

## Finding God in all Places



“Solo, a pie.” Alone and on foot. Thus reads the plaque beneath a statue of St. Ignatius on the campus of ITESO, the Jesuit University in Guadalajara, Mexico. I was struck by that statue and its inscription when I was a novice, sent to Mexico to learn Spanish and to do apostolic work with the Jesuits there. These three words sum up the condition that Jesuits often find themselves in: on a journey, going to a new place, to meet new people and find God amongst them.

From his own experience as a pilgrim, Ignatius was conscious of how a journey can bring great challenges and unexpected grace, urging one towards spiritual growth and maturation. Like many of my contemporaries, since entering the Society of Jesus in 2004 I have traveled far and wide, for formational experiences, to minister or to study: Mexico, Jamaica, Canada, India, and Europe.

Surprisingly, the year I just spent in England stretched my abilities to adapt and discover new aspects of my vocation in ways I never imagined, even though geographically and culturally it was one of the nearest and least exotic journeys.

I was working for the past two years on a double degree in international history at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, which entailed a year in New York, a year in London and research in India and Canada.

This was the first time that as a Jesuit I had studied at a secular university. A Catholic seminarian studying in a very secular, even agnostic, environment? Why? Who are the Jesuits anyway? Didn't they have something to do with the Counter-Reformation? The Ivy League meets Catholicism today, and not just in theoretical terms! I found myself having to explain my life commitment, my vocation, and my faith to others who really had little idea of Church, religious orders, or of vows. Frankly this is something I never had to do during my philosophy studies at Fordham University, which is Jesuit and Catholic, nor in the circles in which I moved in Mexico, Jamaica or even India.

There were ten students in my cohort. We all came from fascinating backgrounds and had different motives for our studies. Despite our many differences, or perhaps because of them, we got to know each other quite well by the end of the first year, and we all continued together in London for year two. Having to explain ourselves to one another, our values, views, and motives—our personal story—was crucial to coming to know one another.

To my delight, three have become close friends. One is a Jewish woman who studies Ottoman history and has written on Christian missionaries in 19th century Turkey. Another is Taiwanese-American man who studies the history of International Human Rights Law. The third is a Russian woman who specializes in Cold War Soviet relations with Africa.

More than just taking an interest in each other's studies, we came to value each other for our respective backgrounds, beliefs, commitments and life path. Our spiritual and theological discussions have been fascinating. This kept us searching and digging deeper in our own traditions and to come to appreciate

others. Last Passover I shared in the Seder meal hosted by my Jewish friend. These friendships have been a great grace of this time spent abroad, which I know will endure for the long term.

This is all part of being “solo, a pie” like Ignatius was. You set out alone into unfamiliar territory. You try to be authentic and present yourself as you are, to people who are unfamiliar and may not share much in common. But soon enough you recognize Christ in them and, even if they wouldn’t name it as such, they also see Christ in you. Your aloneness has been transformed into companionship and you’ve witnessed God’s own hospitality, love and reconciliation work through you and your new friends. It is like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, who finally recognize Christ when they sit down and break bread with him (Luke 24:13-35).

When I began these studies in New York and abroad, I had presumed that my Jesuit vocation and Catholic faith would continue to find their deepest nourishment in the Jesuit community where I lived and in the Catholic apostolates with which I was associated. Instead, I found myself called to witness my faith and my vocation within a secular environment and to non-Catholics, and God met me there and affirmed my own call in and through the companions he gave me for this part of my journey.

One thing is certain: God may be found in all places, people and things.

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