Life of Saint Ignatius

The Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola – Founder of the Society of Jesus

Early Life of St. Ignatius  Inigo de Loyola was born in 1491 in Azpeitia in the Basque province of Guipuzcoa in northern Spain. He was the youngest of thirteen children. At the age of sixteen years he was sent to serve as a page to Juan Velazquez, the treasurer of the kingdom of Castile. As a member of the Velazquez household, he was frequently at court and developed a taste for all it presented, especially the ladies. He was much addicted to gambling, very contentious, and not above engaging in swordplay on occasion. For a number of years he went about in the dress of a fighting man, wearing a coat of mail and breastplate, and carrying a sword and other sorts of arms.

Eventually he found himself at the age of 30 in May of 1521 as an officer defending the fortress of the town of Pamplona against the French, who claimed the territory as their own against Spain. The Spaniards were terribly outnumbered and the commander of the Spanish forces wanted to surrender, but Ignatius convinced him to fight on for the honor of Spain, if not for victory. During the battle a cannon ball struck Ignatius, wounding one leg and breaking the other. Because they admired his courage, the French soldiers carried him back to recuperate at his home, the castle of Loyola, rather than to prison.

His leg was set but did not heal, so it was necessary to break it again and reset it, all without anesthesia. Although he was told to prepare for death, on the fest of Saints Peter and Paul (June 29) he took an unexpected turn for the better. The leg healed, but he was left with one leg shorter than the other. For the rest of his life he walked with a limp.

Conversion of St. Ignatius  During the long weeks of his recuperation, he was extremely bored and asked for some romance novels to pass the time. Luckily there were none in the castle of Loyola, but there was a copy of the life of Christ and a book on the saints. Desperate, Ignatius began to read them. The more he read, the more he considered the exploits of the saints worth imitating. However, at the same time, he continued to have daydreams of fame and glory, along with fantasies of winning the love of a certain noble lady of the court. The identity of this lady has never been discovered but she seems to have been of royal blood. He noticed, however, that after reading and thinking of the saints and Christ he was at peace and satisfied. Yet when he finished his long daydreams of his noble lady, he would feel restless and unsatisfied. Not only was this experience the
beginning of his conversion, it was also the beginning of spiritual discernment, or discernment of spirits, which is associated with Ignatius and described in his Spiritual Exercises.

The Exercises recognize that not only the intellect but also the emotions and feelings can help us to come to a knowledge of the action of the Spirit in our lives. Eventually, completely converted from his old desires and plans of romance and worldly conquests, and recovered from his wounds enough to travel, he left the castle in March of 1522.

He had decided that he wanted to go to Jerusalem to live where our Lord had spent his life on earth. As a first step he began his journey to Barcelona. He first proceeded to the Benedictine shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat, made a general confession, and knelt all night in vigil before Our Lady's altar, following the rites of chivalry. He left his sword and knife at the altar, went out and gave away all his fine clothes to a poor man, and dressed himself in rough clothes with sandals and a staff.

The Experience of Manresa  He continued towards Barcelona but stopped along the river Cardoner at a town called Manresa. He stayed in a cave outside the town, intending to linger only a few days, but he remained for ten months. He spent hours each day in prayer and also worked in a hospice. It was while here that the ideas for what are now known as the Spiritual Exercises began to take shape. It was also on the banks of this river that he had a vision which is regarded as the most significant in his life. The vision was more of an enlightenment, about which he later said that he learned more on that one occasion that he did in the rest of his life. Ignatius never revealed exactly what the vision was, but it seems to have been an encounter with God as He really is so that all creation was seen in a new light and acquired a new meaning and relevance, and experience that enabled Ignatius to find God in all things. This grace, finding God in all things, is one of the central characteristics of Jesuit spirituality.

Ignatius himself never wrote in the rules of the Jesuits that there should be any fixed time for prayer. Actually, by finding God in all things, all times are times of prayer. He did not, of course, exclude formal prayer, but he differed from other founders regarding the imposition of definite times or duration of prayer. One of the reasons some opposed the formation of the Society of Jesus was that Ignatius proposed doing away with the chanting of the Divine Office in choir. This was a radical departure from custom, because until this time, every religious order was held to the recitation of the office in common. For Ignatius, such recitation meant that the type of activity envisioned for the Society
He finally arrived at Barcelona, took a boat to Italy, and ended up in Rome where he met Pope Adrian VI and requested permission to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Once he arrived in the Holy Land he wanted to remain, but was told by the Franciscan superior who had authority over Catholics there that the situation was too dangerous. (At the time, the Turks were the rulers of the Holy Land.) The superior ordered Ignatius to leave. He refused, but when threatened with excommunication, he obediently departed.

