



Celebrating St. Ignatius of Loyola

To Celebrate the Saint's Feast Day – A Brief Biography of St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)

The Founder of the Jesuits

The Early Years

Inigo Lopez de Oñaz y Loyola, whom we now celebrate as **St. Ignatius**, was born in the Castle Loyola, in the Basque country of northeastern Spain, in 1491, during the reign of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. He was the youngest of 13 children, raised in a high Catholic piety with seriously lax morals and he was formed early by the contradictions between the ideals of church and crown and the realities of his own family. His father had several children by another woman, and his grandfather's lawless behavior led to the top two floors of the Loyola castle being demolished – a punishment by order of the Spanish crown.

Inigo hardly knew his mother, Marina, who died when he was a child. His father, Don Beltran Loyola, died when he was 16. One of his brothers was on the second voyage of Columbus and another died in battle. Inigo was raised to be a courtier and diplomat in service to the Spanish crown, having received a chivalric yet academically sparse education typical of his class. He spent time as a "*page*" at court as his passion grew to win personal glory. Known as a fancy dresser, an expert dancer, a womanizer, sensitive to insult, and a rough punkish swordsman, he used his privileged status to escape prosecution for violent crimes committed at various "*carnival*" times.

The Attempted Soldier

In the spring of 1521, a large French army attacked the fortress town of Pamplona. A valiant and tiny band of Spanish soldiers tried to defend the town and were ready to surrender; all, except Iñigo de Loyola. He was prepared to hold off the French "*single-handedly*." But a French cannonball shattered his leg and put an end to his resistance. Still, the French invaders admired his courage and carried him back to his castle of Loyola.

His leg was not the only thing that had been shattered. His image as a handsome, dashing courtier—everything that he had ever lived for—was shattered, too. The broken leg was not properly set, and a bone protruded in a way that would show through a courtier's tight hose, "so much as to be something ugly." Iñigo insisted that the leg be re-cast and re-set; so, with no anesthetic when the leg was rebroken the operation proceeded and in the end one leg remained permanently shorter than the other - Iñigo limped for the rest of his life.

To pass the time while he recovered, he asked for the kind of books he enjoyed reading: chivalric romances. But all that was available in the house was an illustrated Life of Christ and a book of saints' legends. Hence, his intent to spend hours dreaming of the exploits he would do in service to his king and in honor of royal ladies turned to dreams about the exploits he could do to imitate St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic in fidelity to his heavenly Lord.

Gradually he began to reflect on the impact of these experiences; he noticed what was going on. Although both kinds of daydreams engaged him, after the romantic chivalry dreaming was over, he felt empty and dissatisfied, yet after the spiritual dreaming ended, he felt a deep peace, and a quiet happiness. Then, "one day he began to wonder about the difference in his dreaming and to reflect upon it. From experience he knew that some thoughts left him sad while others made him happy, and little by little he came to perceive the different spirits that were moving in him...." Thus, we see

the beginning of his powers of discernment and of decision making. He realized God was leading him by his feelings, drawing him toward an entirely new way of being in life.

The Pilgrim

When he had healed enough to walk, he began a journey to Jerusalem to “kiss the earth where our Lord had walked.” He traveled through the town of Montserrat, Spain where he gave away his fine clothes to a poor man. Then, in an all-night vigil before the Black Madonna in the Benedictine Abbey church there, he hung up his sword and dagger. Effectively, his old life now over, his new life had begun. Barcelona was the normal port from which to embark on a passage to Rome and then to the Holy Land. Yet, not wanting to see his old friends, he went instead to the nearby town of Manresa to stay a few days. But those “few days” turned into the next ten months.

The “Pilgrim,” as he referred to himself in his autobiography, asked for lodging at a hospital for the poor located outside Manresa’s walls. In exchange for his bed, he did chores in the hospital, and he begged for his food in the town. He spent much of his time in a cave, in prayer — praying as much as seven hours a day. He was blessed with powerful insights about himself and about who God was for him. Still, for extended periods, he experienced doubts, anxieties, scruples, and severe depression — to the point that, at one point, he even contemplated suicide to end his emotional pain.

He recorded his experiences in a notebook and found his jottings helpful in guiding others as he continued to revise and expand the notes over time. They eventually formed the basis of the future ***Spiritual Exercises*** which were eventually published, reprinted, and translated into numerous languages as they spread around the world.

An example of conducting a spiritual exercise was to reflect on the ways love has touched your life, or on what your personal gifts are and how you use them. Or to imagine yourself present in one of the gospel scenes—for example, Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000. Today, 500 years later, Jesuits and other priests, religious and many dedicated lay men and women use these ***Spiritual Exercises*** to guide themselves and others toward spiritual transformation and to a deeper relationship with God.

Visiting the Holy Land

Ignatius, the Pilgrim, did manage to beg passage on a ship to the Holy Land. But instead of being able to fulfill his great dream to remain there for the rest of his life, trying to convert the so-called “infidel,” he was ordered by church authorities to return to Europe after only a few weeks. They had enough trouble there without him and his conversion schemes. With another dream shattered Ignatius headed back to the Mount of Olives to see which way the “footprint of Jesus” was facing. Pious legend had it that the mark in a certain rock was left by Jesus as he ascended into heaven. What interests us here is not the historical credibility of the legend, but rather what this action of the Pilgrim tells us about Ignatius’ own inner life, his life grounded in prayerful imagination. He was in the habit of entering imaginatively into all the various gospel stories and scenes, and, in this way, he made them very concrete, real, and immediate to himself. He wanted to be in as deep and as intimate a relationship with Jesus, and with every detail about Jesus as was possible for him.

