



How St. Ignatius Can Help Us See God in the Noise and Interruptions of this Pandemic Year by Cameron Bellm

I'm just settling in on the couch with my coffee to reflect on a Gospel passage when I hear it. "Mommy, can I have some more milk?" As soon as I sit back down, another little voice chimes in, eager to show me his progress in a game he's playing. This loud, holy hour, peppered with laughter and the soundtrack of cartoons, is the best part of my day.

It's also part of a nine-month retreat in everyday life, The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Originally formulated in the 16th century, the Exercises are organized into four movements of meditation and contemplation on the life of Jesus and the retreatant's relationship with God. Initially called "the long retreat," the Exercises were given over a 30-day period of silence and solitude. No noise, no interruptions. St. Ignatius realized, though, that not everyone had 30 days to spare, and so he created the 19th annotation, a version of the Exercises that spans the better part of a year and is known as a retreat in daily life.

As a mother of young children, accustomed to rearranging my schedule to fit my sons' needs, I have long appreciated St. Ignatius' flexibility. But now that everyone's work and daily routines have been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic, I am finding ever more reason to appreciate the wisdom of the man I've come to think of as the patron saint of adaptability.

Ordinarily this retreat in everyday life, offered by my local Ignatian Spirituality Center, would take place in person, with monthly morning retreats supplemented by meetings with a spiritual director in a quiet office, candles lit and sacred art to set the contemplative mood. But this year the retreats and spiritual direction are taking place via Zoom, and I attend them from my office, which is also my closet. My hour of daily prayer takes place not during the peaceful morning lull when my children are at school, but right in their presence, since they are learning at home.

In all honesty, I did not know if I could pull this off. How was I going to enter into a sacred space amidst all the chaos and noise of my daily life? How was I going to focus on God with so many interruptions?

I have to imagine St. Ignatius grinning. What better place could there be to discover the bedrock of Ignatian spirituality, that it is precisely in the obligations of our daily lives that God meets us? In the folding of the laundry, God is present. In the washing of the dishes, God is present. In the voices of my children, God is present. In creating the 19th annotation, St. Ignatius paved the way for us to adapt how we fit prayer into our busy lives, but also, perhaps even more importantly, to recognize that wherever we are and whatever we encounter in our daily lives, God is already there.

During the second movement of the Exercises, we focus our contemplative lens on events in the life of Jesus, starting with the Nativity. As I entered into a guided meditation on that sacred scene with my spiritual director, I was struck by something I had never noticed before: the noise of the nativity. I heard the hustle and bustle of a city overflowing with people registering for the census — shouts and footfalls, the ancient version of a perpetual traffic jam. In the stable I heard the donkeys' braying, mingled with the occasional moo of a cow or bleat of a sheep. For the first time I registered the interruption of the joyful shepherds and the Magi, strangers to Mary and Joseph, but vital players in this holy event.

We are accustomed to thinking of the nativity as serene and silent, as the beloved carol goes, but the noise and interruptions have much to teach us about the movement of God in our own busy lives. When I imagine prayer, I think

of silence, perhaps a candle burning, or fragrant flowers artfully arranged on an otherwise empty table — a perfectly still scene into which God can enter. But what I have learned in these loud months at home is that God speaks just as clearly in and through the interruptions, the noise and the boisterous clamor of my everyday life as he does in a quiet retreat setting.

The next time your prayer time or daily routine is interrupted, try greeting the intrusion as a magi, a shepherd, an animal noise in the stable — not as something that draws you away from God, but as something that adds to your experience of God. Try thinking of the noise in your life not as a roadblock, but as a doorway, an opening to a new path, a new vantage point, where you can see an aspect of God's presence in your life that you would otherwise have missed.

Hallelujah for those holy interruptions. Hallelujah for our God of surprises, who grants us the freedom to see the sacred in the everyday.