



JESUIT RETREAT CENTER

AUGUST 2025

CENTENNIAL NEWSLETTER SERIES

To Know the Place 2012 – 2025

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."
T. S. Eliot

By Pat Clough

For the first time:

We have a full picture of El Retiro's first 100 years, its dreams, its growing pains and its triumphs. We have written about the dreamers, the pioneers, the fundraisers and the visionaries – laymen and women, and religious. We wrote about the extraordinary leaders buffeted by global events and the ever-urgent need for financial support. And despite the challenges, retreat offerings grew, and retreatants came but it was hard work. Our faculty, staff, and donors labored for us. This is the spirit of El Retiro that has rooted us in its soul for decades. Ignatian Spirituality captains the Retreat House ship. Innovators keep it afloat. The mission of the Jesuits is the way forward, always forward.

2012: The McNerny Bookstore

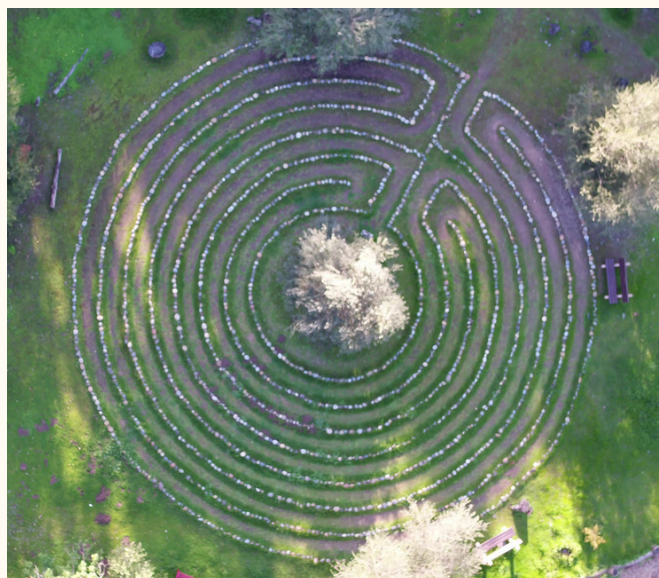
The Honorable Judge John S. McNerny attended the dedication of The McNerny Bookstore in March of 2012. His deep love for El Retiro began when he was a college student at Santa Clara University, and where he received his Juris Doctor degree in 1954. He "worked tirelessly each year to promote the Annual Legal Retreat," writing personal notes and sending invitations to attorneys who had never come before. His determination to see El Retiro flourish is legendary. The McNerny Bookstore is a Retreat Center jewel maintained in Loyola Hall by Shirley Sachs, Bookstore Manager. For some retreatants, it is a peaceful meditation room with comfortable chairs, for others, a library, organized by spiritual topics and religious authors. The bookstore is supported by retreatants who purchase books, gift cards, pamphlets, and holy cards. For Shirley, managing the bookstore is "an act of love" as it was by her predecessor, Mary McCarty. Shirley's office is across the hall in case you are looking for something, or want to say, hello.



2014: The Labyrinth of El Retiro

One of the oldest symbols of the spiritual journey is a labyrinth. At El Retiro, its purposeful circular walking path is marked by rings of stone. Long considered a spiritual practice encouraging contemplative prayer, it leads to a sacred center. Walking forward is the only way to get there. A labyrinth can be seen as a symbol of Ignatius of Loyola's own spiritual pilgrimage in the 16th Century. Calling himself a pilgrim, he wrote *The Spiritual Exercises* detailing the markers for other pilgrims to follow. We can imagine his Exercises are the rocks that define our own pilgrimage guiding us to the sacred center. The smooth ones and the jagged have given meaning to our lives; the obstacles, the switchbacks, the transforming experiences of being led to the center where we are found by a loving God. And in the Ignatian contemplative tradition, the same path guides the pilgrim back out into the world renewed and ready to serve. At El Retiro, *The Spiritual Exercises* and the Jesuits hold us together leading the way. The story is all there in Tom Nann's Labyrinth. It's your story too.

