

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything

A Spirituality for Real Life

by

James Martin, SJ

A Q&A WITH JAMES MARTIN, S.J.

In your book you write that Ignatian spirituality “helped to move me from feeling trapped in life to feeling free” (p. 26). Why did you decide to enter the Jesuits? Was it about “feeling free”?

Much of it was. When I was working in corporate America as a young man I really did feel trapped. And I couldn't see a way out. Business seemed like a natural vocation for some of my colleagues, but I realized after a few years that it wasn't for me. But I had just spent four years in college studying business, and couldn't imagine what else to do.

When I stumbled upon the idea of entering a religious order I knew very little about the Jesuits. During the application process I read about St. Ignatius Loyola, but it wasn't until entering the Jesuit novitiate that I really began to understand the spirituality of Ignatius. From the first moment I heard about "finding God in all things," it just seemed to fit me. It was a practical, sensible, and user-friendly spirituality. Also, I have an active imagination so praying imaginatively—once I got over my initial worries about making things up in my head—felt natural, too.

The most important thing about Ignatian spirituality was that it helped me enter into a deeper relationship with God. That was the real beginning of feeling free, because that was the time that God began to change and form me.

What inspired you to write *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*?

There are probably hundreds, if not thousands, of books written about Ignatius, his writing, and his spirituality. But most are written for predominantly Catholic audiences and published by Catholic publishing houses. I felt that what might be helpful would be a completely mainstream approach, geared toward people who had zero background in anything to do with Ignatius. That's not to say that this book can't be used by people who are intimately familiar with Ignatian spirituality. But I wanted to write something that would not presume anything. That's why the opening line of the book—Who is St. Ignatius Loyola, and why should you care?—was such an important one for me. I wanted to make the book as user-friendly as possible, essentially writing it for a person who was like me at age twenty-seven: someone who knew nothing about the way of Ignatius at all.

Have you been surprised by the strong response The Jesuit Guide has received? Have you encountered any non-Catholic or non-Christian readers who've found universal truths in Ignatian spirituality?

I've been very surprised! Of course I know that Ignatian spirituality is accessible, but I'm so close to it that I sometimes forget what a hidden treasure it is. Many readers have told me, for example, that the examen has changed the way they relate to God. Just as many have said that the book has freed them to use their imagination in prayer. So some of the things I may take for granted about Ignatian spirituality come as a revelation to so many people, which is very gratifying.

At the same time I've been delighted by the response among Jesuits. It's not that they're not always encouraging—rather, my concern was that I might offer an interpretation of Ignatius that some other Jesuits might not agree with. But the response from my brother Jesuits has been astonishingly supportive. Many have told me that they're happy that the book is helping to bring Ignatian spirituality into the mainstream, and that the book includes so many Jesuit wisdom figures of our time. Some have even said, much to my surprise, that my take on Ignatian spirituality has helped deepen their own understanding of it, which is the highest praise of all.

As for non-Catholic or non-Christian readers, yes, many have written to say that they have found tenets of Jesuit spirituality, particularly the emphasis on freedom and detachment, useful in their own lives. Also, using the imagination in prayer is of great use to someone from any religious tradition. Finally, many seekers have said that they appreciate Ignatius's welcome of people on different paths to God. Few things would make Ignatius happier, I would think.

Is there anything you wish that you could have included in the book, anything that you couldn't fit in because of space?

Yes, two things. First, I wish I had spent more time on the concept of *agere contra*. So I'll do it here. The term means "to act against." Ignatius often advises that when you find yourself confronting an "unfreedom" you should act in the opposite manner so as to free yourself. For example, when I was in the novitiate, I told the novice director that last ministry I wanted to do was hospital work, because I was afraid of the sights and smells. So he talked to me about *agere contra*, and of course, assigned me to work a hospital! This helped me to move past some of my unfreedoms in that area. But the key here is discernment. You have to ask yourself: Is this simply something I do not desire for good and healthy reasons? Or is it an unfreedom, and should I use some *agere contra* to, in a sense, move past it?

Second, I wish I had more space to speak about a few more of my Jesuit heroes, whose lives embody Ignatian spirituality. Originally, I had a whole section on three Jesuit saints: St. Aloysius Gonzaga, St. Jean de Brébeuf, and St. Alberto Hurtado, which had to be set aside for space purposes. Maybe mentioning them here will encourage people to read about them on their own.

