

## Companions in Conversation



*John Gilles, Director of the Ignatius Centre, presenting Ignatian pedagogy to teachers from the Jesuit schools of Asia in Cova Cottage.*

This week we have been sponsoring the annual Advanced Ignatian Teacher Programme at the College, with almost thirty teachers from Jesuit schools across Asia in attendance. We explored with them something of best practice from our Ignatian tradition. Here at the College we have a Companions Programme, running a number of years now, which we shared with our overseas colleagues. The programme aims to partner a teacher with an experienced mentor, a Companion, who sits in on lessons to observe teaching styles, follow up with conversations, and assist in professional development. The success of this process hinges on a partnership built on trust, and engagement in these respectful conversations. Such a strategy draws significantly from our Jesuit traditions.

When Ignatius and his band of fellow travellers first committed themselves to a life in common serving the Church and became a religious order, they named themselves the *Compañía de Jesús* ‘the Company of Jesus’ (in Spanish). When people first see that word Company, they immediately recall Ignatius’ military background and think it to be a military term (like platoon or regiment), suggesting the group was characterised by tight discipline or preparedness for the fight. But not so. The word derives from the Latin *cum pane*, ‘with bread’. Companions are therefore people with whom you break bread, share a meal, or sit at table with. It suggests a close relationship of trust. Jesuits in their vowed life together are companions. Lay partners who join us in mission, as in the school, are also close, committed companions.

Ignatius spoke frequently of the value he placed in “holy conversations” with others. He meant those richest communications that are at once pastoral, formational and spiritual. They were and are a central exercise of *cura personalis*, which we know here as that particular care of every colleague and every student in all his or her dimensions. Such conversations are the bedrock of healthy relationships between students, staff and parents.

“Holy conversations” should never be dismissed as some form of pious or saccharine talk. These conversations are called holy because they are based on respect – even reverence – for the other person. They acknowledge the other’s human dignity and worth. A dignity and worth which comes simply from our

being loved by God. Therefore these conversations with another are sacred. They concern themselves with finding common ground and are never about lording it over the other, manipulating or point-scoring – as in, say, a parliamentary debate. They are also holy because they often move into the so-called ‘big questions’ of life: Who am I really? What is the purpose of my life? How do I find meaning? What am I to make of suffering and evil? How do I know and choose what is a good life? And so on.

Conversations became one of the customary activities of the beginning Society. In pursuing opportunities for these conversations, those early Jesuits would speak of “going fishing”. That image was taken, presumably, from Jesus inviting Peter and his friends to become “fishers of people”. So, on their days off (usually Sundays and feast days) those Jesuits would make for the likely places – the marketplace, the ships in dock, the abandoned souls in prisons – to find people in need of conversations, in need of care, of direction, of consolation. Ignatius was very fond of a Spanish idiom of his time: “Go in by the other person’s door and lead them out your own.” That became his style. First find the common ground.

Conversations between staff members can be both pastoral and professional. With students, they are pastoral and formative. Parents, too, know the value of conversations with their children – often yearning for them through some of the challenging years of adolescence. But come they will.

I left our visiting teachers with a very touching verse by an American poet, S. Ramnath. It is about a very effective teacher who could communicate a love of astronomy with his students. One student returns to tell him how his teaching shaped her career. It begins with some memory aids that she recalls – how he taught her to remember the names of stars (‘arc to Arcturus’ and ‘speed to Spica’). It is called *Star Conversations*.

Arc to Arcturus,  
– that’s what she remembered –  
and speed to Spica.  
He had taught her to identify  
all the summer constellations,  
and the day after Independence Day  
she had seen Jupiter and its four moons –  
of course, there had been others in the astronomy class,  
but she remembered it all in a special way,  
as if the instruction had been molded to her needs –  
he was the one who believed in her.

The day of the Star Party was also fresh in her mind.  
All the kids in her class had come, some with their parents,  
and the boys who were playing basketball had lingered to peer through the telescope  
long after Corvus appeared near the horizon.

Now she had come back to the school to see him,  
to tell him that she was working as an astrophysicist,  
working with gas chromatographs and spectrographs,  
instruments, the very mention of whose names,  
would bring sparkle to his eyes;  
to tell him she had made it.  
But he was not there.

“He left a long while back,” a lady at the office said,  
“Went to the Philippines, if I remember correctly.”  
“I was his student,” the young woman said,

but in the busy office activity she had interrupted  
her words dissipated without acknowledgement.

As she walked away from school  
she felt warm with wonder of the world;  
she also felt a sadness that was in all things.

That night she walked outside her house  
and looked at the sky:  
the constellations were shifting patterns, forming new shapes,  
and an old familiar voice in a new place was telling children  
stories about the stars.

Significantly, there are two conversations recalled in this poem. The classroom conversations which so engaged a young student and changed her life. The other was the unhelpful and unpastoral response by an office assistant who cared little.

May all our conversations be life-giving.