

THE JESUIT GUIDE TO (ALMOST) EVERYTHING

A Spirituality
for Real Life

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Another way of understanding that worldview is with a quotation from Pedro Arrupe, S.J. Father Arrupe was the head of the Jesuit Order from 1965 to 1981, a period of volcanic change in the Catholic Church. He is perhaps best known for reminding the Jesuits that part of their original work was with the poor and marginalized. In the 1970s a journalist asked Father Arrupe this question: who is Jesus Christ for you?

One can imagine the journalist anticipating a boilerplate answer like "Jesus Christ is my Savior" or "Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Instead, Arrupe said, "For me Jesus Christ is everything!" That is a good shorthand for how Ignatius looked at God.

But not everyone reading this book has that kind of relationship with God. Maybe few people do. For people on the path of independence, the path of disbelief, the path of exploration, or the path of confusion, the question is less about devoting oneself to God entirely and more about something else, the question that began our discussion: how do I find God?

Here is where we can turn to an important insight of Ignatius: God can speak directly with people in astonishingly personal ways. This can lead even the doubtful and confused and lost to God. The key, the leap of faith required, is believing that these intimate experiences are ways God *communicates* with you.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius wrote that the Creator deals "immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator." God communicates with us. Seekers, then, need to be aware of the variety of ways that God has of communicating with us, of making God's presence known.

In other words, the beginning of the path to finding God is awareness. Not simply awareness of the ways that you can find God, but an awareness that God desires to find you.

That brings us to the first important moment in the life of Ignatius: his initial conversion. By focusing more carefully on this one particular incident, you can see how God can use everything to find you. So let's return to that event and look at it in greater detail.

FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS

After Ignatius's conversion, his life was focused on God. The introduction to the *Spiritual Exercises* reads, "Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls." God, says Ignatius, is at the center of everything and provides meaning for our lives.

LITTLE BY LITTLE

Iñigo of Loyola, as I mentioned earlier, was thirty years old when his leg was shattered by a cannonball during the siege of a castle by the French military in Pamplona in 1521. This pivotal incident, which might have been merely a tragic setback to another person, marked the beginning of Ignatius's new life.

After Ignatius stayed in Pamplona for several days, his French captors, who treated him "with courtesy and kindness," brought him back to his family's castle, where the doctors reset the bone. To do so, they had to break the leg. "This butchery was done again," he writes in his *Autobiography*. His condition worsened, and those around him, worried that he was about to die, arranged for him to have the last rites.

Finally he recovered. Yet Ignatius noticed something troubling: the bone below one knee had been poorly set, shortening his leg. "The bone protruded so much that it was an ugly business." Now his vanity took over. "He was unable to abide it," he wrote, "because he was determined to follow the world." He couldn't abide the idea of being thought unattractive.

Despite the pain involved, he asked the surgeons to cut away the bone. Looking back, the older Ignatius recognized his foolishness. "He was determined to make himself a martyr to his own pleasure," he wrote.

During his subsequent convalescence, Ignatius was unable to find books on what he most enjoyed reading: adventure stories and tales of chivalry. The only things available were a life of Jesus and the lives of the saints. To his surprise, he found that he enjoyed the tales of the saints. Thinking about what the saints had done filled him with a sense that they would be "easy to accomplish."

Still, he was attracted to the ideals of knightly service, and when he wasn't reading about the life of Christ or the lives of the saints, he mused about doing great deeds for "a certain lady." Even though her

station was higher than a countess or a duchess, Ignatius was obsessed on winning her over with daring exploits. In this way he wasn't very different from some men in our time, or any time for that matter.

So he went back and forth, thinking about doing heroic things for the noble lady and doing heroic things for God.

Then a strange thing happened, something that would influence not only Ignatius but the life of every Jesuit and anyone who has followed the way of Ignatius.

Ignatius slowly realized that the *aftereffects* of these thoughts were different. After he thought about impressing his "certain lady" with exploits on the battlefield, he felt one way. After thinking about doing great things and undergoing hardships for God, he felt another.

I'll let him describe it in one of the most famous passages in his autobiography:

Yet there was a difference. When he was thinking about the things of the world, he took much delight in them, and afterwards, when he was tired and put them aside, he found that he was dry and discontented. But when he thought of going to Jerusalem, barefoot and eating nothing but herbs and undergoing all the things that the saints endured, not only was he consoled when he had these thoughts, but even after putting them aside, he remained content and happy.