What would you ask Ignatius if you could ask him anything?

I'd ask him the first question a retreat director ever asked me: "Who is God for you?" I'll bet his answer would be amazing.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR READING GROUPS

CHAPTER ONE: A WAY OF PROCEEDING

- Consider the four elements of Ignatian spirituality (pp. 5–11): finding God in all things, becoming a contemplative in action, looking at the world in an incarnational way, and seeking freedom and detachment. Does any approach come more naturally to you than others? Do you shy away from any—and if so, what might be the root of that resistance?
- What other spiritualities—Christian or otherwise—are you familiar with? How does the practicality of the way of Ignatius offer a “bridge to God” in a new or different way?
- What’s the most compelling part of the life of St. Ignatius? Where might your life intersect with his? For example, have you ever found God in times of vulnerability?

CHAPTER TWO: THE SIX PATHS

- Which of the six paths to God are you on now, and which have you found yourself on in the past? Have you

ever experienced the “envy” the author describes in the first path?

- Fr. Martin speaks frankly about both the negative and the positive aspects of organized religion, arguing that the positives—like love, forgiveness, charity, comfort, community, and the moral imperative to challenge the status quo (p. 45)—stack up higher than the negatives. Have you ever questioned the worth of organized religion? What helped you rediscover its value?
- Fr. Martin warns against spirituality separated from “the wisdom of a community” (p. 50). Consider times in your life when you’ve nurtured your spiritual life within a community, and times when your spirituality may have been a more solitary pursuit. How did your relationship to God change, or the spiritual insights you found differ? What does the community add? What does it make more difficult?
- Have you ever had profound emotions that surprised you? Did you experience those feelings as communication from God? Why or why not?

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT DO YOU WANT?

- Why do you think desire has a “disreputable reputation” in some religious circles? When have you experienced the “deep longings of our hearts” that the author describes? How have you accomplished the sometimes difficult task of finding these holy desires among the surface wants that are often so distracting?

- Fr. Martin refers several times throughout the book to “the God of Surprises,” that is, the God who meets us in ways we often don’t or wouldn’t predict. Have you ever experienced the God of Surprises?
- One of Fr. Martin’s first lessons when he entered the Jesuit novitiate was that “God meets you where you are” (p. 81). Was that insight new to you? How might God meet you where you are now?

CHAPTER FOUR: BEAUTIFUL YESTERDAYS

- In Chapter Four, Fr. Martin introduces the examen and discusses its flexibility. How can you avoid the pitfall of moving through the examen like a checklist?
- The author’s experience of praying about Wanda (p. 93) led him to see God’s presence in her. What people in your life might be unexpected carriers of God’s grace for you?
- Fr. Martin says that it’s often easier to see God in retrospect (p. 97). Does that ring true? Looking back over your life, can you see God in places you might have overlooked at the time?

CHAPTER FIVE: BEGINNING TO PRAY

- Do you ever feel guilty about asking God for help? Does the author’s advice that petitionary prayer is “natural,

human, and common” (p. 105) help you feel more comfortable with that form of prayer?

- One revelation that Fr. Martin gained from his first retreat (pp. 105–10) is that God wanted to be in relation with him, or, as Ignatius said, that the “Creator deals directly with the creature.” Do you believe this in your own life?
- Which of the traditional definitions of prayer (“raising of one’s mind and heart to God,” “God’s self-communication,” a “long, loving look at the real,” and “conversation with God”) on pp. 113–114 resonate with you?

CHAPTER SIX: FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

- The author highlights these words from Psalm 139, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me” (p. 122). Does it help you, or frighten you, to think about God knowing you so intimately? How do you respond to the idea of a “friendship with God?”
- Fr. Martin notes that the more common ways of hearing God in prayer is listening carefully to emotions, insights, memories, feelings, physical feelings, desires, and incommunicable experiences. Which of these have you experienced in prayer? How do you try to listen to God in your prayer?
- In this era of cell phones, laptops, and endless gadgetry, we are, as Fr. Martin writes, “gradually losing the art of silence” (p. 141). How can you create silence in your life?

Do you tend to enjoy or dread quiet “unplugged” time? What might be the source of any feelings of apprehension?

