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*Note: To save paper, I have changed this paper's line spacing from double-spaced to 1.5. --PClauss*

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### MLR and The Salesian Family

**Situation:** As a former attendee of the Salesian March Leadership Retreat (MLR), I am writing to my younger sister, Brooke, who is currently a junior at St. Petersburg Catholic High School in St. Petersburg, Florida. Juniors at SPC have the opportunity to apply for one of eight spots on this four-day retreat, which is held in Stony Point, New York. Brooke is hesitant to fill out the application for a few reasons, but I hope assuage her concerns and ultimately convince her to apply for a spot on this life changing retreat.

Hey, Brooke!

I know I was home for Fall Break not too long ago, but I miss you! It was great to spend a whole week with you, Mom, and Dad; eating Bagel Bites while watching Jeopardy as a family felt just like old times. I'm also really glad I was able to go to a Troupe 4127 rehearsal with you while I was back. Being reunited with everyone for the first time since graduation was an awesome feeling, and it looks like you guys are in great shape for the District Festival! Before I arrived in the auditorium to see you all, I walked around St. Pete Catholic and visited some of my old teachers to see how their years were going. I caught up with Mrs. Blanda in the Youth Ministry office for a good period of time; during our conversation, it occurred to me that she'll soon be speaking in all the junior-year religion classes to give you guys information about the Salesian March Leadership Retreat. You already know quite a bit about this amazing retreat from my attendance in 2014, but last time we talked about it, you had several reservations about applying. Since my visit with Mrs. Blanda, I've thought a lot about my time on MLR and how I still consider it to be the best week of my life. The Salesian March Leadership Retreat was a truly incredible experience, and I hope that you will overcome your hesitations and choose to apply.

Knowing you as well as I do, I'm willing to bet that your fear of planes poses the first problem with MLR. The retreat takes place in Stony Point, New York, which is about a three-hour flight from Tampa. However, from experience, I can assure you that the trips there and back are not as awful as you're imagining. My flight to New York took place super early in the morning – boarding occurred between 5:30 and 6:00 A.M. You are a very heavy sleeper;

therefore, you would have no problem snoozing through a flight at that time. If your plane took off later and you couldn't fall asleep, however, I'm sure your classmates in the surrounding seats would be able to provide a welcome distraction from the aircraft. On my trip, Jackie Bragano, Tanner McNulty, and I sat in the same row and played the card game UNO the whole way to New York. I was nervous about traveling without our family, but that thought hardly crossed my mind once during those three hours. Since several teachers at SPC have remarked that your graduating class resembles mine in terms of behavior and camaraderie, I am confident your peers would provide a similar type of diversion. Your fear of planes would be all but forgotten, and you'd have no issues in transit.

After landing in New York, the brisk early-March weather would likely become your next concern. Since we are from Florida, any temperature below 50 degrees feels like dead of winter. To be honest, I was shocked when my classmates and I stepped outside the airport and onto a snow-covered sidewalk. That was not a familiar sight! The warmest it got during that first week of March was 39 degrees, and at night the temperature dropped as low as 16 degrees ("New"). However, despite the freezing temperatures, I found that the weather was hardly a problem. The retreat takes place inside the Marian Shrine, and there is only one activity that requires leaving the building. During the hour allotted for free time every day, the participants have the opportunity to go outside and play in the snow; I did, and had an absolute blast. Because I brought the proper boots and wore enough layers, I hardly noticed the difference in temperature. Plus, I was having too much fun throwing snowballs at all my new friends to be worried about the cold. If you want, you can borrow the winter coat I bought for my retreat – it's hanging in the back of my closet as you're reading this. I guarantee that if the weather is concerning you, there are plenty of ways to eliminate that problem.

Putting all talk of cold temperatures aside, I know that your biggest worry is missing a whole week of school. You've previously remarked that catching up on schoolwork doesn't happen as easily for you as it does for me, and that is understandable. However, the teachers at St. Pete Catholic are very, *very* generous with assignment extensions for the students who go on the March Leadership Retreat. I had four of your current teachers during my junior year of high school, and I can assure you that the make-up work is almost nonexistent. When I attended, Señora Evans exempted the participants from all Spanish classwork and homework she gave that week. Mr. Kapolka and Father Joe took the same action for Geometry and Religion, respectively,

and Mrs. Vandewalle granted three weeks to complete the American History Honors project she assigned while we were away. There was very little pressure to get missed work done immediately, and the teachers were accommodating with after-school help. They understand that this retreat is a school function and hold the students who attend in high esteem, since it is an honor to be selected. Therefore, they know that the MLR participants will be responsible in keeping up with the topics covered during their absences. I can't speak for your other three teachers since they are new to the school, but if they follow the example of the veteran teachers, you need not be concerned about make-up assignments or missing class.

Now that your worries are hopefully assuaged, I'd like to explain why I think you'd make a perfect candidate for MLR. According to the Salesian Youth Ministry website, "Salesian Leadership Retreats are intended for students who have already demonstrated clear leadership abilities or potential and receptivity to religion." This description fits you to a tee. You have been a member of the Student Government Association since your freshman year, and this year you were elected Junior Class President. You also hold an officer position in Troupe 4127 as Treasurer and were recently inducted into the National Honor Society – an organization that includes leadership as a key pillar. Based on these accomplishments, I would argue that you demonstrate the most leadership ability out of everyone in your class. You are also personable and have a natural ability to interact with others, which is a positive quality in this respect. In terms of faith, you are very involved in Peer Ministry at SPC and have had a growing spiritual life since your youth. That passes as receptive to religion as far as I'm concerned. In reality, you are more qualified to attend this retreat than I was – I was neither Junior Class President nor involved in Peer Ministry. You are, without a doubt, the ideal candidate for MLR.

