Homeless in Charm City

The Baltimore Ignatian Spirituality Program (BISP) is a ministry of St. Ignatius Church, a Jesuit parish in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, which hosts spiritual Retreats to end homelessness. Since 2007, BISP has delivered Retreats to 350 homeless men and women from Baltimore City living in transitional housing and participating in addiction recovery programs.

BISP is the Baltimore City chapter of the national Ignatian Spirituality Project (ISP), the brain-child of Father Bill Creed, S.J., which was launched in 1998 in Chicago. ISP Retreats are firmly rooted at the intersection of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and the 12 Step Recovery Program model. ISP has local chapters in nearly 30 cities across America. In 2013, the total number of Retreatants was over 1,500.

In his classic work, The Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius Loyola unequivocally states that Retreatants and Retreat Guides (Directors or Accompanists) are equal beneficiaries in sharing the fruits and graces of the Exercises. In the Jesuit Constitutions, Ignatius counsels that discernment regarding the choice of mission/ministry should be either on the basis of where one can accomplish the greatest good or where there is otherwise little or no mission presence.

BISP offers volunteers a unique opportunity to serve God in service to Baltimore’s sick, poor and homeless, while simultaneously pursuing...
formation/training in Ignatian Spirituality. Our two-pronged mission objective reflects answering the call to corporeal works of mercy and St. Ignatius’ admonition: “He who goes about to reform the world must begin with himself, or he loses his labor.”

BISP Retreats progress through a rhythm of invitation and challenge, of growing interior awareness and personal sharing with others, of bringing one’s story and one’s self to God and finding God encouraging and receptive. Our Retreatants have had their lives virtually sabotaged by addiction. Possessions, relationships, health, self-esteem and more, all sacrificed on the altar of addiction and substance abuse.

BISP Retreats focus on freedom from addiction, compulsion and obsession — what St. Ignatius called disordered affections or inordinate attachments — and the call to the freedom to be oneself, to be in right relationship with others and in right relationship to God. BISP Retreats are steeped in the Ignatian traditions of meeting people where they are, helping souls and allowing God to deal directly with each BISP TeamRetreatant.

Specific Ignatian Spirituality principles (per the Spiritual Exercises Annotations) that are operative during BISP Retreats include:

- Freedom from disordered behaviors (Annotation 1).
- Focusing on the one reality God is inviting Retreatants to face (Annotation 2).
- Giving generously of one’s self to other Retreatants by speaking the truth and accepting others as they are (Annotation 5).
- Allowing God to deal with each Retreatant uniquely, rather than attempting to correct or preach to them (Annotation 15).
- Adaptation of the Retreat format, content and delivery to the Retreatants themselves (Annotation 18).

Retreat Reflection Question Responses:
“What did you learn about yourself?”

Retreatants:

- “I am not alone - My story is like many others. I can help others with my story. I need to improve my spirituality.”
- “That I am worthy of being a child of God and that I do mean something in life and that I can and do have a purpose as well. I’m not alone, I have a family!”

BISP Team Members:

- “I found myself in service, sometimes things as small as offering to refill a Retreatant’s coffee cup, other times just presenting a clearing into which a difficult story could be shared without judgement, without interruption, without feeling the need to change or correct, just accepting.”
- “I still can’t get over how insightful St. Ignatius was, how much pathos and compassion and how much interior awareness to work this all out. Amazing to watch, amazing to experience. This was grace.”

Baltimore Ignatian Spirituality Project Retreats are conducted at the bucolic Bon Secours Spiritual Center in Marriotsville, MD.
Ideal BISP Retreatants are currently in transitional housing with supporting recovery programs, have maintained sobriety for a minimum of two months, and possess the ability to both share their own as well as listen to others’ stories.

BISP team members meet Retreatants at their facility and provide transportation to the Bon Secours Spiritual Center in Marriottsville, MD. In groups of 12 to 16, Retreatants are led through a series of exercises, discussions and activities designed to identify, mitigate and minimize disordered affections, seek union with God and achieve inner freedom.

It’s the 500 year old Ignatian tradition of Spiritual Exercises, adapted and translated into language of the 12 Step Recovery model, that is, a language in which the Retreatants are already conversant.

Preaching and evangelization are not features of BISP Retreats. The Ignatian penchant for adaptability in this instance means working within the bare bones theology of the 12 Step notion of God as, ‘God as I understand her,’ or even more generically, God as ‘a higher power.’

The 12 Step model stops short of incorporating the Sacraments – other than Confession/Reconciliation with Penance taking the form of ‘being willing to make amends’ – but anyone familiar with basic Catholic tenets as presented in contemporary RCIA programs will see many touch points between the two. A partial lexicon of these roses by other names:

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<tr>
<th>Catholic Concept…..</th>
<th>translated to</th>
<th>.....12 Step Model Equivalent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Acknowledgement of our sinfulness</td>
<td>• Admitted our lives had become unmanageable</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Examination of conscience</td>
<td>• Conducted searching &amp; fearless moral inventory</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Confession</td>
<td>• Admitted to God, ourselves &amp; another exact nature of our wrongs</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Examen (Jesuitical continuation of examination of conscience)</td>
<td>• Continued to take personal history</td>
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Far from seeming like their first rodeo seeking union with God, these and other commonalities between the structure and framework of Ignatian Spirituality and the 12 Step model provide practical shortcuts within the context of BISP Retreats. Because Retreatants are already familiar with the conceptual framework and have generally had significant experience of authentic sharing in group settings, interior movements can be remarkably swift in the BISP Retreat environment.

