

## **“Accompanying young people inside the pandemic”**

**Ruth Holgate**

I have been working with the Jesuits in spirituality for 27 years, mostly in spirituality centres. For the past three years I have also been part of the London Jesuit young adult ministry team, a new initiative offering accompaniment and opportunities for retreats, formation, service and community to people aged 18 to 35, mostly in London.

I have been a Jesuit Associate for 19 years, making a promise of obedience for mission to the Jesuit Provincial – and he has just missioned me to St Beuno’s, the residential Jesuit Spirituality Centre in North Wales.

### **Accompanying young people in the pandemic.**

*As opportunities to meet with young people face to face ceased with the onset of the pandemic, Jesuit Young Adult Ministries in Britain, like so much of the world, went online. Since March 2020 we have been offering spiritual direction, one to one retreats, liturgies, prayer groups and socials on zoom. As well as some of the limits of online accompaniment, we have also become aware of some of its advantages and the ways in which the Holy Spirit creatively continues to call young people to a life of deeper faith and service.*

### **March 2020**

Sunday evening Mass became an online liturgy, using powerpoint and screen sharing as part of it, prayers, scripture, preaching or led contemplation, time of silence, sharing in breakout room groups

- Knew the young adults so thought they would be tolerant of us
- 20-25 regularly participated
- Sharing / listening groups important
- Social time afterward in breakout rooms
  - This was important and for a while unique according to the participants

### **Plugged in Retreats**

We have given four online one to one retreats, 35-40 participants, for the last three

- Opening and closing meetings for the whole group – offered all a sense of the wider community even though most of the retreat just one to one
- Encouraged to pray for 30-60mins a day, and most did!
- 30mins one to one on zoom each day
- Each director uses their own free zoom account for this
- 3 workshops online: ways of praying, discernment, praying with scripture (led imaginative contemplation) about an hour, optional

- Able to use directors who at a distance, also a good number of Jesuit directors who were in other full time roles – including the Provincial directing one or two
- Participants consistently arrived for their spiritual direction sessions, some needed to move times, but mostly not
- We also gave supervision to the retreat directors
- We will probably continue to offer these beyond the pandemic
- Unlikely many of these people would come to an in-person retreat for daily spiritual direction
- FEEDBACK from retreatants

*A closer relationship to the Lord, greater confidence in different methods of prayer, and a sense of community with the wonderful London Jesuits.*

*Excellent! Exceeded expectations. Gained clarity of further constructive steps to take in life and grow closer in my relationship with God. It left me feeling peaceful that this was where God wanted me to be at this*

*It didn't feel any less connected/intimate over zoom - which surprised me - and coupled with the convenience of doing this online, I would definitely be interested in further online opportunities even after Covid. It also forced me to explore faith/prayer in my own room at home, rather than relying on church buildings or retreat centres, and this allowed good practices to be instilled at home, which I'd previously struggled with.*

*The online platform meant that intimate contact with the Lord was prevented from being boxed off in the "over there" of a retreat centre. I now have a greater sense of the close, immediate and tender work of the Lord in my day-to-day life; knowing that he's with me - whether I'm watering the plants, watching Netflix or arguing about whose turn it is to wash the dishes- is something that will stay with me forever. Perhaps the online platform is actually better in this respect, although it is difficult to enter fully into retreat mode when Mum keeps offering me cups of tea while I'm trying to imaginatively contemplate...*

*Brilliant. Taking away many ideas to experiment further in my prayer, which allow me to go deeper & longer independently. I intended for this to kickstart more of a routine, but it's done much more than just that and really enhanced my prayer.*

*My experience overall was very positive. I think I am taking away the fact that God knows me better than I know myself and I need to trust him more.*

### **Spiritual Direction online**

- Free zoom account for one to ones
- At first – this is better than nothing! But in fact it is much more fruitful than this
- Still allows for nuances of facial and some other body language, as well as tone etc. in essence, discernment of spirits is possible through online contact
  