He did not notice this, however; nor did he stop to ponder the difference until one day his eyes were opened a little, and he began to marvel at the difference, realizing from experience that some thoughts left him sad and others happy. Little by little he came to recognize the difference between the spirits that agitated him, one from the enemy and one from God.

Ignatius began to understand that these feelings and desires might be ways that God was communicating with him. This is not

to say that Ignatius found God and women in opposition. Rather, he began to see that his desires of winning fame by impressing others drew him away from God. His desires to surrender to a more generous and selfless way of life drew him toward God. What religious writers call a “grace” was not simply that he *had* these insights, but that he *understood them as coming from God*.

As a result of his experience, Ignatius began to understand that God wants to communicate with us. Directly.

This idea would get Ignatius in trouble with the Inquisition and land him in jail. (Ignatius had his own problems with “religion” at times.) Some critics suspected that Ignatius was trying to bypass the institutional church. If God could deal with humanity directly, they wondered, what need was there for the church?

As I’ve mentioned, religion enables people to encounter God in profound ways in their lives. But Ignatius recognized that God could not be confined within the walls of the church. God was larger than the church.

Today the Ignatian notion of the Creator’s dealing directly with human beings is less controversial. It’s assumed by those on the “spiritual but not religious” journey. The far more controversial idea these days is that God would speak to us through religion.

But Ignatius’s insight is as liberating today as it was in his time. And it is here that Ignatian spirituality can help even the doubtful find God.

Some agnostics or atheists await a rational argument or a philosophical proof to demonstrate the existence of God. Some will not believe until someone can show them how suffering can coexist with the belief in God. A few may even hope for an incontrovertible physical “sign” to convince them of God’s presence.

But God often speaks in ways that are beyond our intellect or reason, beyond philosophical proofs. While many are brought to God through the mind, just as many are brought to God through the heart. Here God often speaks more gently, more quietly, as he did during Ignatius’s convalescence. In these quiet moments God often speaks the loudest.

Let’s look at some examples of these quiet, heartfelt moments in our own lives.

You are holding an infant, maybe your own, who looks at you with wide-open eyes, and you are filled with a surprising sense of gratitude or awe. You wonder: *Where do these powerful feelings come from? I’ve never felt like this before.*

You are walking along the beach, and as you cast your eyes to the horizon, you are filled with a sense of peace that is all out of proportion to what you expect. You wonder: *Why am I getting so emotional about the beach?*

You are in the midst of a sexual encounter with your husband or wife, or an intimate moment with your girlfriend or boyfriend, and you marvel at your capacity for joy. You wonder: *How can I be so happy?*

You are out to dinner or with a friend and feel a sudden sense of contentment, and you recognize how lucky you are to be blessed with her friendship. You wonder: *This is an ordinary night. Where did this deep feeling come from?*

You have finally been able to come to terms with a tragedy in your life, a sickness or death, or you find yourself consoled by a friend, and you are overcome with calm. You wonder: *How is it that I am finally at peace in the midst of such sadness?*

Gratitude, peace, and joy are ways that God communicates with us. During these times, we are feeling a real connection with God, though we might not initially identify it as such. The key insight is accepting that these are ways that God is communicating with us. That is, the first step involves a bit of trust.

Conversely, during times of stress and doubt and sorrow and anger, we can also experience God’s communication.

You accompany a good friend or relative struggling with a horrible illness, or maybe you are ill. You think: *How could this happen?* And you feel a desperate need, an urgent longing, for some comfort or connection.

You are in the midst of a stressful time and wonder how you can ever get through the day. Then someone says something that goes straight to your heart, consoling you out of all proportion to the words, and you feel supported and loved. You think: *How could just those few words help me?*

You are at a funeral and wonder over the meaning of human life. Or you are tired and stressed from your life and wonder how much more you can take. You think: *Is there anyone out there aware of me, who is looking out for me?*

In each of these times—happy and sad, consoling and confusing, intimate and overwhelming—something special is happening, something more than just emotional “projection.” The excess of feeling seems disproportionate to the cause, or perhaps it’s hard to see *any* obvious cause. As well, there is a certain expansion of the soul, a loss of inhibition, and perhaps even an increase in one’s feelings of love and generosity. (Abraham Maslow, the social psychologist, spoke of these as “peak experiences.”) There may even be a change in one’s outlook on life, and a great sense of peace or joy.

During these times, I believe, you are feeling a manifestation of your innate attraction to God. You are feeling what St. Augustine described in the fourth century. “Lord, our hearts are restless,” he wrote, “until they rest in you.” The pull that draws you to God comes from God.

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