



### *Will the Real Ignatius Please Stand Up?*

On the 31st of July the Church celebrates the feast day of St Ignatius of Loyola, one of the founding fathers of the Society of Jesus and its first Superior General. In its practice the congregation tries to "rediscover its charism", "reaffirm its mission" and examine "the governance needed for the service of its universal mission." And so, it regularly questions if Ignatius would be able to recognize "the Jesuits" of today?

#### *Knowing the Mind of Ignatius*

The answers depend on what Ignatius was like. And that is problematic, since his picture has changed significantly over the years. If you put that question to a Jesuit novice or to another involved group, likely as not they would 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 his prayer and who liked nothing better than to converse with people about "the things of God." But that is quite a contemporary view of the man and, I believe, still far from the "original" Ignatius.

Of course, each generation has a different slant on an admittedly complex character. 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 whose almost exaggerated sense of chivalry got him into *hot water* in Pamplona, resulting in his leg being shattered by an enemy cannonball. Certainly, such a re-telling of his life could forge a powerful myth, that of a kind of "*clerical Errol Flynn*," and generations of young Jesuits would be inspired (and, one imagines, occasionally brow-beaten) by fervorinos from their novice masters exhorting them to imitate the heroic knight!

The St Ignatius we inherited from the 19th Century was stern, more than a bit inhuman, a soldier expecting prompt unquestioning execution, the proposer of blind obedience, not greatly given to feeling or affection, rational, with ruthless will-power, hard in endurance, of a sensibility (if it were there at all) under stern control and singularly 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 cherubs.

This Ignatius, who survives in many popular imaginations today formed Jesuits who are something like the Pope's "shock troops." Clearly, he was pre-eminently a *doer*. And surprising as it may seem, it was this Ignatius that led many to join the Jesuits and to give their life to the conversion of the world, teaching for the rest of their days in one of "our schools" with Ignatius as guide and mentor.

#### *Ignatius, Mystical Master*

That said, the Ignatius I have come to know has a different story to tell and that shift echoes a general change in how his followers understand themselves. It is above all the rediscovery of the "Autobiography" which has put the Society back in touch with Ignatius, a man of prayer, with an extraordinary capacity for sensitivity to his interior life, keenly aware of the motions of the spirits, good and bad, able to taste God's sweetness even in the most challenging of environments, and gifted with a visionary insight which created and responded to a wealth of apostolic opportunities aimed at helping others to experience Jesus Christ as he, Ignatius, had.

It has been enjoyable to witness the great rediscovery of Jesuit identity which followed Vatican II and to see what a potent agent of ecclesial transformation Ignatius was and could be. In the beginning one made the Spiritual Exercises in a searching group. A "Master" gave five talks a day and the experience was dominated by the vision of a large red notebook in which one wrote every word that emerged from his mouth, hardly a transformative process! In years later I

made the Spiritual Exercises that emerged the way Ignatius himself intended to give them: “one to one.” Having a guide or director to accompany you daily, helping you to articulate, explain and discern your prayer and learning what Ignatius was trying to do: introduce people to how God speaks directly to the heart in their life.

Ignatius, the mystic, is probably the Ignatius most members of the Society know best. The last thirty years have seen a tremendous growth in leading his Spiritual Exercises and now spirituality is something that practically every member can address in some form or other. Participants now know that Ignatius’ “communal discernment,” is truly a genius and profound experiences in which he knew God to be calling him. It is a daunting challenge to follow in those footsteps, in some ways rather than o keeping up with the militant Ignatius of the Counter Reformation in his camouflage and flak-jacket.

Everything that Ignatius did and wrote forms from his mystical experiences at Manresa, at La Storta and in Rome. Hence the strong interest in the Autobiography and the Spiritual Journal. As always there is truth in both, for he was both a doer and a mystic. The challenge of his life is to hold a spirituality that “minds” both. Today's follower needs a foot in both camps. If there is a challenge emerging it is precisely that of deepening the integration of prayer and action in one’s life and ministry.

### **General Congregation 35**

No doubt had Ignatius paid an impromptu visit to this reflection Ignatius the doer would have felt very much at home. But I think he would also have pointed out that “doing” was not enough. He would want to say something about the subtle and tricky business of “identity,” and the deep motivation and drive that makes the Jesuit heartbeat that little bit faster, about what Hopkins calls the “dearest, freshness, deep-down things”.

At a time when people admire what Jesuits do, it is important to indicate that none of the Jesuit schools and universities, nor any of our pastoral, social or spirituality centers, not even the Jesuit Refugee Service are understandable unless the ‘polarity’ of being with Christ in the world is expressed and made visible in them. Ideally Jesuits live out of an awesome grace that tilts toward seeing the world with the eyes of Christ, loving it with His heart and serving it with His compassion. It is not a matter of meeting needs, doing good, acting justly, *alone*. Nor is it a matter of having faith, praying, living contemplatively, *alone*. Rather it is a matter of doing both *together*.

Those words sum up Ignatius’ reality: mystic and militant, *a contemplative in action*. Years after Ignatius's death, a Belgian Jesuit, suggested an epitaph for his gravestone. It is in Latin and not easy to translate, but I will have a go: ***Non coaceri a maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est.*** (Not to be daunted or held back by the greatest challenge and yet to be concerned with the nitty-gritty, that is the path to holiness.). Ignatius shared an uncanny feel for the “big picture.” He could see the wood for the trees without losing the role and importance of either wood or 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. And that is our challenge and benefit!