



Pope Francis Introduces the Ignatian Year 2021

On May 23, 2021, members of the worldwide Ignatian family — Jesuits and lay collaborators alike — joined together in a virtual prayer to begin the Ignatian Year, a global celebration marking the 500th anniversary of St. Ignatius' conversion. There was one Jesuit who was sure not to miss the event.

"In Pamplona, 500 years ago, all the worldly dreams of Ignatius were shattered in one instance," Pope Francis said in a video message. "That one cannonball changed the course of his life, and of the world."

As we begin this Ignatian Year, I invite you to reflect on Pope Francis' words. Below, we provide the text of his message — with select phrases bolded — along with annotations to consider in your prayer.

Dear friends,

I am happy to join you in this prayer for the Ignatian Year, the celebration of the conversion of St. Ignatius. I hope that all who are inspired by Ignatius and Ignatian spirituality may truly live this year as an experience of conversion. In Pamplona, 500 years ago, all the worldly dreams of Ignatius were shattered in one instance. This one cannonball changed the course of his life, and of the world. Seemingly small things matter.

If Pope Francis thinks having a cannonball shatter your legs is a small thing, I wonder what he considers to be a big thing! But the point is an essential one all the same. It is crucial to Ignatian spirituality and so should be a touchstone to our Ignatian Year experience. St. Ignatius tells us that God is truly present in all things; all of creation can reveal to us something of God and God's dream for our lives and our world. That includes every person we encounter — from the constant emails from colleagues to the person struggling with homelessness on the street. That includes the good and the bad of our days, the struggles and the joys, the tiny smiles, and big tears. That includes the quiet stillness of the morning and the incessant buzzing of the cicadas in the afternoon. So, be alert to God right now in this moment. Remember: it was in the "light silent sound" that Elijah encountered God (1 Kings 19:12).

This cannonball also meant that Ignatius failed in the dreams he had for his life. But God had a bigger dream for him. God's dream for Ignatius was not centered on Ignatius. It was about helping souls. It was a dream of redemption, a dream about going out to the whole world, accompanied by Jesus, humble and poor.

In the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius invites us to meditate on Two Standards. He invites us to pick up *Christ's Standard* and reject that of the Enemy. This means we are called to embrace humility, poverty, and rejection — following the downward path of Christ — and resist the Enemy's temptation to riches, power, and honor. Another way to think of this is to put ourselves in Pope Francis' words: God's dream for us is not centered on us. Amassing wealth, power and honor is an inward process. Too often, we turn our gaze on our own good at the expense of the needs of others. The self-emptying love that we practice through humility, poverty and rejection necessarily turns our gaze outward, seeking those people and places in the world that most need our love. This, too, is a path to discovering our vocation — as St. Ignatius did. And ironically — as Francis reminds us — our vocation is centered not on ourselves but on others.

Conversion is a daily matter; it is never once and for all. Ignatius' conversion started at Pamplona, but it did not end there. All through his life he continually converted, every day, month, and year. And what does this mean? That all through his life he put Christ in the center. And he did so through discernment. Discernment is not about always getting it

right from the start, but it is rather about navigating, about having a compass to be able to set out on the road which has many twists and turns and letting oneself be guided always by the Holy Spirit who is leading us to an encounter with the Lord.

One of the greatest lies we tell ourselves is that our happiness, our contentment, our joy is “...just around the corner,” just one decision away. Everything will click into place as soon as...I get married... I get that promotion.... I enter the convent.... I change my diet.... I...fill in the blank. The adage reminds us that the grass actually is always greener on the other side – but that is only if we keep looking over there, if we keep looking to what is not yet at the expense of what is. These seemingly mundane, ordinary expressions of our desires point to our deepest longings: Of course, we want to be happy, joyful, fulfilled; but that begins by choosing the hard work of practicing joy now — and recognizing the Holy Spirit at work in the immediacy of our present moment. In a marriage, a couple does not say “I do” and solve all their problems forever; no, that couple must do the daily, moment-to-moment work of practicing love, of choosing love. And — at least in my experience — you do not get it right every time. So, too, is it in our spiritual lives as we live into and live out of our vocation? We continually turn back to God; we continually choose God in our lives. We accept the necessary hardships — and our own mistakes — trusting that the Holy Spirit continues to usher us forward into a deepening relationship with God, God’s people, and God’s creation. This might be a good practice, as Pope Francis implies, to take up during the Ignatian Year.

