

Jesuit Retreat Center

September 2024

Centennial Newsletter Series

THE EARLY YEARS

“Long did he search and much did he pray”



By Pat Clough

History is defined as “the record of past events,” but the history of the Jesuit Retreat Center is also a story, a lively and inspiring story, and if we start at the very beginning, we will have to go back to the year 1899 to the origins of a laymen’s retreat movement in California. It was at the Jesuit Novitiate of the Sacred Heart in Los Gatos, CA., when the Exercises of St. Ignatius were first given to a small group of laymen seeking a retreat from their busy lives. A few years later, they formed the Catholic Laymen’s Retreat Association. Retreats were held at Santa Clara College from 1903-1906, then at Villa St. Maria on Stevens Creek from 1906 – 1911. In 1911, they moved to O’Connor Hall at the University of Santa Clara where discussions began with the Jesuits about finding a permanent retreat center. In 1924, Father Provincial Joseph Piet, S.J., a staunch supporter of the laymen’s retreats, assigned Father Joseph Stack, S.J., a frequent retreat director for the laymen’s association, to begin looking for a suitable property.

As this remarkable story unfolds, Father Stack's mission is described in an eloquent account from the Catholic Laymen's Retreat Association Bulletin: 1903 - 1953.

Long did he search and much did he pray. And then who shall say it was not in answer to a prayer, he quite literally stumbled on the Wellman Estate in Los Altos. Suitable in every way, it was purchased at once and readied for the first retreat on April 16, 1925.

Who was William Wellman? Described as a San Francisco "capitalist," he was Director of the wholesale grocery firm of Wellman, Peck and Co. in San Francisco. He had purchased the estate in 1913 but moved after he and his wife divorced, leaving it in the hands of his caretakers. It was the office manager of the Los Altos Water Company who casually suggested to Provincial Rev. Father Piet that he might consider looking at the vacant Wellman estate. Accompanied by Father Stack and Father Zacheus Maher, Rev. Father Piet, standing on the front porch of the Wellman estate looking out over Santa Clara Valley and the vista of its surrounding mountains: "This is our place! You must make every effort to acquire it." (From Los Altos Reminiscences - California History Center, DeAnza, Cupertino, CA.)

The search was over. El Retiro was established as a retreat house under the laws of the State of California as an educational and religious institution in early 1925. "William Wellman asked \$40,000.00 for the property, as it stood, with its 16 acres and improvements, and Rev. Fr. Provincial had the money." What a story!



A long-time friend of the men's retreat movement, it was Archbishop Edward Hanna, D.D., of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, who sanctioned the purchase and suggested the name, El Retiro San Inigo. Retiro means "retreat, or retirement" in Spanish. Inigo is a name of Spanish and Latin origin meaning "fiery" or "ardent." Derived from the medieval name, "Ignatius," could this be what Archbishop Hanna had in mind when he chose the name for the retreat house: "a place of retreat with the ardent Ignatius Loyola and his Exercises?" Given the name "Inigo Lopez de Onaz y Loyola," on October 23, 1491, Ignatius became known as the patron saint of spiritual retreats.

Mission Statement of El Retiro San Inigo

Guided by the Good News of Jesus Christ and steeped in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, El Retiro San Inigo offers a holy setting for individual and group retreats where men and women can deepen their relationship with God and thus build lives that serve the church and our society.

This part of the story isn't complete without naming some of the leaders of the Laymen's Retreat Association who had the earliest vision of a retreat center located conveniently between San Francisco and San Jose. Many were prominent businessmen who helped support the growth of the newly acquired El Retiro San Inigo with substantial donations, legal assistance, hands on labor and "spreading the word."

Clay Green, Thomas A. Driscoll, Paul McCarthy, J. Frank Barrett, James A. Baggigalupi, Paul Fay, Edward Tobin, and many more. We will add to this list in the decades to follow.

The Decade of Rapid Growth: 1925 - 1935

Father Zacheus Maher went to work at El Retiro in February of 1925 while Father Stack visited other retreat houses in the East to see how they were run. The house was cleaned and furnished, and a chapel was made ready in the former billiard room by extending it 25 feet. Pews and the altar were gifts of the University of Santa Clara. The the Blessed Sacrament was placed in the Tabernacle on March 14, 1925. The first mass was celebrated the next day, March 15th. Archbishop Edward J. Hanna officiated at the formal blessing and opening of the retreat house on Thursday, April 2, 1925, with 125 people in attendance.

