Opinion
Guest Voices
Appreciation



Jesuit Fr. Greg Goethals was president of Loyola High School of Los Angeles for 19 years. (Courtesy of Loyola High School of Los Angeles)



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Jesuit Fr. Greg Goethals, former president of Loyola High School of Los Angeles, died Nov. 24 in a New York City hospital, days after having a heart attack. He had just completed a cross-country road trip that became, unknowingly, his spiritual farewell to the people he loved.

Greg was, among many other things, an NCR board member — and I got to spend time with him as he reached the midway point of his final journey.

He began what he thought would be a yearlong sabbatical with a 30-day silent Ignatian retreat in September, at the Jesuit Retreat House in Los Altos, California. Near the end of that retreat, he was unmistakably on fire with love. In an email shared with friends and colleagues — including our NCR Board of Directors — he wrote:

> I am nearing the end of my 30-day silent Ignatian retreat in Los Altos and praying today before the Risen Christ in thanksgiving for all of you and for the prophetic voice that is the NCR. .. Thank you for your prayers. I felt them every minute of the last 30 days.

A Southern California native, "Father Greg," as generations of students and parents called him, graduated from Loyola High School in 1973, earned a bachelor's degree at Santa Clara University, entered the Society of Jesus in 1978, and was ordained a priest in 1988. He remained a spiritual mentor with a steady, compassionate heart — a priest who ministered to the vulnerable, including in his years of service with AIDS organizations.

Greg also spent years on the board — and later as chair — of the Skylight Theatre Company in Los Angeles. He always believed that art opened the way to more profound truths. So, it felt natural that, on the final morning of his retreat — guided by Jesuit Fr. John Auther — he turned to the words of American composer Stephen Sondheim to try to describe the deep renewal he felt. He prayed:

"Loving you is not a choice, it's who I am ... it gives me purpose, gives me voice ... You are why I live."

> When he arrived at my home, he was radiant — peaceful, unguarded, carrying the retreat inside him like a bright flame.
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The line captured what the retreat had revealed to him: that God's unconditional love is everywhere and that this love — not fear, not achievement — is the ground of our belonging to one another. It also revealed something more profound about himself: that his vocation, his identity, his way of walking through the world was simply love.

When the retreat ended, he asked his Jesuit community for one thing: the time and a car to drive across the country to visit old friends.

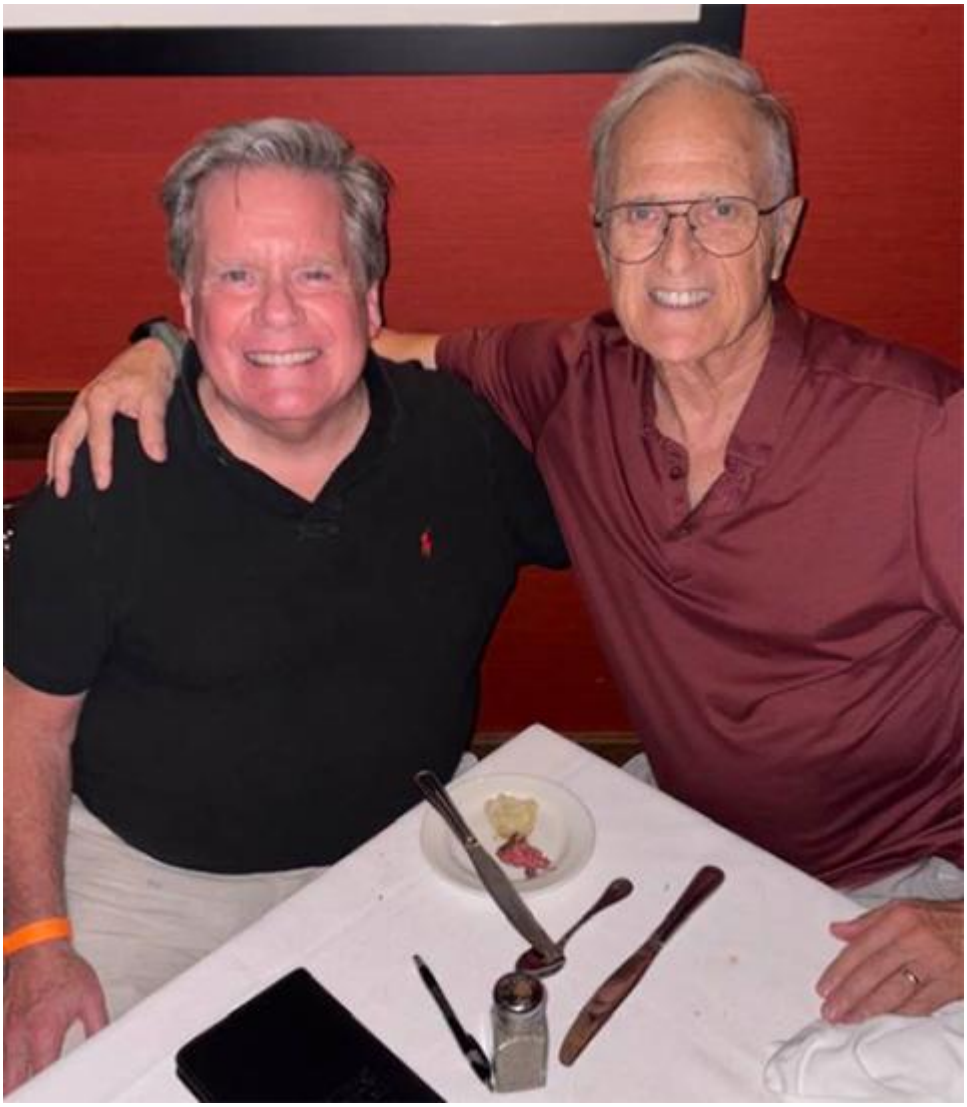
That request marked the beginning of what would become his last sojourn — a pilgrimage of connection, gratitude, and grace.

