



Accompaniment
in the time of
COVID-19



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During his lifetime **Ignatius of Loyola** (1491 – 1556) in person probably accompanied thousands of people attempting to navigate a path leading towards some level of spiritual enlightenment and personal relationship with God. Inadvertently that number probably goes into the hundreds of thousands. He provided especially intimate levels of accompaniment to his retreatants when guiding them through his much revered Spiritual Exercises.

Ignatius was adamant that through accompanying one another with a conscious awareness of God's presence dwelling the midst of our human relationships, that we will inevitably find what it is we're looking for, a meaningful life. It's not only accompaniment that we as educators in the Ignatian tradition uphold as a worthy idea.

We invite our students to become men and women for others for example. By serving others and hopefully going on to dedicate their lives to some sort of principled pursuit, we hope our students become contemplatives in action, another reflective but active practice of which our Spanish namesake felt strongly. While never downplaying the importance of daily prayer, meditation and journaling (in fact Ignatius of Loyola was devoted to these disciplines in his own life), Ignatius also felt the monastic life lacked the get up and go he felt was needed to create long-lasting change in the world.

Other principles not unique to the Ignatian tradition but certainly central to it, include a lifelong commitment to become more for the greater glory of God, the Magis. We're also called to constantly consider our fellow human beings in their entirety when we engage with one another whether it be professionally or personally, we're called to be mindful of the *cura personalis*; the whole person.

In the weeks since the outbreak of COVID-19 however, it's the simplicity of the humble notion of accompaniment that continues to come up for me. It seems to me that it is this gift of grace being offered to us the most in this turbulent and unsettling time. With the closure of our face to face school environment, a cessation of activities club and socially related, and for many a mandated directive to work from home, it's in accompaniment that we might find the hidden key to some nourishing, quiet meaningfulness during the increased time we're enjoying (hopefully?!) with the young people in our care.

We are perhaps being afforded more time, space and accompaniment with those we love than even before. Given our students will be learning from home for what appears to be a little while longer and once precious hours spent at home with our children has increased, let's plan our days with this modest and quiet achiever accompaniment in mind.

Mr Caleb Ryan Companions Coordinator



Apply Self-care:

As parents, educators and guardians, whose lives are driven by the happiness and contentedness of young people, it's never been more important for us to firstly nurture and care for ourselves. If we do, we can then in turn better support the dependents around us.

If we're not good, not well rested and feeling lousy, it's hard for us to provide the level of guidance and support we'd like to.

It's imperative that we sleep well, eat well and avoid stress where possible so we can communicate as clearly as possible with our loved ones when making decisions in the home that affect us all. If we're feeling overwhelmed or heightened or overtired, maybe take five and do something for yourself to shift whatever's bugging you before communicating with young people in our care.

Put self-care practices in place if you haven't already. If you need to run, run. If you're someone that needs to walk or get the washing done before you can relax, do that.

Whatever it is you need to do, to roll up on the home front as your best self, work hard to ensure that it happens. Just as importantly however, if for whatever reason some days you can't get to that space, forgive yourself.

Your family members will reap the benefits.

We can better accompany those around us in a way that leaves us feeling energized and happy when we have applied some love to ourselves first.

Create some Art:

I reckon I've said a hundred times in my classes "There's no such thing as a bad drawing, if it's yours it's original and no matter what you create, it's all good" I genuinely believe it too!

Art only becomes 'bad' when we or others apply judgment to it. What better way is there to give the children in our lives permission to create and express themselves, then having a crack at it ourselves? When's the last time you sharpened a pencil and completed a drawing? Or purchased a blank canvas and splashed some paint around?

What about buying a model airplane and gluing it together? There's plenty of reasons we can convince ourselves not to do it and our mind throws up all of them don't worry, but there's treasures to be found in these organic practices.

My teenage son and I did some drawing the other day. He spent the first thirty minutes or so judging his own scribble (and mine of course), and it tested my patience. I wanted to have a crack at him for not trying something different, but instead I took a deep breath, held space and kept drawing, erasing and sketching.

After a while I felt him shift, lighten and I could feel him watching me out of the corner of his eye. And then he was away. He got into it and eventually created something he looked at and admired. More importantly however, after the initial waves settled and we were drawing, the conversation flowed. He accompanied me, and I him and I smiled and I might have spotted some joy in him too.





