

London Jesuit Volunteers: Contemplation in action

Dan Nisbett

London Jesuit Volunteers has helped many people find ways to follow their desire to help the poor and the marginalised, and provides support and Ignatian reflection to sustain volunteers in their work. Dan Nisbett describes how his involvement with LJV gave him the freedom and inspiration to ask important questions of himself, and to make a life-changing decision.

The last two years have taken my life in a new direction; a direction in which I have always wanted to go but I had never before known how to start the journey. It has been a time rich in experience and spiritual growth, and it began with my introduction to London Jesuit Volunteers.

My journey started as I passed through the parish church at Farm Street one day in May 2007. I noticed some information on a new project – London Jesuit Volunteers (LJV) – which had just completed its pilot season and which was recruiting for a second season. I was immediately interested, and something within me stirred as I read through the leaflet and saw what was proposed: a volunteer placement of my choice, serving those on the margins of society in some capacity, through a Jesuit-run charity that would provide training, support and spiritual reflection within a group – and spiritual direction if I wanted that as well – all supported by LJV and the Mount Street Jesuit Centre.

I had been volunteering for several years with organisations that primarily helped the homeless, and which were all good in themselves, but they were very business-like and lacking in a spiritual dimension. Whilst I appreciated the opportunity to serve that they presented me, I always felt that there was something missing. I had attended a course at Mount Street on Personal and Spiritual Development some years ago, which had given me a deeper understand-



ing of Ignatian spirituality. To my mind, LJV was offering a combination of both of these elements that I had previously explored independently, along with a strong spiritual element and an excellent support structure.

I contacted Lisa, the co-ordinator of LJV at the time, to register my interest, and we exchanged a few emails. At that time I was working full time in the City of London in a pressured job in finance. In addition

to this, I was training part-time to be a counsellor and was also involved in helping with the rehabilitation of those suffering from addictions. My life was already full and I saw that it was going to be hugely difficult to follow my heart's desire to join LJV and to balance my existing commitments. I tried to discern my way forward and asked God to help me. I saw that the things I was already involved in outside of work required my full attention; I needed to give my all to the counselling training, which was demanding in itself, as well as maintain my commitment to those suffering from addiction. I felt then that I would have to walk away from the LJV idea, as it just was not feasible. I let Lisa know and continued with my life; but I felt a real, dull ache in my stomach having made this decision – I felt a sense of desolation. Throughout the summer I just could not get LJV out of my mind or heart. I had a real internal struggle: of the inner light looking for a solution and a creative way of combining things, against desolate feelings and all manner of reasons to leave it be and continue as I was.

When I realised that there was an offer of reduced hours at work, I got out a calculator, did the maths and realised that I could afford to have one day off each week: a day I could spend volunteering! And this is what I decided to do. I was filled with immense joy and satisfaction at this new routine, and found that I was easily able to adapt. I actually felt grateful for the opportunity to moderate my life a little; this in itself highlighted to me that I had more than I needed, and it challenged me to live life more simply, something I found extremely refreshing in these modern times of greed and excess.

Lisa and I met, and we started to look at some volunteer placements. We initially discerned that Sixty Plus, St John's Hospice or Time Together, in that order, would be good placements for me. But God had other ideas! I went away and prayed with these choices, I asked the Holy Spirit to show me where He wanted me to go, where the need was greatest. Time Together came to me, as I felt that the refugee was the person most in need: portrayed very poorly and inaccurately by the media, ostracised by the general public and offered little help by the state. I felt compelled to be involved with them, to accompany them. Lisa and I processed the application and we left it with God.

The LJV prayer groups started to form and I found these a great source of prayerfulness and community. It was good to be amongst others who had the same ideals as I did. I met people who were volunteering at Time Together, as well as at a detention centre for refugees, in a prison for young offenders and with the homeless in London's West End, to name but a few. These early days brought different people together and the groups developed from there. Sister Ingrid became and continues to be the session leader of the group that I attend, which is increasingly fruitful and nourishing with each visit.