**The Return to School**  By now he was 33 years old and determined to study for the priesthood. However, he was ignorant of Latin, a necessary preliminary to university studies in those days. So he started back to school studying Latin grammar with young boys in a school in Barcelona. After two years he moved on to the University of Alcala. There his zeal got him in trouble, a problem that continued throughout his life. He would gather students and adults to explain the Gospels to them and teach them how to pray. His efforts attracted the attention of the Inquisition and he was thrown into jail for 42 days. When he was released he was told to avoid teaching others. (In the eyes of Inquisitors, anyone who was teaching and was not ordained was suspect.)

Because he could not live without helping souls, Ignatius moved on to the University of Salamanca. There, within two weeks, the Dominicans had thrown him back into prison again. Though they could find no heresy in what he taught, he was told that he could only teach children and then only simple religious truths. Once more he took to the road, this time for Paris.

At the University of Paris he began school again, studying Latin grammar and literature, philosophy, and theology. It was also in Paris that he began sharing a room with Francis Xavier and Peter Faber. He greatly influenced a few other fellow students directing them all at one time or another in what we now call the Spiritual Exercises. Eventually six of them plus Ignatius decided to take vows of chastity and poverty and to go to the Holy Land. If going to the Holy Land became impossible, they would go to Rome and place themselves at the disposal of the Pope for whatever he would want them to do. They did not think of doing this as a religious order or congregation, but as individual priests. For a year they waited, however no ship was able to take them to the Holy Land because of the conflict between the Christians and Muslims. It was during this time of waiting that Ignatius was ordained a priest, but he did not say Mass for another year. It is thought that he wanted to say his first Mass in Jerusalem in the land where Jesus himself had lived.
The Company of Jesus  Ignatius, along with two of his companions, Peter Faber and James Lainez, decided to go to Rome and place themselves at the disposal of the Pope. It was a few miles outside of the city that Ignatius had the second most significant of his mystical experiences. At a chapel at La Storta where they had stopped to pray, God the Father told Ignatius, "I will be favorable to you in Rome" and that he would place him (Ignatius) with His Son. Ignatius did not know what this experience meant, for it could mean persecution as well as success since Jesus experienced both.

When they met with the Pope, he very happily put them to work teaching scripture and theology and preaching. It was here on Christmas morning, 1538, that Ignatius celebrated his first Mass at the church of St. Mary Major in the Chapel of the Manger. It was thought this chapel had the actual manger of Bethlehem, so, if Ignatius was not going to be able to say his first Mass at Jesus' birthplace in the Holy Land, then this would be the best substitute.

During the Lent of 1539, Ignatius asked all of his companions to come to Rome to discuss their future. They had never thought of founding a religious order, but now that going to Jerusalem was out, they had to think about their future--whether they would spend it together. After many weeks of prayer and discussion, they decided to form a community, with the Pope's approval, in which they would vow obedience to a superior general who would hold office for life. They would place themselves at the disposal of the Holy Father to travel wherever he should wish to send them for whatever duties. A vow to this effect was added to the ordinary vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Formal approval of this new order was given by Pope Paul III the following year on September 27, 1540. Since they had referred to themselves as the Company of Jesus (in Latin Societas Jesu), in English their order became known as the Society of Jesus.

Ignatius was elected on the first ballot of the group to be the superior, but he begged them to reconsider, pray and vote again a few days later. The second ballot came out as the first, unanimous for Ignatius, except for his own vote. He was still reluctant to accept, but his Franciscan confessor told him it was God's will, so he acquiesced. On the Friday of Easter week, April 22, 1541, at the Church of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls, the friends pronounced their vows in the newly formed Order.

