ENLARGING THE FAMILY
Jesuit-Lay Relations

By LOUISA BLAIR

FIVE YEARS AGO I was at a cocktail party in Quebec City and discovered, among the small group of guests hiding in the kitchen, a Jesuit. I did not know much about Jesuits, but I was looking for a way to live and work in a Christian community alongside the poor, among whom, at this moment, I was distinctly not.

Instead of allowing him to make light, amiable conversation and sip his cocktail in peace, I did what many other party-goers have done to priests before: I cornered the man and bared my soul to him. Particularly this business of the desire to live in community with the poor, which seemed rather shameful in this context. Instead of strong-arming his way past me, which might have been desired, he told me about the Jesuit Companion programme.

As soon as I got home, I wrote a letter to the then Director of the Programme, to which he replied promptly and by hand, enclosing some pages literally ripped out of an old magazine, in which there was a short article describing the programme.

Many people before and since have criticized the programme for its lack of structure and its unsophisticated grasp of the principles of marketing or public relations. But it was exactly this lack, or rather that sincere individual contact for which marketing or communication principles are often a substitute, that attracted me. It was a form of religious life, but contrary to my expectations of religious communities, it did not appear to be institutionalized in any way. Within a couple of weeks I was taking part in the three-week Orientation Programme.

The orientation further confirmed my original impression. Its location was a small dilapidated wooden villa in the middle of a farm that formed the basis of one of the Jesuit apostolates, the Ignatius Farm Community. We lived simply there, sleeping in bunkbeds, the men's and womens' sleeping quarters divided by a blanket hung on a piece of wire with clothespegs.

Speakers came from far and wide to talk to us about various lay and religious enterprises that seemed to represent both new and old ways of living out the message of the gospel. We learned about the Catholic Worker Movement and Dorothy Day. We learned about L'Arche and Jean Vanier, and about the Society of Jesus and St Ignatius. A Sister of St Joseph from Guatemala talked to us about her involvement in founding base communities there. A lay woman from the Farm Community, noted for her gift of contemplative prayer, spoke to us of prayer. The woman considered by the street people of the nearby town to be a sort of Mother Teresa spoke to us of the drop-in centre she had started, the house for people trying to move away from drug or alcohol addiction and a temporary shelter for homeless transients. Former Companions returned to the orientation at the end of their year to help orient incoming Companions, and to share with one another the experiences of the year, to reflect on them, to pray together and to make a final retreat.

As we listened, prayed, took part in workshops, we were surrounded by the work of the farm, and would occasionally be interrupted by someone needing help hooking up a corn-wagon or chasing cows back from the forest after they had broken through an electric fence. In the afternoon we would officially work on the farm before returning again to the villa in the evening.

This was my introduction to the apostolate in which I would be working for the next three years. Ignatius Farm Community was a motley collection of lay people and religious, including two Jesuits, who ran a large beef farm. The community's main purpose was to welcome, live and work with people who had come out of institutions such as the prison or the mental hospital. We lived together as a community in three houses and worked together on the farm.

At the end of the orientation, the Companions spent a week in directed retreat before being sent to live in one of the Canadian Jesuit communities. There they were to work alongside the Jesuits in a variety of apostolates: parish ministry, teaching for justice, school, resource work, native missions, social research, neighbourhood action or the farm community.

A group of Jesuits and lay people acted as the consulting group to the programme and met twice a year, first with the director alone, and then with the Companions. There was a mid-term

winter meeting of a few days in which Companions met to take stock and refresh one another for the second half of the year.

We made commitments of one year to the programme, renewable, and we were each assigned a spiritual director. We were not expected to arrive with outstanding debts or significant wordly assets, we were to receive a small weekly stipend, and we would not expect to leave the programme any richer or any poorer than we had been when we arrived.

The programme accepted both Catholics and non-Catholics. It accepted married couples and single people. Members varied from being fragile and needy to being staunchly self-sufficient: although by the end of their time as companions these stereotypes were as often as not reversed. Some members only remained in the programme for a few months, others stayed for six years. Many people have moved on from the programme. Some entered wholehearted, others not; some left and moved on with ease, others with difficulty, and still others with bitterness.

Structure

The programme did not begin with a clear pre-determined structure. It grew organically according to the needs and personalities of those involved through a slow process of discernment and consensus. There were as many exceptions to the rules as there were rules. The importance of the structure of the programme is more than simply a question of style of management. It is also a reflection of the underlying philosophy of the programme, containing both the signs of its richness and of its shortcomings.

