News
Spirituality



Participants in the Ignatian Legacy Fellows Program, seen here in Chicago, learn about the global network of the Society of Jesus while exploring the "second stage of life" guided by the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. (Lauren De Veau)

by Sophie Vodvarka

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Thalia Doherty retired from a successful career in advertising more than five years ago.

An alumni and Board of Regents member of Santa Clara University, and mother of four, Doherty took a "leap of faith" last year, when she and her husband joined a yearlong pilot fellowship program with 14 other retirement-age participants.

Now halfway through the Ignatian Legacy Fellows Program, Doherty says she was surprised by how quickly she gained "a closeness and a vulnerability" with her new peers, who now meet once per week to video chat about their experiences navigating the coronavirus pandemic.

The new program — hosted by Loyola University Chicago, Santa Clara University, Georgetown University and Boston College — offers professionally accomplished older adults a space to learn about the global network of the Society of Jesus while exploring the "second stage of life" guided by the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius.

The program invites, according to their promotional materials, "institutional leaders, C-suite executives, nonprofit directors, and business owners" who are contemplating retirement, retired or transitioning into retirement, to a space to explore religious and spiritual questions, and the aging process.

Retirement is a "new vocational moment" that "begs a discernment process," according to John Fontana, co-director of the Ignatian Legacy Fellows Program at Loyola University Chicago.

The need for spiritual accompaniment, and the lack of spaces that offered this kind of guidance to retirement-aged people, sparked the creation of the program, he said. "As you age, the death question starts to move in on you," Fontana said. "Religious questions get to be more powerful."

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The yearlong program meets for four days every other month, at six locations around the U.S. and world. Early topics covered include St. Ignatius, the spiritual exercises and aging. Participants read *The Second Mountain* by David Brooks, *How to Live Forever* by Mark Freedman and *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* by Jesuit Fr. James Martin.

The program helps participants do "the inner work that's going to serve them the rest of their lives," said Mariann Salisbury, the program's co-director. "It's about meeting God where you are, however you picture God."

Doherty, who entered the program with a passion for serving people experiencing homelessness and addressing food insecurity, said that the program has deepened her commitment to service.

The program has led her to "seeing new and different things with new and different eyes," she said, also noting spiritual benefits. "The daily examen has become a part of our life that we didn't really explore before embarking upon this journey."

Another element of the program is its practical purpose of raising money for Jesuit institutions and ministries throughout the world.

With a fee of $50,000 plus travel expenses, it attracts people who have wealth to share. However, Salisbury said there is a scholarship fund of $5,000-$20,000, available to people who would not be able to afford the full fee. Spouses of program participants also have a discount of $7,500.

The first two years of the program are additionally funded by a $250,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.



Ignatian Legacy Fellows visit Antonio Ruiz de Montoya University in Lima, Peru. (Lauren De Veau)

Throughout the six locations in the program (Loyola University Chicago; Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara, California; Antonio Ruiz de Montoya University in Lima, Peru; Boston College School of Theology and Ministry; Georgetown University; and a pilgrimage to Spain and Italy), Jesuit values lead participants through experiences with the host institution as well as with people working in local Jesuit ministries.

In Lima this past January, the program's module on "The Church and the Poor" involved visiting a Jesuit ministry in the El Agustino district, where they were able to meet working people living in extreme poverty.

In Chicago, participants visited Chicago Jesuit Academy, a Catholic middle school that serves low-income families. They also learned about different models of Jesuit schools, including Loyola's Arrupe College, which functions like a private community

college, offering two-year associate's degrees to low-income students.

Salisbury said they hoped to create a program that allowed participants the "opportunity to tell their story." She said she wanted to give program participants a "chance to share your pain" in a safe environment with peers.

Doherty said she was pleased with how the program approached interior life, as she was initially hesitant to the idea, hoping it wasn't too "touchy-feely." Rather, she said the program offered an approach that helped her find a new way to experience both her interior life and the reality of the world.

"No judging and no fixing — it is a new way of thinking, in that the greater exposure has given me the ability to be more compassionate," Doherty said.



Ignatian Legacy Fellows engage with undergraduate students at Santa Clara University in California in a discussion on discerning one's vocation. (Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship/Keith Warner)

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Fontana and Salisbury said plans to travel to the final locations, Boston College, Georgetown University and the pilgrimage to Spain

and Italy, are not set in stone. However, weekly Zoom conversations with program participants have taken the place of the planned in-person meetings. Additionally, several program participants also began meeting once per week to discuss how businesses could survive the coronavirus pandemic.

"The fact of the matter is everyone is still very engaged and wants to participate because it has been life-giving," Doherty said.

After the program ends, participants may form groups to do experiential learning or may choose to work in Jesuit-sponsored ministries or on boards of directors, Salisbury said.

Whatever happens next, the program's successful pivot to online meetings and the deep relationships that have emerged suggest the "legacy" will be in the longevity of deep friendships and conversations about how to spend the rest of their lives.

Said Doherty: "If it weren't for this, the grace of the program and these people, I don't know where I'd be."

[Sophie Vodvarka is a freelance writer based in Chicago who covers travel, spirituality and current affairs. Follow her on Twitter: @SophieVodvarka.]