

Learning to Imitate Christ: The Conversion of St. Ignatius of Loyola



Photo of *The Vision of
St. Ignatius of Loyola* by
Peter Paul Rubens.

BY FATHER MICHAEL BISSEX
Associate Pastor, St. Patrick's Church, Huntington

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Painting in the Palace of Versailles of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, depicted in armor with a Christogram on his breastplate.



In the history of the Church, the presence of “saints” is a constant. These saints were men and woman who gave witness that the path to holiness is possible for all through the grace given by Jesus Christ, so that each one of us can live out our identity as sons and daughters of the Father, made in his image.¹ Since the birth of Christianity, some of these saints sent major ripples of positive reform and healing through the Church and the whole world. One example would be the figure of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, more commonly known as the Jesuits.



**FATHER
MICHAEL BISSEX**
*Associate Pastor,
St. Patrick's
Church,
Huntington*

Exactly one century ago, the Jesuit priest Fr. Antonio Astrain composed a short exposition of the life of St. Ignatius, which he wrote to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the conversion of Ignatius to a deeper life of faith. Now in the year 2021, celebrating 500 years since one man's journey changed the world, it is valuable for us to revisit the words of Fr. Astrain when he says that “the very spirit of Ignatius began to take root in the Catholic Church, and to exercise on the modern world an influence of moral regeneration which was truly stupendous, and which has not yet, we think, received sufficient attention.”² Familiarizing ourselves with the

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conversion story of St. Ignatius can serve as a reminder of our very real potential to ignite the renewal that is needed in our Church and in our society.

In our contemporary culture, we look to all sorts of people to inspire us and give us models of behavior. While superheroes, athletes, and great intellectuals often fulfill this role, our fundamental calling as Catholics is to learn to model ourselves after Jesus Christ himself. The more profoundly each one of us fulfills this calling, the wider impact it will have in a world that so desperately needs saints. If we are looking for an ideal example of the potential each one of us has to choose holiness, we can easily find one in the story of St. Ignatius of Loyola’s conversion.

St. Ignatius was born on an uncertain date in 1491, the youngest of 13 children in the family castle of Loyola, in the Basque village of Azpeitia. He was christened Iñigo Lopez, although later in his life he would adopt the Latinized name of “Ignatius.”

His mother died in childbirth, and very little is known about young Iñigo’s childhood. What we do know is that he was notably taken into the service of Juan Velazquez de Cuellar, one of the officials of the royal treasury of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. At around the age of 18, Ignatius made the arduous journey to Arevalo to begin a chapter of his life that would last almost a decade. As an apprentice to Don Juan, Ignatius was well-trained in the matters of the

Statue of St. Ignatius in Loyola Memorial Park, Marikina City, Philippines.



world, being instructed in the ways of the royal court, as well as receiving an education, all in the hopes of one day receiving an official position in the court.

It should be easy for us to picture a somewhat immature and worldly young man, who was certainly enjoying his upbringing and status in the society of the time. We can imagine Ignatius living in the glamor of the Castilian court, with its pomp and circumstance and high society, as well as the promise of status and glory.

We can even find picturesque descriptions of him in the historical accounts: “Iñigo de Loyola cultivated long locks right down to his shoulders and wore particolored cape and hose, and a colored cap.”³ In addition to the care for his appearance, he was definitely not one to back down from a fight.

[Ignatius] was walking down the street up which came a group of men who jostled him and forced him against the wall. At once he whipped out his sword and gave after them to the end of the street. Had there not been passers-by to restrain him, he would surely have killed some of those men, or they would have killed him.⁴

Engaging with the accounts of his young adulthood, we see Ignatius to be quite human. He was a man of his time and of his society, to a certain extent caught up with the vanity and violence of a world that promised



Photo of St. Ignatius in splints and speaking with St. Peter by Antoine de Favray.

St. Ignatius of Loyola depicted in the window of a Catholic church in Guelph, Ontario.



“Many of our family members and friends, many men and women of our community as a whole, have faced not only a physical virus that brings sickness and death, but the great suffering that comes through depression, anxiety, mental illness, addiction, and the wounds of broken relationships.”

glory at the cost of a cycle of rivalry with those around him.

But a position at the court for him was not meant to be. When Ignatius was just 27, his patron died, leaving him without the title and position that he had been working for during most of his young adult life. Fortuitously for the future of the Church, Ignatius made the journey to Pamplona, a city in which his life was to be changed forever.

Pamplona was the site of one of the conflicts that raged across Europe, so common throughout those centuries in history. The city was the capital of Navarre, which the French armies longed to reclaim from the Spanish, who had conquered it about five years before.

