

# A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education



BOSTON COLLEGE

## 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 copy of the 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?

At 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 in 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 seemed 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 success, requests to open schools in other cities multiplied and soon education became the characteristic activity of Jesuits.

When Ignatius died in 1556 there were 35 Jesuit colleges across Europe. Two hundred years later, there were more than 800 in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. They constituted the largest system of education before the modern era of public schooling and the first truly international one.

## WHY WERE JESUIT SCHOOLS SUCCESSFUL?

The simple answer is that they met a need. Europe entered the modern world almost overnight in the early 16th century. The voyages of exploration to the Americas and the Indies, the Protestant revolt, and Gutenberg’s printing press changed people’s understanding of the globe, redistributed wealth, and turned Europe into a battleground of ideas. A prosperous middle class wanted an education that would prepare their sons for the opportunities of this new world that was unfolding around them at a dizzying pace.

When Jesuits began their schools, two models were available. One was the medieval university, where students prepared for professions such as law, the clergy, and teaching by studying the sciences, mathematics, logic, philosophy, and theology. The other model was the Renaissance humanistic academy, which had a curriculum based on Greek and Latin poetry, drama, oratory, and history. The goal of the university was the training of the mind through the pursuit of speculative truth; the goal

of the humanists was character formation, making students better human beings and civic leaders. Jesuit schools were unique in combining these two educational ideals.

Perhaps the most important reason for the success of the early Jesuit schools was a set of qualities that Jesuits aspired to themselves and which they consciously set out to develop in their students:

- **Self-knowledge and discipline,**
- **Attentiveness to their own experience and to others',**
- **Trust in God's direction of their lives,**
- **Respect for intellect and reason as tools for discovering truth,**
- **Skill in discerning the right course of action,**
- **A conviction that talents and knowledge were gifts to be used to help others,**
- **Flexibility and pragmatism in problem solving,**
- **Large-hearted ambition, and**
- **A desire to find God working in all things.**

These qualities were the product of the distinctive spirituality that the early Jesuits had learned from Ignatius and that Ignatius had learned from his own experience. Jesuits hoped, in turn, to form their students in the same spiritual vision, so that their graduates would be prepared to live meaningful lives as leaders in government, the professions, and the Church.

## **JESUIT EDUCATION IS A PROCESS**

**H**ow does this spiritual vision get translated into an educational vision? The early Jesuits struggled to describe what they called “our way of proceeding.” Their accounts varied but it seems that they thought of their distinctive spirituality as a three-part process. It begins with paying attention to experience, moves to reflecting on its meaning, and ends in deciding how to act. Jesuit education, then, can be described in terms of three key movements:

### **1. Be Attentive**

We learn by organizing our experience and appropriating it in the increasingly complex psychological structures by which we engage and make sense of our world. From infancy, learning



is an active process but in our early years it happens without our being aware of it. Once we become adolescents, though, whether we will continue to learn is largely a choice we make.

**Conscious learning begins by choosing to pay attention to our experience**—our experience of our own inner lives and of the people and the world around us. When we do this, we notice a mixture of light and dark, ideas and feelings, things that give us joy and things that sadden us. It is a rich tapestry and it grows more complex the more we let it register on our awareness.

Ignatius was convinced that God deals directly with us in our experience. This conviction rested on his profound realization that God is “working” in every thing that exists. (This is why the spirit of Jesuit education is often described as “**finding God in all things**”). So, our intimate thoughts and feelings, our desires and our fears, and our responses to the people and things around us are not just the accidental ebb and flow of our inner lives but rather the privileged moments through which God creates and sustains a unique relationship with each of us.

How do I pay attention? By observing, wondering, opening myself to what is new, allowing the reality of people and things to enter my consciousness on their own terms.

This is why Jesuit schools have traditionally emphasized liberal education, a core curriculum, and the arts and the humanities—studies that can enlarge our understanding of what it means to be human and make us more sympathetic to experiences different from our own. This happens outside the classroom too—for example, in service programs, when we enter into the lives of others. Referring to students engaged in working with the poor, Peter Hans Kolvenbach, the former leader of Jesuits across the world, stated, “When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change.” The key movement that begins this process of learning and change is paying attention.