Should you choose to apply for MLR and are selected to attend (which I am confident you would be), you would grow as both a leader and as a Catholic. On my retreat, I gained invaluable insights about positive leadership through conversations with the other students who attended. In our small groups, we discussed topics such as stereotypes and cliques within our student bodies. We then brainstormed solutions for unifying our classmates to promote community, increase school spirit, and spread the Salesian message. Improving your skills in these areas while learning other effective leadership techniques would prove very beneficial at the end of this school year, when you try to achieve your goal of becoming Student Body President. It will also look fantastic on college applications. This is a Leadership Retreat, after

all; it demonstrates clearly that you strive to be a leader among your peers. In terms of spiritual growth, this retreat provides many opportunities for maturing in faith. I found the religious components of MLR to be incredibly powerful. For instance, on the second night of the retreat, everyone gathered together in the cozy little chapel to attend Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Some people sat in chairs, others sat on the floor; the only illumination in the room was candlelight, and Praise and Worship music provided a perfect soundtrack for reflection. Some people were singing, others were crying, and during the song “Alive Again” I was moved by the way that community of strangers became united in our common faith. God’s love was present in that space – I hadn’t had a spiritual experience like that since attending Antioch [the retreat our parish holds for young people before they receive the Sacrament of Confirmation]. MLR fosters development in the participants as leaders and as Catholics, and you would surely undergo profound growth in both areas.

Aside from the personal developments MLR provides, this retreat is an amazing opportunity to form friendships with teenagers from around the country. My small group (which we named the Pink Panthers) was comprised of ten participants – three from Florida, three from New Orleans, two from New Jersey, one from Washington D.C., and one from New York City. I spent a lot of time getting to know the other nine students in my group during discussions and over meals, and it was eye opening to realize how different their lives had been from my own. One girl named Nancy opened up about her parents’ divorce, while another boy named Justin shared his struggle with self-harm. After such emotional conversations, we quickly became a quasi-family and support system for one another. Even a year and a half later, we still use our group message to keep in touch. Marion, the girl in my small group from Miami, also chose to attend the University of Notre Dame. The two of us met for dinner last week to talk about our transitions to college life. I find a great comfort in knowing that the Salesian community formed during this retreat did not evaporate when we went our separate ways; in some respects, it grew stronger when the participants returned home. Recently, I was talking with my good friend Andy Robins about this endurance of the Salesian community. He has twice as much experience with it as I do, since he attended MLR with me *and* was selected to lead the next retreat as a member of the Young Team. Andy said that although it may be hard to live out his values in college and beyond, he knows his Salesian family will always be a source of support and encouragement in times of struggle. Like me, he uses group chats to stay connected with his long-distance friends.

If you apply and are selected for this retreat, you would undoubtedly make similar lasting friendships with your peers from around the country.

Finally, MLR allows you to not only meet new people, but also create fantastic memories with them. One of my favorite events from the retreat occurred on the second night, following Adoration. Since the next day happened to be Ash Wednesday, the sixteen students from New Orleans threw us a fantastic Marti Gras celebration. There were green, gold, and purple streamers all over the cafeteria; upbeat jazz music filled the air, and everyone paraded around the room while enjoying a piece of authentic King Cake. This was not the only late-night festivity I remember fondly, however. The next day, the participants from Miami took it upon themselves to teach everyone how to salsa dance. Though it was far more challenging than I anticipated, I was able to master the rhythm with some help from my friends Marialejandra and Andres. Watching the two of them dance together was even more enjoyable than doing it myself – they were *amazing*. If you attend MLR, I'm sure one of the boys from Miami will gladly teach you how to salsa, too. While almost every moment spent with the participants at the Marian Shrine was incredible, the best memory I have from this week actually took place in New York City. Each year, several of the Salesian schools visit NYC after the retreat concludes; in 2014 both St. Pete Catholic and Immaculata La Salle (the high school from Miami) made the trip. Although our schools were touring Manhattan separately, we happened to visit Ground Zero at exactly the same time. My classmates and I were walking on Greenwich Street away from the memorial as La Salle was arriving, and the excitement in the air was palpable when we realized who was approaching us. Running down an NYC sidewalk to hug Marialejandra, Marion, and the others was exhilarating; I have the pictures that ensued hanging in my dorm room to remind me of how happy I was on that day. The friendships you'd form on MLR would certainly be different than mine; nonetheless, the memories you'd make would be equally as amazing.

Applying to the Salesian March Leadership Retreat is a big decision – it involves time away from school and would require you to brave both airplanes and cold weather. It is wise of you to consider all the pros and cons before choosing whether or not to fill out the application. However, my unbiased opinion is that you are the most suitable candidate in your class for this retreat. You would benefit tremendously from the lessons about leadership, while also learning countless things about yourself. Additionally, because you're so outgoing, the students from the other eight schools would adore you. You'd leave New York with almost eighty new friends and

an extended family that will never fail to support you. I think about my experience on MLR very often; I'd give almost anything to go back and relive it. But it's your turn now! I hope that you do choose to apply, and that you appreciate every moment of the retreat. It is an opportunity for which you will never get a second chance. If you have any more questions about the application or the retreat itself, we can talk when I'm home in a few weeks.

Love always,

Anne

### Works Cited

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