

THE IGNATIAN YEAR AND THE PANDEMIC

Reflections from a Field Hospital

Oscar Momanyi

'There are no mistakes, no coincidences. All events are blessings given to us to learn from.' (Elizabeth Kübler-Ross)¹

A Virus in a Faraway Land

WHEN THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK started, there was a general sense in my neighbourhood that it was a faraway disease that would never come to us. After all, many other viral diseases, such as Ebola, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV-1), H1N1 and 'swine flu' have in the past reared their ugly heads in many parts of the world, but they never reached us. So I continued to live in the oblivious conviction that I was safe and that this new virus would pass me by as the others had done. I live and work in the Mwangaza Jesuit Spirituality Centre, a retreat house linked to an infirmary for elderly Jesuits of the Eastern Africa Province in the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya. I work as a retreat-giver and spiritual guide, together with other Jesuits and lay collaborators. I also have responsibility for taking care of the elderly community members as Prefect of Health in the infirmary.² The area has lush gardens with beautiful flowers and trees on the foothills of the Ngong Hills. It is a little Garden of Eden.³

How could a virus originating thousands of miles away come to this serene and secluded corner of the world? But when the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Kenya in March 2020, I realised that my naïveté was over. I started to think seriously about the possibility of myself or people I knew getting infected with the virus. Eventually, to our shock, the virus began spreading among the community. The drama of infection among us unfolded as we were preparing to celebrate the

¹ Quoted in Lennie Kronisch, 'Elizabeth Kübler-Ross: Messenger of Love', *Yoga Journal* (November/December 1976), 20.

² See *Constitutions* III.2.6 [303] and III.2.G [304] on the role of a Prefect of Health.

³ *Mwangaza* is a Swahili word meaning *light*.



Mwangaza Jesuit Spirituality Centre

Ignatian Year (20 May 2021 to 31 July 2022), marking the 500th anniversary of the conversion of St Ignatius of Loyola.

The pandemic did not stop us from making plans to reach out to people in the Ignatian Year; it was not going to undermine us in our mission of bringing Good News to the people of God. We battled the virus together knowing that St Ignatius was with us and interceding for us. He too, in his time, went through this experience. In his *Autobiography* he describes a plague and a lockdown on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1523. After a voyage of five days and nights, the vessel in which he had set out from Barcelona reached Gaeta, and Iñigo disembarked and started for Rome, although there was danger there on account of the plague. He writes:

... arriving at a town [Fondi] that was nearby, they found it shut up. Not being able to enter, they spent that night, all three of them, in a church just there; it was raining. In the morning they wouldn't open the town to them (n.39)

The situation was an opportunity for us to undergo deeper conversion as we continued with our mission of bringing Christ's message to the people of God, even in challenging times.

What follows is a reflection on the lessons learnt as I, my Jesuit companions and our lay collaborators struggled to live amid the pandemic in our quest to find God. What lessons did we learn that would enable us to be better ministers in the vineyard of the Lord?

Finding God in the Midst of a Pandemic

We had planned to offer a thematic day of prayer at the retreat house on the first weekend of January 2021, to a group of laypeople and some religious, titled *Finding God in the Midst of a Pandemic*. The coronavirus had by that time been spreading around the world for a year with devastating effects. We thought that it would be good to help people reflect on their experience and try to find meaning in it, despite the challenges. Little did we know that shortly before that day of recollection the virus would have arrived at our home.

Months before the day of prayer we had a meeting to plan how it would unfold. We knew the dangers, but we had a naïve sense that the virus was something *out there*, about which we could talk in a detached way. I had prepared my presentation and I felt content that I would be able to help people pray and give them hope amid the pandemic. My companion with whom I was to facilitate the day of prayer was the first to be diagnosed, a few days before it was due to take place. I decided that I would give the recollection by myself. A few hours later we identified another case, and so we had to cancel the day of prayer altogether, not knowing the extent of the infection among us. We did not want to expose other people to the virus unintentionally.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Just before we had the first case of COVID-19 in our community, I had the privilege of listening to a conversation between an elderly community member and a nurse who was taking care of him. The conversation was about the virus and the possibility of death after contracting it. The community member elegantly explained to the nurse the Principle and Foundation, with a special focus on Ignatian indifference and interior freedom—especially concerning a long life over a short one.⁴ I was impressed by the explanation. I had never heard such a lucid account of that foundational statement of Ignatian spirituality.

