similarly, from this religious perspective, the justification for the time, costs and investment of staff resources in live-in retreats would need to include a convincing account of how the retreat makes a distinctive contribution to the spiritual/religious aspects of young people's lives. But, articulating the links between retreat

processes and young people's specifically religious and moral development is more difficult today in a secularised, individualistic, consumer-oriented wider culture than would have been the case in the relatively religious culture of Australian Catholicism say in the 1950s – and even in the 1970s.

One of the central issues is the combination of religious experience with fun/community and enjoyment. It is difficult to differentiate the relative spiritual influence of each dimension to what is an holistic experience. However, there will usually be concerns by authorities if the latter appears to be disproportionate to the former, or if the latter seems to eclipse the former; if it is mainly a fun experience, is it justified? Also, there may be the additional question: does the activity promote increased engagement with the Church. Different appraisals of retreats will result from different positions on these questions.

It is proposed that an understanding of the spiritual and religious dynamics of retreats requires a prior understanding of the complexities in current relationships between the *spiritual* and the *religious* (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, pp. 179-200). Measures of religiosity more appropriate to an earlier time will not be useful in gauging the success of contemporary senior school retreats. The gradual cultural slide from regular Sunday Mass attendance by Catholics in the 1950s to its current low level is not likely to be reversed by any activities or programs like retreats, religious education, Catholic schooling or World Youth Days (Tullio & Rossiter, 2009). These structures and activities may well be affecting young people spiritually, but it is not possible to measure the results in the short term, and neither is it possible to find simple measures of religiosity that will give an adequate account of the complexity to this growth and development. Nevertheless, as noted in the introduction, studies of the views of Year 12 students over many years have shown that retreats were regarded as spiritually valuable.

Both Catholic schooling generally, and live-in retreats specifically, need to have religious purposes that take into account the contemporary situation where the 'locus of the spiritual' (that is, where the spiritual dimension is most readily encountered in life) seems to have shifted from a more *formally religious position* within a clearly identifiable *religious culture* to a more *personal and individualistic* place within people's *daily life structure* (Rossiter, 2009). This would imply that the retreat should aim to promote the spiritual and moral development of young people in the way that is judged most appropriate to the live-in setting; this will mean focusing on activities that are more evidently identifiable as *personal development oriented* than those that are *formally religious*. This is exactly the same situation as that of the first communitarian retreats conducted during the mid-1960s. They were primarily personal development oriented, but they were conducted within an overarching religious structure, and they included a prominent place for key religious activities like the Eucharist, reconciliation and prayer. They also operated within a framework where spirituality was considered to be more than just the religious – that is, a spirituality that was relevant to:- the students' everyday lives, the spiritual and moral issues that they were encountering, and personal reflection / review of life. In these terms, the purpose and function of communitarian retreats have not changed since their introduction in 1964, even if there have been different estimates of the relative influence of various retreat strategies and activities. However, the difficulty that schools now have in arranging for priests to be present for the celebration of mass, let alone the possibility of being key retreat leaders, means that adjustments have been required to address this change in the availability of ordained ministers. For example: if no priest can celebrate mass, a paraliturgy and/or a communion service may be programmed; students could be engaged in the preparation of the paraliturgy.

**Human/personal dimension to spirituality:** Those involved in school retreats often considered them to be 'spiritual' because they were perceived as enhancing the personal life of students through reflection on life experience and their interactions with others. In this sense, spirituality was embedded in a community experience that explored relationships with friends, family, the wider community and with God (and even relationships with the physical world and animals). The retreat provided a particularly favourable personal and social environment where community building experiences provided an experiential base for this sort of reflection. In this sense, the retreat was qualitatively different from religion lessons. On the retreat, there was much more scope and freedom to explore and discuss the complexities of relationships.

The retreat thus sought to enhance young people's self-awareness and self-understanding; this was considered a 'spiritual quest' as it helped in the search for personal meaning and identity (Hughes, 2007). Educators who shared this understanding of spirituality would have no difficulty in seeing the retreat as engaging with, and fostering the development of, young people's spirituality; according to this view, the personal and the spiritual were closely interlinked. However, for those who had a more formally religious understanding of spirituality, this could look like a 'watering down' of the religious dimension of the retreat.

We consider that the planning and conduct of retreats require an insightful understanding of contemporary youth spirituality as explained below.