CHAPTER SEVEN: GOD MEETS YOU WHERE YOU ARE

- Consider the forms of prayer discussed in Chapter Seven: contemplation, *lectio divina*, centering prayer, the colloquy, communal prayer, rote prayer, journaling, nature prayer, music, and work. Did any of these forms of prayer surprise you? Have you tried any new approaches to prayer since reading this book?
- Fr. Martin’s original objection to Ignatian contemplation was that it was just “making things up in your head” (p. 146). In response, David, his spiritual director, suggested that God could work through his imagination. Does that make sense?
- Try selecting a favorite passage from your sacred Scriptures and using it for “Ignatian contemplation.” What was your experience like?

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE SIMPLE LIFE

- Why do you think poverty, chastity, and obedience are “threatening” in our culture?
- Fr. Martin’s experience in East Africa showed him that “less stood between the refugees and God,” and therefore

they were close to God. What stands between you and God? Is there any way you can minimize that distance?

- Does a “sensible simplicity” sound appealing or uncomfortable? How might living more simply draw you closer to God?
- What, to you, is the underlying message of Pedro Arrupe’s surprising experience in the slum, on pp. 211–212?

CHAPTER NINE: LIKE THE ANGELS?

- The author addresses the old stereotype of the cold and bitter priest or nun (p. 217). Can you think of examples to the contrary? Do you know friends or family members—widows or widowers, unmarried men or women—who are single and celibate? How do they love?
- “Chastity is about love,” Fr. Martin says, and suggests that even people in committed relationships can learn about “freedom” in love. How can this freedom help you love more deeply and honestly?
- Consider Fr. Martin’s suggestions under “How Can I Love Chastely?” (p. 227). Which ones do you feel that you are already living? Which ones might you like to put into action?

CHAPTER TEN: MORE BY DEEDS THAN BY WORDS

- The Jesuit way of life emphasizes an underappreciated part of the spiritual life: friendship. How have your friends been blessings in your life, and how have they moved you closer to God?
- Ignatius's "Presupposition" (pp. 234–236) means giving people the benefit of the doubt. When have you found that approach rewarding?
- "One of the best gifts to give a friend is freedom," writes Fr. Martin (p. 243). What does that mean for you? Where might you be called to give your friends more freedom?
- Consider "Some Barriers to Healthy Friendship" (pp. 246–248) and "Healthy Friendships" (pp. 259–263). Have these recommendations shed light on any of your relationships?

CHAPTER ELEVEN: SURRENDERING TO THE FUTURE

- In his provincial's decision to delay his theology studies, Fr. Martin met with disappointment. Yet his spiritual director suggested that God might be "forming" him through this difficult time (p. 278). What painful experiences have formed you?
- How do you understand Walter Ciszek's insight that God's will is found in the "reality of the situation" (p. 281)?

- Sister Janice suggested that an important part of life is learning to “surrender to the future that God has in store for you”—even when that includes suffering (p. 284). In what areas of your life have you had to “surrender”? Where did that surrender lead?
- The Ignatian approach to suffering includes an imaginative encounter with the Jesus who has suffered. Do you believe that God is “with you” as you go through difficult times? How have you experienced this?

CHAPTER TWELVE: WHAT SHOULD I DO?

- One of the main goals of the way of Ignatius is “indifference,” which is often confused with simply not caring about things. How could a greater sense of healthy indifference help you?
- Ignatian discernment starts with the belief that God is with you in making decisions and that acting in concert with God’s desires for you sometimes brings “consolation.” Have you ever felt a feeling of “rightness” or “consolation” after making a good decision?
- Fr. Martin notes that the “Third Time” of decision making, when things seem very unclear, is probably the most common. Which of the decision-making steps he outlines on pp. 319–326 sound the most helpful?
- Fr. Martin speaks about making decisions as your “best self.” Who is your “best self” and how would that person act in ways different from the way you are living now?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: BE WHO YOU IS!

- Have you ever imagined yourself as having a “vocation”? How would you describe it? Or, what desires do you have that could help you discover your vocation?
- The author’s list of challenges for developing a spirituality of work are: finding time for God and you, finding God around you, finding time for solitude, working and living ethically, and remembering the poor. In which areas could you grow?
- Karl Rahner’s reflection on “The Dignity of Work,” in the box on p. 374, praises work that is hidden from public recognition. Who in your life does such hidden work? What kind of hidden work do you do?
- Read Fr. Martin’s suggestions on pp. 385–386 for “Becoming Yourself.” Which insight was new to you? Which might help you the most?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE CONTEMPLATIVE IN ACTION

- Now that you’ve read the book, how would you describe, in your own words, the Ignatian ideal of being a “contemplative in action”?
- Fr. Martin uses the Jesuit saying “The road is our home” to underline the fact that we are always en route to God. How might the image of the journey help you in the spiritual life?

