

## **Accompanying Today's Young People in the Ignatian Tradition**

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**[Abstract]** Formation of the youth is a key concern for parents, teachers, social workers, schools, universities, governments and societies around the world. The Society of Jesus has made “Journeying with the youth” as one of its four Apostolate Preferences from 2019 to 2029. Using “accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future” as the subtitle to this Preference, the adoption of accompaniment as a uniquely Ignatian way is highlighted. Of the many approaches that one can go about relating to and forming young people, why is accompaniment uniquely relevant in today's context? What are the conditions, approaches and dispositions of the accompanying person that will be conducive to such an approach to formation? In this article the author shares his insights based on reflection upon his years of experience working with and forming young people in secondary school, university and business through the lens of Ignatian spirituality.

**Keywords:** Youth, Education, Formation, Ignatian Spirituality, Universal Apostolic Preferences

## **A. Introduction**

This article is the author’s reflections on experience of working with and for young people in different contexts: home, secondary school, university and the workplace. It may be of reference to parents, teachers, and mentors who are interested in the formation of young people.

Older adults’ views about young people today vary greatly. On one end of the spectrum, there are those who lament their naiveté, are horrified by their extreme views and infuriated by their “insolence.” On the other end, there are those who are touched by their purity of intentions, hopefulness about the possibilities for change, and courage to take action. Despite the divergent views, these older adults probably agree on one point, that the youth represent our future. In this regard, they are all interested in the formation of the youth.

## **B. Why Accompany**

How should one go about developing today’s young people? A range of possibilities is commonly suggested: from disciplining them, commanding them, lecturing them, motivating them, accompanying them, to simply leaving them alone, i.e. the “laissez-faire” approach. Obviously, one should pay attention to the context, but context aside, the approach of choice will be dependent primarily on one’s values as well as assumptions about human beings, the world and life. Based on reasons to be elaborated later in this section, the author believes that the “accompanying relationship” as inspired by Ignatian spirituality is worth serious consideration for adoption as the underlying attitude by parents, teachers, mentors and anyone with the purpose of youth formation.

The accompanying relationship evokes the image of the accompanying person journeying with the accompanied together so that the former is always somewhere near, though the distance and position could vary from time to time in a somewhat natural manner without a rigid pattern. He or she is sometimes beside the accompanied, sometimes in front, and sometimes behind. As pointed out by Fr. Alan Harrison SJ,

“...accompaniment relates essentially to the art or skill of becoming or acting as a companion to a person or persons. It implies a willingness to associate with and establish some union of interest with others, and often a desire to further the wellbeing of the other or others, always within the essential professional boundaries.”<sup>1</sup>

In terms of time and effort per person, the accompanying relationship in the Ignatian tradition is resource-intensive and may thus seem inefficient. However, efficiency in effort without effectiveness in outcome is meaningless. Worse still, blind push for efficiency in human affairs may even produce the opposite result. There are a number of reasons why accompaniment is especially effective in youth formation today.

Firstly, it is the approach that young people will be most receptive of, given the stage of development in their lives and the current erosion

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Harrison SJ (2012) “Accompaniment in Ignatian Education” in *Accompaniment in Education in the Tradition of St Ignatius: Papers from a Colloquium on Jesuit Education*, Campion Hall Oxford, April 2012.

in the authority of more experienced people. With a receptive mind, the impact will also be more profound and long-lasting.

Secondly, in the context of greater diversity in views, a higher level of automation in technology, and increased uncertainty about how our society will develop, those young people who are more open and who can think more independently based on a deeper appreciation of human beings and how the world works will be much better prepared for the future. The respect, openness, and space provided in accompaniment offer the optimal conditions for developing such needed qualities in young people.

Finally, the formation of young people’s attitudes, character, values, worldviews, beliefs, etc. goes much deeper than skills training and touches on the way they find ultimate meaning. Things cannot simply be imposed from outside or above. There must be the recognition of and meeting with the young person’s inner being which may be in various stages of awakening. Space must be provided for the process to run a course that no one in the world can perfectly predict.

