



## **JECSE – Pastoral Webinar**

**“He sent them two by two ... Accompaniment;  
walking with our colleagues from and into the heart of our Ignatian tradition”**

**27 January 2022**

### **Short talk on accompaniment by Dr John Stoer**

I am talking to you today about the Ignatian idea of accompaniment. In doing so I am conscious that one of the greatest challenges facing Jesuit education and all Catholic schools in Britain, and I suspect in most of Europe, is the shortage of committed Catholic teachers, and the ascendancy and growth of a secular outlook. An important element of your work in school is not just with young people but also with staff. A school is successful when teachers work together with a shared vision. This afternoon I want to imagine that I am talking not to experts on Ignatian pedagogy or the Spiritual Exercises but to a group of teachers some of whom will be Catholic, some other Christians, and some from other religions or no religion. A number may well be suspicious of or even anti the Catholic Church. I want to try to engage, enthuse and encourage all staff with this idea of accompaniment. If I was talking to such a group of teachers, this is what I would say.

Amongst the many joys and strengths of being involved in Jesuit education is that we are part of a long and well thought out tradition, and we belong to a global organisation with over a million students across the world. The British Jesuit, Philip Endean, in reflecting on the four Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus poses this question. “What is it to engage in the Jesuit mission today? [His answer is] to seek God's will, to promote discernment, to walk with the poor, to accompany the young, to collaborate in caring for the earth, our common home”. In sharing this reflection, he emphasises that this mission is not just about actions but also about how we as institutions and as individuals are changed. To put that in the context of this talk, the question we must ask of ourselves is, are we open to be challenged in accompanying the young?



So, what is accompaniment? What does it mean to accompany another, in particular a young person? The answer to that question is both simple and complex. It is about the quality of our relationships demonstrated in ordinary everyday ways such as kindness, conversation, greetings, affirmation, and answering and asking questions. The adjectives warm, friendly, safe and gentle are good words to describe the quality of the relationship.

One significant emphasis that the Ignatian tradition brings to an understanding of a warm relationship is the importance of the individual. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius writes that God speaks directly with the individual (n15). The *Exercises* are rooted in a profound respect for the other person. Another Ignatian emphasis is that accompaniment is not an end in itself but a means to an end, which is to encourage a strong and coherent inner life. But what does that mean? Let me give you some examples.

First, to develop a strong and coherent inner life we need to see, understand, realise for ourselves and not because we have been told what the answer is. In the *Exercises* we are invited “to consider, observe, and contemplate what persons are saying, and then to reflect on myself and draw some fruit from it” (n115). As teachers we find it very difficult not to tell young people what they should be doing and thinking.

Second, accepting that choices need to be realistic. A young person cannot wave a magic wand and make a death, or divorce, or dysfunctional family situation go away; to be responsible is to be realistic.

Third, the ultimate goal is interior freedom, a goal we will spend our lives chasing, for as the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus wrote in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century: “Freedom is secured not by the fulfilling of one’s desires, but by the removal of desire... No man is free who is not master of himself”. Saint Ignatius would have wholeheartedly agreed with Epictetus.

Before going any further, I want to point out that the *Spiritual Exercises*, which are the model for accompaniment, is for mature adults. The situation in school is different. Whilst we should be warm and friendly, a teacher cannot be a young person’s friend. There must be clear boundaries. You cannot promise confidentiality in all matters because you may need to report a safeguarding concern, and when a young person goes home at the end of the day or at the end of term, they are not your responsibility.

What qualities therefore does someone who accompanies another need? Over my years in school, I have worked with different teachers and staffs. To make a sweeping generalisation, I would say that those who saw themselves as good companions were the ones I would be most anxious about. Accompaniment is not about me. It is a young



person's journey not my journey; it is not for my satisfaction or needs, or to make me feel good about myself. Let me illustrate this with an example. I have always been impressed when music teachers accompany on the piano or keyboard very young children singing. The teacher needs to lead the children but sometimes also needs to follow them. The focus should be on the children and not the piano accompanist who needs to blend into the background. Accompanying a singer on the piano is very different to performing on the piano.

One of the strengths and insights of the Ignatian tradition of accompaniment is the focus on the individual. Without wishing to take anything away from this emphasis, I would like to draw attention to the ability of the community to accompany. A strong, stable family helps a young person in their journey through life. In a similar way, a strong, stable and I would add warm, supportive and friendly school community can accompany young people and staff in their time at school. Let me illustrate this with an unusual historical example. In the Korean War, in the early 1950s, the Americans conducted empirical research into the different casualty rates between the United States army, the United States Marine Corp, and the British army. They had noticed that the death rate following becoming a casualty was higher in the US army than in the Marines and in the British army. What they identified was that in the US army, soldiers came and went, and no great sense of family or belonging was established. In contrast, amongst the marines and the British there was a strong emphasis on belonging and being part of a family that looked out for each other. The result was that their death rates were noticeably lower. A school community that accompanies people in a warm, supportive and friendly way will have less casualties on the journey.

