

DEC 1, 2023

LEADERSHIP

## CATHOLIC CORNER

After 30+ years teaching and running retreats in high schools, Danny Brock has developed a formula for creating the conditions for emotional and spiritual growth in teens. For the past 8 months Danny has been working with Students and Staff at Immaculata to foster emotional and spiritual growth in our community. The attached open letter from Danny speaks to his "... great joy for me(Danny) to see God in the students of Immaculata High School."

Dear Immaculata High School Parents and Guardians

With the assistance of Mr. Mike Wilson, Mrs. Leah Drebit, Mr. Grant Richard and the support of the Principal, Mr. Rob Plaxton, I had the honour and privilege of facilitating two retreats for grade 8 and 9 students at Immaculata High School over the last seven months.

The highlight of the retreat, what I call a 'Student-Talk Retreat', was the senior student talks – not a lecture, not a speech, not a dissertation on a topic or an exhortation on a subject, just a 'talk', a story from their life experience and the lesson they learned.

On the grade 8 retreat this past fall, one grade 12 student leader, a boy, opened up about his cruelty to his fellow classmates until a brief heart-to-heart with his uncle inspired him to change. This led to the reconciliation and restoration of the frayed relationships with his peers.

Another boy told the story of how he could never be content with himself unless he had perfect grades which began to take a toll on his inner peace and joy.

A girl shared her struggle with her looks, convinced she was not pretty enough and that her ethnicity was somehow not good enough.

Another girl told of being lost in a maze of toxic friendships that began to destroy her own sense of identity and worth.

The above talk summaries do little to convey the veracity and depth of the talk the students gave and the effect it had on student retreatants and adult staff alike. While sixty students sat in rapt attention, four older teenagers embarked on an inward journey sifting through the contents of their heart in order to give younger students a heads-up on their journey forward.

Although I have heard many student talks as a high school retreat director for thirty years, these talks had the same effect on me – I was humbled into soulful reflection. While teenage stereotypes are a dime a dozen, it is a stunning and numinous experience to actually see their soul. I find myself praying: *Dear Lord, let me never forget those talks, and please help me to be the person those students made me.*

Over the years on anonymous student evaluation forms, I would read what effect the talks had on individual students, the class as a whole, and the overall culture of the school:

*This retreat helped me open up the feelings that I wanted to keep buried inside. I let myself be vulnerable and it helped me find a piece of myself.*

## CATHOLIC CORNER

*I recognize in a better way, that everyone experiences hardships and tribulations and I believe his will affect the way I treat others for the rest of my life.*

*The students that gave the talks have definitely brought our grade closer and stronger, resulting in a better 'family'.*

*I love this school more than ever. I am so very happy to be here and I don't want to miss a moment. It fully restored my spirit and love for school.*

Then, a while back, Pope Francis further explained to me what was happening on our student-talk retreats. They were Synodal Listening Circles, Conversations in the Spirit. It was the young church in the practice of Synodality.

*Youth ministry needs to become more flexible: inviting young people to events or occasions that provide an opportunity not only for learning, but also for conversing, celebrating, singing, listening to real stories and experiencing a shared encounter with the living God...Youth ministry has to be synodal.*

Walking Together: The Way of Synodality, Pope Francis, pg.79

For those who have tasted this synodal 'walking together' over the last year, one oft-cited highlight of the synodal experience was the "Listening Circle."

*Several specific proposals were made. These include learning how to have healthy conversations, developing spaces for youth to talk...*

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops National Synthesis, Synod on Synodality, 2022, #45

*Participants appreciated the opportunity to share their stories – including painful stories without interruption, contradiction, or apologetics. Many expressed that the process and the experience were healing and hopeful, and desperately needed in the church today.*

National Synthesis of the People of God in the USA for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod.

*When we do this, others feel welcome, not judged, free to share their own spiritual journeys. For some this has been the most transformative aspect of the whole process.*

*It was precisely young people who brought out the need for a more synodal Church in view of the transmission of the faith today.*

Working Document for the Continental Stage, General Secretariat of the Synod, Vatican, October 2022

Building a culture of synodality—a culture of compassion, in the Catholic high school is an ongoing, never ending en-

## CATHOLIC CORNER

deavour. It is the task of all the staff at the school. It is the task of the students as well. Students are not just the 'church of the future', they are the young church of today. I have discovered that senior students, actively involved in the student-talk retreats, play a necessary and transformational role in building this culture, what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

Toward the end of the grade 8 retreat this past fall, I invited the grade 8's to take the microphone on stage and speak to the four grade 12 students who gave talks. Earlier on the retreat these grade 8's showed their exuberant hearts by playing, dancing, singing and laughing – now, they revealed their gracious hearts by thanking the student leaders for modelling a way to be honest and open and vulnerable in order to help their class. One girl took the mic and addressed each of the four students individually, expressing, in a perfect economy of words, the lessons they taught her. She was eloquent and inspirational and thirteen years old.

The spiritual life is natural to young people. You don't have to give it to them, they already have it. "We all have something to contribute to the grade," a student said, "we just need an environment to make it happen." One environment is the student-talk retreat. "God is in every person's life," said Pope Francis, "You can, you must try to seek God in every human life." It has been a great joy for me to see God in the students of Immaculata High School.

Advent Blessings

to the students and their families

Danny Brock

<https://dannybrock.ca/>

Student-led retreats video:

<https://youtu.be/l2Buz9nySA0>