

INTRODUCTION

Consider where you are right now, this place you've been given as shelter, the breakfast you had this morning. Notice your breath, the blinking of your eyes, your ability to read this. Consider the brain power you have, which has given you reason to make decisions that have led you up to this moment in your life. As you opened this book or turned the page, did you notice the miracle of your fingers and the tiny muscle movements that made it happen? Consider the hundreds of processes going on inside of you right now. Whom do you most care about? What are you good at? What are your talents?

God has given this all to you. God sustains all of this in existence. God is the life-giving Source. This truth enriches our seemingly mundane actions with a greater awareness of the goodness within them. This is finding God in all things.

In Ronald Rolheiser's masterpiece *The Holy Longing*, he introduces the idea of a "God with skin." It's rooted in the Incarnation of Christ, where God took on literal flesh—skin—and walked the earth. The Incarnation is the foundation of Ignatian spirituality. There we find a God who is concrete and whom we can experience. Rolheiser says, "The God of the incarnation has real flesh

on earth and speaks to us in the bread and butter of our lives, through things that have skin—historical circumstance, our families, our neighbors, our churches, and that borderline-psychotic friend who painfully reminds us that we are not God.”¹

The Incarnation of God is not just about God’s coming to earth in the person of Jesus but about Christ’s continued presence and “fleshiness” in the world. My hope is to take this idea further and make it practical for our everyday living. Through just a few short years, I discovered how the God with skin appears at practically every waking moment.

Living a deeply spiritual life is not just about morals or obligations. It’s about something deeper, which our churches—at times—fail to tap into. Much of my spiritual growth has occurred in the normal places of daily life: at school, at work, in the car, or with friends. My spirituality is heavily influenced by Ignatian spirituality, the most important principle of which is finding God in all things, in these plain and ordinary spaces, and within ourselves. God’s presence dwells in everything. God gives life and being and existence to everything, so finding God in all things is just a matter of paying attention. You look at spring buds on the trees, and you see God giving them life. You feel the warmth of the sun on your face, and you sense God comforting you. A stranger smiles at you, and suddenly you feel connected to all of God’s family. In the hustle of life, it’s easy for us to miss these God moments. Time and time again, we must remind ourselves to look and listen more attentively to the ways God is present to us.

I first learned about finding God in all things with the story of St. Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuit order (which I was a part of for a short time). Ignatius was born into wealth around the turn of the sixteenth century in northern Spain. As a Castilian military governor, he fought for his people—a literal knight in shining armor. Caught up with his nobility and fancy new castle, he dreamed of living the good life and indulged in

gambling, dueling, and having affairs. Then, when he was fighting the French in battle, his castle was stormed and a cannonball shattered his leg. As he recovered in bed, he continued dreaming of a fantastic life, but how that would play out would not be in the way he expected.

During his recuperation, he read about the lives of Christ and the saints and chose instead to live fighting for God. The benefit of all this time in recovery was that he had time to pay attention to his feelings. As he weighed his desires for a life of knighthood with his desires for more saintly living, he discovered that his feelings pointed him to a life of following God rather than seeking riches and status. This was the beginning of Ignatian spirituality. Through his life experiences, travels, and encounters, he came to notice a God with skin who was communicating with him through those experiences and people.

After I learned this story, I began to understand, like St. Ignatius, how God takes on flesh in the various experiences and people around me. The “all things” in which we desire to find God includes you and me. We not only encounter God in the world but, like St. Ignatius, *we* give God skin. “All things” really means that God is not limited to any one thing or any one person in particular. A church does not contain God *more* than a field of corn. A priest is not more holy than a single mother. God is uncontained and unconfined.



When I met my wife-to-be, we realized we had a shared spirituality. And when it came time to enter into the sacrament of Marriage, we wanted to be intentional about it, so we asked ourselves why we were getting married. What was the purpose of forming a lifelong partnership with each other? Our answer was not just about how much we loved each other or how we wanted to grow old together. Our answer was that we wanted *to change the world*.