The first retreat was advertised for April 16th, the second, April 30th. Father Stack, Father William Lonergan, and Father Dominic Giacobbi were its first retreat masters. On Thursday, May 7th, the third retreat began. On May 14th, the fourth. Retreatants were attracted by the location, the permanent status of a retreat house, and the promise of year-round retreats

In a very short time, the facilities were bursting. It's a breathtaking story, documented and true.

By 1928, twelve more acres had been added to the property, and Loyola Hall, a residence hall with a conference area was built. "Much of the pioneering work in laying out paths on the property was done by volunteers from the San Francisco Fire Department." John Pope, engineer and member of the Gentlemen's Sodality of St. Ignatius, diagrammed a map of the roads leading to Los Altos. A plan for a larger chapel soon followed.

The story of Rossi Chapel is a mighty narrative all its own. Still at the heart of the retreat grounds in 2024, Rossi Chapel was a gift of P. Carlo Rossi. Carlo was the 14th child of a pioneer San Francisco Italian Catholic family.

In 1928 he donated his family inheritance to the Jesuit Retreat House for the creation of the chapel in honor of his deceased parents, Mr. and Mrs. Pietro Rossi.



Main Alter at Rossi Chapel

***The 1903 -1953 Catholic Laymen's
Retreat Association Commemorative
Issue:**

"Seldom is it granted a young man to erect a chapel in memory of his beloved parents and later to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in that same chapel. Father Carlo P. Rossi, S.J., erected this chapel before entering the Society of Jesus, January 23, 1928." The stained-glass windows represent the key meditations of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola."

Then, there's the story of the bell. It was J. Frank Barrett, a local building contractor, who constructed Loyola Hall, and was working on Rossi Chapel when he discovered the perfect bell for the chapel tower. It was the bell that had hung in the old church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Santa Barbara, destroyed by an earthquake in 1925, and left on the floor of a garage. An inscription on the bell dated it to the year 1722, cast in Zacatecas, Mexico. Realizing it was the perfect bell for Rossi Chapel, Frank Barrett asked for it. The bell was donated by the pastor of the new Our Lady of the Sorrows in Santa Barbara and shipped to El Retiro. This bell summoned retreatants to prayer for many years, its lovely tones reverberating beyond the hillside retreat and across the valley.

These retreats permit me to step outside the march of humanity and watch the parade from the stands. I try to see where the parade is going, also, whether I have been out of step with the right order of things.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1934

"Since 1927, the Jesuits have been holding retreats for laymen at El Retiro San Inigo, and in that time, more than 5000 men have joined in the Holy Exercises." Tom Bellow, reporter

Though discovery and development are the major hallmarks of the first decade, the article in the San Francisco Chronicle, takes the story of El Retiro into personal testimonials of the retreatants. Yes, expansion was rapid and necessary but what did they have to say about "making a retreat?"

*The retreats let "the man I
ought to be,' look at the man
I am.*

*Retreatants who have
made the Exercises say
that at the end of this
rendezvous with Christ,
they have come back to
town with their minds
enlightened, their will
strengthened, their hearts
inspired, and their whole
beings fortified. Tom
Bellow, reporter*

Ignatian guides, following in the footsteps of Ignatius and his companions, over four hundred years later, attracted thousands to El Retiro. The retreat center was expanding. What comes next? More building, more retreats, more stories! Next issue: 1935 through the end of World War II.

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

September 2024

Centennial Newsletter Series



12-Step Recovery Retreat for Women
October 11 - 13, 2024

Discerning God's Will for Your Retirement

October 11 - 13, 2024

Forgiveness and the Kingdom of God
October 11 - 13, 2024

"Be Still and know that I Am God!"

October 25 - 27, 2024

5-Day Guided Retreat

October 30 - November 3, 2024

FOR MORE EVENTS



Centennial Garden Dedication

Fundraising Event

October 27, 2024

4:00 pm - 8:00 pm

<https://www.jrclosaltos.org/centennialgarden2024>