



## Finding God in Amsterdam

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A recent endeavour saw 100 Jesuits sent out in small groups on 'experiments' across North West Europe to engage in different aspects of the Society of Jesus's ministry. Jim Corkery and three of his Jesuit brothers found themselves in Amsterdam, where they experienced the graces of community life in a new way and found God at work everywhere, from a Jesuit church to the red light district!

This summer over 100 Jesuits, aged 65 or under, were invited to come together to share life, prayer and work in a way that would leave them open to being gently 'ambushed' by God, in ways hitherto unimagined, in preparation for a future in which they might live and work together, also in ways hitherto unimagined. These 'younger' Jesuits converged on a large Jesuit house in Heverlee, near Brussels, on 21 July, to begin a two-week meeting that was divided into three parts. First, there was a period of getting to know each other and learning about our respective Jesuit provinces: the [Netherlands](#), [Flanders](#), [Britain](#) and [Ireland](#). Second, we went out in groups (of four or five) to various places in our different provinces in order to live, pray, work and simply *be* together, open to how God might show us, through these experiences, possibilities for a future mission together. Third, we came together again as a full group at Clongowes Wood College, near Dublin, to reflect on our experiences and to wonder, as we looked back on all that had happened to us, what God might be indicating about our future together through how he had been with us in the week that we spent in small groups in different places.

I am from the Irish Province and I was sent to Amsterdam with [William Pearsall](#) and [Nick Austin](#) from the British Province and Bert Daelemans from the Flemish Province. We were not well known to each other. I myself knew Nick a little, having met him recently in Dublin; William and I had last met when we were novices in the early 1970s; and I had

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never laid eyes on Bert! So there we were, a small group from three different countries headed to a fourth country that was native to none of us; and our mission was, simply, to 'find God in the city.' Three of us did not speak its language; but we were helped by the one who did and by our Dutch Jesuit hosts (all over 65 of course – the younger ones were away!), who opened their home and their hearts to us and provided us with opportunities

for sharing in the (largely hidden) Christian life of a secularised city, the beauty, vibrancy and diversity of which captured our interest immediately.

The mission of a Jesuit, expressed in broadest terms, is to bring God to the world and the world to God. This word 'bring' is not quite right, actually, because a Jesuit's presupposition, based on his faith in the Incarnation, is that God is *already* in the world – present in its depths, healing and loving it, and reconciling it to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). So our mission in Amsterdam was less to 'bring' God to the city than to 'find' God already present in it, to detect his activity and to dispose ourselves, somehow, for being opened up and enlivened by it. How were we to do this? First, we would pray alone for about an hour each day, using (but not confining ourselves to) themes and biblical texts that had been prepared for us with a gentle focus on seeking out God's desires for our provinces together in the years ahead; and then we would take time to share with one another what had occurred as we prayed. Second, we would try to participate a little in the work of the [church of Saint](#)

[Francis Xavier](#) that was attached to our house, sharing at times in its liturgies (our Dutch-speaker especially) and attempting to show visitors around it, using the various languages we could speak. Third, we would visit, pray and converse with some communities, known to our Dutch hosts, which would enable us to tap into existing ways in which God was evidently present and active in Amsterdam. Fourth – and this depended on the particular ingenuity, gifts and inclinations of each person – the whole city lay before us, it was there to be visited, explored and enjoyed, and there was no reason that, going out into it, we could not find the presence of God in unexpected ways. So we attempted this also, seeking to be open to the possibility of being encountered by the ‘God of surprises.’

The Amsterdam ‘experiment’ proved to be extraordinarily worthwhile. Simply living together, shopping in the city’s supermarkets, cooking for ourselves (and often for two of our Dutch brethren), lingering over meals and planning, as a group, the outline of each day were activities that imperceptibly formed us into a community. The conversations in which we spoke about our prayer – but also the fact that we *knew* that everyone else was praying each day – led to a deepening of our sense of community and to a growing trust between us. These conversations were almost always followed by a celebration of the Eucharist together, so that, all in all, we were spending some three hours a day in prayer. We were not exactly on retreat; neither were we *not* on retreat; and the mutual support in prayer made our experience richer than that of many a solitary annual retreat. I recall expressions such as, ‘I am being opened up by this way of being together’ and I recall also how, one day, a person reported being moved from desolation to consolation – a movement we all perceived – *during* our prayerful conversation together. We were able, also, to admit that this was not really how we lived in the Society on a regular basis. This admission was not an experience of guilt – we recognised that the time for togetherness that was ours in Amsterdam was privileged and could not be given in every situation – but it did challenge us to think about how we could incarnate something more of it in our daily lives (which, for two of us, are in provinces not our own in which we work).