A road lit with joy

He recorded each stop with Facebook posts that revealed a man whose spirit was wide open.

In Aspen and Denver, he delighted in early October snow. "Not sure this California boy is ready for this," he wrote, "but it is beautiful and so peaceful ... I think I love the Rocky Mountains. Let it snow."

He shared dinner in Denver with an old friend, Mary Lu Tuthill. Entering Kansas, he wandered the quiet grounds of the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene. And then he headed toward Kansas City, Missouri.



Jesuit Fr. Greg Goethals at dinner with Tom Fox on Oct. 17, 2025 (Facebook/Greg Goethals)

He had planned to meet NCR Board Chair Steve Miller and visit our Midtown offices. Steve was out of town, so I had the unexpected opportunity to welcome him for an afternoon and evening. When he arrived at my home, he was radiant — peaceful, unguarded, carrying the retreat inside him like a bright flame.

We sat with red wine while he spoke about "living in the love of God," not as an idea but as something as immediate as breath. He talked about the spiritual life being lived not in mountaintop visions but in ordinary days: dinners, stories, shared laughter.

We went to dinner, then stopped for Baskin-Robbins ice cream, laughing like two men with nothing on our minds but gratitude. Afterward, I suggested we stop at a Korean reflexology center. In the dim room, surrounded by soft music, he drifted into gentle snores. When we stepped back into the cool night, he smiled, bright and infectious:
"It was spectacular. I'll never forget this evening."

The next day, he visited the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and took in a Monet "Water Lilies" panel. Then he drove to St. Louis to see the companion panel at the St. Louis Art Museum. The two canvases were once part of the same triptych — Kansas City had the right panel, St. Louis the center.

He delighted in the discovery: "I love when the world rhymes with itself."

The threads of his own story

From his Facebook posts, hundreds of friends followed the pieces of a journey, including some he said only his family would fully understand.

In Cresco, Iowa, he found his great-grandfather's house — the same home where William Jennings Bryan once stayed as a family friend.

In Decorah, he wandered into Vesterheim, the National Norwegian-American Museum. His grandfather's family — the Moens (his own middle name) — had lived among the Norwegian immigrant communities of that region. His comment was vintage Greg: "Who knew?"

At the Blessed Virgin Mary Motherhouse in Dubuque, he visited the grave of Sr. Mary Laurian McDonald — the woman whose influence helped shape his vocation. In that same cemetery, he noticed another grace note: Pope Leo XIV's aunt was buried there. His Facebook caption repeated his road-trip mantra: "You never know what you'll find."

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The final passing of the baton

Greg's last days were spent in New York, and his posts shimmered with energy and joy.

He walked Madison Avenue. He spent an afternoon at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his niece, Gretchen Schoenberger, and her friend Kristin. That night, the three of them heard Loyola alumnus Sean Michael Plumb sing in Franco Zeffirelli's "La Bohème" at the Metropolitan Opera.

He wrote: "What a great New York day and evening, and you never know what you will find on the road." The next night, he joked he was "singing adjacent," sharing dinner with Plumb and his wife, Tess, at Fiorello's across from the opera house.

Greg met friends for drinks at Bemelmans Bar and dinner in the Village.

The next day he posted: "Great New York day — the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and then dinner with good Jesuit friends, including Vin DeCola and Jim Martin."

"At social before dinner," Jesuit Fr. James Martin recalled, "he just volunteered that he had never felt God's love more powerfully than he had during his long retreat."

"At social, things are usually pretty light, and for him to share that deeply was really touching. And he was just so obviously moved by the whole experience that he really felt that he wanted to share it — just the sense of wanting to share God's love for him. It was really very powerful. ... That's quite a thing to say over a beer."

Martin said it's important to stress that Greg had done his third 30-day retreat. Most Jesuits do it twice, after their first year and during their third year of formation. "His retreat seems to have been a foretaste of what he's experiencing now — his encounter with God, and also, his being reunited with his friends."

"That's a foretaste of what we hope to experience in heaven and what he is experiencing now."

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