Cook, bake and eat together:

Is it possible that Jesus of Nazareth was on to something when he chose the dinner table to instigate the most famous ritual ever performed in the history of humankind? I think we can by now at least conclude that the first century Nazarene was no dill. He wanted his followers to stop and accompany one another every day so they could remember him and his teachings.

He could have pleaded with them to find this time or that during the day to stop and recall his sacrifice. In his wisdom though it must have occurred to him that one thing (most) people did every day is *eat*. And so he initiated the breaking of bread to be the time during the day to remember him, be with God and each other.

It's genius in its simplicity. When we prepare food, cook and bake, mix, place and stir etc we inevitably *talk*. Convincing our kids to get in the kitchen might not be as challenging as we might think either. Some children love it and can't wait, they're easy, they need little to no enticement.

But how do we get a reluctant teenager to chop vegies? Or a cranky adolescent to stir ingredients for fresh muffins? It's all about the *tradeoff*.

It'd be nice if each time we asked a teenager to help that they responded with an enthusiastic '*I'd love to!*', but let's be fair dinkum, it aint gonna' happen. So we need to strategise. I have two boys in my house who enjoy sport, video games, iPads and tv shows, so I often suggest that if they give me a hand in the kitchen, they can have an extra half hour of their favourite activities.

If yours are stubborn like mine, try not to get cross or take it personally just remain calm and suggest "*no worries, you mustn't be real keen on PS4 time then. No probs.*"

Reverse psychology has its moments. Once you get them in the kitchen, *keep it simple*.

Don't try and reinvent the wheel.

Prepare something that your child wants to eat and give them easy and fun jobs first and when they make progress they'll get a taste for it.

Be careful though! Laughter, banter and *accompaniment* may follow.



Exercise, Sport and Leisure:

It's easy to slip into apathy in the current climate and Netflix and other streaming services don't help. It can be difficult to self-motivate at times. We get so much from those around us and we may have taken this for granted somewhat. Lethargy can take hold when we're forced to spend so much more time indoors and the couch gets more use than it normally would, not to mention the fridge and the pantry.

Our children watch us, either consciously or sub consciously, they observe us and take our lead.

If we don't maintain a healthy lifestyle and eat good fresh food and remain active, chances are they won't either. It doesn't matter you do together during this time, as long as you're moving *together*.

A long daily walk, a bike ride, a jog or kicking the footy will do, but moving *together* and being active *together* is a great way to show our children how much we value their health and our own. We should be applying ourselves more to physical exercise at the moment given how much more time we're idle and the less fresh air we're taking into our lungs.

The mental health benefits can't be overstated either. Getting the whole household involved is the easiest way to maintain momentum because whether we see it ourselves or not, our children admire us when we make healthy choices and if we bit the pavement at the same time every day, they probably will too. Importantly again, it's time next to one another in *accompaniment*.

Play video games! (sometimes):

Yep. I'm not joking. Over the past weeks I have discovered why my son and his mates cry 'green!' every time someone makes a shot in basketball. The catch cry originates in the PS4 game 'NBA2K'. Who knew? It had been bugging me for months. I couldn't work out why a clean shot in basketball has been labelled as *green*?

Well now I know. When a player in NBA2K executes a shot with acute timing their shooting action lights up in a green colour and the game player is signaled that this is a sweet shot.



It's a badge of honor of sorts. How do I know all this? Because the other night after playing 2K with my 13-year-old son, by the end of the night I was shouting 'green!' and I need to confess, loving every minute of it.

I couldn't have done it however, without the tutelage of both my sons the whole way through.

They ravished in their role as my personal PS4 tutors. They *accompanied* me. In the past I have often considered the 'can't beat 'em join'em' idea of sitting with the boys and playing their games but it's seriously not my thing at all.

I feel very much like a fish out of water around computer games. (I even struggled with Atari and Commodore 64 for Pete's sake). In no way am I condoning more screen time and our young people free reign on their gaming console. What I do think is worth considering is sharing their fascination once in a while. Curiously, after our shared experience on the console my boys didn't want to keep playing without me, they wanted to talk to me about it after wards and they told me I "*didn't do too bad*". I walked a tad taller.

