

# A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education

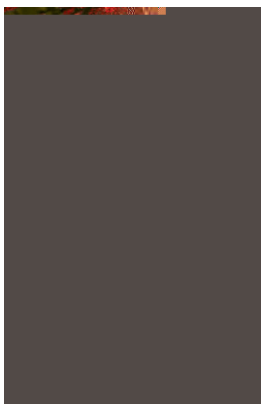


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## BEGINNINGS

The first Jesuit college opened at Messina in Sicily in 1548, but the roots of Jesuit education reach back to an earlier event. In 1521, a young man training for a career at the Spanish court was wounded in a military engagement with the French. Ignatius Loyola was the youngest child in a family of feudal lords in the Basque region of northern Spain. He returned to his family's home to recover from his wounds. There, he passed the time reading a life of Christ and a book about the saints, which led him to reflect deeply about his own life and to experience a calling to abandon his career at court and to follow Jesus instead.

Calling himself a "pilgrim," he traveled across Spain to the ancient monastery at Montserrat where he dedicated his sword to Mary as a symbol of his new life. In the nearby town of Manresa, he spent months alone in prayer, reflection, and service of the needy, trying to learn the rudiments of the spiritual life on his own. In spite of his mistakes, he slowly learned how to distinguish between what led him in a good



direction and what did not. He later said of this part of his life that God was teaching him the way a schoolmaster deals with a child. He discovered he had a talent for helping others find the freedom to respond to God's invitation in their lives. He began to keep notes about his own spiritual experiences and his conversations with those who came to him. These became the basis for a small book he later put together for those helping others to grow spiritually, which he called *Spiritual Exercises*.

## JESUITS

Ignatius decided that to serve God effectively he needed an education. This quest brought him to the University of Paris, where he became the center of a group of friends. Using his spiritual exercises, he challenged them to think about how they were going to use the unique gifts and personalities God had given them. After receiving their degrees, they decided they would stay together as a group and "help people" as Jesus and his disciples did. Gradually, they came to the decision to form a new kind of religious order. They were ordained Catholic priests and, in 1540, they received the approval of the Pope and called themselves "The Society of Jesus." Later, critics derisively called them "Jesuits" and this is the name that has stuck.

## how did jesuits get involved in schools?

**A**t first, no single activity defined the new religious order. The early Jesuits preached in the streets, led men and women through the Spiritual Exercises, taught theology in universities, instructed children in the catechism, and cared for plague victims and prostitutes. Others went off to work in distant parts of the world, as Francis Xavier did in India. They were discovering their mission by doing it, adapting to change, taking risks, and learning by trial and error.

Nonetheless, the early companions were all graduates of the best university of Europe and they thought of themselves as specialists in “ministries of the word.” Gradually, they came to realize that there was one emerging activity that connected their intellectual training, their world-affirming spirituality, their pastoral experience, and their goal of helping souls. When citizens of Messina asked Ignatius to open a school for their sons, he seems to have decided that schools could be a powerful means of forming the minds and hearts of those, who, because they would be important citizens in their communities, could influence many others. When the college in Messina proved a







more by deeds than by words. Action is what counts, not talk and promises. This is why Jesuit education is incomplete unless it produces men and women who will do something with their gifts.

More profoundly, Ignatius says that love consists in communication. One who loves communicates what he or she has with another. Thus, lovers desire each other's good, give what they have to one another, share themselves.

It is easy to see this communication in two people in love. For Ignatius, however, love was most dramatically evident in the relationship that God has with human beings. Two examples of this are central in the *Exercises*. First, God creates the world and gives life to everything in it. People and things come into existence because God communicates God's own self to them. And God continues *working* in each person and thing in its own specific reality and at every moment. God keeps wanting to be in relationship with us, even when we fail to respond. Second, surpassing even the gift of creation is the gift God has given us in the person of Jesus. God's taking on our human nature in order to heal our brokenness is the ultimate evidence of God's love for us. Jesus' life and death are, for Ignatius, the model of how to love in return.

If every human being is so loved by God, then our loving relationships do not stop with the special people we choose to love, or with our families, or with the social class or ethnic group we belong to. We are potentially in love with the whole world.

So, for Jesuit education, it is not enough to live authentically in the world. We have to participate in the transformation of the world (the Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam* conveys the same idea, of mending or repairing the world). For more

than four hundred years, it has been said that Jesuit education educated "the whole person." Today, we live with an increasingly global sense of what it means to be human. A person can't be considered "whole" without an educated solidarity with other human beings in their hopes and fears and especially in their needs. We can't pay attention to our experience and reflect on it without realizing how our own lives are connected with the dreams of all those with whom we share the journey of human existence, and therefore with the economic, political, and social realities that support or frustrate their dreams. This is why Jesuit education is so often said to produce "men and women for others."

## the habit of discerning

Jesuit education, we have said, is a *process* that has three key parts, *being attentive*, *being reflective*, and *being loving*. It results in the kind of good decision-making that Ignatius called “discernment.” The goal of Jesuit education is to produce men and women for whom discernment is a habit.

We can think of discernment as the lifelong project of exploring our experience, naming its meaning, and living in a way that translates this meaning into action. We can also think of this process as something we focus on with special intensity at particular moments in our lives—during the four years of college, for example, or when we have to make important decisions and want to do so freely and with a sense of what God is calling us to. At these times, we might be especially conscious of using spiritual exercises to help us negotiate the process. But we can also think of these three movements as the intertwined dynamics of daily life, the moment-by-moment activity of becoming fully human.

Arguably, it is the daily exercise of discernment that grounds the other kinds of spiritual growth—the regular practice of attentiveness, reflection, and choosing through which our lives take on a meaningful direction. In fact, Ignatius thought that the most useful kind of prayer is to spend a few minutes each day deepening our awareness of how God works in the events of the day and how we respond, a practice he called an *examen*. I begin by calling to mind that God is involved in shaping the direction of my life and I ask for light about this. Then, I review the events of the day, especially those where my feelings have been most engaged, positively or negatively. I notice the patterns



for the princess he was in love with, and then for Jesus. Even in old age, when he spent his days sitting at a desk in Rome administering the affairs of the Society, he would go to the roof of the Jesuit residence in the evening and look at the stars in order to see his life as God saw it. Finding images that embody our dreams can be a lifelong form of prayer.

In the practice of discerning, we grow in being able to imagine how we are going to live our lives. **We discover our vocations.** The novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner describes voca-

If you want to learn more about Jesuit education,  
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Cover:

The Spiritual Journey of St. Ignatius Loyola  
Panel 5 of 5: Abiding Intimacy with the Trinity in Rome  
Acrylic on wood panel with gold leaf, 44" X 27"  
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