A few weeks later, this elderly companion contracted the coronavirus. He was visibly shaken, and he realised that he was not ready to let go of his life. That led him to a deeper reflection on indifference, once he was out of danger. His experience helped me, too, to reflect on Ignatian indifference in a new way. I had prayed with the Principle and Foundation

⁴ St Ignatius places this profound prayer at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises* and invites the exercitant to pray for the grace of interior freedom or indifference.

many times in my life but I continued to realise that I was still learning new things about myself, God and others. We may desire to be indifferent and accept a short rather than a long life, and to be free in front of God, but we may still be on the way to achieving it. Thus, we are invited to remain humble and keep asking for the grace to be truly indifferent even into our sunset years.

A Field Hospital

The experience of coronavirus made Pope Francis's image of the Church as field hospital real for me.⁵ It was no longer an abstract idea but a lived reality. We had to turn part of the community house into a quarantine zone for the confrères who had contracted the virus. We also hired two nurses to look after them. Our family doctor was gracious enough to come to check on them from time to time. Seeing our nurses and doctor wearing full Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) before entering the rooms of those infected was quite a scary experience. Our house had become a hospital. What we had only seen on television screens for many months was now a reality at home.

As the Prefect of Health, I had to work closely with the nurses and the doctor. In a way, I joined the medics as a kind of 'first responder'. Sometimes I had to wear PPE myself and visit the patients in their rooms for different reasons. The idea of putting the other's welfare first and not my own gained a new meaning for me. One day, a patient wanted some help while the nurses had stepped out for a break. I carefully put on my PPE suit and went into the room. After a couple of minutes, I noticed that my suit was partly torn. I was very scared, but I could not leave the room since I was already exposed. I continued helping my confrère, which I believe was the right thing to do. I was lucky that I did not get the virus that day. Reflecting on the experience, I was happy to receive confirmation in my prayer that Jesus would have done the same thing; he would not have put his own safety first but the life and needs of a desperate brother or sister.

Finding God in Our Rooms

At the beginning of the pandemic in the community, we stopped celebrating Mass in common. Everyone was encouraged to pray in his

⁵ Pope Francis first used this image in an interview with Antonio Spadaro of *La Civiltà Cattolica* in September 2013. See *A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 30–33.

room. The curtains, the altar linens, the purificators in our chapels were all taken out. The chapels were then closed altogether and the Blessed Sacrament was relocated. It was Good Friday in January! However, Jesus continued to hang on the cross; even the virus could not bring Jesus down. He continued to suffer with us in that crisis as a people loved by God whose faith was being put to a test.

The Ignatian invitation to ‘find God in all things’ took on a new and radical meaning for us. We had to find God in our rooms. With all the normal liturgies of the community suspended, we had to find God in isolation. The reality of losing community life was hard for some of us who find the support we need in it. Mask-wearing was recommended for everyone who ventured out of his room, just in case someone he met on the corridors was infected. The most vulnerable had their food brought to them in their rooms, while the healthier members had to sit one per table in the dining room. This went on for months, and I could feel the pain of the companions who longed to share community life again. Owing to the alienating situation of physical distancing, meals were often eaten in silence, or else we would have to shout to be heard—bearing in mind most of our senior members have hearing problems. One day, I joked: ‘how’s the retreat going?’ The community experience of our three-week lockdown was similar to that of making a thirty-day retreat. God’s grace of interior silence was coming to us in ways that we did not expect. We learnt to be closer to one another even in silent isolation.

Luckily, even though physically distancing was painful, it paid off. One companion got infected weeks after all the previously infected confrères had tested negative. However, since we were physically distanced, we were able to isolate him when we noticed the symptoms, before the virus could spread again. During that second cycle of infection there was less panic in the community because we knew what to do. We had befriended the virus and we knew how to live with it. By that time we had become less afraid of death; we were even experiencing a sense of freedom in the way we lived our lives. We did not prefer a long life to a short one, we had grown to another level of indifference as a community.

At one point, I developed the symptoms of the virus myself: loss of the ability to taste and smell, shortness of breath and body aches. I had to self-isolate for some days; but when I was tested, I was negative. That was when I realised that maybe the crisis had taken such a huge psychological toll on me that I was experiencing COVID-like symptoms. When I described this to a friend, she told me that I must have been seriously

fatigued by all the extra care work brought by the virus, and I had been considerably weakened both physically and psychologically. I realised that I needed to care for myself or else I could experience burnout.