Unfortunately, Time Together had their funding suspended and they ceased to recruit new members of their team. So, we discerned where else I might go. I felt that the Spirit was calling me to St John's Hospice. Shortly before Christmas 2007, Lisa introduced me to the people at the hospice and I started to attend training. In my placement at St John's, I got to know many of the people at the hospice, including other volunteers who had joined

the hospice independently. I could see how rich the LJV project was in comparison to the experiences of those volunteers: LJV was giving me the opportunity and organisation to literally be a contemplative in action. I have also appreciated the flexibility of being able to volunteer at a range of places in need, in keeping with the Ignatian spirit. Members of the LJV community are often asked to help out with various projects if they have a spare morning or afternoon, and there are always plenty of willing volunteers, people who want to go where the need is greatest.

My initial role at St John's was intended to be as a 'befriender'. However, due to administrative staff changes and red tape, starting this role became quite a cumbersome procedure, and so in the interim I was invited to help in other ways. I attended the house of a dying man to give him and his partner moral support; this was a profound experience, and I felt honoured to have been allowed into this most sacred space. We sat with them for an hour or so, much of it in prayerful silence, and we were able to offer love and compassion. It had a deep effect both on myself and on the volunteer co-ordinators who attended with me, and we spent time afterwards reflecting upon the experience in spiritual conversation.

I also helped St John's with some fundraising, a very humbling task I came to find. To be shunned by the crowds as you request alms for the hospice is no easy task, and it made me reflect upon many things. It helped me realise what a thankless task that is, and I now try to give my time to those engaged in such activities: a friendly face, a smile, a kind word – bread for the journey.

My involvement with LJV amplified my understanding of Ignatian spirituality: with the support of my group I was able to put the tools that it offers to great use in my own life. I began to use the prayer methods suggested by Ignatius in daily life. I began to reflect much more deeply on my life generally, and to look for God in all things: where was He moving me? What was He saying to me?

In Spring 2008, I began to really ask such questions of myself, and I found myself at a crossroads. I embraced the Ignatian idea of doing more of what gives you life and less of what drains you of life, and I left my job in the City, which was definitely doing the latter! As

each day passed I had felt more and more depleted by a job that had no spiritual content and that wore away at me. I decided that I would take some time out and try to sense where God was calling me. I was fortunate enough to have the resources to do this. For a couple of months I gave myself to prayer and service, to discerning and listening. I then came across an advertisement for a job at L'Arche, a faith community of people with learning difficulties and their assistants, living and working together. I felt a calling towards this opportunity and I applied.

I met with the HR co-ordinator and was overjoyed when I visited L'Arche; I felt such a deep sense of contentment there, of consolation. It was nothing like the business world that I had long been part of, that had long drained me of energy, of life. I had supper with the community and this was a joyful occasion: I felt deeply moved by the experience and honoured to have been their guest. There was a strong sense of love there, of family, of community and of kinship – a real feeling of home. During prayers after supper, we focused on 'The road to Emmaus' from the L'Arche prayer book. We sat in a circle and passed a candle around, each person taking a turn to hold it and recite personal petitions for the group prayer. I was overwhelmed by this moment, and by the whole visit. As I reflected on this experience some time later on, I felt the feeling that Ignatius describes in the Spiritual Exercises as 'water falling softly onto a sponge.' It felt very much like that as peace gently and consistently soothed my sense of being. I realised that, by discerning as LJV had encouraged me to do, I was able to make better life choices – real life choices – through the Spirit.

Since joining L'Arche I have continued to be fully involved with LJV and with St John's. I continue to discern the will of God in my life in an Ignatian way, and have that trust in Him that allowed me to make the decision to leave my comfort zone of the job in finance. The L'Arche approach to life and spirituality is very similar, and I have found that a consolation. I try to take more time in things, I try to be more contemplative, because otherwise I am hurried and I am unable to hear the voice of God amongst all the hustle and bustle. In the world of finance I could not do that: with the advance of technology, tight deadlines and an ever-increasing workload I was unable to 'taste and savour' life, I was unable to feel and unable to be still.

Having recently taken time out to reflect deeply upon my life over the past two years, I have realised just how bright it has been; how I have been given so much life, so much love, so much consolation. I feel very grateful for that. Life has not been without its challenges and its desolation, but they are also signposts on the journey and give me an inner sense of navigation towards where my life is heading.

I feel excited at what God has in store for me. I feel free and alive at the thought of going to help where the need is greatest. Over past years I have wished to live this life but have always been held back, always found reasons to stay the same. LJV has helped me to embrace life, to change and to welcome God wherever I find Him. I am inspired as I see the community growing and developing. LJV has helped me to hear the whisper and to answer the call.

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