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ECI Fellowship

March 9th, 2025

Intellectual Retreat Written Reflection

The Thomistic Institute's Intellectual Retreat was a wonderful experience comprised of reverent liturgies, silent time for prayer (in a beautiful chapel), thought-provoking lectures, and communion with my classmates. Our time with the friars was very moving, as their holy hours and liturgies are reverent and quiet to the point that you almost feel the other people in the room worshipping God. In one lecture, Dr. Hart mentioned how Aquinas found the worst venial sin to be distracting someone in contemplative prayer (perhaps by creaking a chair or flipping pages in a book). I understand what Aquinas was talking about after my weekend with the friars.

There was plenty of time to explore the beautiful chapels during the retreat, including the Dominican House of Studies chapel and the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Fr. Irenaeus gave us a tour of the DHS chapel, which has some extremely detailed stained-glass windows. They depicted the life of St. Dominic, including his mother's dream, his establishment of the Dominicans, and his mystical experience with the Blessed Mother.

Renovations of the chapel had recently been completed, allowing us to see the back wall of the altar, which displayed stunning images of Saints and Doctors of the Church under the mantle of Our Lady. Furthermore, the large reredos was stunning to observe, with its detailed depictions of Christ's life surrounding the crucifix. I was quite jealous that the Dominicans got to pray here every day.

On Saturday morning, I rose early to explore the basilica alone. I had only been in it once on the March for Life trip with Providence College, and it is safe to say that the church was a lot quieter this time around. Either way, I was as stunned as the first time I saw it, since each chapel could be its own little church. There are so many different colors, styles of art, and Marian devotions for each country, which does a wonderful job displaying America's diversity. My personal favorite is the side chapel with the Pietà, as my girlfriend and I have a devotion to the image, and the chapel itself holds a special place in my heart. While I was on the March for Life trip, that chapel was the first time I saw people my age showing a deep devotion to their faith: two young ladies, with their heads bowed, kneeling on cold concrete to pray a rosary in front of the image. Puritan New England never showed me that sort of devotion, but one day I hope that my future children have such a heart for their mother. As I followed in the footsteps of those two girls (though I had a kneeler), I felt as though I grew in greater love of Mary, and like she was there to comfort me in the place I first saw true love of her.

Besides wonderful moments for prayer and contemplation of art, the retreat also had some phenomenal lectures which challenged me intellectually. Of all the thoughts that provoked me on this trip, I think the main one is life as a form of contemplative prayer. During one lecture, Dr. Hart mentioned three ways of having faith. First, there is *Credere Deum*, which is belief that God exists—and Dr. Hart quickly noted that even demons possess this form of faith. Next, *Credere Deo*, which is belief that what God says is true, or as the professor more eloquently put it: “to believe toward God.” This one is also contained by demons—though they obviously do not follow what He says. Lastly, *Credere in Deum*, which means something along the line of “to believe into God.” This makes a lot of sense when an esteemed intellectual explains it, but less sense when an un-esteemed semi-intellectual writes it in a reflection about a retreat. But, after

feeling quite challenged to be more faithful than a demon, *Credere in Deum* helped me better understand contemplative prayer.

To me, life seems like one long prayer, meaning that what we feed our soul—or what we do with our lives and in our lives and through our lives—affects us deeply. In fact, in my opinion, the weight of human action is not emphasized enough nowadays. What we do echoes through eternity. So, how are we going to form ourselves to be like Christ? Everything we do plays into our formation. Do not believe me? Try to do nothing for a moment and see how hard it is to slow down your thoughts. Everything we do affects our soul and will appear in more-or-less subtle ways in our lives (if we are looking carefully enough). So, believe into God; make every waking moment a way to worship Him and a prayer to Him. There seems to me no better way—no more worthy way—to live because in this way we begin to truly believe in Him, and there He can give us the grace to love Him.

Those thoughts—and many more—left me with a lot to consider after the retreat. But it would be a disservice if I did not mention the less formal part of the retreat: late nights with my friends. All the participants on this retreat grew very close, and the guys grew especially close from our late-night discussions in the living room of our weekend house. We went over many important subjects regarding Marian apparitions, the Eucharist, sin and scrupulosity, Church documents, and more. The discussion got quite heated, but everyone was a man of good character and made sure to apologize if they acted unruly for even a moment. This part of the retreat helped me grow the most as a man, and it was complimented well by an encompassment in the Sacraments.

Photo Journal

Before I actually get to the photos, I want to note: the first half of this journal is meant to be a light-hearted and comedic part of the entire reflection. My prior portion was quite serious, and if that was the only part of this reflection, it would miss the youthful, jovial, and hilarious atmosphere that only Providence College students could bring to this sort of trip. The second half will get serious again because there is no other way to describe it, but please enjoy the comedic reflections on my experiences as a child would, because in some moments that child-like perspective is more valuable than any other.



The best way to start this photo journal is with the man, the myth, the legend himself: Dr. Kevin Hart. Did my friends and I joke that he should be a comedian? Yes. Was he? Yes... but some of the jokes went over my head. This man was such a pleasure to witness. His lectures were absolutely mind-boggling. I was lost in my intellect at many parts of his remarks, but his voice was so soothing that I was also at peace! This photo shows his wonderful attire, which I strive to attain one day, but you—my reader—do not get to hear his amazing British accent! That was a pleasure only I get to experience. I pity you.



