

Andrew Murray Center for Spirituality, Wellington

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Workshop: Rooted in community: Formational experiences from the monastic Jesuit community in Amsterdam

The overall theme for the opening conference is “Remain in me as I remain in you”. The theme which has been announced for this workshop does not take up the image of the vine, however, but refers to roots in a community. Given that I am supposed to say something about Jesuits I would have been quite happy to stay with the image of the vine. Let me explain this before addressing some formational experiences of the Jesuit community.

The official name of the Jesuit Order is Society of Jesus. Through this name the first Jesuits expressed that they were united by their individual bond with Jesus. They had preached with amazing power, administered the sacraments, taught theology, shared a life of prayer and poverty (real poverty), hunger and cold, travel, danger, calumny, together serving the uncared for sick in the hospitals, gathering and feeding and tending those stricken by famine and disease, begging to get the wherewithal for their works of mercy. Through all these shared experiences, bonds of brotherhood grew more strong and grew into one of the most splendid friendships in history. It was at this time they decided that when anyone inquired who they were, they should answer that they were the *Compania de Jesus*.

They preferred to talk about their little group as “friends in the Lord”. Actually, their first vows in 1534 had been private vows of poverty and celibacy and a vow to go to Jerusalem – not to form a community. It was only when the group of friends had arrived in Rome to offer their services to the Pope that they were confronted with the imminent prospect of being spread around the world. In fact their fame had preceded them to Rome, and they found that the Kings of Spain and Portugal had asked the Pope for their services. The Ignatian charism appeared to fit with a time of expanding horizons. But they had not anticipated being spread over the world. So the question came naturally whether to remain united. Actually, it was two questions that they set out to answer. First, should they constitute a religious order? Second, should they obey one of the group? A unanimous answer to the first question came very quickly, but the second question was far from evident, and they spent three months, from mid-March to mid-June 1539, to respond. [Actually they feared that the Pope might require them to adopt one of the existing Rules for religious orders, which would have been a serious threat to what they understood as their mission.]

So, the Jesuits are known for their openness to be sent wherever the Church might need them. This makes them the first religious community in the history of the Church which is not fixed to a particular place. Jesuits do not live in monasteries, but in houses. They do not wear the robes of monks, but dress according to the customs of the place where they live. They do not have the liturgy of the hours, as other monastic orders do. And they hardly make any effort at community life. They are held together by a common love for Jesus Christ, dedication to apostolic work and their vow of obedience to the General Superior.

The Jesuit presence in Holland since the 19th century has traditionally centered on the five high schools – in Nijmegen, Zeist, Groningen, Delft and Amsterdam – including two boarding schools. This constituted an enormous contribution to the emancipation of Dutch Catholics, who had had a marginal role in society until 1853. When the number of Jesuits started to decline sharply in the 1970s the colleges were turned over in the hands of lay people and the Jesuit presence was confined to two locations – Amsterdam and Nijmegen.

Nijmegen is essentially a nursing facility and an old-age home. In Amsterdam, the remaining Jesuits concentrate on pastoral work in the Church of St. Francis Xavier and on the internet. The current church was built in 1881-1883. The preceding schuilkerk had been served by Jesuits since 1654.

The Platform for Jesuit spirituality in the Low Countries brings together a number of Jesuits to explore pastoral work on the internet, including a daily prayer podcast, Ignatian meditations based on a Bible text, work of art or feast day of a saint, digital retreats and a spirituality blog.

This Platform is the successor to a formation center based on Ignatian spirituality, which was initially located in the premises of the high school and, when these were sold, in a house adjacent to the Francis Xavier Church. The formation center was initially set up with the idea of serving the 40-45 parishes in and about Amsterdam through formation of volunteers. In practice the formation center appeared to be particularly attractive for its liturgy which somehow stood out from the ordinary. Besides the liturgy the formation program was characterized more by Eastern philosophy than by the Christian tradition. The combined effect was that the formation center attracted its own audience and missed the connection with the parishes. If anything, a competitive and antagonistic relation with the parishes developed until the Provincial superior decided to close down the entire operation around 2012.

So what can we say about any formational experiences? I think that the effort towards formation of volunteers - in spite of the good intentions of the individuals involved – failed because of the views of a small but dominant group who mainly valued their own community. The roots of the formation center stood in the way of building relations with the parishes and generously offering the wisdom of the Ignatian tradition to the wider Church.