Our Year 11 Retreat took place as a two day overnight trip to the rural property, Riyala. The theme of our retreat was ‘The Gift’; in my case this was the recognition of the gifts God’s given me, and the appreciation of the gifts God’s given to others.

Our first session focused on the metaphorical masks we use to fit in and protect ourselves from other’s opinions. Mr Bourke, shared with us the masks he wore at school and his reasons. I related strongly to his talk, having worn masks myself to fit in at school. In our small groups talk, we discussed our experiences with masks and why it is sometimes easier to wear them. We then talked about recognising that God has given us each a unique gift that we cannot share when wearing masks, because we aren’t being true to Him if we aren’t being true to others. Thus to share our gifts we must take off our masks which can be challenging and takes strength, trust and sometimes a leap of faith.

Mr Katal – [shared] why he loves life and gives back to others, Miss Hill [shared] her journey with God and the importance of Reconciliation within ourselves, and Mr Bowden – his heroes and the gifts that made them special. But the session I found most awakening was our session about the masks. It helped me open up about my connection with God and what gifts I have to share with others through his bidding.

We were given a range of opportunities to connect with our spirituality and faith over the retreat including:

~ Prayer; as a group and singularly – petitionary, thanksgiving and praise
~ Guest Speaker’s insights
~ Small Group discussions; sharing different views/experiences on how others view/experience spirituality and the world around them
~ Music and Song
~ Meditation
~ Sunset Mass with Father Roy
~ Sacrament of Reconciliation
~ Reflection time; personal and as a group during bush walk
~ Recitation of ‘You Are Special’ by Max Lucado – Eli and the Woodcarver
I felt a connection to my inner self during all of these activities but the most profoundly during the Sacrament of Reconciliation and personal reflection time.

At the end of the first day, we were encouraged to spend half-an-hour in silence on our own to reflect on the events and issues we discussed throughout the day. It is not often we can pause our high-paced lifestyle to reflect and appreciate on the gifts we and others are given. It was in this time that I thought about what my mask must look like to others and why I feel the need to wear it. It was hard admitting to myself that I feared the rejection of others so thus used my mask to fit in. Nevertheless the people who have my unwavering trust see me without my mask at all times. I prayed that I would be able to shed my mask for God and to not be afraid of what others think of me. The mask I drew during this time is a reminder that I don’t need my mask anymore: “The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1).

We were lucky to have three priests come out to the property to administer the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This was the highlight of the retreat for me as I felt a true change within myself after sharing with the priest. It was like I went to Retreat heavy with doubts and after my confession I felt a weight be lifted off my chest. The Retreat has reminded me that God has a plan for me and I don’t need to worry about what is to come. This idea was mirrored in the Gospel reading during Sunset Mass (Luke 11: 5 – 13) in which Jesus told his disciples: “Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you”. In Reconciliation, I asked for God’s forgiveness, I sought out his presence in my life, and I knocked on his door to renew and strengthen our relationship during confession. The time and place at which Reconciliation was administered also added to the depth of connection I felt. We were seated out in an open aired clearing at night by candlelight. It was so unlike any other confession I’ve ever had and I believe this is a reason the experience has affected me so greatly.

I wasn’t the only one affected on a spiritual level during our Retreat. I saw a distinct change in a particular friend, whom struggles with her body image as well as her confidence and stress, with some of the comments she made about the sessions and how she began shedding her own mask. I felt special to recognise this change in her, and showed that the Retreat was beneficial spiritually and emotionally to others no matter their beliefs.
This experience as a whole has affected me positively. I feel closer to God and my faith in a way I find difficult to describe but I can feel it in my heart. The feeling is something I have rarely experienced, being completely content and at peace with myself. I connected with myself as much as I did with my peers through the shared experience of the Retreat. The Retreat has given me true hope for the future by knowing God walks with me.