BEGINNINGS
The first Jesuit school opened in Messina, Sicily in 1548, but the roots of Jesuit education reach back to an earlier event. In 1521, Ignatius Loyola, a young man training for a career in the Spanish court, was wounded in a military engagement with the French. Ignatius was the youngest child in a family of feudal lords in the Basque region of northern Spain. While recovering from his wounds at his family’s home, he passed the time reading about the life of Christ and about the lives of the saints. This led him to reflect deeply about his own life and to experience a spiritual awakening to abandon his career at court and 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, 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 that God was teaching him the way a schoolmaster mentors a child.

Ignatius 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. He called this book the *Spiritual Exercises*. 

BE ATTENTIVE
BE REFLECTIVE
BE LOVING
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 their unique gifts and personalities that God had given them. After receiving their degrees, the group decided to stay together to “help souls” as Jesus and his disciples had done. 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 THE JESUITS GET INVOLVED IN SCHOOLS?

At first, no single activity defined the new religious order. 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 discovered 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 universities of Europe and they thought of themselves as specialists in ministries of the word. 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 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 Jesuit schools 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 medieval 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 models.

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**

How does the spiritual vision of Ignatius Loyola 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:

**Be Attentive**

We learn by organizing our experience and appropriating it in the increasingly complex psychological structures by which we engage and make sense out 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 everything 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, 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 we pay attention? By observing, wondering, opening ourselves to what is new, allowing the reality of people and things to enter our consciousness on its own terms.

This is why Jesuit schools have traditionally emphasized liberal education, a core curriculum and the arts and 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 the Jesuits across the world, has said, “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.

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, weigh options in light of their possible consequences. We need, that is, to see the patterns of 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 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.

**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 are 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 and 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 and 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 others’ 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 to which we belong. **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 400 years, it has been said that Jesuit education educates “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 **“women and men 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 women and men for whom discernment is a habit.

We can think of discernment as the lifelong process 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 high school, 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 do. At these times, we might be especially conscious of using the 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 shaping the direction of our lives and to ask for light or clarity about this. Then, we review the events of the day,
especially those where our feelings have been most engaged, positively or negatively. We notice the patterns and the emerging insights about which experiences lead us towards God and which lead away. And we end by looking ahead to tomorrow and asking to live with a growing sense of God’s trust in our future.

For Ignatius, a key element of discerning is the exercise of imagination. In doing the *Examen*, he suggests we use our imagination 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 for 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.**

**QUESTIONS?**

If you want to learn more about Jesuit education, you can find a number of resources at [www.goramblers.org](http://www.goramblers.org)
JESUIT EDUCATION TODAY

Today, approximately 4,000 Jesuits run 3,730 educational institutions serving 2.5 million students worldwide. In the U.S., there are 28 Jesuit colleges and universities and 55 high schools. Georgetown Preparatory School was the first high school founded in 1789. Loyola Academy was founded in 1909 and is the largest Jesuit preparatory school in the country. Increasingly, Jesuit educational institutions are staffed and administered by men and women who are not Jesuits, but animated by the vision of Jesuit education and the spirituality of Ignatius Loyola. Jesuit education continues to adapt old ideas to modern-day times and needs.