Here is where the intellectual discussion (and not just intellectual listening) was had. These conversations were hotter than the potato—burning hot! But it was so much fun to break down important questions with guys my age. We were all going back and forth that one topic turned into a stream of consciousness, but it was many consciousnesses—call it a communal conscious (but do not compare me to Marx). Anyways, I was laughing so much during these discussions, and we were having fun while we were talking—which I hope Max’s water bottle displays. Also, look at the art in the background. This whole house was filled with beautiful biblical scenes and divine images. 10/10 living conditions. Even though there was no wine (for obvious reasons), the La Croix worked well until we found out we weren’t supposed to be drinking it (we were not made aware of that until the second night).



Another great example of community, we had many great discussions during our meals, especially with the friars (there tends to be a lot of them at this place). This also relates back to the March for Life. This is Br. Roland, who I met on the March for Life after my first visit to the basilica. This was only my second time seeing him as well, which made it a joy to catch up with him, and he is close to becoming a deacon (so pray for him)!



Max! This man is a pleasure to hang out with and a pure example of the kind of people that Providence College finds. He transferred in as a second-semester sophomore, went to community college for two years before PC, loves his faith, and wants to be involved in anything he can be during his last five semesters. I met him, along with many of the freshman on this retreat, at the beginning of the semester, and then we went on this trip together a few months later. We definitely grew closer and he had some great insight—as well as a very tranquil disposition—to add to our late night discussions.



Okay, the first half might have been comedic, but it is hard to be funny when discussing such beautiful chapels. We had a private Mass in this chapel celebrated by Fr. Ireneaus, who is simply a phenomenal celebrant. His disposition brings forth a sense of reverence and devotion that helps the entire congregation take part in the Mass well. His homily was great (unsurprisingly), but the Liturgy of the Eucharist was something else. Every word and movement was intentional and pious, and it echoed through the entire room. This was a great way to start the retreat. Also do not be concerned, I tried to bring the comedic atmosphere. When he asked if anyone needed anything before Mass, I said “a short homily.”



Our second private Mass on Saturday was excellent as well. The setting certainly helped, with such a beautiful chapel that points to God in every single way—including the stained-glass windows, gothic arches, detailed lamps, and the crosses on the choir stalls. On top of that, the splendid details that make up the sanctuary elevated the Mass. I loved the reredos and altarpiece, as well as the veil over the tabernacle. We got to learn about some of these art pieces and ask questions about sanctuary afterwards. The veil relates back to the Old Testament and the Holy of Holies.



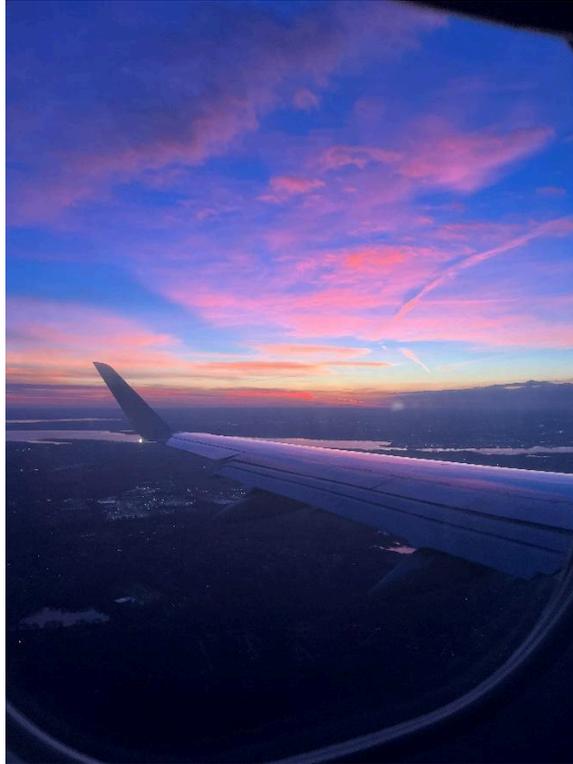
Here is the side chapel in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception which I previously described. I love the blue stone, as it is my favorite color. Furthermore, the gold images from Christ's crucifixion, crown of thorns, and empty cross all complement the Pietà. It is a striking image of a perfect mother holding her innocent Son—the perfect lamb, the God-man—and the space centers around it. I had a wonderful morning here, which I was glad to enjoy on my own, and I hope to start the rest of my days like this one.



This image is also from the basilica and something which I did not appreciate my first time around. I remember seeing it, being curious, and then getting rushed by a crowd of people behind me. However, I love this image, as it clearly displays how Mary's appearance always fits that of the local people, and her clothing is so beautiful in this example. She is wearing a traditional Chinese dress, with the red and green details on a white garment, along with a clear veil. Additionally, I love how she uses both hands to gently hold Jesus, as it displays the care we must show towards Him in every respect.



This was so cool! I do not know how else to describe it properly (at least in the manner I speak). This image is called the “Madonna del Parto” or the “Pregnant Madonna,” which is Mary pregnant with Jesus. I thought it was awesome, especially when Fr. Damian described her as “pregnant with the Word,” as it relates to one of my favorite titles for her: The New Ark. Also, her hands are in a preaching position (which only priests are allowed to do during Mass), and it represents how she can preach the Word because she is carrying the Word. Lastly, the detail of the demon holding up the bookstand (the image on the right) is a perfect touch.



Finally, here is the wonderful way we ended this trip. After an exhausting weekend considering the deepest questions about human existence and spirituality, it seemed like God was smiling down on us for a job well done. It is hard to put the greatness of this weekend into words, and this sunset reflects that fact, since it is hard to describe the grace God gives us, but it still has its effect. There were so many great moments on this retreat, many of which I could not fit in this reflection or simply forgot, but I hope that this sunset can fill in what I could not say. It seems to me that the first of *Credere in Deum* is like a sunset: simply relax and take it all in.