Befriending Our Fears

Even after all the infected companions tested negative—including the oldest member of the community, who was 98 years old—we still had to deal with the aftermath of the infections. One of us, our beloved resident nurse, Sr Teresa Brancalione, died of post-COVID complications: the virus had caused severe lung damage and, after many days in the intensive care unit, she passed away. It was a big blow for us: we were so happy when all the COVID-positive confrères tested negative; we thought we had conquered the virus. A sense of loss and confusion pervaded the house after her death. Companions felt broken-hearted and shocked. God was inviting us to continue to trust in God's providence and kindness, and not in our own strength and medical care. Even in death, God continued to strengthen us and to give us hope in the resurrection.

The words of Mawlānā Rumi, a Farsi poet, were a consolation in bearing that loss:

Through Love, all that is bitter will be sweet,
 Through Love, all that is copper will be gold,
 Through Love, all dregs will turn to purest wine,
 Through Love, all pain will turn to medicine.⁶

It is only love that can make us understand and feel the pain of the death of a loved one. The love that person showed us in caring for us makes him or her 'the unlosable', who continues to abide with us.⁷ Even though Sr Teresa is not with us physically any more, we know she is with us spiritually, guiding and supporting us along the way. The memories of her loving presence carry us on. In *Death the Final Stage of Growth* Elizabeth Kübler-Ross tells us:

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion,

⁶ Look! *This Is Love: Poems of Rumi*, translated by Annemarie Schimmel (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), 31.

⁷ For 'the unlosable', see William Ernest Hocking, *The Coming World Civilization* (New York: Harper, 1956), 49–50.

The Ignatian Year and the Pandemic

55

gentleness, and deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.⁸

The pain of loss that we experienced at the death of one of us was teaching us to be more appreciative of life and more compassionate to one another, and that all was not lost.

Death was not the only consequence of the coronavirus pandemic in our little bubble. Many people were traumatized by the thought of getting infected or reinfected, to the point that they became alienated, losing the human contact that they needed. One community member stayed in total isolation in his room for several months after he recovered from the infection. This took a mental and physical toll on him, but efforts to convince him to stop his regime of self-isolation yielded no results. Another confrère suffered from Long COVID. The symptoms of infection persisted for many months even after he had tested negative for the virus. They included shortness of breath, general bodily weakness, brain fog and changes in the senses of taste and smell. The psychological and physical effects of the virus on us as a community continued to be felt for a long time after the real crisis had passed.

Being present and ministering to my companions became one of my primary tasks. That is when the idea of community life as a mission made more sense to me. The Thirty-Fifth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus had emphasized that ‘community is not just for mission:



The Mwangaza Community

⁸ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 175.

it is itself mission'.⁹ Previously, this just sounded like a slogan to me, but it became a reality in a practical way during the pandemic. In the first half of 2021 and the following months, we as a community were learning to find God amid the pandemic. What we had theoretically envisioned for our day of prayer at the beginning of the year, we lived practically, for months, as the reality of the virus came home to us in sometimes surprising ways. Our faith in God was tested, our normal life disrupted, but our hope was made steadfast.

A Common Fate Holds Us Here

The pandemic has taught me that my first naïve feeling that the virus was a faraway reality was dangerous. Another person's problem is my problem too; what affects other people should ultimately affect me and so I should always show concern for their well-being. A common fate binds us together here on earth: we are all interconnected brothers and sisters sharing a common humanity. Pope Francis affirms this in *Fratelli tutti* and *Laudato si'*. He invites us to realise the reality that 'everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others'.¹⁰

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons to be learnt from the pandemic is the invitation to develop a genuine freedom that can help us grow in fraternal friendship as members of a global and interconnected village. Pope Francis beautifully says that 'the process of building fraternity, be it local or universal, can only be undertaken by spirits that are free and open to authentic encounters'.¹¹ Naïvely thinking that what happens in a faraway part of the world cannot affect us is a sad illusion.

Hopeful Imagination

As the pandemic unfolded in our community, I felt that this was a crisis moment that could turn into a *kairos* moment, a time of God's grace for me, the community and the Church, so long as we viewed it with eyes of faith. Everything starts with personal conversion. Fundamentally, the pandemic is a crisis that calls all of us to conversion as a human family.

The pandemic has been a form of exile. We as a people have been exiled, from our work, schools, churches and places of recreation.

⁹ GC 35, decree 3, n. 41.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 70.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 50.