- The “Take, Lord, Receive” prayer (pp. 396–397) is, as Fr. Martin says, a “tall order.” What would it mean for you to “give yourself” to God?
- What’s your favorite part of Ignatian spirituality?

TEN THINGS YOU (ALMOST) DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT JESUITS

1. They invented the trap door. Without the Jesuits, who wrote and directed plays in their sixteenth and seventeenth-century schools, modern theater would be vastly different and—to take one example—the Wicked Witch of the West wouldn't have been able to disappear so easily in “The Wizard of Oz.” Jesuits also invented or perfected the “scrim,” the sheer curtain used in theaters today.
2. They discovered quinine (called “Jesuit bark” in the seventeenth century), which is still used for anti-malarial drugs and, not incidentally, for tonic water. Without the Jesuits you wouldn't be enjoying your gin and tonic. (Nor would the West have known as early about ginseng or the camellia flower.)
3. Their dictionaries and lexicons of the native languages in North America in the seventeenth century were the first resources Europeans used to understand these ancient tongues, and today they still provide scholars with some of the earliest transcriptions of these languages. Of the letters and reports that Jesuit explorers sent back to Europe, the American historian Francis Parkman said, “In respect to the value of their contents, they are exceedingly unequal.”

4. They located the source of the Blue Nile, and charted large stretches of both the Amazon and the Mississippi rivers.
5. They educated in their high schools, colleges and universities Descartes, Voltaire, Molière, Arthur Conan Doyle, James Joyce, Fidel Castro and Alfred Hitchcock—not to mention Bing Crosby, Bill Clinton and Denzel Washington.
6. They founded the city of São Paulo, Brazil. Specifically, Blessed José de Anchieta (1534–1597) did so, with some help of course, during his missionary work there.
7. They championed the Baroque style of architecture by fostering it in their churches across Europe in the early seventeenth century. The mother church of the Jesuits, the Church of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, often called “Il Gesù,” features what many historians term the first fully Baroque facade. Across town, the Jesuit brother Andrea Pozzo designed the *trompe-l’œil* ceiling in the Church of St. Ignatius that fools people to this day.
8. There are thirty-five craters on the moon named for Jesuit scientists. And Athanasius Kircher, a seventeenth-century Jesuit scientist, called “master of a hundred arts” and “the last man to know everything,” was a geologist, a biologist, a linguist, a decipherer of hieroglyphics, and the inventor of the megaphone.
9. They inspired the 1954 film *On the Waterfront*, based on the groundbreaking labor-relations work of the Jesuit John Corridan (1911–1984), the “Waterfront Priest” who worked on the docks with labor unions in New York City

in the 1940s and 1950s. His part was played by Karl Malden. The films “The Mission” and “Black Robe” were also inspired by real-life Jesuits.

10. They count fifty saints and dozens of blessed and venerables (near-saints), including the theologian and cardinal St. Robert Bellarmine; the English writer and martyr St. Edmund Campion; and the North America martyrs St. Isaac Jogues and his companions. Among their famous “former” members are Garry Wills, John McLaughlin, and Jerry Brown.

FRIENDS IN THE LORD

JESUIT LIVES ARE ALWAYS INTERCONNECTED

St. Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556). The founder of the Society of Jesus was a former hothead, courtier, soldier, and ladies' man who was wounded by a cannonball in a battle. During his long recuperation, the Spaniard started to wonder if he could be like some of the great saints, and turned his life around. To cheer up downcast Jesuits, he often did Basque dances to encourage them to smile. *One of Ignatius's best friends was. . .*

St. Francis Xavier (1506–52). The church's greatest missionary since St. Paul, he traveled to lands that few Westerners had seen (or imagined), and wrote letters back home showing a great love for the new peoples he visited, rare for a missionary of the time. Francis would do anything to draw people into conversation, even ringing a bell to get their attention. *His adventurous life was an inspiration for the quiet. . .*