Its richness was its potential for sensitivity to the changing needs of individual members, and responsiveness to the hidden quality of the growth both of the people and of the programme as a whole. It reflected love, trust and Ignatian discernment as the guiding principles of community, and meant that the programme relied heavily on the faith, friendship and responsibility of its members.

The lack of structure also meant that there was a risk of avoiding issues that were difficult or unpleasant. It meant that there was no demand for rigorous definitions of purpose, or any fixed agendas for accomplishing our goals. It also meant that when members challenged some of the numerous unspoken rules, such as 'You may not spend every weekend carousing with your friends', there were accusations of 'No-one ever told me I couldn't do that', which, strictly speaking, was true.

Culture and community

Although the Companions learned something of the history of the Society of Jesus during the Orientation, there was another kind of information being transmitted in a subtler way about Jesuit life. Both the Jesuits and the former Jesuit Companions were teaching the new Companions the Jesuit culture.

Every religious community has its own distinct culture: its own language, norms, dress, ideas, information and communication systems that are distinct from the culture at large. The inculturation of Jesuit companions into Jesuit life is problematic and risky for both parties. From the point of view of the Jesuits, their acceptance of lay people within their 'outer walls' means that Companions, while remaining uncommitted to Jesuit life, nevertheless can see and criticize some of the seamier elements of their lifestyles or relationships. Their distinct culture provides the Jesuits with an internal sense of security, and this security is at risk in communities that take on Companions.

Some Jesuits take advantage of this threat to their security and allow themselves to be challenged by the sometimes uncomfortable presence of laypeople in their midst. For example, how to respond to a pregnant woman who is going through mood swings and is having sudden cravings for exotic foods. Many of their habits and assumptions are thrown into relief, and it gives them an opportunity to reassess their work and lifestyles in the light of the new challenge. Some found that it was more than they had bargained for.

The specific culture of the Companion Programme evolved as something closely linked to the Jesuit culture and yet always slightly removed. Companions who wanted to be completely involved in Jesuit life found that they could never quite do so. Yet those who wanted to work alongside Jesuits but retain their own cultural identity found that to enter fully into the life of the community, as they were expected to do, was difficult.

In some ways, then, the Companion Programme formed us for life on the periphery of religious community.

The Companions also take a risk in making a professional and emotional investment in a community in which as yet they have no long-term future. Living in community is an intense experience and, if it is lived authentically, I believe we must open ourselves to one another, which means making ourselves vulnerable. Vulnerability is a risk, and it is both a privilege and a suffering.

The privilege was in living alongside people who had struggled to make community, celibacy and poverty lifelong options in a world in which individualism, sex and money are idolized, and yet still to remain connected and relevant to that world. The privilege was in being with people for whom daily prayer was assumed to be essential for continued survival. The privilege was in being introduced to the riches of Ignatian spirituality, including the Spiritual Exercises. The privilege was being immersed in a set of values for long enough, we hoped, that their importance would not be undermined by our re-entry into the secular world.

One of the enduring values of the programme for me, for example, has been the importance of belonging to a faith community of some kind, and the need to work with patience and faith through all the difficulties that a commitment to a community entails. I was in the programme long enough to pass through the notorious phases in community life, first of honeymoon and then of total disillusionment. The fact that I finally emerged into an acceptance of the reality of community life as an essential component of my faith is largely thanks to the fact that I lived through the phases in the company of people with a long tradition of community life and a deep commitment to it.

For most Companions leaving the programme, however, re-entering the outside culture is painful. There is little preparation and little warning for the culture shock that we experience. Outside the security of the community our vulnerability is easily violated, and we have to learn to build up certain walls again in order to survive, and learn to discern when it is appropriate to lower them. For example, we are not prepared for re-entering a society in which the celibacy of single people is not taken for granted.

Nor are we prepared for the cold anonymity and traditional, empty forms of liturgy that await us in parish life. In Ignatius Farm Community, Mass was an intimate and central part of our lives. It took place in our living room, with the dog lying asleep on the rug. The fact that a priest is always necessary to consecrate the host was made more acceptable (to me) by the fact that in our case, he was one of us, and the rest of us, including the children and the handicapped people, each took on remaining parts of the Mass. We felt that it was *ours*. Returning to the city, it was hard to get used to the kind of participation in Mass that was limited to rising, kneeling and sitting at the right moments, repeating prayers in unison, and singing just enough of a hymn to let the

priest and his procession proceed in or out of the church. The rest consisted of watching and listening to someone else's performance from a very great distance.

