

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO  
**Student Retreats**

FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION  
THROUGH RETREATS



Dr Jill Gowdie



VAUGHAN PUBLISHING

*This book is dedicated  
with grateful thanks to all those who pour their hearts and souls  
into the work of student formation.  
You are casting your beautiful gifts into our future.*

*I also dedicate this book  
to one luminous leader in particular – Therese d'Orsa.  
It was Therese who asked me to write this book. How could I refuse her!  
Let us never forget her name in the litany of  
Catholic educational and missional trailblazers.*



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### **The Educator's Guides**

The Mission and Education Project of BBI-TAITE (The Australian Institute of Theological Education) presents a series of Guides to serve the educational mission of Catholic schools in Australia and beyond. The Guides, each dealing with a specific area, introduce educators to ways in which mission and education may be integrated in the life and work of Catholic educators and students. The mandate given to the expert writers who create these Guides is to tap into the best available treatments of mission and also to ground their work in quality practice.

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# Foreword

Student retreats offer powerful opportunities for our young people. When done very well, retreat experiences stimulate a young person's search for meaning and purpose; they prompt a willingness to be open to revelation; they give the encouragement and confidence to young people to embrace faith in such a way that it becomes first-hand and into which they can grow. And they are life-leaning: offering a fitting context to facilitate for students a safe space for reflection on questions of vocation and meaning. *What are my gifts, goals and desires? What kind of person do I want to be? What do I want to do with my life? Where is my hope? What could I give myself to, and what needs in my context call out to me?*

The nature of the student retreat has evolved significantly over decades, with a need today for retreat facilitators who are skilled and who understand both the purpose and the processes of retreat work. More than ever, the would-be retreat leader needs a sound guide to take them through all stages of the process, before, during, and afterwards. And this is precisely what Jill Gowdie gives the reader of this book.

Jill brings out very effectively the power and the promise of a retreat experience for students. Her book is as immersive an experience as the retreat itself should be. Jill offers a model for how to foster authentic human development underpinned by the spiritual wisdom of the Christian faith community. She is highly skilled in showing how to bring together into fruitful dialogue the story of salvation, as mediated by the Church, and the sacred and precious lives of each and every student.

Readers of this book cannot help but appreciate the holistic and humanising advice shared by this exemplary Catholic leader and educator. They will find a range of rich resources from which to select and fit to their own context and according to their own capacity. The author's personal voice comes through as one speaking from the heart and the head, in a tone that is winsome and invitational. Here is a very valuable map of how to go about planning, providing, managing, and following up on student retreats. Her book is both theologically informed and filled with practical wisdom. Jill understands the multidimensional aspects of spiritual development and the conditions that enhance personal growth. This book will appeal to and offer wonderful support for teachers and school youth ministers who want to be close to the hearts of young people and who hope to touch their spirits in a life-giving way.

– John Sullivan,  
*Emeritus Professor of Christian Education,*  
*Liverpool Hope University*  
*June 2025*

# Introduction



Long after finishing their Catholic schooling, when past students are asked about the things that had most impact on them during their secondary years, two responses are most often shared: the memory of a special teacher, and the memory of a retreat experience.<sup>1</sup>

The power of the retreat experience for students is well understood among those teachers who work in this area, but is rarely given extensive reference in broader education conversation. And yet we are in a time where the need for pathways, that open up a student's meaning-making space, helping them to grow a deep identity and anchor them to a picture bigger than themselves, has never been more urgent. Well-facilitated retreats do this.

This Guide is the third in a trilogy that gives practical focus to student formation.

The first – *An Educators Guide to Immersion for Mission* – provides an understanding and step-by-step guide to planning Immersions with your school/college context.

The second – *An Educators Guide to Service Learning* – provides theological background and professional processes for putting in place a school-based service-learning program.

