

Jesuit Retreat Center

April 2025

Centennial Newsletter Series

RESILIENCE

THE 1970'S AND 1980'S

Survival – a strong word. It can imply desperation, but that is not what El Retiro was about. Too many people loved it; despair was never an option. But there were realities, and they were portrayed in every newsletter, in every appeal for help, even in the good news of new ideas, new initiatives. The 70's and 80's were similar and so we are grouping the two decades together. How were they similar? The Retreat Center was struggling financially. Infrastructure was crumbling. Membership in fundraising campaigns was declining. Weather was wreaking havoc on hillsides and roadways, roofs and foundations. Expenses far out-weighed income. Debt and interest on past renovations had mounted and new renovations were needed. It would take planning and innovation. In the best Ignatian tradition, leaders appeared, lay leaders and Jesuits. El Retiro is a story of resilience.



Pic: New Entrance of the Retreat House

Development of financial support systems

In the early 1970's, new sponsorship programs to provide financial support offered retreatants and donors more options. Jesuit Father Louis Franklin, founded the Century Club (\$100 donation per year), followed by Father Robert St. Clair, S.J., who established a New Founders Program with an annual contribution of one thousand dollars for new members. The Board of Directors formed the Development Fund to be used specifically for renovations. Two other important programs were launched in the early 1980's, the Matching Major Donors Fund and the Endowment Fund. In 1982, twelve acres of land were sold for a condominium development producing the first modest endowment for the retreat house.



Growth of Retreats

El Retiro was becoming a conference center during the week bringing in needed income from outside service organizations as well as introducing more of the public to the variety of retreat offerings. They were drawn to the married couples' retreats, Spanish speaking retreats for men and women, young singles retreats, divorced and separated Catholics retreats, retreats for retirees, widows and widowers, and weekends for recovering alcoholics. In response to the growth and needs of retreatants, The Jesuit Institute for Family Life was formed in 1979 by Father Robert Fabing, S.J., who introduced the integration of psychotherapy and Ignatian Spirituality. He also introduced the 36-day full Ignatian retreat program which became highly successful. Father Fabing became a legend at El Retiro where he served for almost 50 years. More will be written about him and other heroes and heroines in future newsletters.



Pic: First Married Couples' Retreat, January 9 - 11, 1970

The Women of El Retiro organized in the late 1970's and 80's and stepped into management of the bookstore, the library, retreat registration, and assisting the office staff. With the leadership of Sister Dolores Kramer, B.V.M, an introduction to the Spiritual Exercises led to the formation of the Women's Spirituality Program. Specified topics on contemplative prayer, discernment, and spiritual direction led to a successful 10-week series titled The Seasons of a Woman's Prayer Workshop in 1980 and the inauguration of the Women's Wisdom Series: Women in Scripture.

Meanwhile, Father Superior John F. Dullea, S.J., 1975:

"To cope with the challenges, marked by a new stage of growth in the life of El Retiro, it has become necessary to reorganize the administration of the retreat house. Fortunately, Father Provincial has heard my call for help and the duties of superior have been divided. A Superior needs to be more than an administrator, he has to be the father of our Jesuit family. He has to be the heart of the house. He has to give his time first and foremost to the men of the Jesuit community."

The job of Superior had become too big. More Jesuits were needed to staff the increased variety of retreats, and the mounting financial problems needed urgent decisions. In July 1975, Father Robert L. Schmitt, S. J. became the Superior of El Retiro and Father Dullea became the first Director of the Retreat Association responsible for recruitment, development, facilities, and programs.

The Role of Captains

Early in the men's retreat movement, a particular set of lay leaders became the organizers of retreats for their individual groups. They were known as captains. In the large diocese of San Francisco, each parish had captains who would handle registration and coordinate calendars with El Retiro staff on behalf of their parish. They were indispensable to the smooth running of the retreat house and kept a steady flow of retreat groups coming during the week and on weekends. The captains were also important marketers. They brought new retreatants from their membership: San Francisco Fire Department, San Francisco Law Enforcement, Knights of Columbus, Italian Catholics Federation to name a few. There were even retreats just for captains creating an important opportunity to recruit more captains. Their leadership roles lasted for decades giving administrative relief to the Directors of the Retreat Association.

Earthquake Ends the Eighties

The 7.1 magnitude earthquake of 1989 did significant damage to El Retiro – to foundations, statuary, windows, roofs and hillsides. Boilers burst, water flooded basements, trees fell, the lights went out. We end this twenty-year history knowing El Retiro survived and not just survived, proved its immense value to so many. Once again, in the best Ignatian tradition, leaders appeared, lay and Jesuit. Volunteers were summoned. Retreats resumed. El Retiro – a story of resilience.



Next: Preparing for the Millenium and Spirituality for the 21st Century

Pat Clough is a writer living in Palo Alto, CA. She is a second 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.

Upcoming Events

April 2025

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Palm Sunday Weekend Retreat - Men & Women

April 11- 13, 2025

Spirit, Soul, Body: The Universal Call to Contemplation

May 2 - 4, 2025

A Retreat for Families and Friends of Alcoholics and Addicts

May 9 - 11, 2025

5-Day Guided Retreat

May 14 - 18, 2025

Go Set the World on Fire: A Retreat for Men

May 15 - 18, 2025

FOR MORE EVENTS



El Retiro San Inigo Gala Award

May 22, 2025

4:00 pm - 8:00 pm

<https://www.jrclosaltos.org/gala>