A Non-traditional Student

Although Inigo was unable to preach and serve God in the Holy Land as he had hoped, he was determined to connect to this goal in some fashion. He decided that he needed to get a proper education to “help souls.” He returned to Barcelona and attended a grammar school to prepare himself for entrance into a university. This meant that beginning at the age of 33 and for two years, he studied Latin grammar and other basics with classmates who were 8 to 14 years old. He may have felt some personal discomfort at the age difference, but it was at this time that he had the “most beloved” teacher in his entire academic career—Master Jeronimo Ardevol.

Ignatius in Prison

After this initial schooling in Barcelona, Inigo moved to various Spanish university towns—first Alcala, near Madrid, and then Salamanca in the north. In both places, he spent nearly as much time engaging people in conversation about spiritual matters as he did studying and attending lectures. Such conversations got him into trouble with the Spanish Inquisition and he was imprisoned and interrogated three different times. The charge was always the same - he dared to

speak of theological matters when he did not have a formal theology degree. Further, he was not ordained. In the end, he was exonerated each time, but he decided to avoid further harassment by the Inquisition. He left his homeland and headed north to the premier universities of sixteenth-century Europe.

Higher Education in Paris

At the age of 38, the Pilgrim attended the College Ste. Barbe at the University of Paris, considered the heart of the French Renaissance. He knew little French, and he was not very fluent or correct in Latin. Still, he made progress, little by little. In those days, students rose at 4:00 a.m.; classes—lectures—began at 5:00 am. There were also classes for several hours in the later afternoon. The university curriculum, in the Parisian style, was much more orderly than he was used to in Spain. There was a formal system of progression with clear prerequisites. As a result, he started all over again with grammar, language, and the humanities, and only then moved on to the sciences, philosophy, and theology. Our *present-day* notion of class levels —freshman, sophomore, junior, senior—are, in fact, a Jesuit legacy for formal education based on the experience with this Parisian learning organization.

Eventually, he earned a master's degree and the name on his diploma was not Iñigo, but "Ignatius," which he adopted in Paris and used for the rest of his life. (It is speculated that he named himself after a saint he admired, *Ignatius of Antioch*). When he applied for doctoral studies, he was turned down as too old – he was 44, and too ill, from stomach ailments that he attributed to the extreme penances he practiced during his time in Manresa.

The First Companions

While at the University of Paris, Ignatius roomed with Peter Faber, a young man from Savoy in the south of France, and Francis Xavier, a nobleman from the eastern end of the Basque country. Gradually a whole circle of "Friends in the Lord," as they called themselves, formed around Ignatius. What bonded them closely together was that one after another they were led through the "Spiritual Exercises." Most were guided by Ignatius himself. In this period, they all became "Companions of Jesus" and of one another.

Ignatius shared with them his dream of going on "*mission*" to the Holy Land, yet this time, with a bit more realistic, practical view. If the Holy Land dream fell through, they would go instead to Rome and put themselves at the disposition of the pope. The pope, as universal pastor, would know where the greatest mission needs were. They waited in Venice a whole year for a ship to take them to the Holy Land. But, because of war between Venice and the Turks, no ship sailed. So, they proceeded to Rome, and there entered an extended period of communal discernment. Their mission was to be dispersed all over Europe and the known world. They pondered together, how, spread out like that, would they maintain the spiritual bond among them? Their decision was to form themselves into a formal religious order which they named "the Company (meaning *the companionship*) or Society of Jesus." Outsiders disparagingly nicknamed them the "Jesuits" and the name caught on and eventually was used by all, alike.

The Founder

The ***Society of Jesus*** was approved by Pope Paul III in **1540** and became an official Catholic religious order. Ignatius was elected the first leader. He declined after the first vote. He considered himself unworthy for the position because of the vanity and licentiousness of his earlier life and because he felt that others were more theologically knowledgeable and generally able. After much discernment, he accepted the position and served his brothers until his death sixteen years later.

As the Superior General, he missioned companions all over Europe and around the world. He called them to "hurry to any part of the world where...the needs of the neighbor should summon them." And he counseled them to serve "without hard words or contempt for people's errors." In addition to writing the Constitutions of the fledgling order, with the help of his assistant, Juan Polanco, he wrote nearly 7,000 letters. He wrote to high and low in the church and state and to various women and men throughout the known world. But most of the letters were to his Jesuit companions, thus forming a vast communication network of friendship, love, and care.

At the time of his death, there were 1,000 Jesuits, a good number of them involved in the 35 schools that had been founded by the priests and brothers of the new order. Twenty-five years later the number of schools rose to 144, and another 35 years after that, they approached 400.

In contrast to the ambitions of his early days, the fundamental philosophy of the “mature” Ignatius was to desire and to choose only that which is conducive to the end for which we are created—to praise, reverence, and serve God through serving the learning and growth of other human beings.

His prayer:

Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve.

To give, and not to count the cost,

To fight, and not to heed the wounds,

To toil, and not to seek for rest,

To labor, and not to ask for reward,

Except that of knowing we are doing your will.

The great 20th-century British historian Dom David Knowles assessed the early Jesuits with these words: “*That mighty impulse from Manresa which spread over Europe and to the ends of the earth—perhaps the greatest single religious impulse [in Christianity] since the preaching of the apostles.*” *Has become a blessing and benefit for us all!*” May thus be said of all following the road to the Lord led by Ignatius.

A M D G

If you wish to learn more of the spirituality and prayer history and designs of St Ignatius of Loyola, please contact Dr Little in the parish Office of Faith Formation! thomas.little@archbalt.org