As people of faith, we wanted our marriage to affect the world in a positive way. We wanted the sacrament of our Marriage to be a way in which God broke into the world. When people looked at the fruits of our love and actions, we wanted them to see God manifested through us. We simply wanted to live our Christian call of loving God and neighbor and concretely bring God's love to others. And we could do that better together than on our own.

St. Paul says, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22b, NRSV). He alludes to the need for us, as people of God who serve and love and minister to others, to be adaptable enough so that we may be able compassionately to companion others. This means that we can be present for the single mother as much as for the widowed man. We can be God's loving presence as much for a starving orphan as we can for a coworker. God's limits know no bounds, which means that God's reach manifests itself in us in a multitude of ways.

St. Paul expands on how we can be all things to all people: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all" (1 Cor 12:4-7, GNT). The mission is the same: to serve God and serve our neighbor. But each of us carries it out in different ways and with different gifts. In this way, that last verse can be fulfilled: "The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all."

Day-to-day living reveals how God uses us in different ways. One day my conversation with a coworker turned into her pouring out her heart to me about her past struggles. This was a God moment for me, so I sat and listened lovingly. As a high school teacher, I often feel God using me to empathize with my students' struggles of growing up. There have been other times I've sat

with the dying and have been a loving presence for them. Each circumstance is very different and requires us to adapt, but each circumstance shows the same thing: that God can be found in us, that “all things” simply means letting God be present through us for whatever person or situation presents itself.



I’ve discovered the God with skin can be found through *awareness* and *prayer* and that we give God skin through *discernment* and *decision-making*. These two themes are the foundation for this book. This book is less about me and more about you. While I will offer personal anecdotes from time to time, the hope is that *God Moments* will draw you into a deeper awareness of God’s concrete presence in your life as I share ways in which I’ve become more aware of the divine presence in my own life. Whether or not you have heard of Ignatian spirituality before, this book will serve as a practical companion as you explore the ways that God appears before you in an ordinary and messy world.

Ignatius says that we should always let the Spirit of God lead. While God may use the following pages and chapters to speak to you, you cannot confine the God with skin even to this book. You may discover that the fruits and “aha” moments you get within these pages will unfold more once you’ve put this book down.

Just days after leaving the Jesuits, I began *GodInAllThings.com*, a blog and website devoted to Ignatian spirituality. It was the fruit of what God had shown me in the past years, and it has unfolded now into this book. I encourage you to use this book and the website as resources. But don’t make books and websites your only resources. God has created a stunning world outside your door to explore, and God has also given you the gift of prayer. You’ll often find that more comes from *within* than from any book or blog. Let this book just be the spark at the beginning of a long and slow burn of an encounter with the God with skin.

1

AWARENESS

I grew up in a fairly typical Catholic family that went to church weekly, prayed at meals and before bed, and was involved in religious classes. Like many “cradle Catholics,” I blew through the sacraments without much thought. My mother gave me a list of my sins to take to my first Confession, I made my first Communion, and then I reached Confirmation. The teacher told us that Confirmation was the point when we could make an adult decision to continue as Catholics, that it was *our* choice, not our parents’. This was a minor turning point for me. While many of my classmates stopped going to church after Confirmation, I maintained an interest. Yet for me, prayer was about praying to a distant God who mysteriously chose whether or not to answer my prayers. It was a fairly uninvolved God in my mind: a God who appeared as static, dusty crucifixes, religious statues, and formulaic prayers. My favorite part of going to my family’s church was the donuts after Mass. My undergraduate years didn’t do much for my faith. I continued to attend church out of obligation, and I didn’t really pray all that much.

After graduating, I began working in Boston and decided to join an online dating site. I didn’t know exactly why it was important to me, but I set my preferences to only return matches from Christian women. I soon began dating a Protestant girl who

was alive in her faith. She invited me to her weekly Bible study and introduced me to her friends, who were also on fire with a love for God. What struck me in our faith sharing was how much these women and men, who worked in all sorts of fields, could find God in their everyday lives. My life was so routine, and I hadn't yet moved beyond going to church out of obligation. Church seemed like something I had to do, like flossing or going to work, in order to get my "spiritual paycheck"—whatever that was good for. God still seemed one-dimensional and uninvolved. How was it that these people at the Bible study had such intimate encounters with God?