St. Aloysius Gonzaga (1568–91). As a young man Aloysius gave up an immense fortune (as well as his rights as a marquis) in order to join the Jesuits, even after his father, the Marquis of Castiglione, threatened to have him whipped. When he entered the novitiate, he carried with him a letter from his father to the novice director. It read: "I simply say I am sending you the most precious thing I possess." Aloysius died at twenty-two after caring for victims of the plague in Rome. *His gentle disposition mirrored that of. . .*

St. Alphonsus Rodriguez (1532–1617). The humble Jesuit brother led a sad early life, losing his wife and children to illness. After joining the Jesuits, Alphonsus was assigned to work as “porter,” or doorkeeper, at the Jesuit school in Majorca, Spain. Trying to treat each person as if he or she were Jesus himself, Alphonsus would answer each knock on the door with the words, “I’m coming Lord!” *While at Majorca Alphonsus became close friends with. . .*

St. Peter Claver (1580–1654). Peter was sent from his native Spain to work with the slaves in Cartagena, in what is now Colombia, where he tirelessly ministered to the slaves, awaiting them with baskets of food as their ships pulled into the docks after their horrific voyages. For his work Peter was called *el esclavo de los esclavos*: the slave of the slaves. *Working in the New World around the same time was. . .*

St. Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649). One of the great missionaries to “New France,” Jean, a French Jesuit, earned a reputation for hardiness among the Native American people because of his physical prowess. He was called “Echon,” or “he who carries great loads,” by the Hurons. Jean’s determination to understand the peoples with whom he ministered drove him to become fluent in the Huron language and compile that tongue’s first written dictionary. *His martyrdom at the hands of the Hurons’ enemy, the Iroquois, inspired another worker in what would become North America, named. . .*

Pierre-Jean de Smet (1801–73). Born in Belgium, De Smet worked in the American West and was said to have traveled 180,000 miles in his peripatetic lifetime. His primary work was

among the Flatheads, Crees, Chippewas, and Blackfeet. De Smet (after whom a town in South Dakota is named) was known as “Friend of Sitting Bull” for his work with the Sioux leader. *De Smet’s incredibly active life mirrors that of. . .*

St. Alberto Hurtado (1901–52). One of the newest Jesuit saints, and only the second Chilean saint, Alberto was a multitasker: a lawyer, priest, writer, and social worker, who started a Catholic magazine, worked with the poor and founded “El Hogar de Cristo,” (the Hearth of Christ) for poor youth in his country. The beat-up green pickup truck Alberto used to visit the poor in the city is still maintained in the shrine dedicated to him in Santiago. *He was as devoted to the working man as was. . .*

John Corridan (1911–84). A “labor priest” who worked with dockworkers in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, he fought corruption and organized crime, and began “labor schools” in New York City to teach the principles of social justice. Father Corridan was the inspiration for the movie “On the Waterfront.” Karl Malden’s famous speech as “Father Barry” in the hold of a ship is inspired by one of Fr. Corridan’s actual homilies. *Corridan faced injustice head on, as did another American Jesuit named. . .*

Walter Ciszek (1904–84). In 1963, President John F. Kennedy worked out a behind-the-scenes deal that finally released this Jesuit priest, who had spent nearly twenty years in Moscow’s notorious Lubianka prison and in Soviet labor camps in Siberia. The American Jesuits had already sent out a notice years

before announcing his death, and were astonished when he returned home. Ciszek, who is currently being considered for canonization, moved into a house near Fordham University, in New York, where another gifted Jesuit would soon take up a teaching assignment there. *He was named. . .*

Avery Cardinal Dulles (1918–2008). Son of the U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and a decorated war hero, he converted to Catholicism while an undergraduate at Harvard. As a Jesuit priest, he authored dozens of books and hundreds of articles, and was considered the dean of American Catholic theologians during his lifetime. He was also the first American Jesuit named a cardinal. *Cardinal Dulles was a contemporary of another well-known American Jesuit. . .*

Daniel Berrigan (born 1921). The priest, writer, poet, and peace activist was a Jesuit whose protests against the Vietnam War landed him for a time on the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted Fugitives" list. Berrigan, who continued his activism into his 80s, was a member of the "Catonsville Nine," who burned draft documents, and the "Plowshares Eight," who began an anti-nuclear weapons movement. Like the rest of these Jesuits, Berrigan reminds us that. . .

Being yourself comes in many flavors, and, as the saying goes, "If you've met one Jesuit, you've met one Jesuit!"