



Following the Path of the Founder – Ignatius 2021

On the 31st of July the Church celebrates the feast of St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus and its first Superior General. After a recent Jesuits' general leadership election, the Congregation took some time to reflect on the role of the Society in today's world. The Congregation was trying to "rediscover its charism", "reaffirm its mission today" and examine "the governance needed for the service of its universal mission." Of course, the question is would Ignatius have agreed with the Jesuit's conclusions? Would he have felt at home in their discussions? And would he have been able to recognize "the Jesuit" which the modern leaders described?

Knowing the Mind of Ignatius

The answer to those questions depends on what you think the founder was like. And that is problematic, since the picture we have of Ignatius has changed significantly over the years. For a contemporary Jesuit novice or to a member of the congregation, or an interested lay member, likely as not they might describe a man who could "find God in all things", who developed a way of following God's will in everyday life, someone who used his imagination in prayer and who liked to converse with people about "the things of God." But that is quite a contemporary view of the man and very far from the authentic Ignatius.

It is not surprising that each generation has a different slant on an admittedly complex character. We probably all see things in St. Ignatius that are important to us. But the founder's character has often been the victim of attempts to mold a particular "Ignatian identity." A few years ago, the late Irish Jesuit, Joe Veale, S.J., wrote of the interpretations of Ignatius' life. Most of the popular images, he pointed out, go back to a first "official" biography, from the end of the 16th century. But there is a source which pre-dates that consisting of the personal reminiscences of Ignatius dictated to an early Jesuit companion, Gonsalves da Camara. This narrative is the seminal portrayal of the personality of Ignatius.

Ignatius, Man of Action

The "Official" Ignatian biography appeared in the aftermath of the Council of Trent and is marked decisively by the ethos of the "Counter-Reformation" and its aggressive stance towards the Reformation's era relationship of the Church with Protestantism. It is not surprising to find the Ignatius portrayed here is of a great soldier-saint. Spinning such an image hardly required a huge amount of invention. There was already much in Ignatius' life to suggest a penchant for swash-buckling and derring-do. His upbringing had been that of a typical minor aristocrat and his almost exaggerated sense of chivalry got him into hot water in Pamplona, and famously resulted in his leg being shattered by an enemy cannonball. Was such a man not destined to take his place among the great reformers of the Church's history? Such a re-telling of his life was to forge a powerful myth, that of a kind of "clerical Errol Flynn," and generations of young Jesuits were inspired (and, one imagines, occasionally brow-beaten) by fervorinos from novice masters exhorting them to imitate the heroic knight. Joe Veale, S.J., remarks:

"The St Ignatius we inherited from the 19th Century was stern, more than a little inhuman, a soldier, militant, militaristic, a martinet expecting prompt unquestioning execution, the proposer of blind obedience, not greatly given to feeling or affection, rational, a man of ruthless will-power, hard in endurance, of a sensibility (if it were there at all) under stern control, heroic. That was when he was not a superhuman, Olympian figure, just this side of apotheosis, remote among baroque clouds and shafts of light and gamboling cherubs."

Ignatius, Mystical Master

That said, the Ignatius we have come to know since then tells a different story. It is the rediscovery of the *A da Camara* autobiography which put us back in touch with St. Ignatius. Here we see the man of prayer, with an extraordinary capacity for sensitivity to his interior life, keenly aware of the motions of the spirits, good and bad, tasting the sweetness of the Trinity even in the most challenging of environments, and with a visionary insight creating and responding to a wealth of apostolic opportunities aimed at helping others to experience Jesus Christ as he had.

Any biography of Ignatius appearing in the aftermath of the Council of Trent is marked by the ethos of the Counter-Reformation. There was already much in the life of Ignatius to suggest a penchant for “*swash-buckling derring-do*.” His upbringing had been that of a minor aristocrat and his almost exaggerated sense of chivalry got him into hot water in Pamplona, famously resulting in his leg being shattered by an enemy cannonball. Was such a man not destined to take his place among the great reformers of the Church’s history?

That said, the Ignatius I have come to know tells a different story. It is the story of a man of prayer, someone with an extraordinary capacity for sensitivity to his interior life. He was keenly aware of the motions of the spirits, good and bad and able to taste the sweetness of the Trinity even in the most challenging of environments. He was gifted with a visionary insight which created and responded to a wealth of apostolic opportunities to help others experience Jesus Christ as he had. Joe Veale, S.J., writes: *There we see a man of feeling often given to tears; a spirit of soaring imagination; a dreamer with sensitive self-awareness, attentive to the subtle movements of his sensibility; a man of strong affectivity with a gift for friendship and affection; a companionable person.*

Ignatius had an uncanny feel for the “big picture.” He could see the wood for the trees and at the same time realized the importance of the trees. William Blake's words could well have come from Ignatius: “... if you would do good, you must do it in minute particulars.” Ignatius the man of vision, the man of order, could do both at once. That is what modern followers still try to do. A divine mission worthy of the man!