I began reading more, learning about my faith, attending a young-adult group at my church, and meeting with a Jesuit spiritual director. I had heard about Ignatian spirituality at church and through my brother, who was a Jesuit studying for priesthood. My spiritual director helped me discover, for the first time, how to find God in all things—the heart of Ignatian spirituality. He helped me pray using my imagination, and my awareness opened to the ways that God was touching me in my daily life. God took on skin by appearing all around me: in the people on my commuter bus, in the sun shining off the snow, in my girlfriend making me a meal. I could finally see how beauty was a sign of God's presence and how others were *bringing God to me* through their love and friendship. I could not believe how my relationship with God was beginning to grow and how prayer for me was becoming more than asking God for things.

Prayer became something I lived and breathed. Prayer was not just folding my hands and speaking to God but *awareness*, moments of gazing at the faces of people sharing the bus on my commute or watching my dog pounce through the snow during her first winter. It was if God leapt from out of the clouds down to my earthly reality and became intimately involved in my life. God was no longer just located in church on Sunday or in Bible passages discussed in religious-education classes. It was

like the joy of Christmas morning when you realize that Christ's birth was not just some sanitized fairy tale but God's radical leap from heaven to earth, becoming human so he could be intimately involved in our lives.

At times prayer for me became a conversation with God, but I also had quiet nights in prayer when there was no light in my bedroom but a small tealight candle in a red glass votive cup. It was simple and disarming. My prayer had no words. It was nothing more than watching the flicker of the flame and feeling God's presence in the room. There was something about the flame that revealed God to me. A flame has a life of its own, flickering and moving on its own, even without an apparent breeze. Sometimes the orange-red flame goes wild, while at other moments it sits calmly and still. It was alive like me, like the Spirit, and was providing warmth and light as if by magic. But the force behind it was God.

This is the simple magic we see in a sunset or an ant crawling across the floor. They are the simple things of beauty that are outside our control yet have amazing lives of their own. I'll never forget an evening of Taizé prayer I attended when the thin taper candle I was holding in my fist started moving on a rhythm. It was my pulse—the blood coursing through my arteries and veins—that was causing the taper to move, pulse by pulse. I remember staring at it, knowing that it was not I consciously moving it but the blood that God was causing to pulse rhythmically through my hand.

Now the simple act of lighting a candle becomes a prayer for me, initiating that flame which I've come to see as so close to God's essence, providing me light and comfort. And I suppose that magic, as I call it, is that life force beyond me—God sustaining and causing, creating beauty through a flickering flame and the pulse of my blood. These things can be explained through physics and biology, but there is something there still hidden, which is why I can see God there.

C. S. Lewis uses the word *magic* in his book *Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer*: “I should define magic in this sense as ‘objective efficacy which cannot be further analysed.’ . . . Now the value, for me, of the magical element of Christianity is this. It is a permanent witness that the heavenly realm, certainly no less than the natural universe and perhaps very much more, is a realm of objective facts. . . . One cannot conceive a more completely ‘given,’ or, if you like, a more ‘magical,’ fact than the existence of God as *causa sui*.”¹

Deep stuff. In essence, the “magic” of the universe, of the flame, the pulse, the sunset, and the ant is a witness to the existence of God. But the magical element cannot be gotten rid of by mere explanation. I think that even though I can explain the photons and energy of the flame in my votive cup and I can explain how the impulses from my heart caused the pressure of my blood to move the taper in my hand, there remains a wonder and awe that has its source in God. And that invisible Source becomes visible in the material world. God creates those physical and bodily processes that make my hand pulse.

Michael Gungor’s song “Cannot Keep You” speaks about our boxing in of God, our trying to confine God to churches, rituals, or scripture.

So we will find you in the streets
And we will find you in the prisons
And even in our Bibles and churches.²

When we confine God *only* to the faith of our childhood or rules and doctrine, we make God very small. The God with skin is a deeply personal God, intimately involved in the nooks and crannies of our lives. This God is ready to appear not just in church but in a listening friend, in a remarkable teacher, in a gorgeous sunset, on the street, and even in us.

As time went on, God became part of my everyday life. Through the influence of my Jesuit spiritual director and my