

# Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 47 *The Spiritual Exercises as Foundation for  
Jesuit Higher Education*

Article 13

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March 2015

## Available and Willing

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### Recommended Citation

Schapker, Holly (2015) "Available and Willing," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 47, Article 13.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol47/iss1/13>

Ignatius: oil and maps  
on canvas  
by Holly Schapker.  
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# Available and Willing

By Holly Schapker

**S**even years ago I completed the Spiritual Exercises under the guidance of Darrell Burns, S.J. One can do the Exercises without departing for an extended retreat and instead make them while going on in one's everyday normal course of life. That is what I did. I practiced them daily and met with my director once a week. This changed my whole perspective on life and, most particularly, on my artwork. Before my experience of the Exercises, I was a traditional landscape painter, concentrating on developing my skills and hoping that my art would be successful by looking the way I wanted it to look. Being so focused on the outcome brought a lot of strife because I was trying to control the end result. The Spiritual Exercises helped me understand that I am not the sole creator of my work, but a co-creator with God. I now listen to my work and allow it to give me the answers. I stay open in the creative process with a trust that all has a purpose, even the mistakes, twists, and turns, and that the end result is exactly as it is intended by God to be.

As I got to know St. Ignatius, I was surprised by how much I related to this man who lived at the turn of the 16th century. I was inspired to create a series of paintings based on his life and spirituality. I named these works *Adsum* because that is the Latin word for Mary's response when Gabriel asked her to have the son of God. It means, "I am here and completely available and willing to serve God." The Spiritual Exercises moved me closer to that point.

The third week of the Spiritual Exercises deals with the crucifixion and then resurrection of Christ. I realized that a God who can make something as ugly and horrible as what happened in the passion at Calvary into something beautiful can make anything I offer him into something beautiful as well. I discovered that my insecurities regarding my talents were blocking my creativity. Comparing my skills to other artists' is a futile, masochistic habit. I relinquished these character defects to the Black Madonna just as St. Ignatius did with his sword as a statement that he would thereafter become a pilgrim for God. This is one of the best things I ever did for myself and my creative process, as it knocked those self-defeating thoughts out of the



Above: In September 2014 Holly Schapker spoke at Rockhurst University about how she draws her inspiration from the mission of St. Ignatius Loyola. Seen here with her painting *Shoes*: oil and maps on canvas.



Left: *Angel 2*: oil on canvas.

studio. This surrender allowed me to let go of others' expectations of me as an artist, and rather than compare myself to other talented artists I now express art in my own unique way.

Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises continue to be alive in my life today. All of those old paintings, which I considered a failure because I could not resolve them, now have new life. I see answers and beauty in those old paintings, and it's a joy to paint on them. Each painting session begins with an acknowledgment of God's grandeur and an offering up of my work for God's purpose. I am now more interested in the process than concerned with the results

Because of the Spiritual Exercises, I experience more moments in my studio that seem

like a practical holy experience. There is an intersection in the creative process where my heart is guiding my hands and I experience timelessness as I am in the present moment, filled with love. Although there was a great deal of pain and frustration before this was experienced, I bow to all of my struggles and the Spiritual Exercises to get me to the point of knowing this. ■

*Holly Schapker graduated from Xavier University in 1992. Adsum, which summarizes her interpretation of St. Ignatius's mission and her own journey is prominently displayed in the mission and identity offices at Xavier University. Please visit her website at [www.hollyschapker.com](http://www.hollyschapker.com)*