- Now, I have been asked to move about 250 miles away to a new role – a number of people I see for spiritual direction have said they would prefer to continue to see me online

### **Spiritual direction with young adults (22-35)**

- Wide range of spiritual formation so need to be adaptable as a director
  - spiritual direction – deep listening and discernment of spirits with the person
  - pastoral accompaniment – for young people who are less formed in discernment themselves
  - pastoral support – a lot of loneliness, anxiety etc. accompaniment one to one, from a faith perspective, for where they are now .. and tentatively point toward a retreat
- It works with their busy lives in London, far fewer cancellations or late running appointments
- We have been able to put young people in contact with spiritual directors around the country

### **Online training in spiritual accompaniment**

- adapted a course we have been running for many years in one form or another
- two cohorts
  - 6 months of 1 Saturday plus one evening a months
  - 7 weeks – 5 x 2 day blocks
- Usual talks, discussions, led meditations – just adapted by shortening all large group elements, more reading and exercises for their own time
- Observed listening sessions with feedback from the trainers – observed with cameras off which many of the trainees preferred to usual in person training
  
- As with in person training you get a good idea of the participants level of skills
- One to one tutorials helped participants to journey through the course and discern how to use it in their life and work

- There were enough practical listening sessions to be able to judge who might be ready to go on to further spiritual direction training
- Significantly cheaper than our residential version – though unrealistically priced this first time as we were experimenting
- Three times over-subscribed for both courses
- A lot more younger people than usual

### **Online training for Supervision of Spiritual Directors**

#### **Online groups – young adult Christian life Community -**

Christian Life Community

Communauté de Vie Chrétienne

Comunidad de Vida Cristiana

- four groups of between 7 & 9 people each, meet online once every two weeks
- prayer and sharing about life and faith
- our young adult ministry team accompany the groups – and offer some formation
- for younger CLC groups it has become apparent that they appreciate and need ongoing accompaniment, rather than the usual pattern of a CLC group keeping itself going.

#### **Online Jesuit vocations event in the summer**

- 3 hour event
- A talk about an aspect of Jesuit life, a life witness from Jesuit, small group discussion, questions etc.
- 10 Jesuits involved from around the Province

#### **Jesuit DNA – monthly ,online meeting**

- One hour
- Same format: the vocations director plus two more Jesuits  
one gives a short talk  
the other a witness, tells something of his vocation story
- Then there is a conversation – enquirers engage as much or as little as they want
- Some of the enquirers and candidates are staying in touch with the Jesuits they met online

- Fr Jim, vocations director, able to invite Jesuits from all over the province to take part
- Connects the enquirers and candidates with each other despite distance
  - They have a sense of journeying together
  - They can engage as much or as little as they want
- In the early stages of exploring a vocation this is a gentler, less overwhelming introduction to the congregation
- Will continue with this beyond the pandemic, while adding in the usual 'in person' events, community visits etc.

### What we have learned ...

- **Spiritual direction online** – for seekers, young people exploring vocation,
  - it works! Sometimes it is the better option than face to face
  - Geography – greater range of spiritual directors
  - Easier on a retreat as no travel involved
  - Disadvantages – the lack of bodily presence
  - The risk of people writing emails etc. until immediately before and then straight after, less time to enter and exit the session mentally
- **Working with groups**
  - Good to have someone on the tech side & practice the tech!
  - Need to invite people more explicitly to connect with the others on the screen
  - All talks etc. should be shorter, reading offline, plenty of breaks
  - Using share screen disconnects you from the group unless you have a second screen, so limit its use and break it up
  - Faith sharing in small groups works well, particularly if have an explicit format
    - After an initial intro / prayer, each one shares in their own time
    - Then 2<sup>nd</sup> / 3<sup>rd</sup> 'rounds' of sharing
    - Use this for CLC, also used it for two Jesuit Province retreats over the past year
- **Vocations accompaniment**
  - One to one helps people continue to explore and discern
  - It is very flexible and means enquirers and candidates can be put in touch with an appropriate spiritual director
  - The group dimension of the monthly session online brings people together