We risk a profound disenchantment with the Church, and yet are given a vision of what Church could be like.

In terms of our careers, by being part of the Companion Programme we sacrificed at least a year, and according to our choice of career, a year that might not look impressive on a resumé. On the mundane, practical front, paying one's bills, saving money for pensions and housing, or paying insurance premiums and taxes were all aspects of life from which as Companions we were completely shielded. This has its good and bad side, too. It is nice to have that economic cushion temporarily, but it does little to prepare one for life in the big, bad cushionless world to which we return.

Work and lifestyle

The work of the Jesuit apostolates is demanding, as Jesuits tend to work in the spirit of a vocation rather than the spirit of a job, and they communicate this expectation to Companions, whether they intend to or not. Whether it is working with the poor, or neighbourhood action the work is a somewhat different experience for the Companions than for the Jesuits, owing to their place in the communities in which they live. The Jesuits have the comfort and security of their mother communities to return to, with relationships and roles that were established long ago and are likely to go on. The community base for Companions is less secure, and relationships have a short history and are of a more temporary nature. Although the Jesuits can offer a certain amount of support, there is always that inner core from which one knows one is forever banned.

For some Companions the commitment to a simple lifestyle is a brand new concept that remains with most Companions once they have left the programme. Voluntary poverty is lived better in some Jesuit communities than others, but Companions are assigned to live in communities that are most radically committed. Differences in both the work and the lifestyle between Jesuits and Companions are nevertheless unavoidable.

In the Farm Community, for example, the Companions are expected to maintain a permanent presence in the community, while the Jesuits are involved in more than one apostolate, and their

other commitments require them to work outside the immediate community. Their additional commitments might require them to do retreat work, parish work, prison work, or ministry to developing countries. If they need it, Jesuits always have access to a car. The Companions have limited access to Jesuit resources and few opportunities to travel.

There were times when life in the community was particularly tough and there were no Jesuits around to share the burden, when we said to one another, 'They are out there preaching voluntary poverty and solidarity with the poor, while we stay at home and live it for them'.

Not that everyone should stay at home and the Word should go unpreached. Jesuits need the refreshments of a different enviroment, and their lives in the community gave background, substance and authenticity to their other roles. But Jesuit Companions also needed to spread the Good News while Jesuits stayed at home and covered them. In some apostolates, however, Companions find that there is a more equitable sharing of opportunities.

Apart from the ultimate authority of the superior of Jesuit communities, Companions and Jesuits theoretically have an equal say in their government. The way things actually turn out, the Companions are often given plenty of responsibilities but without the concomitant rights. By virtue of their shorter length of stay in the community, and the difference in the nature of their commitment, the Companions have a lesser voice, and especially when it comes to major decisions it is clear that the Jesuits are the ones in charge. This ambiguity probably arises as a result of a confusion between working *for* people and working *with* them, a confusion that is inherent in the aim itself of the programme.

The Jesuits understood the Jesuit Companion Programme to be an apostolate in itself, another responsibility on the already overburdened shoulders of the religious people in the vanguard of progressive change. Their self-imposed mandate includes social justice, solidarity with the poor and collaboration with laity. Companions came to the programme hoping to join with the Jesuits in their apostolates, but find out that they themselves *are* an apostolate.

The possibility of Companions truly working with Jesuits is anomalous with the very formation of Jesuits, who only after ten years of higher education and then ordination are considered fully qualified for their apostolic work. Perhaps they never questioned

that the Companions could not participate at the same level as themselves, but this was left ambiguous.

Spirituality

One of the consequences of the co-habitation of priests and lay people is that the priests have to step down from their pedestals, and another is that the lay people have to let them step down. The roles of dominance and subordination are deeply ingrained in the Church and they have a maddeningly subtle character. True spiritual authority can so easily get mixed up with ego-voyaging. Augustine said that his role as bishop was a 'title of duty', while his identity as a Christian was a 'title of grace'. He added, 'The former is a danger, the latter, salvation'.