The Ignatian Year and the Pandemic

57

Fundamentally, we have been alienated from one another; a crisis of relationships has unfolded that no vaccine can cure. When the mandate for mask-wearing was in place in various parts of the world, people could not show their smiles to one another; it was hard to know what other people were feeling. Walter Brueggemann writes in *Hopeful Imagination* that exile 'is not simply a geographical fact, but also a theological decision'.¹² Our exile, I believe, provided us with space, as people of faith, to make a theological-spiritual decision: to remain hopeful. To be a people who have been given 'the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word' (Isaiah 50:4). The prophet Isaiah enthusiastically proclaims his mission in the Third Song of the Servant of God: to be a messenger of hope to the weary. Yet he quickly notes that it involves suffering too: 'I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting' (50:6). We are likewise called to that prophetic mission.

I believe the prophetic message for us during the pandemic is to remain hopeful in our exile of isolation: to be a people with open ears (Isaiah 50:5), who listen to the voice of God within us and proclaim hope and words of comfort to God's people amid the despair, pain and weariness brought by the virus. We are called to be discerners of God's will in these difficult times. The pandemic as an exile also invites us to grieve. It is out of our grief that we experience newness. This is a 'season of grief', in which we groan inwardly for newness in our lives in the same way as the exiles who sat and wept by the rivers of Babylon (Psalm 137:1).¹³ It is out of the pain of grief that we will learn to do things differently in the future. What are we learning from our tears?

Brueggemann uses the image of homecoming to signal the end of exile. Homecoming for us will come at the end of the pandemic just as it came to the exiles in Babylon. The reality of the pandemic invites us to imagine a future where the lessons learnt from this crisis can lead to the emergence of a better world in which love, compassion, solidarity and reconciliation will triumph. Brueggemann argues that 'the homecoming metaphor makes sense only where the metaphor of exile has been accepted as true'.¹⁴ How we live and learn in the exile of the coronavirus pandemic will enable us to imagine a better post-COVID future. We shall emerge

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 93.

¹³ Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 33.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 94.

stronger from the pandemic if we let the crisis move us to ask deeper questions about ourselves, God and others. We shall not stay this way forever. However, as we look forward to homecoming, we are invited not to ignore the opportunities for growth during this time of darkness itself.

How does the current crisis move us to be prophetic in our different contexts? Stories of hope abound: around the world nurses and doctors (we witnessed this at first hand in our community) continually put their lives on the line to save others; friends, family and neighbours reach out to one another in different ways. The most striking inspiration for me was 99-year-old Captain Sir Thomas More who raised over £30 million for the National Health Service in Britain through his daily walks in his back yard.¹⁵ There are many more inspirational stories of heroic actions during the pandemic. Where do we fit in with these stories?

We all have something we can share to bring hope in the darkness of the pandemic. It is in small prophetic deeds and words shared that we can help to uplift ourselves and other people who feel isolated, are weary and are in fear. We need to make the theological decision to remain hopeful and to witness. That decision will help us believe that this exile too shall pass: a new post-COVID world will emerge, a world that is more loving, and a world that stops from time to time to reflect on the effects of our human activities on the planet.

A Laudato si' Moment

Even though a clear origin for COVID-19 has not been established, it is almost certain that the virus jumped from wild animals to humans.¹⁶ Other zoonotic diseases, such as Ebola, which has been found in various areas of Africa over the years, and localised epidemics in other parts of the world, invite us to reflect on how we care for our common home in the quest to avert future pandemics. It is, I believe, a *Laudato si'* moment. The pandemic is, ultimately, our common home crying out; our environment has been destroyed; our ecosystem has been tampered with.

The pandemic has invited me to ask: what can I do concretely to care for our common home? What have I been doing? Years ago, when Pope Francis published *Laudato si'*, a friend came up with a list of things

¹⁵ See 'Captain Sir Tom Moore: "National Inspiration" Dies with Covid-19', at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-55881753>.

¹⁶ See World Health Organization, 'WHO-Convended Global Study of Origins of SARS-CoV-2: China Part. Joint WHO-China Study, 14 January–10 February 2021', available at https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/final-joint-report_origins-studies-6-april-2021.pdf.

that community members should avoid doing, in order not to hurt one another and our common home. He called his list: 'Laudato No!' What are the things we will avoid doing in future to protect and preserve our common home? Most importantly, what are our positive choices in response to *Laudato si'*?

We now know better than ever that one thing we needed to do was to slow down. And the virus has slowed us down, stopped us in our tracks and woken us up to thinking carefully about caring more for one another and the environment. What we are called to do in these times is a question for our discernment and prayer. There are no black-and-white answers. Each person in his or her context is invited to discern what to do. How do we reach out to the less fortunate at this time? What I am called to do in the community or the Church during the current pandemic is a question that I will always bring to my prayer, making discerned choices to help make the world a better place.