It was during the conflict for this region and city that Ignatius found himself helping to hold the final stronghold against the French forces. The odds were against the Spanish soldiers, as their enemy outnumbered them and the locals, who hated their Spanish conquerors, sought to aid the French.

But Ignatius was determined to hold the garrison:

Ignatius went into the citadel, apparently as a volunteer. At the council of war the senior officers were against fighting. But Ignatius insisted that it was better to be killed than to continue the surrenders and retreats which had already brought the invaders into the heart of the country ...⁵

During the resulting attack, although he escaped the fate of death, a cannon ball struck Ignatius' right leg, severely injuring it and causing damage to his left leg as well. The victorious French forces treated him with the utmost courtesy and had him returned to his family home about 50 miles away.

This famous incident of the injury that brought down a bold and popular young soldier cannot be understated. “The fight at Pamplona was only a small local affair that

settled nothing but, from a larger point of view, it was one of the truly decisive battles of the world.”⁶ It was as he recuperated from his injury that St. Ignatius experienced real conversion, even while in the face of suffering.

Probably any one of us, even some of the youngest in the Catholic Church here on Long Island, could describe a memory of experiencing suffering. To be sure, those experiences can come in all shapes and sizes, some more tragic and unbearable than others. We can recall experiences of a sharp blow, when a sudden death of a loved one or an episodic tragedy can shake the foundations of our personal or communal lives. We can remember those times when battling a long-drawn out illness, or enduring the stress of marital difficulty, did not come as a single episode, but were experienced as painful processes, in which it could be difficult to even pinpoint where the suffering began and where it ended.

“The experience of suffering often causes us to assume an attitude of reflection, through which the values and priorities we once had are challenged and put into perspective.”

The past calendar year has perhaps brought a heavy dose of this latter type of suffering in the form of the isolation and separation due to the quarantine; the challenge of a daily commitment to carry a burden that seemed to arrive quickly but leave us all too slowly. Many of our family members and friends, many men and women of our community as a whole, have faced not only a physical virus that brings sickness and death, but the great suffering that comes through depression, anxiety, mental illness, addiction, and the wounds of broken relationships.

The experience of suffering often causes us to assume an attitude of reflection, through which the values and priorities we once had are challenged and put into perspective. We acknowledge our regrets at taking for granted things that we no longer have, or placing too much value on things that are ephemeral and unreliable.

If we enter into the story of St. Ignatius of Loyola we



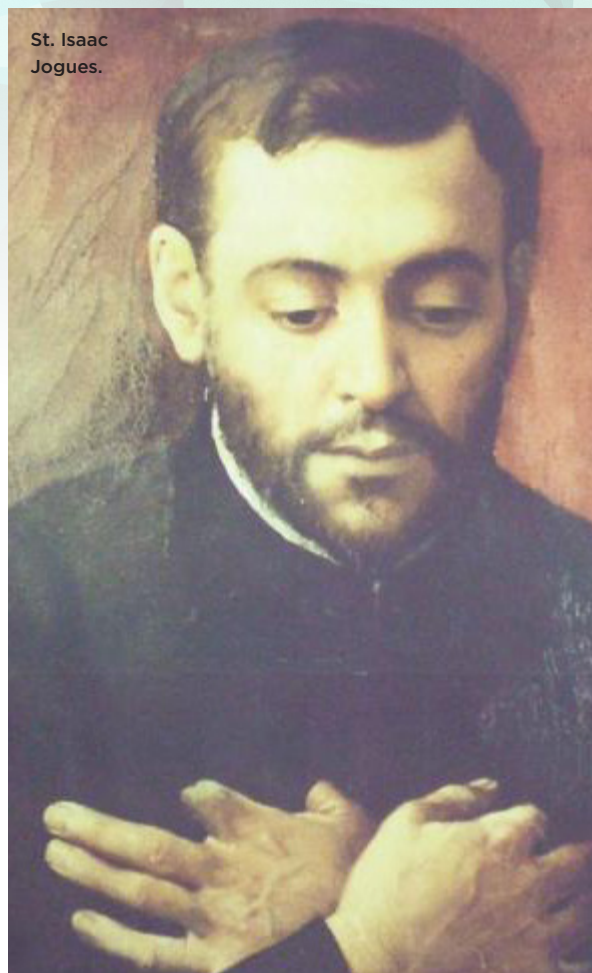
Christian George, director of research at France's National Center of Scientific Research, helps a patient suffering from the coronavirus.

can connect our suffering to his on a deeply personal level, recognizing the painstaking and burdensome process of his recuperation. As his doctors attempted to heal his legs with only a fraction of the medical expertise that we have today, he was forced to assume an attitude of reflection on a sickbed in which he had no recourse to amusement or pleasure.