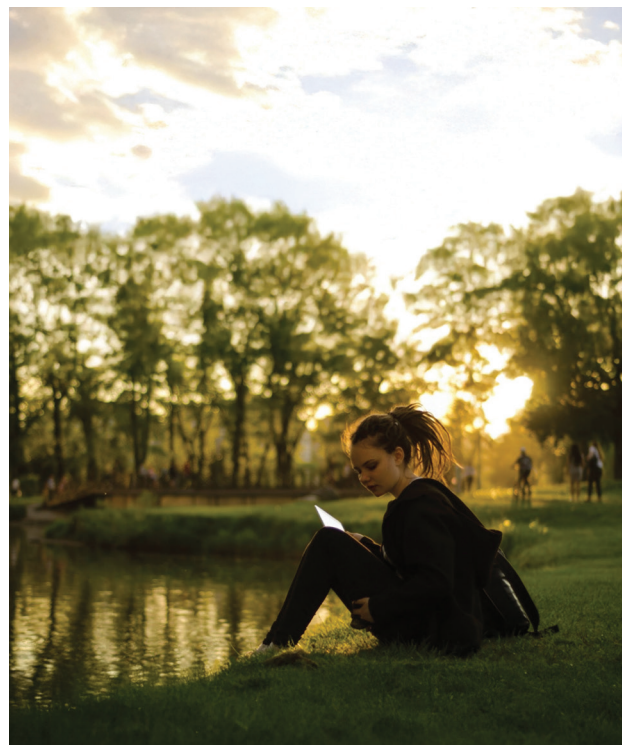
This third guide – *An Educators Guide to Student Retreats* – shifts the lens to Student Retreats and provides you with an understanding of retreats within a Mission key and a step-by-step approach to develop a holistic, theological, professional and psychologically sound student retreat program in your school.

Each of these key kinds of engagements: immersions, service learning and retreats when planned together as part of an integrated arc of formation across the student years, shift the needle for student engagement

from 'learning about' to 'knowing deeply'. This internal transformative journey has the impact of growing the heart of the student to engage in the world in the footsteps of Jesus.

I hope you find this guidebook helpful and affirming, and that it inspires you in your own authentic witness to students.

Remember that you are the fifth gospel – and you may be the only gospel your students will ever truly read by heart. You are God's mission in the world!



<sup>1</sup> Refer Marcellin Flynn *The Culture of Catholic Schools*, "No area of school life received such **strong approval from students** as their retreats... For many, **retreats are the most important religious experience of their lives.**" Refer also to 2024 NCEC Year 12 Exit Survey data.



# What is a Student Retreat?

**All that we do as Catholic educators is about teaching and giving witness in how to be in the world ... how to live, and how to live fully and meaningfully. We lean deeply into the intellectual tradition, the mystic tradition and the social action tradition for this work of our lives, this 'work of love', as Pope Francis called it.**

In retreat work in particular, we guide our students in a *14-inch drop from the head to the heart* in order for them to find their unique way of being in the world, and of finding their path all the way home to God. There is no greater privilege for a teacher or leader than being a companion to the soul for the young people in your care. This opens up not just their minds, but their hearts too in ways that not only shape a wholeness to their being, but which allow them to shape a life of meaning that matters and grows them into the fullness of eternity.

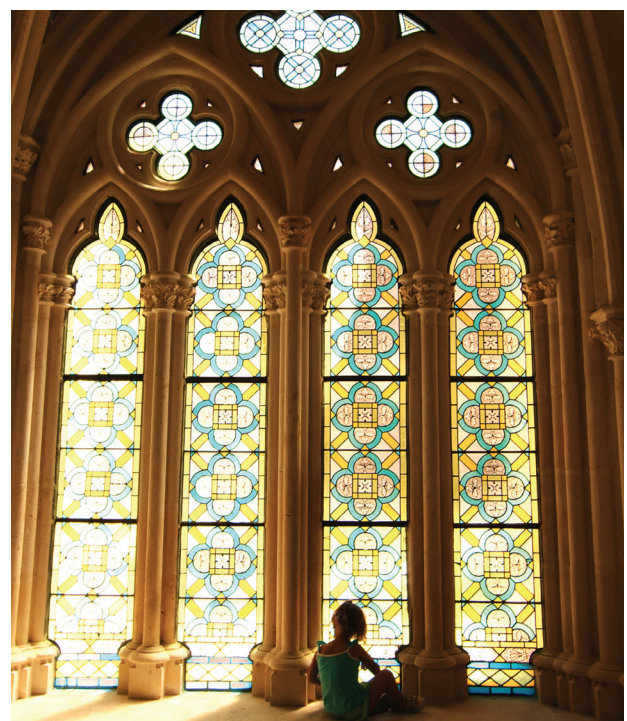
Most simply, a 'retreat' means to move away from everyday routine for a time of reflection and inner growth. In the last twenty years, for a variety of reasons, the use of the word 'retreat' has become popular across corporate leadership, health, and other business sectors to describe short breaks with a focus on general wellbeing, team building and personal development. The word has also become part of marketing vocabulary to describe real estate, rooms, and high-end holidays! But the origin of the practice of Retreats is essentially a spiritual one that has a long and deeply embedded history in the Catholic Church. In Catholic education, the student retreat process – customised for the context of students – opens them to the world of spirituality, and has the capacity to impact them lifelong, more so than any other experience in Catholic schooling.