What would be an oxymoron in other contexts, the notion of an ‘efficient spiritual experience,’ has been borne out over the past 15 years delivering Retreats to the homeless across the country.

By meeting Retreatants where they are, fostering authentic sharing among BISP Team members and Retreatants, guiding sorties into art, music and video activities and sharing table fellowship with wholesome, filling and

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The Baltimore Spirituality Project
sustaining food fare in a serene, bucolic setting where Retreatants are provided with their own bedrooms and bathrooms, sets the stage for a profound interior experience, a spiritual encounter with God that indeed has the potential to follow Retreatants as they return to the transitional housing environment in which they will continue the daily battles for their sobriety.

**Baltimore Homeless**

St. Ignatius said, ‘If our church is not marked by caring for the poor, oppressed and hungry, we are guilty of heresy.’

On any given day in Baltimore City, nearly 3,000 people are homeless, a number that is believed to have been fairly constant from 2005 through 2013, although the counting/census methodology has undergone significant changes over the same period. Homelessness itself is driven by several factors, including a lack of affordable housing stock, lack of affordable healthcare, low income levels and a lack of comprehensive services.

Baltimore City accounts for 11% of the state’s population, but 32% of Maryland’s homeless live here. More than 4 of every 1,000 Baltimore City residents are homeless, which is more than 3 times the rate of homeless in Maryland overall.

Astoundingly, here in Charm City, 36% of the homeless evidence a history of chronic substance abuse, as compared with 21% for the nation as a whole. This means chronic substance abuse associated with homelessness is a staggering 70% higher in Baltimore than the rest of the country, while other homeless health subpopulations (severe mental illness and HIV/AIDS) are pretty much in line with national levels.

When we look at the data by homeless in shelters (as opposed to unsheltered homeless), chronic substance abuse in Baltimore is still 50% above the national level, 86% versus 58% for the cohort. Survey data for persons with chronic substance abuse conditions further indicates that 69% have received treatment for alcohol or substance abuse prior to the census count.

Certainly there are reasons, even compelling reasons to question these data. But one conclusion is certain: Homelessness in Baltimore City is highly correlated with chronic substance abuse, and significantly more than the national average.

However, the higher proportion of the chronic substance abuse health subpopulation in shelters (which are themselves positively correlated with addiction recovery programs) offers some glimmer of hope for helping these people overcome addiction and homelessness. Fifteen years of ISP Retreat experience has shown that the combination of being in transitional housing, which is a relatively stable form of shelter, and two months of sobriety participating in a 12 Step Recovery program increases the apparent efficacy of the BISP Retreat experience, making it an ‘efficient and effective spiritual experience.’

The 2013 estimate of total homeless in Baltimore at 2,638 details a split of nearly 10 to 1 for homeless with a housing status of sheltered (2,343) versus unsheltered (295). We do need to remember that these data, obtained in a Point in Time (PIT) study, are essentially balance sheet figures. That is, on any given night/day, this is the expected number of homeless.
But what these data don’t tell us is the homeless ‘churn rate.’ PIT studies provide no insight into the number of people entering into and/or leaving homeless status over a given period, a statistic that is determined by a census methodology termed ‘period prevalence count.’ Period prevalence counts are problematic for other reasons, but in any event, do not appear to have been conducted in Baltimore.

However, we can factor the PIT of 2,343 by the 86% of chronic substance abusers in sheltered facilities to derive a total of 2,015 Baltimore homeless that could potentially benefit from BISP Retreats, although that number is virtually certain to be lower than a calculation derived under a period prevalence count, because over any given period, people are entering into and exiting the state of homelessness.

The takeaway point here is that there is significant potential demand for BISP Retreats in Baltimore, well above the current BISP rate of 50 Retreatants per year.

BISP currently partners with local Baltimorean organizations providing transitional housing, addiction recovery programs and other support services, e.g., The Baltimore Station, Marian House, Carrington House, Martha’s Place, among others to locate and offer Retreats to potential BISP Retreatants.

To increase the number of Retreat offerings and expand programs to include pre- and post-Retreat preparatory and support events, the BISP Ministry at St. Ignatius plans to partner with multiple churches, other faith groups, social organizations and individuals. We are actively seeking additional BISP team members. The expansion, projected to begin in early 2015, will require a range of activities and positions, including Retreat Accompanists, Drivers, Partner Networking Liaisons, Researchers, Writers, Digital and Administrative personnel, Training/Formation Leads, Fund Raisers, etc.

If you feel called to BISP’s mission combining service to others and personal formation experienced, if you recognize that helping others maintain sobriety meets the standard of ‘doing the most good,’ if you subscribe to the idea that to reform the world, you necessarily need to address your own spiritual development, we’d like you to talk to you about walking with us in this ministry providing Retreats to end homelessness in Charm City.

End Notes

1) Ignatian Spirituality Project Annual Report 2011
2) The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and The 12 Steps, Bill Creed, S.J.
3) ISP Volunteer Application and Handbook 2014
5) Recovery.org website: http://www.recovery.org/
6) Ignatian Spirituality Project website: http://www.ignatianspiritualityproject.org/
7) The State of Homelessness in America 2012, National Alliance to End Homelessness
8) 2013 Homeless Point In Time Count Report, Baltimore City, Mayor’s Office of Human Services, Homeless Service Program
11) The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola (Autograph Translation Elder Mullan, S.J.)

12) Stretched for Greater Glory: What To Expect From The Spiritual Exercises, George A. Aschenbrenner, S.J.

13) Draw Me Into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises, David L. Fleming, S.J.