This situation could easily have caused him to come back with even greater determination to his previous pattern of desires for the glory of conquest in war or the ambitions of high societal connections. Alternatively, his near-fatal wounds might have induced him to simply fade into his broken dreams and vanities.

Instead, he turned to examples of the saints as more authentic sources for imitation than anything he had found before.

For while engaged on the life of our Lord and the Saints, he used to stop and think within himself, How would it be if I should do what St. Francis did and what St. Dominic did? And so he would reflect on many matters which he judged to be good, always proposing to himself actions painful and arduous that he seemed to have the ability to achieve. But



St. Isaac
Jogues.

the conclusions of all his self-communings was to say in his heart, St. Dominic did such and such a thing, so I also must do it; St. Francis did such and such a thing, so I also must do it.⁷

In deciding to imitate the great founders of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, St. Ignatius converted his desires from material gain, ambition, and cyclical violence, seeing in the saints reliable examples of true self-fulfillment: the imitation of Jesus Christ. It was through his rejection of a cycle of love of the world, which results in confusion and dead ends, that St. Ignatius opened himself up to a different kind of love, a different kind of desire, which he clearly saw as the only one worth imitating with his whole self.

In the wake of his conversion, St. Ignatius travelled to Montserrat, where on March 24, 1522, the vigil of the Feast of the Annunciation, he made “the generous offering of himself for the divine service and imploring the help of the Queen of Heaven,”⁸ thereby beginning his life of sanctity and heroism for the Church.

Aside from making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Ignatius spent roughly the next 12 years in studies, primarily at the University of Paris. Although he did not achieve high intellectual or academic success, his



Pope Francis greets a child as he visits people who came to the Vatican for the second dose of their Covid-19 vaccinations.

diligence allowed him to successfully receive the degree of Master of the Arts in Lent of 1533.

Perhaps more notable than his academic studies was the attraction to Ignatius of various companions who wanted to join him in a set way of life. By 1536 the companions of St. Ignatius numbered nine, and the first formulations of the Society of Jesus had begun. Finally, on September 27, 1540, Pope Paul III promulgated the papal bull *Regimini militantis ecclesiae*, thereby confirming the status of the Society of Jesus as an official religious order of the Catholic Church.

At the time of St. Ignatius' death in July of 1556, there were already approximately 1,000 Jesuit priests in the fast-growing order. Today, with Pope Francis as the first Jesuit pope in the history of the Church, over 20,000 Jesuits minister in over 100 countries across the globe.

Over the course of those centuries, countless schools, missions, and institutions of charitable have been founded by the order. It is interesting to remember that in our own state of New York (and also what is now Manhattan) the first priest to celebrate Mass was a Jesuit: St. Isaac Jogues, one of the North American Martyrs who first brought Catholicism to the New York area. It is easy to see in these few examples, as well as countless others, the incredible impact that began when a single cannonball was fired at the Battle of Pamplona.

Today, perhaps more than ever, our Church and our society are in need of men and women who will break the cycles of greed and violence that overwhelm us. What is required is not fundamentally the formation of programs, the acquiring of material wealth for projects, or seeking a redemption that is formed by the human race rather than God. What is needed now is for men and women of all ages and stages of life to learn to imitate Jesus Christ, "the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin."⁹

Just as St. Ignatius was inspired by the lives of other saints, perhaps we can find the inspiration we need in reading about his story. It is a story that shows the potential we have to be the impetus for positive change in both our Church and society, a change that can only be brought about through true conversion of heart. As we commemorate the five hundredth year since the conversion of St. Ignatius after the battle of Pamplona, we can echo the words of Fr. Astrain when he says that "all men of sound judgment, and even those who are enemies of the Church, are at one in affirming the originality of thought and the superiority of character of the man who so profoundly influenced his own century, and still continues to influence the modern world."¹⁰

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5. St. Ignatius of Loyola depicted in the window of a Catholic church in Guelph, Ontario. (CNS Photo from Crosiers)
6. Christian George, director of research at France's National Center of Scientific Research, helps a patient suffering from the coronavirus. (CNS photo/Yiming Woo, Reuters)
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8. Pope Francis greets a child as he visits people who came to the Vatican for the second dose of their Covid-19 vaccinations. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Most Reverend John O. Barres, Bishop, Diocese of Rockville Centre
50 North Park Avenue, Rockville Centre, New York 11571-9023
Ph: 516.678.5800 | www.drvc.org

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