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Book Review: James Martin, S.J., *A Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*

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marry its “secular excellence with its religious tradition.” “We have shown that we can be ‘good’ as a university,” he declared, “but we have yet to show that we can continue to be ‘Catholic’ and all that means.” Issues of identity remained on the forefront at Georgetown—as at other Jesuit schools—in the years that followed,

although perhaps with more urgency and attention at Georgetown because of its prominence.

This three-volume study, weighing in at ten pounds, is grand in every sense of the word. It rests on research in American and European archives, numerous interviews, and an impressive array of source materials.

Georgetown is university history at its best—thoroughly grounded, impartially told, and crisply written. It is also beautifully designed and illustrated, satisfying both mind and eye. One hesitates to describe a work as definitive, but that is the right adjective for this elegant and informative study. ■

James Martin, S.J., *A Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*

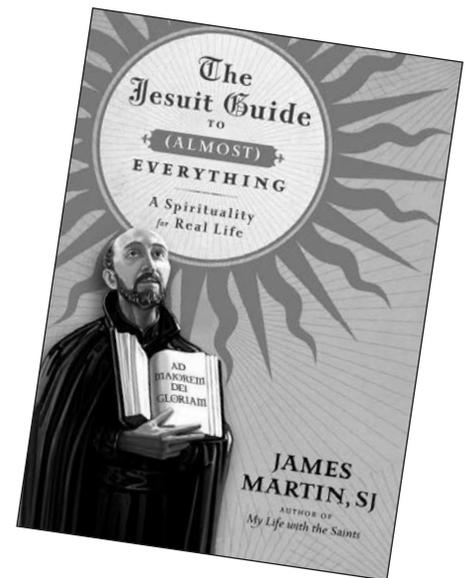
Harper One, 432 pp, \$26.

By Aparna Venkatesan

As a non-Catholic faculty member at a Jesuit university, I found *A Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* to be very well written and an enjoyable read for the general layperson. It is entertaining and humorous, but its accessible style goes hand-in-hand with depth of material. The author conveys simply and succinctly the background of the Ignatian paradigm and the Spiritual Exercises, and how to apply these teachings practically in one’s life and to the world today. I found much of this background as well as the topics and specific suggestions interesting and helpful for my understanding of Jesuit practices.

James Martin, S.J., begins with a description of the life of St. Ignatius and

key Ignatian qualities, including finding God in all things, and seeking freedom and detachment. He stresses that Ignatian life is not just about prayer but about being contemplatives in action. Within this context, and the three Catholic religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, he presents a provocative discussion of the purpose and goals of chastity in the wake of the sexual-abuse crisis in the Catholic church. He also points to the unexpected freedom of “downward mobility” (a term coined by Dean Brackley, S.J., an author in this *Conversations* issue), in relation to the vow of poverty. A simplified life with fewer possessions could be a potent antidote for some of the modern gods of career and monetary ambitions, and have an impact on many lives. This reminded me of the Gandhian motto “Live simply so that others may



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simply live,” and resonates with the perception of the current economic crisis being brought on by a larger culture of greed, consumerism and materialism.

Mr. Martin highlights key aspects of a spiritual path: practicality, flexibility, and a sense of humor. These qualities are expressed in the book itself through numerous anecdotes and jokes, including two of my favorites: one on “Bring on Chastity,” and the other about a child who, when given a choice of whiskey, a dollar bill or a Bible, chooses all three and is pronounced a Jesuit!

The book has Jesuit practices at its heart, but it can easily translate to most faiths. As the author emphasizes near the end of the book, the experiences and ideas of St. Ignatius have an appeal beyond a Jesuit/Catholic context. The Ignatian idea of “indifference,” which he states is often much misunderstood, has parallels in the ideas of Zen, Hinduism and Taoism of experiencing the world without attachment (a grandmotherly indifferent sort of love) rather than through a grasping attachment (a parental type of love). Flexibility as a key aspect of living is also emphasized in the Tao Te Ching. (For those atheist and agnostic readers, I would suggest that they replace all occurrences of “God” with the idea of their best or highest selves.) The 31-year old Ignatius leaving his well-off home, “stripping off his garment,” practicing austerities, and ultimately arriving at a moderated path to self-discovery is reminiscent of the 29-year old Siddhartha (later to become the Buddha) who left his home in the middle of the night, undergoing six years of extreme penances before realizing the principles of the Middle Path, and thereafter becoming a walking, teaching contemplative on the roads of India and modern Nepal.



Spots for prayer or quiet reflection are not hard to come by at Seattle University. Photo by

Faculty and students (at Jesuit or non-Jesuit institutions) may find some valuable practices and insights in the book’s discussion of the work/life balance, and of using the Examen to slow down and listen amidst the noise and hectic pace of modern life. Practicing reflection, gratitude and silence can also reduce the stress of university life. For students, reflecting on moments of consolation and desolation may help them discover a sense of purpose, and find a path or vocation true to

their deepest longings. For faculty, practicing detachment and freedom could lead (ironically) to greater spontaneity, openness, and closeness with their students, and discern what is most important to them personally in their course material and their role as teachers.

In summary, I see this as a spiritual self-help book on how to live, love, work and be your best self from a Jesuit perspective – a popular psychology book with a spiritual foundation. It aims for people from all backgrounds and places, and does not try to be, in the author’s words, “overly scholarly or academic.” As the author points out, the reader does not have to be Catholic or even religious to benefit from the Ignatian spiritual tradition. This seems especially valuable at present when, according to a 2009 *Newsweek* poll, an increasing number of Americans refer to themselves as “spiritual, not religious” (currently estimated at 30 percent), while millennials (those between the ages of 19 and 30), are increasingly likely to blend multiple faiths and spiritual practices. ■