In what may seem counterintuitive, or contrary to what we imagine, young people like security, they like the sense of order that comes with a strong community. I can recall a school council meeting when I put forward for discussion the idea that we should try to make school assemblies more engaging. The consensus from the pupils on the council was that we should leave assemblies exactly as they were. In assembly, the staff and pupils of the senior school, around 900 people, would gather in the Church twice a week. I thought the assemblies needed livening up, the pupils did not. The main comment they made was when we come to assembly we do the same thing every time, we know exactly what is going to happen, and we like that. I left assemblies as they were. Following on from that, most young people like school to be well-ordered and organised; for there to be sensible rules that are justly applied. There will be many occasions when pupils are not well behaved and the patience of any teacher or accompanier of young people will be tested. To be realistic and responsible means that on occasion a school and a teacher will cease to accompany a young person and he or she may even be asked to leave.



I am very conscious that everything that I have been saying so far assumes that people can meet and that groups can gather together. Given our experience of the last two years with the COVID pandemic that is not an assumption that we should take for granted. As teachers we all feel for the young people in our care and what they have missed during this time of disruption. Online education is no substitute for lessons in class and for taking a full part in the life of a school. The idea of accompaniment, however, is very relevant during this time of pandemic. Accompaniment is about relationship, but the relationship does not always have to be person to person. It can be with a text, an image, or a symbol. I suspect that most of you can recall a text, or a novel, or a poem; or a song; or image; or an event from your time at school that has accompanied you, hopefully in a good way, all your life.

Whilst this idea of being accompanied by something other than a person is probably more easily applied in the arts and humanities subjects, in maths and science significant people and significant ideas have, without question, accompanied people in the way they have lived and worked. As teachers think about what in your subject, what text, or image or idea you would want your young people to keep and take with them through life, when they have forgotten everything else.

Can I share with you one example. I was taught by Benedictine monks and my maths teacher, Father Louis, for reasons which I cannot recall, shared with us one day a passage from the *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, book 10, chapter 22. Augustine writes in relation to Christ that “happiness is to know You and love You; that is true happiness and there is no other”. That short text has accompanied me throughout my life as a challenge and consolation, as well as being the inspiration for many assemblies. This focus on Christ leads me to my last point, being hope-filled.

What I have said so far makes sense, I hope, whether or not you are a Christian, or of another religion or have no religion. It is human and that makes it both very Ignatian and very Catholic. Young people seem able to generate hope and, whilst this is a generalisation, we must be thankful that they do, and in turn be encouraged and challenged by their hope and enthusiasm. In a Jesuit school, as in all Catholic schools, we know that our hope rests in Christ. Without Christ there is no *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius, no Society of Jesus. Whilst we must strive to work with others to build a better school community, and in doing so we place our trust and our hope in our fellow teachers and in our pupils, we should be conscious of the presence of Christ.

To use the language of accompaniment, as a person Jesus can accompany us, all of us, regardless of religion or no religion through the witness of his life, his sayings, and his stories which can guide us all our lives. Christians believe that His Spirit, the Holy Spirit,



is found in all of us, regardless of religious commitment, and when we do good in accompanying young people the Holy Spirit is present. The fruits of the Holy Spirit include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and gentleness. If we try to practice these virtues we will be good companions of each other and of young people. But for Christians, Jesus is not just a person, He is God who becomes human, both wholly God and wholly human. In doing so he makes the human holy, and He is the person and not a person who accompanies us. The mission of the Society of Jesus, of which we are part, rests on Him, our hope is in Him, and in His life, passion, death and resurrection. We may live in difficult times, we do not know what the future holds for us, for our school, indeed for our common home, the earth, but we place our hope in Him as we work together and accompany each other.

I would like to acknowledge some of the sources that I have used in preparing this short presentation.

Denis Delobre SJ, *Accompagner – Pilier de la Pédagogie Ignatienne in Christus*, Mai 2011, no. 230, pp. 88-94.

Alan Harrison SJ, *Accompaniment in Ignatian Education*, Papers from a Colloquium on Jesuit Education, April 2012, pp. 8-12.

[http://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/Accompaniment%20in%20Education%20in%20the%20Tradition%20of%20St%20Ignatius%20\(2012\).pdf](http://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/Accompaniment%20in%20Education%20in%20the%20Tradition%20of%20St%20Ignatius%20(2012).pdf)