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FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES IN THE IGNATIAN TRADITION AT THE SERVICE OF YOUNG ADULTS

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Three spontaneous phrases come to mind as I present this issue on “Ignatian spirituality at the service of young adults”: *‘Friends in the Lord’*, *‘The thrust of Ignatian Spirituality towards young people’* and *‘Contemplating young adults today’*.

Friends in the Lord

As I worked on the articles published in this issue, I could not but think of the first companions of Ignatius in Paris: Peter Favre, Francis Xavier, Diego Lainez, Alfonso Salmeron, Simon Rodriguez, Nicolás Bobadilla. There were six of them to begin with; they ended up as nine. They were all young adults, with the exception of Ignatius, who was the guide accompanying the group in spiritual conversations and a minimum of common rules. He did a wonderful job with these young adults, building on their personality, talents and history. Taking seriously their “greater desires and ideals” Ignatius was even accused of seducing them (*Aut.* 78,5).

The Society of Jesus was born at the University of Paris among young adults. Since that time – the 1520s – it has never ceased to exercise this wonderful ministry of accompanying young adults, helping them to take life decisions, and enabling them to discover how to be instruments for good in God’s hands.

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This ministry has never been an easy task. Ignatius' time, like ours today, suffered a radical cultural change, a paradigm shift in the way people perceived, thought, felt and acted: Copernicus, Luther, Columbus. On all fronts, it was a new world, a new vision of God, a new anthropology.

After 450 years, we are still accompanying young adults in a context analogical to that of Ignatius' time, where huge cultural transitions are taking place. In great part, this explains why Ignatian spirituality responds to the needs of young adults to-day. It was born and developed in times of crisis and change.

The thrust of Ignatian spirituality towards young people

Why is Ignatian Spirituality relevant today? I would say that it is because it is young in its proposals and ways of approach as well as having the internal strength to keep itself fresh.

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Many characteristics of young adults – to journey, to search for and experience new things, persons and places; to have faith in the intuition that tells them that a completely unexpected discovery has real significance (serendipity); not to be content to live a mediocre life, to desire great things, to make full use of all their talents ... - all these are very much present, incarnated in Ignatius' personality and biography.

The pilgrim, as he liked to be called, travelled more than 2000 kilometres on foot: Loyola, Manresa, Jerusalem, Barcelona, Alcalá, Salamanca, Paris, Venice, Rome. In each place, in each experience, he journeyed interiorly; he searched for, discerned and was faithful to whatever he discovered to be part of God's project. In Loyola he discovered discernment of spirits, in Manresa he was transformed into an apostle for the good of souls, in Jerusalem he gained a universal vision; while in Barcelona he experienced the need of companions, in Paris he learned to value human resources and realised the importance of studies; in Venice he grew in the practice of letting go into the hands of God and in Rome he deepened the sense of mission in the service of the Church. Ignatian spirituality as a specific charism, a concrete way of living the gospel, came

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to be the unique synthesis of all these traits lived by the first group of “friends in the Lord”; and they were all young adults at the time.

This spirituality invites one to be alive: to be aware of what is happening *outside*, in the various contexts in which we live and work; of what is happening *inside*, in our deeper self and of how all this relates to God and his plans for humanity. It is young in its interior mechanism, open to growth, to the new and to frontiers. It is young in the discernment processes it uses along the way.

Contemplating young adults in the world today

Perhaps no other ministry is so much in touch with today’s culture as that of accompanying young adults. This ministry is a huge service, not only to young adults, but to the Church herself. The Church needs the experience with young adults because it needs to listen to, and dialogue with, contemporary cultural trends. This is best reflected in young people with all their assets and ambiguities. This we do as we contemplate the Lord’s presence acting in young adults. This ministry will be a poor one, and certainly not Ignatian, without this contemplative vision of the young adult and his/her world. Contemplation is, in great part, active passivity: listening to, looking at, waiting for, letting oneself be surprised by, tasting, suffering and being joyful with. It is a grace that embraces this ministry of accompanying young adults.

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The inputs given during the European Assistancy’s meeting in Dobogoko, Hungary, October 2006, on “**Accompanying youth in choosing and deciding**” [see articles by Franz Meures, SJ, Sr.Christine Gizard, and Mario Danieli, S.J.] and other contributions in this issue coming from Chile (Juan Cristóbal Beytia, S.J.), Malta (Christine Rossi), USA (Nathan Stone,S.J.) and Perú (Javier Uriarte, S.J.) indicate four complementary and foundational experiences that contain the basic elements or pillars when accompanying young adults. These experiences or probations as Ignatius calls them (*Const.* 18, 4; 64, 1), suggest a structure and pedagogy in the ignatian tradition when working with youth:

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i) *The experience of exposure to the poor, the marginalized, the sick and the fragile; the experience of different cultural realities*

With due accompaniment and sharing during and after these experiences, young adults grow in self-knowledge, take distance from their ordinary life, and deep desires are elicited. Many generous and authentic vocations had their beginning in such experiences, for being exposed to others in need, to other cultures, enabled this world to be seen as loved by God.

ii) *The experience of God in Jesus Christ*

This we do in the liturgy, in spiritual reading of the Word of God, in teaching and sharing ways of prayer, in giving the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, in pilgrimages, etc. Two challenges present themselves here: helping the young to move from a vague notion of spirituality, a half-hearted search for the meaning of life, to an authentic religious experience in Jesus Christ; a bigger challenge perhaps will be that of passing from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ to that of “feeling that they are Church”. The Awareness Examen, the spirituality of the Annotations (*SpEx* 1-20) and the life of saints as models have their place here.

*the young
evangelise the young*

iii) *The experience of church as community (peer groups)*

This has to do with *koinonia*, community experience as support group, faith sharing among peers. It will always be true that the young evangelise the young. This experience of church as community will become a space where a sense of “belonging” is felt, and where the same values, ideals and common projects are shared. It is an indispensable support structure in today’s fragmented human ecology.

iv) *The experience of spiritual personal accompaniment*

Spiritual personal accompaniment has a unique place in young adult ministry. No experiences, courses or group sharing can supplement this

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one-to-one helping ministry. It is a privileged space where it is possible to detect and follow what the Spirit is doing in the young adult and help him/her read his/her life story as personal salvation history in the making. To choose and decide need discernment processes which are enlightened and accompanied by experienced guides.

These four formative experiences are like four circles interlinked and overlapping. Chronological order between them is not always uniform and depends largely on social contexts and circumstances. One experience may occupy more space than others during one phase of life but to be really fruitful each experience must be in dialogue with the other areas discussed.

Ignatian pedagogy does not distrust the young person's capacity of living and giving, even amidst the difficulties of choosing and deciding, of "going against their self-love, will and self-interest" (*SpEx* 189), to follow Christ's way of life, in loving and serving others. This has been the story of Xavier, Favre and the founding fathers; it has been the story of thousands who through the centuries followed Jesus inspired and aided by the Ignatian vision; it has been and is our own story. Why hesitate to share this gift with young adults today?

¹ The central ideas of this introduction is largely taken from what I shared in the last session of the European meeting on Young Adult Ministry held in Dobogoko, Hungary, October 2006.