**Spirituality: The core to retreat purposes and processes:** In the conduct of the first communitarian retreats in the 1960s, one of the driving forces of the movement was the exploration of an emerging, new type of Catholic, Christian spirituality that was in tune with the Second Vatican Council's call for a "reading of the signs of the times" (Firman, 1968). This same quest for a relevant spirituality remains central to contemporary Catholic school retreats.

How Catholic spirituality is to be interpreted underpins the retreat purposes and processes. It is considered that their success ultimately depends on the quality and the perceived relevance of the spirituality that is brought into play during the retreats. Inevitably, questions about the value and the success of the retreats will be conditioned by different estimates of what an authentic modern Catholic spirituality looks like. Hence it is to be expected that there will remain divisions and ongoing debate about how the retreats should operate and about what they should be expected to achieve.

Four pertinent issues about spirituality on retreats raised by the teachers in this study will be signposted here, while there is insufficient space to discuss them in detail:-

- A concern that specific attention to the topic 'God' does not decline on retreats. While a central place for liturgy and prayer remained, it would be problematic to try to appraise how prominent God was in students' reflections and spirituality.
- While the retreat was intended to enhance the spirituality of all students who attended, it could be a helpful experience for individuals who were uncertain about their belief in God and about their association with the church.
- The community dimension to retreats could help make religious rituals (especially formal prayer and liturgy) more relevant to young people's spirituality. The retreat presented one of the best opportunities in the Catholic secondary school for the evangelisation of youth.

A sufficiently broad-based view of spirituality needs to inform discussion about the spiritual dimension to retreats. They will function best for young people if they are not used as vehicles for promoting either a specifically conservative or a progressive spirituality. To some extent, these divisions need to be transcended. The spiritual profiles of young people and of retreat staff will cut across these categories. A broad spectrum spirituality is required in the retreat so that it can be taken up differentially by participants according to their situation and needs.

If retreats are to promote both the personal religious faith and spirituality of young people, including those who were not Catholic, as well as those who were uncertain about belief in God and the relevance of religion, then retreat leaders need to take into account the relatively secular, individualistic, eclectic and self-reliant spirituality of many contemporary youth (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Mason et al. 2007; Maroney, 2008). This includes understanding the distinctions that have emerged between the spiritual and the religious, as well as the relationships between spiritual and personal development. While this thinking about spirituality is specifically concerned with relatively non-religious youth, making relevant adjustments in the conduct of retreats is considered to be equally beneficial to those who are religious and who participate in a local community of faith. In other words, this conception of a retreat does nothing that



would compromise the needs of religious youth who were described by Rymarz & Graham (2006a, 2006b) as “core Catholic youth.”

In the retreat, the spirituality of the adult leaders is usually more religious and clearly engaged with the church than that of the students. The purpose of the leaders is to offer unconditionally to the young retreat participants a combination religious/spiritual experience that will hopefully enhance and resource their spirituality – whether they are religious or not. Being attuned to contemporary youth spirituality does not require the elimination of religious elements. Rather, the retreat provides a special opportunity for young people to experience first hand some of the traditional religious spirituality that can be made more accessible to them in a favourable community setting.

## Conclusion

The article has examined a range of psychological and spiritual/religious questions about the purposes and conduct of retreats that we consider need to be addressed as part of the ongoing enhancement of retreats and maintenance of their prominent position within Catholic secondary schooling.

While the original research study has given a voice to a small sample of teachers who conducted retreats, there is a need to see whether the issues raised by this group, as well as our interpretation of their significance, apply more extensively to the conduct of retreats in Catholic secondary schools around the country. But what is of even more importance would be research that gives young people a voice on the conduct of retreats. For many years, research and anecdotal evidence have indicated that young people enjoy retreats and see them as valuable spiritual experiences. But nothing systematic has yet been done to investigate their perceptions of the psychological and spiritual dynamics of retreats.

Also a particular concern of ours is the availability of professional development programs for retreat teachers. Hopefully, this and the earlier article will endorse the need for such programs as well as identify an agenda of content and issues that they could address. To complete our interpretation of the current state of retreats and of what needs to be done to promote their continuity and development, we intend to give further attention to contextual school factors that have a bearing on the success of retreats (c/f Tullio & Rossiter, 2010).

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