The effectiveness of accompaniment can be summarized by St Ignatius’ observation in the notes to the Spiritual Exercises:

“...if retreatants advance considering matters for themselves, they find more relish and spiritual fruit than if their director explains to them and amplifies the meaning of the events.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* n.2

### **C. Creating the Conditions for Accompaniment**

Among the different approaches to develop the youth, accompaniment is the least straightforward and most subtle. Since this is a less structured approach and seemingly less formal, the underlying assumptions about this relationship become even more important than other approaches.

First and foremost, the young person being accompanied needs to feel safe in a relationship based on trust. The accompanying person should not have any ulterior and selfish motives. It should either be governed by a certain professional code of conduct if it is in a professional context or that there is a mutual understanding about boundaries if the context is less formal.

Secondly, the person being accompanied should feel accepted and welcome unconditionally for who he or she is. Love is an essential element in the accompanying relationship. However, being limited beings, we do not always know how to love. Even in the case where the accompanying person cares deeply about the young person, the former's eagerness to enable the latter to become the "best" person possible (based on the former's standards), he/she may inadvertently form the impression that meeting his/her high expectations is a condition for his/her love. Thus, it is vital for the young person to appreciate that there are two sources of love—the unconditional love of God and the strive towards unconditional love of the accompanying person. For the latter, it is a lesson in the awareness of our limitation in understanding other complex beings like us, the faith to acknowledge that there is goodness in all human beings created by God even if one is not yet able to

appreciate what it is for some, and the deep appreciation that Jesus has loved and forgiven ourselves unconditionally.

The classic distinction between loving the person and approving of the person’s actions must be conscientiously guarded and sensitively communicated. Admittedly, this is not easy. The natural inclination for us is to see other humans in a holistic manner. The skill to communicate simultaneously a genuine concern for a person with a suspension of judgment of the person’s actions will be helpful. However, the more enduring approach would be the gradual development of a proper mutual understanding of this subtle distinction in the relationship through experience over an extended period of quality time spent together.

Thirdly, there must be an assumption about honesty with goodwill in the relationship so that one can tell the truth even if it may be unwelcome. The distinction highlighted in the last paragraph is again relevant here. While the one accompanied is accepted unconditionally, this does not mean that, for the sake of maintaining a harmonious relationship, the accompanying person does not care about the accompanied person’s behaviors or thoughts that raise concerns. In fact, this care is an expression of love. Certainly, being honest is not the same as being tactless. The way to express and follow up on concerns must be conscientiously managed, and more detailed discussions on this point can be found in the next section of this paper.

Fourthly, while a trusting and loving relationship is key to the success of the accompaniment, one should be careful not to develop dependence in the relationship other than healthy mutual support among companions. After all, the aim of the accompanying relationship with

young people is to form them in such a way that they learn to act responsibly. The ultimate measure of whether the formation is successful is whether the accompanied youth can stand on his or her own feet and be free.

A sign of dependence is that the person accompanied trusts the love and wisdom of the accompanying person so much that he/she just relies on whatever advice the latter gives and feels very insecure when such advice is not available. Thus, to avoid the development of such a relationship of dependence, a degree of restraint and openness on the part of the accompanying person when dealing with the accompanied is necessary so that space is provided for the latter to learn to discern on his/her own the decision to make. While that part of Note 2 of the Spiritual Exercises as quoted at the end of Section B is again relevant here, Note 15 may provide further insight at this point:

“In the Spiritual Exercises, it is more suitable and much better that the Creator and the Lord in person communicate Himself to the devout soul in quest of the divine will, that He inflame it with His love and praise, and dispose it for the way in which it could better serve God in the future. Therefore, the director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

When the young person accompanied is seen to be making considered decisions on his/her own (notwithstanding that he/she makes

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<sup>3</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* n.15.

reference to advice from others as inputs), takes responsibilities for such decisions, and reflects on the experience afterwards, then he/she is on the way to being free.<sup>4</sup>

By adding this fourth condition to the previous three on the list, the task of the accompanying person becomes more nuanced. For example, when the young person expresses an unconventional thought which is potentially risky, should the accompanying person give space for the former to go ahead and learn from the richness of the experience or should the accompanying person challenge the former or even step in to stop him/her? To answer these questions, some general factors to consider might include seriousness and reversibility of consequences, the effect on others and the maturity of the young person being accompanied. However, this is a tension which is intrinsic to an accompanying relationship, and there are bound to be some situations which do not yield straightforward solutions.

