

## **Friendship and Ignatius Loyola in isolation** Andrew Hamilton 30 July 2020

Ordinarily the last two days of July would for me be occasions of celebration. July 30 is the International Day of Friendship and July 31 is the feast day of Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. This July, in Victoria, at least, it is hard to summon energy to celebrate. We are in a time of endurance.

In the beginning everything was new and seemingly distant: the news of the virus, the extraordinarily ruthless lockdown of a province in China to limit its spread, the first cases in Australia in quarantine and then in the community, the first experience of isolation, limitation of public gatherings, social distancing, working and studying from home, and widespread unemployment. Each experience, however unwelcome, was new. It was accompanied by some satisfaction that our privations were endured for the good of the whole community, and by the unexpressed hope that life might soon return to normal.

The second lockdown, occurring in midwinter, marks an unwanted return to a stale world with an alarming rise in infection. The response has included the introduction of compulsory mask wearing. The masks, which make it difficult to read faces and to communicate, widen the distance between people. They enact the privileging of immunity over community, and conduce to self-preoccupation. The public mood is more sour, reflected in the media hunt for people to blame, as the personal costs of the COVID-19 and the response to it are more deeply felt.

People now realise that life may not return to where it was before, and that the new normal may continue to include social distancing, wearing masks in public spaces, and restricted and unpredictable access to travel, with all the consequences for employment and income in these conditions. Even after a vaccine becomes available we may still have to live with the virus and its successors.

This bleak vision of a possible future suggests that the responsibility of governments to keep people safe and to encourage an economic growth that benefits all will be difficult to discharge. It suggests, too, that the challenge we all face to live decently and hopefully in the time of coronavirus with all its strictures will be equally exacting. Both the threat of the virus and the restrictions necessary to meet it weigh heavily on the lightness that is an essential part of ordinary human living.

The International Day of Friendship and the feast of St Ignatius Loyola offer some quirky hints on how to live. For many people they may evoke quite contrary moods. Friendship is soft, unifying, blurs boundaries and can be an obstacle to rulers in making fair and wise decisions. In many popular accounts Ignatius is seen as a hard man, a general in the Catholic army that opposed the Reformation, and a proponent of strong discipline in schools and church.

That image is misleading, but it is understandable. Ignatius certainly did become at home in hard places. He had to convalesce after being wounded in battle. He begged his way around Spain, slept rough, had constant run-ins with authorities suspicious of his faith and morals, went back to school in his late 20s, begged his way to visit the Holy Land but was ordered

home, and faced every obstacle in placing himself and his friends at the disposal of the Pope. For much of his life, too, he suffered the acute pain of kidney stones.

If resilience is a quality highly to be prized — as is widely proclaimed in this year of coronavirus — Ignatius had it in spades. It came from his conviction that God loved and had called him into service, and that the map of the future is read by reflecting on the successes, the failures, the lights and the unnoticed shadows of one's life. In a world marked by bitter conflicts, by people wanting unconditional commitment to narrow causes, by war and plague and troubled conscience, he listened to people and led them to focus on what matters most deeply. These are qualities suited to hard times like our own.

So is friendship. The coronavirus threatens deep relationships: it arouses fear, tempts us to see other people as threats, and emphasises social distance. These responses discourage expressions of friendship, and impede the ordinary ways in which we deepen relationships. Although they are necessary to limit the effect of the COVID-19, they can foster isolation and withdrawal from society at the precise time when connection with society and an affective commitment to the common good and especially to the people who are most vulnerable are most necessary. Attention to making friends and deepening friendships have a high social as well as personal value.

Contrary to the image of Ignatius as an austere warrior, friendship was also central to him both personally and in his work within the Catholic Church. The group of students who formed the nucleus of the Jesuits were friends. They met at university and decided to stay together. Ignatius described the members of the Religious Order that developed out of this group as friends in the Lord, bound together both by lively faith and by mutual friendship. They relied on both these qualities for meeting the demands of the life they envisaged. They would need to spend much of their time alone on special missions without the support of a local community and an ordered timetable. To counteract the natural erosion of shared commitment by distance and separation they needed to cultivate a strong faith, a habit of reflection, and enduring friendships.

In grinding times of insecurity, immobility and unpredictability, when we all must travel light, friendship is a great gift. Like all gifts it needs to be watered and nurtured if it is to flower and fruit. Far from being the enemy of resilience and endurance, it is their companion and enabler. If not providential, the juxtaposition of Friendship Day and St Ignatius Feastday is at least suggestive.