Get in the garden:

Building a little vegie patch, planting a fruit tree or growing some herbs is a wholesome way to model for children a growing need to sustain ourselves. It certainly beats fighting other consumers in supermarket aisles over packet pasta, plain flour and toilet paper.

Studies suggest we can feed an entire family a wide variety of fresh fruit and vegetables with access only to space the size of a small balcony.

Some of us are blessed with plenty of space outside, some are not. But there'd be very few of us who can't at the very least get our hands on some soil or potting mix, seedlings and start growing some food at home.

I needed to drag my sons kicking and screaming to pot some herbs outside our kitchen window last week. I used the PS4 and TV as bargaining chips and suggested that were they to spend an hour planting and potting, they could have the same amount of extra time on screens that afternoon.



If they refused it was no screens altogether.

So I dangled a carrot but I had a big fat stick on hand too! I made them feel they had a choice when they really had none, and I somehow got away with it, count your blessings. They took the carrot and potted, reluctantly yes.

But...now only a week or two later, they're checking their seedlings, watering them, watching them, accompanying them. Get your hands dirty together, you won't be sorry.

Set some goals:

The social situation impressed upon us with COVID-19 can make it a vulnerable time for young people and losing their zest for life is a real risk. It's crucial they have plenty of things to look forward to and goal setting can be a good way for us to drop some crumbs for them when they get a little lost.

For example, without competitive sport the naturally competitive creatures amongst our students will be finding it tough not having access to the lifeblood of competing on the sporting arena. Children of this nature, need to be competing with themselves in the current context. They need to be pushing through personal bests, striving to achieve goals, or they will become uneasy, agitated more susceptible to mental health slumps.

If young people in your house fit this mould, sit with them and set some goals and discuss possible rewards (intrinsic or extrinsic – whatever works best for you and your home) that will keep them focused.

My son wants to get better at basketball and he admits that his fitness levels and running capacity have room for improvement.

I've told him if he runs a certain amount of times a week, I'll shout him a cool birthday surprise in October when (hopefully), we have the liberty to do so. Other students who aren't as driven with the sport side of things might find more satisfaction by setting themselves financial, creative or project based goals.

Maybe they have a certain dollar value they'd like to meet so they can do something special when restrictions lift. Or maybe they have a creative writing competition they can enter?

Maybe they could brainstorm a business idea and if they go through a complete design process you could agree on a reward?

Our senior Arts captains have just announced they'll be running a series of competitions this term in the Arts space whilst in remote learning.

Check it out. The most important part of sitting together and going through this process is not whether or not they meet their goals, it's the fact that you will sit down and figure out more about what makes the boy or girl in front of you tick. And when you do you can be there for them more.

Pray, meditate and journal:

One of my favourite books is a wonderful novel titled '*Love in the time of Cholera*' by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. If you haven't read it, I implore you to do so. Set in South America during a deadly cholera outbreak, the story is about finding love, joy and passion in a time when the outside world around is spiraling into chaos and pandemic.

Can we relate? There's no doubt that the past months have been trying for us all, and at times surreal and even frightening.

Some have suffered more than others and our hearts especially go out to the sick and those in our community whose livelihoods have been adversely affected.

We've all felt the impact of this nasty virus and the social implications it has had on our lives and the lives of our students, can't be understated. To help make sense of it all, I've had my own children capture some of their feelings during this time and get it down on paper, the good, the bad and the ugly.

We have journaled together every day at 5pm, especially in the initial weeks when the fear was high and the restrictions tight. We've also said grace before our meals a little more often these days. Gratitude is something we should all practice, now more than ever. There are also many reputable apps that young people can download to their phones to provide guided meditations to help clear all the negative mental energy they're being exposed to on a daily basis.

These young people need to be strongly urged to find a way to switch off and if they can't do it themselves we need to find ways to help them.

This is vital. The news has been constant and unrelenting and time spent being still and free of it is a grace we must give to our children and ourselves. The SICG Wellbeing team do an extraordinary job providing options in this area and students and parents are encouraged to contact them for further ideas.

The most important thing to remember is that it doesn't really matter what you're doing with the young people in your care (within reason of course). What matters is that you accompany them, be with and for them and that means looking after yourself too.

The rest will look after itself.

Take care.

Caleb Ryan

Companions Coordinator