## **D. Conversation**

A large part of youth formation is effected through verbal communication. The primary approach to verbal communication in the accompanying relationship is “conversation.” As noted by David Fleming:

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth clarifying the meaning of “independent” and “free” in this section in that they refer to the relationship with other human beings only and not to the divine. Actually, in ridding oneself of dependence on some human beings, one should be developing a reliance on God or some transcendental goodness as it is a dangerous illusion to believe that one can be absolutely independent even from God.

“Ignatius describes his ministry by the simple Spanish word *conversar*...Its simplest meaning in English is sincere talk with another person, the kind of comfortable, satisfying conversation whereby we truly get to know someone else...*Conversar* has broader meaning as well. It means “to be conversant with” something or someone—that is, truly know them deeply...To converse with someone is to know them and to be involved with their lives.”<sup>5</sup>

While it is natural to first think about what to “say” in a conversation, the essence of conversation is that it is a two-way process. This means that each engaging party is expected to adjust his or her responses in the course of conversation based on what the other party says. Thus, it is not a prepared speech but a flexible “semi-rehearsed dance.” In order for this to happen, attentive and empathic listening is crucial.

And when it comes to the accompanying person to speak, the objective is to enable the one accompanied to find the way himself or herself. One aspect to consider is the degree of openness in the accompanying’s response. In general, it should be more questioning than answers, more offering of alternatives for consideration than the “best” option, more suggestive than assertive, more tentative than absolute. Even silence is an option. The point is to make it open enough so the one accompanied needs to take an active part in the process, but not so open

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<sup>5</sup> David L. Fleming, S.J., *What is Ignatian Spirituality?* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 50.

as to leave the one accompanied clueless.<sup>6</sup> The actual degree of openness will depend on the maturity of the one accompanied and the context, including factors mentioned in the last paragraph of Section C.

A closely related aspect to consider is the primacy of the process of searching for the way over the result of that search. The purpose in the accompanying relationship is to enable the person accompanied to experience, explore and master the way applicable to different situations. This implies that the accompanying person might find it appropriate to let the person accompanied go through uncertainties, make mistakes and suffer short term setbacks as it can be a worthwhile price to pay if this experience provides a chance for more profound learning. The accompanying relationship is not result-driven, not short-term results anyway.

There is no guarantee that the accompanying person knows what to say in every situation or, even if he or she knows what to say, finds it appropriate to say it in that particular situation. Regarded as the wiser one in the relationship, the accompanying person may feel pressured to say something inspiring, especially when it seems that the one accompanied is totally stuck. This calls to mind an incident when Pope Francis was confronted by a 12-year-old girl in Manila in 2017 when she tearfully described how, as a young kid, she was forced to scavenge for food from garbage and to sleep outside on cardboard mats. “Why did God let this happen to us?” she asked, covering her face with her hands as she wept. The Pope’s response is a lesson about accompaniment:

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<sup>6</sup> Unless getting the accompanied clueless is intended to be part of the journey for formation.