Months after the virus first arrived in our community, we had the privilege of being vaccinated. We had an opportunity to receive two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The relief that came to the whole community was visible. The chance to access needed medication in an unequal society invited us as a community to be more vigilant and to be in solidarity with people who do not have such opportunities. It is our duty not to be selfish and turn a blind eye to the reality of those



A nurse in Ghana prepares to administer the AstraZeneca vaccine

who cannot afford or cannot access medical care, and may die if they do not. I am invited to ask: what I am called to do in the face of vaccine inequity, when the poorest and most vulnerable are left out?

One thing that comes to my mind is the call to be an ambassador who spreads the message that the vaccines are safe to use. A lot of misinformation is being peddled online and elsewhere, and it was sad to hear that some countries have had to destroy thousands of doses of life-saving vaccines which had expired—for reasons that included people being hesitant to get vaccinated.¹⁷ I feel challenged in this uncertain and confusing time to be a messenger of the right information, Good News, life-giving messages rather than propaganda.

The pandemic has brought new urgency to familiar social justice issues: how the vulnerable are being treated, the accessibility of vaccines for the less fortunate, keeping people safe. When lockdowns are put in place, it is the most vulnerable—those who live from hand to mouth on less than a dollar a day—who suffer most. Such people fear lockdowns more than the coronavirus itself! How do we reach out to ease the misfortunes of such people?

Towards a Post-COVID World

Compassion and the common good should be the driving force for us as we move towards a post-COVID world. In the words of Pope Francis, compassion ‘means to suffer with, to suffer together, to not remain indifferent to the pain and suffering of others’.¹⁸ How we suffer with others is a question for discernment for all of us in the particular situation where we find ourselves. What would Jesus do in the varied contexts in which we live? We are invited to go and do likewise (Luke 10:37)!

For Pope Francis there are several crises linked to the pandemic: a health crisis, an environmental crisis, an economic and social crisis, a crisis of politics and ‘perhaps the most serious of all: the crisis of human relationships’. The Pope argues that there are ‘opportunities’ these crises ‘offer for the building of a more humane, just, supportive and peaceful world’. The pandemic ‘set before us a choice: either to continue on the road we have followed until now or to set out on a new path’.¹⁹

¹⁷ See Sara Jarvin, ‘African Nations Have Destroyed 450,000 Expired Covid-19 Vaccine Doses’, at <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus/origins-of-the-virus>, accessed 19 July 2021.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy*, translated by Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016), 87; see also Pope Francis, *Life after the Pandemic* (Vatican City: Editrice Vaticana, 2020).

¹⁹ Pope Francis, address to members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, 21 February 2021.

The Ignatian Year and the Pandemic

61

What can we do in these times, as we prepare for life after the pandemic, to restore our human relationships? I believe we are continually called to be people of hope looking at the world with eyes of faith and continuing to work for the Reign of God here and now.

We decided, as the Mwangaza Jesuit Spirituality Centre community, to continue with our mission of guiding retreats, offering spiritual direction, training spiritual guides and retreat directors, and offering days of prayer to people hungering and thirsting for spiritual relief. The only alternative would have been to close down the retreat house and sit in our comfort zone of vaccinated people, a vaccinated island if you like, and not have contact with the people outside. I also received a personal invitation, springing from my prayer, to resume my Sunday pastoral ministry in a nearby parish in the informal settlement of Gataka, close to Mwangaza. Most people there are poor, living on less than a dollar a day. At the beginning of the vaccine rollout in Kenya, I may have been the only vaccinated person in that area, and the threat of being infected with the virus was real. But I was glad to be in solidarity with the people of Gataka, the *anawim* of God, through the whole drama of the pandemic. In such situations, it is discernment and trust in God that should be our guide rather than selfish focus on self-preservation.

I believe that St Ignatius invites us, in this Ignatian Year and amid the pandemic, to stand in solidarity with the people, as the first Jesuit companions did five hundred years ago with the victims of plagues and other disasters that faced the world at the time. The Jesuits at Mwangaza have learnt about solidarity from first-hand experience of living under the shadow of coronavirus. The experience of the virus has taught us as a community to be what Henri Nouwen calls 'wounded healers', sent out on a mission to bring the Good News of Christ to all people of good will in the field hospital.²⁰ We are called to embody the vision of Pope Francis who prefers 'a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security'.²¹

Oscar Momanyi SJ is a retreat and spiritual guide at Mwangaza Jesuit Spirituality Centre in Nairobi, Kenya.

²⁰ For more on being a wounded healer, see Henri Nouwen, *Wounded Healer: Ministry in the Contemporary World* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1979).

²¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 49.