Humility and obedience can also be dangerously confused with internalized oppression, unwarranted guilt and self-abuse. As lay and religious people we worked out these subtle conflicts on each other, and sometimes we used each other as scapegoats. There was one period of my life as a Companion when as Jesuits and Companions we found ourselves divided into camps, and when it came to trying to forgive one another and ask pardon of God, the wounds were simply reopened as the sacrament of reconciliation divided us once again into the transmitters and the receivers of God. Eventually we agreed that a mutual confession was more appropriate.

But in objecting to traditional confession as a means to make peace with one another in the context of a mixed community of religious and lay people, we found that we were doing far more than that: we were challenging the basis of the sacramental privilege of the priesthood. This challenge may be frequently encountered on an intellectual level in, say, a theology faculty, but it is rarely encountered in such a raw and direct way as it can be when lay people and religious live together. We began daily to challenge some of the fundamental tenets of the Church hierarchy. Later on it was apparent that we were living out a painful incarnation of religious life, indeed the whole Church, in transition, but at the time no such heroic interpretation came to our rescue.

One of the original reasons for the formation of the Jesuit Companion programme was that some Jesuits felt called to share the riches of their spiritual tradition with people outside the religious life Outside the formality of spiritual direction, the Ignatian spiritual tradition is imbibed by Companions in much the same

way as they take in the rest of the Jesuit culture, and few would say that their lives have not been enriched by it.

Companions experience a loss of confidence in their own spiritual insights, traditions and prayer experiences when they encounter Jesuits who do not appreciate that lay people have anything to offer them as apostles of Christ. Even if disrespect is not intended, the pervasive Jesuit spirituality tends soon to overshadow any spiritual traditions that Companions might arrive with.

One of the principal ways in which the Jesuit spirituality is transmitted is through the medium of spiritual direction, and the danger of spiritual direction is looking to the director for God-mediation and not trusting one's own prayer. The term spiritual direction is at best a misnomer, and at its worst it represents a danger that both lay and religious can fall into in their collaboration: the dismounting of the pedestal is made that much more problematic when the term spiritual direction is taken literally by either priest or lay person. Spiritual direction should be renamed and reconceived as spiritual companionship.

A good spiritual companion is a person who can listen to your story, or to your experience told in terms of your faith, and can recognize in it a legitimate path; a person who can stand back enough to see the direction the story is taking, and can reassure you of the presence and guidance of God in that story, however twisted and senseless and chaotic it may appear. God is like a skilled seamstress: you can give her a sack full of seemingly disparate scraps of cloth and she will help you to piece it together into your own beautiful and unique garment. A good spiritual director will help you to see the order, the pattern that was developing, but that you, being so close to it, were unable to see.

Sexuality

People often fall in love with their spiritual directors. This applies to relationships of the same sex as well as opposite sexes. This is not surprising, as a similar sharing of one's life to the same depth, outside the setting of religious life, often leads to romantic love. Within a community, the intensity of relationships is, if anything, heightened. The trust required for spiritual direction leads to a tremendous vulnerability and that vulnerability is a short step to dependency. In the traditional relationship of director and directee, the director does not share his or her life to the same extent, and may not feel the same vulnerability. This difference only increases

dependency, because the directee is not in a position to see the director's own neediness or fragility, and can maintain a false image of that person's strength.

Outside the context of spiritual direction the situation for Companions and Jesuits living together may not be any less complex. Religious celibates need intimacy as much as anyone does, but they have made a choice as to where the line can be drawn: their intimacy is circumscribed. Whether those limits are clearly delineated or not, there is a certainty that they do exist, somewhere. Within those limits, however, relationships of intimacy can develop to a high degree of intensity.

Again, Companions, who have not necessarily chosen celibacy for life, may be led into a depth of relationship that in secular society would normally herald a serious 'non-celibate' relationship. If that person takes equal responsibility for circumscribing the relationship it may be at considerable personal sacrifice of their own desires for a long-term relationship. We found no precedents for learning how to live through these kinds of relationships and of deciding how to proceed with them. Yet I believe it is an experience common to many lay people and religious who have worked together, yet another of the unspoken challenges and risks of collaboration.

From both the Companion and the Jesuit perspective, the collaboration between the two gives rise to sexual issues that may have been buried in both or either, and there seems to be no forum for working out these difficulties together. Perhaps the most helpful model is that of lay people helping one another to deal with it, and for the religious, too, to help one another, but then one is led to observe, 'Here we are drawing up the lines of battle again'.