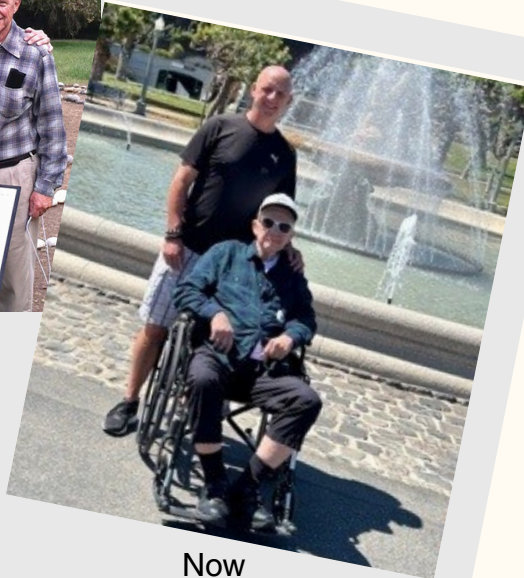
Tom Nann, El Retiro Board Member and long-time retreatant, decided he wanted to build a Labyrinth for the Retreat Center to honor and surprise his dad for his 80th birthday. But the Nann family history at El Retiro began in the 1930's with both of his grandfathers who came to their first retreats. His father, Ray, came to El Retiro as a high school senior in 1951 and brought Tom to his first Palm Sunday men's weekend retreat in 1990. Tom's love for the Retreat Center would grow as he walked the grounds becoming familiar with every building, statue, monument, and the acres of meandering trails. He felt El Retiro held a secret; a vision was forming in his head – a Labyrinth. The lower property was a perfect site framed by small olive trees that reminded him of his favorite place to pray - with the kneeling Jesus in the olive grove just below St. Robert's Hall.



He did his research, calling several rock distributors to determine what rock he could use to build the Labyrinth with his own hands. He would pay for it by raising the money at a poker tournament with friends. And for \$500, the rocks were delivered and dumped in the middle of Tom's plan. He found he could begin by clearing them from the center and the inner circle for the Labyrinth began to emerge. He worked his way out creating a concentric path with a measuring stick and a drawing. In one day, he completed 4 ½ rings framing the 30-inch inner pathway. But he ran out of rock. One month later, Tom returned, more rock was delivered, and the Labyrinth was almost finished – but for the last ring. Students on retreat were summoned to help while Tom located a hidden pile of jagged rocks on the hillside. At Tom's direction, the work party interspersed the smooth rocks with the jagged so that the all the rings of the Labyrinth mirrored the lived experience of life. It was completed by the end of the day. The moment Ray Nann saw the Labyrinth for the first time is captured on video. It was an emotional moment for Tom and Ray, one they cherish. "It's an inner compass," Tom explains, "you walk into your inner self and find God has been with you all along." The Labyrinth was dedicated in 2014 and blessed by his friend and mentor, Father Bernie Bush, S.J.



Then



Now

Leadership: 2015-2025

"To live by the Ignatian norm that calls us to find God in all things; to discover where God will best be served and where people will best be helped; to show love in deeds and not just words," this was the founding vision of El Retiro in 1925. One hundred years later, this is not just the story of a place. It is the living legacy of every person who entered searching and left with something holy they couldn't quite name.

The guides were and are the Jesuits, the ones celebrated in the archives and the ones we celebrate now who have held El Retiro together through the challenges of the last ten years. Expansion took the form of new retreat offerings. Financial planning and the latest computer technology replaced older systems. It took collaboration, planning, and leadership. Father Chi Ngo, S.J., was named Executive Director in 2018. The El Retiro Board, staff and Jesuits anticipated many changes, but no one saw a pandemic coming in the midst of revitalizing the Retreat Center that would force it to close its doors.