When we speak of spirituality and the spiritual journey, we make some assumptions in a Catholic school. We assume that everyone has a spirit and that there is a spark of the divine – an animating fire within (see Rolheiser) – in everyone. It is also generally believed that the vision and role we have as Catholic educators is to

help each student access that holy fire, and to develop a relationship with God at their centre in a way that shapes how they live fully in the world. Opening students to that relationship opens the doors to the riches, the treasures and the witness of the faith tradition.

What a privilege ... What a responsibility!

*Spirituality is our personal inner sense of the sacred or transcendent and it colours all our relationships and the meaning we make of our life. Spirituality in the Catholic faith tradition links that personal spiritual growth with the wisdom journey of a whole people of faith through millennia who seek to follow Jesus within a community...*





### What does a Christian hope look like?

*Being a Christian implies a new perspective: a gaze full of hope.*

(Pope Francis, *Hope is a light in the night: Meditation on the humble virtue*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, pp 96 E9))



## The emergence of retreats in Catholic schools

The patterns of spiritual retreat are older than Christianity itself and traced easily through the Hebrew scriptures. In the gospel accounts, Jesus' time in the desert following his baptism by John modelled the pattern of withdrawal from the swirl of the everyday in order to align deeply with God. Jesus followed this pattern of withdrawal from crowds, from activity, from all of 'the next things', many times. The Desert Fathers and Mothers of the third century imitated Jesus' 'desert' days, drawing many others to do the same. This practice was then championed during the Counter-Reformation led by St Ignatius of Loyola (later named as the Patron Saint of Retreats) in the 1520s, and then later by St Francis de Sales and St Vincent de Paul. In 1674, Catherine de Francheville founded the first retreat house for women. By the 17th century, the practice of retreats was quite widespread across the Catholic church.



Catholic schools began to be established across Australia from the 1820s. From this time up until the 1950s, any retreats offered for lay adults or for Catholic school students were modelled on the traditional contemplative style of retreat established for those religious orders of the 15th and 16th centuries. The retreat structure was silent, combining lectures, spiritual reading, Confession and Eucharist. They were provided mostly for senior students, during daytime and on school grounds. The next 60 years (post Vatican II) saw an extraordinary further development in a variety of different styles of retreat designed for students. And the last 10 years has seen the distillation of shared principles and focus on the fundamentals of student retreats.

Since Vatican II (1962–1965) we can see three big shifts in the development of Catholic school retreats:

### 1. A shift to more opportunity for all

It was not until after Vatican II however that laypeople were given access to the Church's spiritual and theological resources. ('Layman' was originally used to distinguish between non-clerical men and the clergy. The term 'lay' comes from the Greek word *laikos*, meaning in fact 'of the people'). These resources included retreats and spiritual direction.

### 2. A shift to being more intentional, contextual and purposeful

In 1964, a group of teachers gathered and, led by De La Salle Brother Bernie Neville, conducted the first 'communitarian' retreat weekend for senior students in Adelaide. This represented a big shift in the style of retreat: from a silent individual mode to a socially interactive mode.

It also reflected the changes happening in both the education world and the church world in the post-Vatican II period. The new communitarian style was intentional in offering a spiritual experience that was tailor-made for the age group, rather than copying an adult and clerical style. In education too there was renewed focus on the student context. Since those years, research in spiritual, psychological and small group dynamics have meant that the retreat experience has become more customised, more skilful and more intentional about purpose and process.

### 3. A shift to more school/college staff-led retreats

Australian Catholic schools have traditionally engaged in retreats through religious congregations or special purpose retreat teams and facilitators. Among these, the Marist, Jesuit, Lasallian, Good Samaritan and Passionist teams working in youth ministry offer direct student retreat opportunities as well as opportunities for staff training to run in-school retreats. Diocesan Education systems around the country also offer guidelines to support schools and colleges in creating theologically sound and appropriately safe retreat opportunities for students. Today, schools are putting more and more resources into building confidence and capacity in school-based staff who can run school based 'in-house' retreats for both students and staff.

If the student retreat is part of your role in your school community, this Guide is designed for you!



To think about  
and talk about...

- What is your own experience of retreats?
- Have you seen any changes in how retreats are run for students?
- What has been good? What might be lost?