Identity

As both lay people and religious living in such close proximity we found ourselves questioning and sometimes redefining our respective identities. What was our primary identity? Mine was as a member of the Farm Community first, and secondly as a Jesuit Companion. For the religious the primary identity was as priest and as Jesuit and then a member of a secondary community such as Ignatius Farm Community.

The only identity that clearly linked the lay people was that we were not religious. The word 'laity' itself is a negative definition, not something that we are but something that we are not. Sometimes we

defined ourselves in defiant ways for lack of a positive definition of ourselves as we were, living alongside people who had chosen their self-definitions for life. Sometimes I defined myself as a token lay female in a male hierarchy that had no intentions of giving up power, aware that my presence was hiding that truth by giving the Jesuits the comfortable feeling that they were 'actively collaborating with the lay people and women'.

The question of our identity as lay people is a crucial factor in the future of lay-religious collaboration. If laity is a negative definition, the term lay spirituality is a spurious term. We must struggle at all times to keep sight of the definition that links us at the deepest level: that we are all Christians trying to live the gospel together.

* * *

I have pointed out some of the painful ambiguities and dangers that I encountered in collaborating with religious. In my struggle to understand the reasons for these difficulties and to know how to proceed we prayed, thought, discussed, argued and read. It is far easier to be objective in retrospect than in the heat of the moment.

In looking over some of the Vatican II documents on the laity I see that these ambiguities are enshrined in the language itself. Paul VI called the laity the 'Church's bridge to the modern world', implying that over to one side was the Church, meaning the hierarchy, and on the other side was the world, and that in between the two was something that was not quite either, the laity. At times, in the Documents, the terms 'Church' and 'hierarchy' are used interchangeably, while at other times 'Church' is used to mean the people of God. The mixture of fraternal and paternal language used to advocate the relationships between clergy and laity is both an explanation for and a description of the relationship between the Jesuits and the Jesuit Companions.

When first introduced to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, I very soon came across a passage that read: 'a good work done under a vow is more meritorious than one done without a vow'. I gave up on Ignatius immediately, and it was two more years before I went back to the Exercises with a determination to see beyond his peccadilloes. (My attempt at tolerance was greatly rewarded.)

Added to the ambiguous guidance offered to us by the Vatican documents and Ignatius, we have as a further explanation for the

difficulties involved in lay-religious collaboration the widespread misconception among both clergy and laity that sacramental privilege confers some kind of intrinsic superiority.

The culture of religious life, too, is based on a constitution that was designed deliberately to defend the community members against the corruption of the secular world: that, after all, was one of the major objectives in establishing religious communities in the first place. Not surprising, then, that people who hark from the heart of that secular world may not find themselves easily accommodated into the culture of religious life.

Few Jesuit communities have taken up the challenge of living and working with Jesuit Companions, and in the light of these longstanding reasons, that is not surprising. What is surprising is that any of them have made the attempt.

It takes time to internalize, or take to heart, something that makes the theological, political, intellectual sense that collaboration between religious and laity does. Those who leave it in the intellectual realm are not confronted with it sufficiently to take it to heart. We who have tried it, both religious and lay, have had our patience sorely tried and our hearts sorely bruised. The religious who do try it have to make a commitment to do more than make a project out of the laity, and laity who try it have to be deeply commited to the Church.

If we are to take the collaboration between religious and laity seriously, some of the assumptions within religious formation and in the culture of religious life have to be questioned in as serious a way as we question the values and traditions of secular life. We must do this not just in the context of our theological colleges and institutes, but in the pain and struggle and rebirth of daily life.

It is now two years since I left the Companion Programme, and it has changed my life unalterably, for better or worse. Does the programme represent a collaboration between lay and religious that works? It represents a growth in the Church that is both necessary and inevitable. But in order to keep growing, perhaps we had better not grasp at models or look for conclusions. The programme still goes on, and has weathered many slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. A handful of lay people continue to be attracted to it, and a handful of Jesuit communities still wish to cast in their lot with them, and from that we can hope that the Holy Spirit approves.

NOTE

I wish to thank Mary Doak, Janet Somerville, Charles Fernandes and Sarah Blair for helping me to reflect on the Companion Programme.