Why I Am a Jesuit

By Rick "Mugs" Malloy SJ

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The primary reason I am a Jesuit is because I am fascinated by God. The only point of life is to try and figure out why we are alive, what we are to do while we are on earth, and what happens when we die. Those three questions all have to do with the mystery of existence, i.e. God. Over 30 years ago I was led to a nursing home to work as an orderly, and that experience of service transformed my life. There, I found joy, assisting the elderly and helping them prepare for death. That job mysteriously was an answer to a prayer I prayed out on the quad at Lafayette College, “Okay, Lord, if you’re there, do something.” What turned me to prayer was the experience a few days before of falling drunk down the fraternity house stairs and splitting my head open. Sometimes it takes a blow to the head to wake up an Irishman.

Ever since, I have been searching for God. This is the God who was part of the thought I had as a little boy at a Lenten daily Mass, as I knelt amidst the entire student body, looked up at the priest and realized, “I’m going to do that someday.” On the High School “Encounter” retreat in 1972, I met this God, and then hid from him for several years. This God is the meaning and mystery of my life. This mysterious God saved me from death when I totaled a pick up truck on the Garden State Parkway, after a wild night in the bars of Margate, N.J., in the summer of 1974. This God has led me, fascinated me, explicitly and directly, ever since calling me to Jesuit life in 1976 when the words of Mk 10:21 powerfully spoke to my soul. This same God refused to be God my way in the 30-day Spiritual Exercises of 1977 and 2000. This God about whom I’ve read and read, and thought and thought, to whom I’ve prayed and prayed, is the reason I’m a Jesuit.

Life in the Society of Jesus is one within which a man is necessarily pursued by God and is freed to pursue God, and to pursue God in a way radically oriented toward service of others, to be “of help to souls.” As a Jesuit, I find that I am naturally, constantly, daily impelled to seek God in all realities, in all personal encounters, in all that is and can be. People in my life support and challenge me as I develop this mysterious relationship with God, a relationship many days muddled and murky, and often cantankerous (eight-day retreats are usually more mud wrestling with God than halcyon interludes between months of apostolic service). Often, evidence of that primary relationship with God is manifest in interactions with fellow Jesuits, our praying, daily living, sometimes fighting, but always laughing, together. Most deeply, that reality of God and God of all reality is mediated to me by those who love me and those I love.

Those who are not Jesuits, of course, are also able to serve others, and to seek and encounter God, and many most likely do so more faithfully, authentically and integrally than I. For me, the structure and constraints of life in the Society of Jesus focus and free me in the quest for God. If I were not a Jesuit, I’d probably be a truck driver, wandering endlessly, wasting away my life in the pursuit of trivialities and distractions from what really matters, our eternal destiny.

As a Jesuit, I grew and was formed despite my myriad faults and failings, yet also with a flowing forth of abilities and talents I never would have known, had I not taken vows, had I not let go and placed my feet firmly in air, had I not received the grace to keep saying “the Infinite Yes” to God. Preaching and ministering in situations and contexts far, far too numerous to count, have made me a man ready for just about anything: from teaching English and religion in a high school in Osorno, Chile; to burying a 15-year-old killed in the insane violence of the inner city drug wars of Camden, N.J., a young man to whom I had given First Communion just five years earlier; to regularly celebrating Mass with a gym full of mentally challenged children; to teaching anthropology and sociology at a Jesuit University; to speaking in contexts as varied as hospitals and retreat houses; to writing of many kinds; to learning from the elders on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and in Yup’ik Eskimo villages; to the necessary penances of multiple committee and board meetings; to preaching and presiding at Masses in parishes and prisons; to celebrations of baptisms and weddings; to retreat weekends on hilltops with Jesuit Volunteers; on and on. I am not unique. Most Jesuits lead lives as varied and as interesting as
mine. Many Jesuits’ lives are even more varied, interesting and fascinating. When people ask why Jesuits are what we are, and do what we do, I don’t think we communicate clearly that this life is fascinating and fun.

That’s a second major reason I am a Jesuit. This life is endlessly intriguing and interesting. There are critics galore in the Society of Jesus, and sometimes the criticism fails to rise above the level of petty complaint, but the one complaint I have never, ever, heard is that Jesuit life is boring. The intellectual feast that is Jesuit life means engaging in a never-ending discussion of theoretical physics, string theory at breakfast to lunch debates about global politics to kitchen talks late at night over ice cream, sharing about the meaning of suffering and death. It really is true that a Jesuit is one with a “flair for meaning of suffering and death. It really is necessary measured by the degree to which others have life opportunities like ours. The degree, density and depth of my solidarity with the poor and marginalized are the measure of the freedom that I can love.

The third and most fundamental reason I am a Jesuit is because I have experienced freedom and love as a Jesuit. I never cease to be amazed at how well and deeply and unreservedly and quickly and easily I am loved precisely as a Jesuit, open in ways I little deserve or merit, and for reasons I little understand. Wherever I go, from a summer in a parish in Springfield, N.M., to the students’ Hawk Rock café at Saint Joseph’s University, to tee ball games for Holy Name Little Leaguers in Camden, to Jesuit Volunteer Corps’ orientations and retreats, people want to be nice to me, share their food with me, talk with me about their lives and loves, struggles and sins, joys and jubilations. It’s not because I’m some kind of special person or priest. It is because they already have met Jesuits, and trust and expect I will be like those fine priests and brothers. At Jesuit parishes, schools and retreat houses, the people we serve never relate to one Jesuit in isolation from other Jesuits. They love us, not just me.

Most deeply, as a Jesuit, I have been made an integral member of many, many families. The love I have experienced at the reunions of the family of a fellow Jesuit, the welcome and support of several families who invite me over, clamor for me to visit, and let me just be me when I am among them, the families who trust me to play with their small children when I am among them, the families who invite me over, clamor for me to visit, and let me just be me when I am among them, the families who trust me to play with their small children despite the horrific scandals of abuse perpetrated by some priests, are all a direct result of their knowing me as a Jesuit. They call me to be a better and more genuinely authentic son of Ignatius and disciple of Jesus. Great graces too are the many individuals who have loved and listened to me, helping me grow and be a better man of the Gospel and Church, a more authentic human being, a man loving and loved. Love is best expressed in deeds, and one way of expressing love is the practice of prayer.

Finally, I am a Jesuit because of the reality and challenge of prayer. All these realities I mention in this reflection come together in some mysterious and inexplicable way as we pray. Praying the Office, contemplating the scriptures and church teachings, studying spiritual and theological books, and sitting in the silence of Centering Prayer, unite everything in God who is “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). All these graced/gifted realities of my life are present as the throbbing center at the heart of the daily Eucharist. That pulsating center is charged through, and sustained by, the constant presence of an inexplicable, unfathomable, utter-ly mysterious God, the God who is love, the God revealed and communicated to us in human history in the preaching, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the God who lives in our hearts by the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out in our hearts (Rom 5:5). Ultimately, I am a Jesuit because I am made one by the grace of God, the call of Jesus, and the challenge, support and love of others. Deo Gratias. 

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