



Seeing the Cannonball: A reflection with Ignatius

Nearly 500 years later, we find ourselves still being struck by cannonballs - on the news, in our families and in our personal and professional lives. The cannonball of seeing persons being challenged and beaten on social media. The cannonball of suddenly being unemployed and searching for work in a “down” economy. The cannonball of a global pandemic that seems unmanageable, unbeatable, omnipresent.

The cannonball of accompanying a loved one in their final days of life – maybe from a distance. The cannonball of hearing hateful, derogatory language hurled at friends and strangers alike. The cannonball of unsustainable temperatures and unsustainable pollution. But the cannonball is only the first step.

St. Ignatius might just as well have rolled over in bed, ignored the stories of saints, and found some other role at court. So, too, we might switch off the TV, ignore our neighbors struggling and shrug at the ongoing disregard for human life and human decency so prevalent in our world.

Cannonballs are unavoidable. It’s what we do next that matters. Do we allow the cannonballs in our lives to change us? Or do we insist upon returning to an old “normal” that provides us with comfort but forgoes meaningful change? St. Ignatius chose to discard his “old normal.” The cannonball opened his eyes to what had been missing, to what he’d failed to see and to do!

But it wasn’t until he stood before the Blessed Mother, the Black Madonna, Our Lady of Montserrat – in a chapel not far from Barcelona – that he finally surrendered his sword and picked up a pilgrim’s staff. The cannonball wasn’t his decision. But giving up the symbol of his old life, laying it at the foot of our Lady, was. And from there, a new life took root.

Our Lady comes to us in simple, familiar clothing. She looks like one of us – no matter where we’re from. She speaks our language; she knows the sorrows and joys of our heart and the cannonballs that rattle within. What does our Lady look like to you? What image comes to mind? Our Lady of Guadalupe? Kibeho? Lourdes? Or do you see a young Palestinian girl, the Mary we know from our history and from Scripture?

Imagine you stand today with St. Ignatius before our Lady, before the Mother of God. The chapel is quiet, lit only by candlelight. The candles line the edges of the room, a slight breeze causes them to flicker. Shadows dance on the walls, but your eyes are held by those of our Lady. What does she see in you? What burdens do you carry to her? What in your life has the cannonball shattered?

You see St. Ignatius pull forth his sword, the emblem of his former ways, his hoped-for life. He steps forward quietly, offering it to our Lady. He lays it at her feet. You realize that you, too, are holding something, something that represents the old normal, the way things were *before* the cannonball strike. What is it you’re holding? What does it represent?

You, too, step forward to lay it at our Lady’s feet. A moment of hesitation: What do you feel? Eagerness? Sorrow? Pain? Letting go of this item is a significant next step, the logical conclusion of that cannonball strike.

But that doesn't make it easy. As you glance up, you meet our Lady's gaze once more. You sense the encouragement of Ignatius. You feel the loving presence of the Holy Spirit. You hear these words from Scripture: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus."

What happens next?