On this pilgrimage on earth, we meet others – as Ignatius did in his life. These others are signposts who help us keep on track and who invite us to convert every time again. They are brothers [and sisters], they are situations and God speaks to us also through them. Let us listen to one another. Let us read the situations. Let us be signposts for others, showing the way to God. Conversion always happens in dialogue. With God, with the others, with the world.

If you have ever been on a pilgrimage, you know that arriving at the destination is not really the point. It is about the journey, what you discover along the way. But if you keep your head down and march straight toward the finish line, you miss the spiritual gifts buried along your path. You finish your journey with the same, stubborn perspective with which you began: I know what is at the end and how best to get there. Pope Francis’ framing of conversion as an invitation to dialogue is a better approach to this Ignatian Year pilgrimage. We are called to walk humbly and to recognize that we might not yet have all the answers, that we need to change ourselves and our perspectives. We need others — and others need us — to fully appreciate and understand all that God is inviting us to over the course of this Ignatian Year — and our life’s pilgrimage. But if we stubbornly hold to our own ways of doing things, our own way of approaching God, then we will simply ignore the signposts this year offers us. I am always struck by St. Ignatius’ words to his fellow Jesuits attending the Council of Trent: “Be slow to speak, and only after having first listened quietly, so that you may understand the meaning, leanings, and wishes of those who do speak. Thus, you will better know when to speak and when to be silent.”

I pray that all who are inspired by Ignatian spirituality may take this journey together as one Ignatian family. And I pray that many others may come to discover the richness of this spirituality that God gave to Ignatius. I bless you with all my heart, that his year may really be an inspiration to go out in the world to help souls, and to see all things new in Christ....

I am struck by Pope Francis’ pairing of the phrases “go out in the world to help souls” and “to see all things new in Christ.” The first phrase perfectly encapsulates Ignatius’ own desire and the mission of the Society of Jesus. We are all called to go out beyond ourselves to live the Gospel for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. In Latin, ***Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam inque hominum salute*** (AMDG). That is what Ignatian spirituality ultimately calls us to do: live out the encounter with God we ourselves have experienced so to show others their own paths to that same God of love. What the Ignatian Year puts front and center for us — and this should be no surprise — is the universality of Christ, the newness that Christ brings to our understanding of our lives. Our God of love is so invested in our very being that God entered into creation itself through Christ. Creation pulses with God’s love, and an encounter with Christ helps us see all things in this new, loving way. That going out into the world is really a going deeper in relationship with Christ. How might we encourage others in their relationships with our God of love?

May it also be an inspiration to let ourselves be helped. No one saves him or herself. We are either saved together, or we are not saved. No one demonstrates the way to the other. Only Jesus showed us the way. We help one another to find and follow this way together.

Catholicism is a “team sport.” We go to God together. We do so literally when we stand in line to receive God in the Eucharist. But we do so in countless other ways, too: in our works of charity and justice, in our family lives, in our Bible studies and book clubs, our parish halls and school auditoriums. We do so most dramatically in our intercessions to saints, to the Blessed Mother, in our praying for those who have gone before us. We grapple with life in all its joys and challenges together, trying to make sense of and build upon the legacies of saints and sinners before us. We show others the way to God, and we know that in so doing, we learn something new of God ourselves. And all along, we follow Jesus, who himself is the Way, the Truth, and the Light.

May almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.