*“The nucleus of your question almost doesn't have a reply,” the pontiff said at first, pain clearly etched on his face as he mentioned that he had seen her tears.*

*“Only when we too can cry about the things that you said are we able to come close to replying to that question,” Francis continued.*

*“Why did children suffer so much?” he asked. “Why do children suffer?”*

*“Certain realities in life we only see through eyes that are cleansed through our tears,” Francis said.<sup>7</sup>*

This is a powerful response, not because of the wisdom of the answer (as none was actually offered to the question of why God let the suffering happen), but the love embodied in the empathic accompaniment: it is as if the Pope was saying “I don’t know the answer, but I shall be with you in the suffering.” This is another layer to the conversation, moving from a dialogue on the subject of the discussion to the underlying relationship that holds that dialogue. Furthermore, implicit in this response is the message that while the accompanying one may not yet have an answer, his or her faith still shines a light of hope on the matter. Ultimately, it is not the accompanying person who is offering the answer, but God. The “Creator deals directly with the creature, and the creature directly with the Creator.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Joshua J. McElwee, “Francis Struggles to Answer Crying Girl’s Question about Suffering,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 17 January 2015, accessed 7 July 2020: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/francis-struggles-answer-crying-girls-question-about-suffering>.

<sup>8</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* n.15.

## **E. Disposition of the Accompanying Person**

Based on the nature of the accompanying relationship inspired by Ignatian spirituality discussed in the previous sections, one can infer a list of qualities required of the accompanying person. Certain skills, such as communication or counselling, will surely be helpful. The more fundamental, however, are some inner dispositions that will be conducive to an accompanying relationship.

To create a safe and trusting relationship necessary for effective accompaniment, the accompanying person has to be sincere, authentic and with integrity. He or she should also emanate peace and calm so that his or her stability and that of the relationship are not a concern.

As attentive and empathic listening is of paramount importance, the accompanying one should be a reflective person with good appreciation of the complexity of the self as well as of the human person in general through introspection and other means. Listening is not solely about how good one’s ears are. What has been heard has to be decoded and interpreted, and the quality of this process depends on the maturity of the accompanying person.

To provide the necessary space for the young person accompanied to explore the possibilities of finding his or her way, the accompanying person has to be respectful, patient and humble. This is not a matter of virtue. Rather it must be grounded on the genuine appreciation of one’s own finite understanding and the sense of wonder of the infinite mystery of God and his creation.

## F. Conclusion

In introducing Ignatian Spirituality, Fr. Brian Grogan SJ said:

“What is important about [Ignatius of Loyola] is not what he said, or did, or wrote, or suffered. What matters most I think is that this man had a gift, a gift to share with people in any time and place. The gift is to enable others to get in touch with God so that God directs their lives from then on.”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the greatest contribution of St. Ignatius is not the fruits of his encounter with God, but rather his sharing his way with others so that they too can have their personal encounter with God, bearing their own fruits as a result. This lies at the heart of the emphasis on accompaniment in the Ignatian tradition as a way to lead, teach, nurture and mentor people who are younger or less experienced than us. No matter how experienced or wise, we remain hopelessly limited in front of the limitless potentials of the multitude of people whom God has created. Accompaniment will help unlock such potentials which the accompanying person himself or herself may not possess, enabling the person accompanied to go to places that even the accompanying person can never tread.

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<sup>9</sup> From Fr. Brian Grogan’s online video introduction to the Online Course *Ignatian Spirituality and Leadership*, accessed 8 July 2020: <https://www.educatemagis.org/lesson/ignatian-spirituality-leadership-course-materials/>.

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〔摘要〕培育青年是父母、教師、社會工作者、學校、大學、政府，以至整個社會都十分關心的。耶穌會將「陪同年輕人創造充滿希望的未來」作為其 2019 年至 2029 年間四個普世性使徒優先之一。這裡用上了「陪同」兩字並非偶然，事實上「陪伴」是依納爵傳統的特色之一。培育青年有許多方法，為什麼「陪伴」在當今的處境具有獨特的意義？若果「陪伴」要做得好，要有哪些條件和方法？作為陪伴者又要有甚麼質素？在本文中，作者以依納爵靈修的角度，反思他在中學、大學和企業中多年培育年輕人的經驗，並分享了他的見解。

**關鍵詞：**青年，教育，培育，依納爵靈修，普世性使徒優先