

From time to time, people ask me, “What’s the best thing about being a Jesuit?”, and I have a ready answer, or three! My third favourite thing about being a Jesuit is the long formation. It gives us so much time to reflect on our lives, to recognise what moves or motivates us and our particular strengths and tendencies. My second favourite thing about being a Jesuit is the community. I am part of a family that includes members doing all sorts of fascinating and important work— intellectual study, work with refugees, advocacy in the public square and political sphere, pastoral ministry with people from all walks of life, and so much. And I know that I belong in this family. I’m not just along for the ride: my contribution is just as valuable and just as valued, even if, at least at present, it isn’t as spectacular as some other Jesuits’.

But the greatest privilege of Jesuit life is the opportunity to listen to so many different people. One of the most captivating gospel scenes is Jesus sitting at the well with the Samaritan woman. There are no spectators, just Jesus getting to know this woman and her spiritual needs. The conversation seems difficult to interpret, but I think that’s part of the point: it’s not the content but the encounter that matters.

And religious life is full of encounter. When I worked as a physicist, life was all about what I could do. In academia, people don’t much care what hours you work, or what you look like, or how eccentric you are, but you are constantly assessed on what you have achieved and what you are expected to achieve in the future. Then when I entered the novitiate, all of that fell away. The novitiate is not a world of applications and deadlines, and there wasn’t even much of the service or pastoral work that I had expected.

But there was encounter. First, the primary encounter, with God. Could I see religious life, not so much as a good thing to do, but as a way of living out a relationship with some One who I had glimpsed but would never be able to comprehend or predict? Then with my fellow novices: was I prepared to surrender control over not just my mission in the world but the mundane realities of household life, in order to be part of a community that shares all things in common?

Then, as my pattern of life became more active, encounter with others among whom I have been missioned. When I turned up to volunteer at a subsidised food store, I was asked, “Are you here to work for the dole?” And spending my days stacking shelves is not the kind of career I envisaged during my PhD studies. Yet to explain to a young mother the quantity of groceries she could buy with the money she had, and to see her relief at finding she could feed her family not meagrely but abundantly, made it all worthwhile, even though the part I played was so small. I moved on from that placement convinced that I could happily carry out even the simplest of works, as long as it was with a community of fellow workers as dedicated to a common mission as those I found at that store.

We all have encounters throughout life, but it’s important that those of us with a particular call to pastoral ministry take time to reflect on these encounters and what they teach us. I was fortunate to do this in a formal way through Clinical Pastoral Education. My biggest learning from this course was the importance of being myself. I went into the course thinking I might need to take on a different persona: more outgoing, perhaps, and more direct in the way I talk about emotions. But I found the opposite. Patients found my quiet, calm presence unimposing, and by being slow to talk I left space for them to share more and more of what was important to them. More than one patient appreciated my recognition that a careful application of the logical brain need not be a running away from emotions, but can be a way of taking them seriously and responding appropriately. And I found my analytical skills useful in helping my fellow students draw out what they were aiming to achieve in their encounters and their writing about them. Of course, a different personality and set of skills

could have served me equally well: what was asked for from me was sincerity. Without this, there is no genuine encounter.

A special test of my orientation to encounter came with a placement in a remote Aboriginal community. The problems of poverty and lack of direction and identity seemed insurmountable, and I believed that even if a more positive and sustainable way of living could be achieved, getting there will involve just as much disruption as was brought by our initial invasion of Aboriginal peoples' lands and lives. My hope for a brighter future was not found in anything I could see with my eyes, but only in the Resurrection of Christ and its promise of life even from death. I had to accept that after my few months in the community, all the problems would be just as present as when I arrived. Much more, my fellow religious who spend years or decades there must live with the same reality. Why, then, were we there? Because we believed that, even in the midst of so much pain, loving encounter is valuable. When I accepted an elder's welcome to her country, and listened to her story of how faith in Jesus has provided hope to her family for several generations, Christ was present in our midst. When a young student with behaviour difficulties came to apologise to me for some unkind words and was clearly trying so hard to do better, Christ was present. When I volunteered with the COVID testing team and could provide some reassurance to a mother worried about her sons and their weak lungs, Christ was present. I could do little, but I could do it with love.

My most significant pastoral placement has been at a university college, living with people at a stage of life that's recent enough that I remember it well. And what is it that I do there? I'm not the rector, or the chaplain, or the dean. Even when I have deeper conversations with students about matters of importance to them, I don't feel like I have any special wisdom to offer. In fact, when I find myself trying to offer good advice, I know that I am starting to go wrong. My role is just to provide a listening ear, a space for this student to express what has previously been bottled up inside. It is time that will lead them to some kind of resolution, and I can only offer a little support along the way. My ministry is one of friendship.

But young university students have many friends; what makes my friendship distinctive? Is it merely the fact that I'm a little older and (at least according to the idiom) wiser? No: I believe that the vows provide a witness that even people with no other connection to our faith recognise and value. If there's one thing people know about Catholic priests—and priest-in-training is a description most people understand better than vowed religious—it's that they are not married. Even in today's world, actively choosing to be unmarried and to pursue a vocation that requires this is unusual and is seen as such. And it is seen as a choice made for the purpose of service. Here I am in debt to those Jesuits and other religious who the young people I encounter have met before me. These young people aren't interested in debating the relative importance of the eschatological and practical purposes of celibacy: they simply recognise the generosity of the particular religious they have met. They are quick to include me in this tradition, which I see as both compliment and challenge. At a time when the reputation of Catholic priests and religious considered in the abstract is at rock bottom, living, breathing priests and religious are seen very positively.

Poverty likewise has an appeal for young people. As attractive as all the good things money can buy are, young people see the emptiness of a life devoted solely or even largely to pursuing these things. Many have expressed a wish that they were bold enough to follow a path like mine. I don't think obedience resonates as strongly with the young people I meet: driven by their own ideas of the good they can do with their life—for themselves, those dear to them and the world—they see it as a restriction, rather than a freeing for a greater good that my vision may not be wide enough to recognise.

Ultimately, my efforts to love more generously and unconditionally must be directed towards witness to the God whose love is completely generous and unconditional. Most of the young people encounter don't have an explicit faith in God, and most don't develop such a faith during the time I know them. But if they know that I love them, and better recognise others' love for them, I believe I have helped them come closer to God.