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## Review: Jesuits Telling Jokes: A [Serious] Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality by Nikolaas Sintobin, S.J.

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**Review: *Jesuits Telling Jokes: A [Serious] Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*  
by Nikolaas Sintobin, S.J.**

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*Jesuits Telling Jokes: A [Serious] Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (English Edition). By Nikolaas Sintobin, S.J. Foreword by Mark Rotsaert, S.J. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2016. xi + 97 pages. \$10.95 (paper).

*“God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh.”*  
—Voltaire

In *Jesuits Telling Jokes*, scholar Nikolaas Sintobin, S.J. uses gentle humor to engage learners and introduce them to Ignatian spirituality. He weaves visual, humorous, anecdotal, philosophical, and historical threads into a pedagogical welcome mat that, at least for me, makes the doorway to understanding the Society of Jesus more inviting: a garden gate rather than a forbidding portcullis. His quickly read (and happily revisited) book helped me through the fear factor that accompanies lack of knowledge.

My years of parochial school, CCD, and freshman Bible studies at a Catholic women’s college were insufficient background for the Ignatian Scholars Program at Regis University. The first set of spiritual readings from a variety of Jesuit scholars impressed me with their erudition and bewildering (albeit compelling) philosophical discussions. New vocabulary—*cura personalis*, *Examen*, *humaniora*—and new juxtapositions for previously familiar terms like discernment, consolation/disconsolation, freedom/obedience, apostolic courage, and heart/intelligence/will. Although beautiful linguistic shards, the new concepts didn’t self-organize quickly into a recognizable and memorable mosaic for me. They sounded good but I knew I wasn’t getting it. How would I be able to apply these principles to my life and to courses I was leading at Regis? I was not yet even teetering on the first step of Bloom’s pyramidal taxonomy of learning, of knowledge; higher order thinking levels like understanding and application seemed sadly distant.

Sintobin’s deceptively simple treatment of 20 basic Jesuit concepts opened my mind to serial “aha” moments. The amusing cartoons that open each short chapter put one at ease, showing tolerance for the foibles of those already initiated, and letting others in on the humor of the human spiritual condition: that asking questions may be more instructive than receiving answers. The reader recognizes immediately that instruction will be adaptable to one’s own level of preparedness and need, similar to the Jesuit counsel about walking through the door of another for better understanding. An added benefit is that the cartoons decode the relationships among other religious orders, in addition to making wry comments on the Jesuits’ reputation for being pragmatic and finding the other-worldly in worldly matters.

The jokes that follow the cartoons echo the visual chuckle and reify what to expect from the different religious philosophies while emphasizing the Society of Jesus. In an illustration of the Ignatian concept of adaptation (sensitivity to context), for example, a dying father requests that each of his sons—a Dominican, a Franciscan, and a Jesuit—put \$1000 in his casket before burial. The Dominican dutifully places \$1000 in cash in the casket. The Franciscan asks forgiveness for being thrifty, and declines to honor the request. The Jesuit then grandly lets the Franciscan off the paternal hook: He’ll cover his brother’s debt. He pockets the Dominican brother’s \$1000 and places a check for \$3000 in the casket. He has obeyed his father and yet acted pragmatically.

Other such examples of Jesuit edge—or just the Jesuit being in the world but often at the periphery of more cloistered orders—abound. Primed for

learning by these humorous preludes, Sintobin then expands on the principles in a conversational tone that flows through, rather than preaches to, the reader's mind. He tells stories, recounting incidents in Ignatius's search for meaning in a way that follows the tradition of the hero's journey (as discussed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*). In so doing, the point is made clear that individual adherents to the Society of Jesus are intended to make their own hero's journey, to identify the way that is most fit for them, to converse with God on uniquely personal terms without concern about judging others or being judged. As Sintobin summarizes: "finding God in all things gives us the opportunity to consider our lives here and now as the precise place where we can already experience the fullness of God's love."<sup>1</sup>

Structurally, Sintobin's approach conveys the spirit of Jesuit spirituality. The ornamental (or "not serious") preludes, in effect, walk the reader through his or her own door and then the author walks the reader out through the scholar's door of philosophical exegesis. The meandering route brings the reader to the point with less effort because the discussion feels relevant—grounded.

Sintobin makes good work of using humor to accommodate psychological and cognitive barriers to learning, a pedagogical approach whose benefits are documented in formal research studies. According to one survey of research literature on the advantages of using humor, "instructional humor has been touted as an excellent way for students to learn vocabulary, increase critical thinking, practice semantics, and remember more information . . . it helps individuals change their current mental perspective by visualizing problems in an alternate way, as well as engaging their critical thinking."<sup>2</sup>

It worked for me. I feel less afraid, less clueless about exploring Ignatian teachings with Sintobin's guidance as a more secular lens through which I can see the bigger picture more clearly and start perceiving the significance of the details. What a sweet combination of "aha" and "ha-ha" moments! 🙏

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nikolaas Sintobin, S.J., *Jesuits Telling Jokes: A [Serious] Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*, English ed. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2016), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Jana Hackathorn, Amy M. Garczynski, Kathryn Blankmeyer, Rachel D. Tennial, and Erin D. Solomon, "All Kidding Aside: Humor Increases Learning at Knowledge and Comprehension Levels," *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 11, no. 4 (2011): 116–123.