

Accompanying and accompanied: the headmaster and the accompanying relationship in a Jesuit school

Proposal for a personal summary of the JECSE 2023

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The JECSE 2023 session for secondary school heads was devoted to the theme of support, based in particular on a phrase from the Gospel according to Saint Luke: "He sent them out two by two"¹.

Before looking at the theme of accompaniment for its own sake, we need to take the time to analyse this verse, since it is the one that opens our reflection. How does this verse provide an effective introduction to the theme of accompaniment? Firstly, it reminds us that the call and the sending are at the heart of our mission; and secondly, this sending "two by two" places intersubjectivity as the basic condition of the sending - a fundamental condition of our vocation. These two points are like two sides of the same fundamental reality that characterises our professional posture: I am not the sole source of my action (I am called by someone other than myself, I am sent outside myself, and I am sent with someone other than myself). I am not alone in my vocation: everything begins with otherness and with relationships. This is a good point to start from when conceiving our mission in a Christian environment, as we can tend to be marked first and foremost by the *solitude that comes* with the job - or who can also perhaps be tempted to make our own the work we are called to serve.

In the light of this twofold reference to the sending and the relationship from Luke chapter 10, the theme of accompaniment in our schools takes on a particular light, it seems to me. And so we can ask ourselves in what way this concept makes it possible to say something essential not only about our mission as school heads, but also about our mission in the service of a Jesuit school. In our ordinary practices, the recurrent reference to certain key concepts of our pedagogical tradition (whether we are thinking in particular of *cura personalis*, learning to reread, or education for discernment) seems to suggest that we have a particular way of accompanying young people - or at least that we claim to. It is precisely this that I would like to examine very quickly in this short report, which will be a very personal way of re-reading the contributions we heard (it will not be a succession of summaries of the contributions, nor a collection of impressions). I have chosen to focus in particular on two general ideas that seemed to me to be important and stimulating for a re-reading of our practice. I propose to deal with them separately in the few lines below.

1. Support is an *embodied* relationship

This is a first key element that can be broken down into three points, which are perhaps worth mentioning, even if they may seem a little trivial or too simple to some.

¹ Luke 10:1; see also Mark 6:7.

Firstly, *we always work with specific people*, i.e. with specific bodies, histories, concerns, hopes, vulnerabilities and so on. This means at least three things. Firstly, on a very practical level, it means that not all times are suitable for initiating a dialogue - and *even less so for* providing support in the strict sense of the word. The temporality of support not only refers to the specific time of exchanges and the development of the relationship that is being built up, it also refers to the fact that there is a *hic et nunc* of support over which we do not have complete control. Secondly, it also means that we have to be attentive to the inner reality of the other person - a necessary precondition for the possibility of exchange. Recognition of the other person means first and foremost acknowledging and taking into account their personal state (making room for their worries and fears, for example, hearing their despair or their appeal, etc.). Thirdly, it seems to me that this is a reminder of the obvious: not just anyone can necessarily accompany anyone else at any time. These three points each contribute in their own way to making us realise that accompaniment is not just a listening technique, and that our position in accompaniment is not one of overhang or mastery - which is another way of reminding us that the principle of accompaniment essentially refers to a position of humility, as has been said a lot.

Secondly, *we ourselves are special people*. This is an obvious point, the depth of which we have never fully appreciated. Our discussions have often emphasised the fact that, as a special person, the headteacher obviously has the same anthropological characteristics as the other people he or she serves (young people or adults). The way in which we progressively discover our own functioning and improve our ability to provide support, the importance of personal training as well as the importance of being supported ourselves, the absolutely central and constantly reaffirmed role of our family or of self-care... These are all aspects of the same basic idea which, in this session, found the opportunity to be expressed, illustrated by very concrete examples from our lives, and analysed: as a special person, the headteacher has a degree of vulnerability that it is essential to take into account if we want support to be more than just a technical matter, but a matter of establishing relationships and meeting people. This is probably also a very simple way of reiterating the need for those providing support to be supported themselves.

Finally, *we have a vocation*. Why say this here, as a deducible consequence of the first idea stated: "accompaniment is an incarnate relationship"? It's simply a way of making a link between our vocation and the concrete reality of our missions - to guard against what has been called the "idealised" vision of our vocation. The initial reference to Luke's verse, by reiterating the importance of the *sending* that follows a *call*, reminds us, in my opinion, of two essential things about our vocation as Christians - and as Christian educators. On the one hand, this sending is not a purely spiritual sending, inviting the disciples to preach. It is *into this world* that the disciples are sent, and the rest of the text indicates that this is definitely not an ethereal or disembodied vocation: they must walk, enter houses, speak, eat and drink, stay with a welcoming host, heal the sick (or, on the contrary, shake the dust from their sandals)². On the other hand, this sending out was not simply a preparation for Christ's coming to the cities to which he himself was going. It is much more than that, since the disciples *bear witness to Christ*

² Luke 10, 3-11

and it is Christ who speaks through them³. Of course, this is a vocation of proclamation and witness - the disciples were not sent to "accompany" the inhabitants they met. But all the same, it allows us to ask what we are ultimately called to in the educational relationship - and in our vocation to *accompany* the young people and adults who make up the communities we serve. How can we think about the meaning of our own vocation? Is this not also a call to a form of witness to the presence of God - something that could also be echoed in the text of our Thursday morning prayer⁴?