## 2. Be Reflective

The outcome of paying attention to our experience may be a complex variety of images, unrelated insights, feelings that lead in contradictory directions. To connect the parts of our experience into a whole, we need to examine data, test evidence, clarify relationships, understand causes and implications, and weigh options in light of their possible consequences. We need, that is, to see the patterns in our experience and grasp their significance. **Reflection is the way we discover and compose the meaning of our experience.**

Figuring out our experience can be an inward-looking activity—identifying our gifts and the future they point us towards or confronting the prejudices, fears, and shortcomings that prevent



us from being the kind of people we want to be—but it can also mean looking outward—at the questions that philosophy and theology pose to us, at subjects like biology and finance and economics and the different

ways they organize and interpret the world and help us understand ourselves. In either direction, the goal is the freedom that comes from knowing ourselves, understanding the world, and finding the direction that God is disclosing for our lives in and through our experience.

**Reflection is a kind of reality-testing.** It takes time and care. Ultimately, it is the work of intelligence, which is why Jesuit education has always emphasized intellectual excellence. There is no substitute for using the minds God gave us, to understand our experience and discover its meaning.

### 3. Be Loving

*Being attentive* is largely about us and how God is working in us through our experience. *Being reflective* moves our gaze outward, measuring our experience against the accumulated wisdom of the world. *Being loving* requires that we look even more closely at the world around us. It asks the question: **How are we going to act in this world?**

In part, this is a question about what we are going to do with the knowledge and self-understanding and freedom that we have appropriated by reflection. How shall we act in ways that are consistent with this new self and what it knows and values?

But we can't move very far in the direction of answering this question without discovering that it is not only a question about how our lives can be authentic. It is also a question about our relationship to the world around us and **what the world needs us to do**. We are not solitary creatures. From the womb, we live in relationships with others, grow up in cultural, social, and political institutions that others have created for us. To be human is to find our place in these relationships and these institutions, to take responsibility for them, to contribute to nurturing and improving them, to give something back.

We can understand this in quite secular terms if we choose to, but through the eyes of faith there is an even more compelling reason for thinking and living this way. Ignatius ends his *Spiritual Exercises* with a consideration of love. For him growing in love is the whole point of the spiritual life. He suggests two principles to help us understand love. One is that **love shows itself**

**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, and 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 and the emerging insights about which experiences lead me towards God and which lead away. And I end by looking ahead to tomorrow and asking to live with a growing sense of God’s trust in my future.

For Ignatius, a key element of discerning is the exercise of imagination. In doing the *examen*, he suggests we use our imaginations to elicit the feelings that have pulled us one way or another during the day and to picture how we might live differently tomorrow. In the *Exercises*, when he is advising us how to pray, he urges us to take a passage from the Gospels and imagine ourselves present in the scene, listening to the words of the people there, experiencing their feelings, and he asks us to elicit our own feelings in response. And, in the account of his very earliest spiritual experiences, he tells us that, while he was recovering from his wounds, he used to lie on his bed by the open window of his room and contemplate the stars, lost in reveries about the great deeds he would accomplish, at first



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 vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” When we arrive at this place, and understand the fit between who we are and what the world needs of us, Ignatius urges us to be unafraid to live with the consequences of this realization, to respond with generosity and magnanimity because this is the way we can love as God loves. Jesuit tradition uses the Latin word *magis* or “more” to sum up this ideal, a life lived in response to the question: How can I be more, do more, give more? Jesuit education is complete when its graduates embody this vision of life and work.

## JESUIT EDUCATION TODAY

**I**n the United States, there are 28 Jesuit colleges and universities and 60 high schools. The first of these was Georgetown, established in 1789. Boston College was the eleventh when it was founded in 1863. Around the world, there are more than 200 Jesuit secondary schools—including 93 in India alone—and some 100 institutions of higher education, along with numerous centers of social and cultural analysis. Jesuit education is still growing. In recent years, U.S. Jesuits and lay men and women have created more than two dozen inner city high schools and several middle schools modeled on Chicago’s Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, which provide a college preparatory education for low-income, urban communities. Increasingly, all these institutions are staffed and administered by men and women who are not Jesuits and may not even be Catholic or Christian, but who are animated by the vision of Jesuit education and the spirituality of Ignatius. Jesuit education continues to adapt old ideals to new times and new needs.



If you want to learn more about Jesuit education,  
you can find a number of resources at  
**[www.bc.edu/mission/exploring](http://www.bc.edu/mission/exploring)**.

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