"There was no time when we stopped innovating and changing." Father Chi captured the moment the construction began. Jesuits came from closed parishes and schools; tradesmen and volunteers came from lockdown to lend a hand. Skills were evaluated and people went to work on residence halls, bathrooms, meeting rooms, and trails. Contractors guided workers and brought in materials. It was a time of great activity. And not forgotten, plans were made for retreats to resume on an unknown timetable. El Retiro would be ready; it would make it to its centennial and beyond. Even the skeptics would be enrolled in the deep sense of mission.

Leading the Way

Father John Auther, S.J., came to El Retiro in 2020, just in time for the pandemic. He recalls the first chaotic days of reconstruction after El Retiro was required to close. The “old” was being pulled from resident halls and meeting rooms – carpets, beds and worn furnishings, sinks and tile. He sought the supervisor and asked if there was something he would be better suited to do, maybe out of doors with plants and landscaping. “Plants were a lot more forgiving than plumbing,” he recalls. He set about pruning, caring for the roses in newly relandscaped Loyola Garden, seeking survivors that needed water and fertilizer, identifying dead and dangerous tree limbs along the trails. He would become a gardener for the beautification of the grounds. Discouraging deer from eating the roses became a creative passion.

Father Kevin Leidich, S. J., came to El Retiro in 2015 as the Superior of the Jesuit community. “It was a time of organizational chaos,” he recalls. “We had a lot of work to do to stabilize the administration of duties and responsibilities.” A Board was formed for the first time in 2014. The captain’s system for parish retreats was in place. Carmel Smith, “Director of First Impressions,” and registrar for 40 years, and Brother Tom Koller, S.J., preserved El Retiro’s reputation for hospitality, assisting the captains and the pastoral staff through a rough period. And while the pandemic allowed for renovation of buildings when the doors had to close in March of 2020, the cancellation of summer programs prompted a time of innovation. Ministry through technology took off.

“Ignatian Moment” became a five-minute daily internet offering hosted by a Jesuit.

Eight-day retreats, spiritual direction, and lessons from St. Ignatius’s autobiography were offered online. Daily Mass was held in the Grotto. In Fall of 2020, the thirty-day silent retreats were allowed to resume on campus.

Father Chi Ngo, S.J., brought administrative expertise and technology skills to stabilize the operations at El Retiro. A new Board of Directors brought experience and personal knowledge of the Retreat Center helping boost morale. More hands set about bringing people back to the Retreat Center. Father Chi established order, energized the staff, welcomed retreatants, and seemed everywhere at once. And people came. Father John examined the records of retreats in the years 2023-2024 and found more retreatants attended Jesuit retreats than had come in the previous 20 years. El Retiro was growing again. It had survived, and more than surviving, it was thriving.

It was ready for the Centennial. Much has been written about the Centennial celebrations of 2024-2025. The dedication of the Centennial Garden, the March 15th celebration of the first Mass in 1925, the May Gala commemoration of the founding of El Retiro, and the inaugural presentation of the San Inigo award to Father Gregory Boyle, S.J. We give thanks to all who made these successful commemorative events happen - the staff, the planning committees, and volunteers who put in hours planning, preparing, welcoming and serving, but especially, the staff.





Centennial Mass - March 15, 2025



Governor Brown, Keynote Speaker,
Centennial Mass - March 15, 2025



San Iñigo Award Gala - May 22, 2025

The Future

The next issue of the El Retiro Newsletter will look ahead with interviews and tributes. The Jesuits continue to labor. Their gaze is forward looking. They are energized, by the legacy they inherited, the 100-year celebrations and the people who came, and yes, by the labyrinth – a symbol of the story that is El Retiro.

Pat Clough is a writer living in Palo Alto, CA. She is a third year student in the Pierre Favre program and a frequent retreatant at El Retiro. She is our guide through this journey in time at The Jesuit Retreat Center.

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