The Years As Superior General  Ignatius, whose love it was to be actively involved in teaching catechism to children, directing adults in the Spiritual Exercises, and working among the poor and in hospitals, would for the most part sacrifice this love for the next fifteen years. From his election as superior general until his death he would work out of
two small rooms, his bedroom and next to it his office, directing this new society throughout the world. He would spend years composing the Constitutions of the Society and would write thousands of letters to all corners of the globe to his fellow Jesuits dealing with the affairs of the Society and to lay men and women directing them in the spiritual life. From his tiny quarters in Rome he would live to see in his lifetime the Society of Jesus grow from eight to a thousand members. The Jesuits would found colleges and houses all over Europe and as far away as Brazil and Japan. Some of the original companions were to become the Pope's theologians at the Council of Trent, an event which played an important role in the Catholic Counter Reformation.

The Jesuits and Schools Perhaps the work of the Society of Jesus begun by Ignatius that is best known is that of education. It is interesting that he had no intention of including teaching among the Jesuits' works at the beginning. As already mentioned, the purpose of the first members was to be at the disposal of the Pope to go where they would be most needed. Before 1548 Ignatius had opened schools in Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, and India. These schools, however, were intended primarily for the education of the new young Jesuit recruits. Ten such colleges built within six years indicated the rapid growth of the Jesuits. But in 1548 at the request of the magistrates of Messina in Sicily, Ignatius sent five men to open a school for lay as well as Jesuit students. It soon became clear by requests from rulers, bishops and cities for schools that this work was truly one of the most effective ways to correct ignorance and corruption among the clergy and the faithful, to stem the decline of the Church in the face of the Reformation, and to fulfill the motto of the Society of Jesus, "Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam,"--to the greater glory of God.

This was clearly in keeping with one of Ignatius' first principles in choosing apostolates: all other things being equal, choose those apostolates that will influence those who have the most influence on others. Maybe the best expression of this idea was in a letter he wrote about the founding of colleges in December of 1551: From among those who are now merely students, in time some will depart to play diverse roles--one to preach and carry on the care of souls, another to government of the land and the administration of justice, and others to other callings. Finally, since young boys become grown men, their good education in life and doctrine will be beneficial to many others, with the fruit expanding more widely every day. From then on, Ignatius helped to establish Jesuit schools and universities all over Europe and the world.

Ignatius the Person It is probably true that the picture of Ignatius that most people have
is that of a soldier: stern, iron-willed, practical, showing little emotion -- not a very 
attractive or warm personality. Yet if this picture is exact, it is hard to see how he could 
have had such a strong influence on those who knew him. Luis Goncalves de Camara, 
one of his closest associates wrote, He (Ignatius) was always rather inclined toward love; 
moreover, he seemed all love, and because of that he was universally loved by all. There 
was no one in the Society who did not have much great love for him and did not consider 
himself much loved by him.

We regard a number of saints as great mystics but never think of Ignatius as one of them. 
We have recounted a few of the many visions and mystical experiences in his life. His 
holiness, however, did not consist in such, but in the great love that directed his life to do 
everything A.M.D.G., for the greater glory of God.

**Last Illness** Ever since his student days in Paris, Ignatius had suffered from stomach 
ailments and they became increasingly troublesome in Rome. In the summer of 1556 his 
health grew worse, but his physician thought he would survive this summer as he had 
done others. Ignatius, however, thought that the end was near. On the afternoon of July 
30th he asked Polanco, his secretary, to go and get the Pope's blessing for him, 
suggesting by this to Polanco that he was dying. Polanco, however, trusted the physician 
more than Ignatius and told him he had a lot of letters to write and mail that day. He 
would go for the Pope's blessing the next day. Shortly after midnight Ignatius took a turn 
for the worse. Polanco rushed off to the Vatican to get the papal blessing, but it was too 
late. The former worldly courtier and soldier who had turned his gaze to another court 
and a different type of battle had rendered his soul into the hands of God. Ignatius was 
beatified on July 27, 1609 and canonized by Pope Gregory XV on March 12, 1622 
together with St. Francis Xavier. Ignatius' feast day is celebrated by the universal Church 
and the Jesuits on July 31, the day he died.

*[This material is extracted from The Life of St. Ignatius of Loyola by Rev. Norman 
O'Neal, S.J. This account was written on the occasion of the Ignatian Year in order to 
better acquaint the lay teachers, staff, and students of Jesuit High in New Orleans with 
the founder of the order which has conducted that school for more than 140 years. We 
are grateful to him for permission to use it.]*