2. Support at school is not just a one-to-one relationship

We probably have a tendency to understand the concept of accompaniment in terms of two models: on the one hand, that of spiritual accompaniment, i.e. a relationship over time between one person and another, listening to the Lord, and oriented towards the freedom of the person being accompanied; on the other hand, that of *cura personalis* (or the idea we have of it) which we are all used to mobilising in our projects, and which could be associated with specific attention to the person⁵. But it is very striking to note that the various presentations, like many of the discussions in the smaller groups, very often emphasised the community dimension of support in a school setting. This can be understood in at least three senses, each of which in its own way, it seems to me, clarifies the position of the headteacher in the support relationship.

Firstly, *it is the whole community that provides support*. It's a very common experience in the life of our establishments, and I'm almost embarrassed to start with such a point, but we see on a daily basis that, in the establishments, caring for people is not the exclusive domain of the head of establishment, but is first and foremost a collective concern. It is by working together that we take care of each other, that a particular fragility is identified, that a particular suffering is heard - in the same way that support for this fragility or suffering is often provided or taken care of collectively. In any case, the session as a whole placed a great deal of emphasis on the fact that support in the school context was much more a matter of a network of multiple relationships (for example, there was talk of the need to establish "safety chains") than of an exclusive relationship. This is both a great consolation (because our shoulders would not be broad enough to carry the weight of caring for everyone on their own) and a great challenge, because it presupposes that the structures themselves are organised on the basis of this concern to care for everyone, if we do not want the quality of the support to depend solely on the goodwill of so-and-so (the presence of a few good Samaritans within the community). So what can be done to ensure that care for each individual is translated into action at institutional level? What places are there for people to talk about their frailties? Which people are trained to hear them? And how can we create opportunities to guide people towards hope?

Secondly, *the community itself needs to be supported*. This is a variation on the previous idea, but it says something different about the life of our establishments: the importance of supporting

³ Luke 10:16: "Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me".

⁴ The prayer was built around Matthew 18:20: "When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them".

⁵ On this point, it is very enlightening to read Superior General Arturo Sosa's letter of 25 March 2020, "*Cura* in the government of the life-mission of the Society in these changing times". In particular, it stresses the close link between *cura personalis* and *cura apostolica* (p. 5).

the community *as a community* - and not just as the sum of particular individuals. What does this mean? Essentially, it refers to the community's autonomy and its own need for dedicated time and places for informal exchanges, training, collective reflection and so on. Perhaps it's a bit heavy-handed to say it like that, but these are all opportunities for the community to experience itself as a community. This community life is probably the one that places the headteacher in the most out-of-step position with regard to the community insofar as he or she has to extract him or herself from it in order to consider its needs - and it should be pointed out that this out-of-step position presupposes being accompanied by a third party who can provide an outside view of this community.

Thirdly, as *school heads, we ourselves are caught up in a network of support*. Here is another striking aspect of the way in which the personal and collective times were able to respond to each other and enable us to identify strong recurrences: as directors of works (and as alone as we may sometimes feel) we are supported at different levels, in different dimensions and in different ways by a network of people and structures which not only help us to hold firm to the mission entrusted to us, but which also enable us to unify our personal and professional lives (in this respect, we can see that all the speakers mentioned the role of the family and that of personal prayer in addition to the other more traditional forms of professional support). After all, who supports us? Our guardians, our peers, our families, our colleagues, our readings, our dioceses, our academies, our staffs, and even, to a certain extent, the young people themselves. This network of support at so many different levels is probably the best support we have in our missions.

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Even in the most ordinary tasks of our professional lives (those that seem furthest removed from the nobility of our educational mission), what else are we doing than accompanying (accompanying a person, a team, a structure)? The notion of support is in fact a central theme when it comes to expressing the essence of our missions, and it also has the merit of making us realise that we are first and foremost beings of *relationships* and *words*. But there is obviously nothing in this that can be considered as belonging uniquely to our establishments (Catholic and Jesuit): any educational relationship, whatever the type of establishment, presupposes a form of accompaniment.

Precisely, it seems to me that our session has brought to light a very essential fact which consists in saying that in a Christian context, accompaniment is rooted in fundamental anthropological presuppositions, which reinforce its value even more and which oblige us to accompany *towards hope*. It may sound a bit grandiloquent when you put it like that, but it seems to me that these presuppositions are as follows: Christ is always already present in the other person, whether young or adult (the other person is, we could say, always already accompanied by Christ and I therefore have to join in this accompaniment - I always come second, which can be both reassuring and demanding for the person accompanying); and in the same way, I myself am always already accompanied by Christ - something we experience in prayer and which saves us from the weight of loneliness in certain situations. These anthropological presuppositions obviously take nothing away from the need for support structures, the value of training, or the importance of the networks within which support actually takes place in establishments. They are simply a reminder of the direction and depth of this relationship.