Fine! So we were finding God better in the community, but were we also doing so in the city, as we had been asked? Yes. There was a pendulum-like character to our experience and we noticed that as we oscillated between being a prayerful community at home and visiting, in this spirit, communities in the city, we did so more as a ‘we’ than as four individuals. At the Catholic Worker (Dorothy Day) community in south-east Amsterdam – which was founded in 1986 when three members came from The Catholic Worker in New York and which today offers hospitality to migrants from Africa, Asia and Europe – we found, as we ate with the people there and talked afterwards with members of the community, that they picked up on our spirit of community and even remarked on our way of being together. This was encouraging because they were such a strikingly Christian community themselves, consciously and explicitly, even if one or two lived from a goodness that left God unnamed but did not leave his face unseen.

At the [Oudezijds 100](#) ecumenical community located in the heart of the city’s red light district, we were strongly impacted by the trust in God that radiated from the woman who leads the core group of this community that has been helping, sheltering and supporting people on the edge of society in inner-city Amsterdam for fifty years. She told stories of forgiveness, of reliance on grace, of trust in providence that moved our hearts and that later, as once again we prayed and reflected together, made us see the presence and importance of vulnerability in our own lives. As individual Jesuits we are vulnerable; as provinces we are also vulnerable; any future together will not be able to ignore this.

I have been using the pronoun ‘we’ to convey what happened in Amsterdam, even as I am aware that each person’s experience was also unique. The ‘we’ is justified, however, because we shared – much more than Jesuits usually do – all of the important activities; and we shared our prayer and our daily lives. We went on all of the visits together and found that what we heard and saw in those re-surfaced and was echoed in our prayer and in our conversations about them. That is where the recognition of our being ‘opened up’ by our experiences first surfaced.

And everywhere we went was a ‘frontier,’ to use the language of the Society of Jesus today, so that the Jesuit mission to be with people at the edges was not neglected. Something of this occurred also on the morning we spent at Amsterdam’s *Vrije Universiteit* with a professor who has a background in business and who, in the theology faculty there, specialises in spirituality and business ethics in an interreligious context, drawing on Jesuit sources to speak of decision-making and discernment. (As a person who teaches theology myself, I was challenged to bring it to as many frontiers as he does all at once).

Individual gifts found their outlet also, grace building on nature. While William found God not only in the city’s art but also in speaking of the treasures of Saint Francis Xavier church to its afternoon visitors, Bert played the organ in the church on some of those afternoons; and I loitered there too, limitedly schooled in the church’s treasures, but using my scant knowledge of them to occasionally open up conversations that went other places. All of us, I think, had encounters in the city, engaging with people in ways that transcended the merely functional. I achieved this in coffee shops, bookstores and occasionally on a park bench; others did it according to their personalities and interests. Being in consolation ourselves, we spread this a little – certainly more than its contrary.

And once, in conversation, we agreed that if we could offer people in the city of Amsterdam, or indeed anywhere, an opportunity to live more in consolation – more under the influence of the ‘good spirit’ – then we might be beginning to shine like stars in the world, offering it the gift of life (Philippians 2:15-16). In a modest way, we would be ‘finding’ God, surfacing God’s presence in the city, which is what we had been asked to do in the first place.

It is not too much to hope, based on our experiences in Amsterdam, that members of the four provinces of the Netherlands, Flanders, Britain and Ireland *could* develop together, from the seeds of grace that we now know will be given, a shared mission that would draw people towards greater consolation – because we are in greater consolation ourselves. This is surely in alignment with God’s plan, as described recently by Pope Francis: ‘What is God’s plan? It is to make of us all a single family of his children, in which each person feels that God is close and feels loved by him. ... The Church is rooted in this great plan.’ And so are the Jesuit provinces of Northwest Europe.

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