

St Ignatius Loyola: "Go and set the world on fire!"

The year 1492 is famous to Americans as the year Columbus discovered the New World, sailing under the patronage of the Spanish crown. It has yet another significance in Spanish history. It was the year of the final expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula, the last act in a drama that had been unfolding for centuries, and it marked the beginning of what has been called *El Siglo de Oro*, Spain's Golden Age. First under the joint rule of Ferdinand and Isabella, and then during the reign of Charles V, Spain emerged as Europe's strongest kingdom and the world's first global power. The Spaniards developed a vast empire, controlling large portions of Europe and ruling lands from Latin America and Africa to the Philippines in East Asia. The Spanish army during those years was well-nigh invincible. Yet not only in political life, but in all areas of cultural activity, sixteenth-century Spain saw a remarkable efflorescence. This was the age of El Greco and Velazquez in painting, of Cervantes and Lope de Vega in literature, of Tomas de Victoria in music. It was a time of the growth of universities and of rich developments in many fields. The fort collapsed, and Ignatius was sent by his courteous French captors to convalesce at the home of his father. His insistence that his leg be healed such as not to mar his appearance led to a number of painful operations, and at times he was close to death. He was thirty years old, and his life was about to take a radical new direction.

To pass the time while convalescing, Ignatius asked to be given books of chivalrous romances. There were none of the kind he wanted to be found in the castle, so instead he took to reading two religious books: *The Life of Christ* by the German monk Ludolph of Saxony, and *The Golden Legend*, a collection of the lives of the saints. Confronted by the personality of Christ and the great deeds of the saints, Ignatius was deeply moved. All the Spanish chivalric instinct and desire for glory that ran so strongly in him were caught up and inflamed; his earlier desire for worldly fame was transposed into a determination to do great things for his true King and so to win honor in Heaven. "While reading the life of Our Lord and of the saints," Ignatius remembered later, "he stopped to think, reasoning within himself, 'What if I should do what St. Francis did, what St. Dominic did?'" He was filled with loathing for his past life, and he determined to do penance by taking to the road as a pilgrim. It was the beginning of a long journey that would ultimately have a great effect on both the Church and the world.

The year 1521 was notable for more than Ignatius's conversion. It was the year that Hernan Cortes, a man of roughly the same age and social background as Ignatius, completed the conquest of Tenochtitlan and the Aztec Empire, opening a new chapter in Spanish and European history. It was also the year in which Martin

Luther, having written three widely-read tracts against the Catholic Church, refused to retract his positions before the imperial general assembly, or Diet, at Worms, thereby effectively initiating the Protestant Reformation. These momentous events did much to shape the world into which Ignatius would throw his considerable energies as a missionary and reformer of the Church. He later said, "I do not consider myself as having retired from military service, but only as having come under the orders of God."

Ignatius's life after his conversion can conveniently be divided into three parts or phases, each of which has its special significance. The first phase, which began as soon as his conversion had commenced, lasted some three years. It included the time of his convalescence, his yearlong stay in Manresa, and his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This was a period of intense interior life: long hours of prayer, rigorous works of penance and purification, and remarkable mystical experiences. The second phase, lasting some fourteen years, was an extended time of study and apostolic activity during which Ignatius gathered groups of men around him, first in Barcelona, then at the universities of Alcala, Salamanca, and Paris, and then for a short time in Venice. It was a period of honing his method of evangelization and of significant opposition to his apostolate. The final phase began with his return to Rome in 1538 and involved the founding of the Society of Jesus two years later and his wide-ranging duties as general of the order, a task that ended only with his death in 1556.

The First Phase: Ignatius Is Taught by God: A time-honored practical rule of the spiritual life says that one needs to be careful when imitating the saints. Their faith, their virtues, and their abandonment to the Divine Will are examples for all believers. But the particular patterns of their lives and the specific ways they are called to respond to providential initiative are often exceptional and idiosyncratic. What is excellent in the life of a saint may not be prudent or praiseworthy in every believer. This rule should be remembered when we examine the life of St. Ignatius.

From the time of his initial conversion, Ignatius was dealt with by God in a unique way. The uniqueness was not so much in the conversion itself. It was certainly a dramatic event to go from soldier to pilgrim as Ignatius did, leaving behind family, worldly ambitions, social status, and possessions in order to follow Christ. But many others caught by the beauty and love of God have altered their lives in equally drastic ways. When Peter and John left their nets and their fishing business to follow Jesus, they modeled the inner pattern of every true conversion. What made the early years of Ignatius's conversion so distinctive was the degree to which God took him in hand and taught him profound spiritual and pastoral truths,

including the whole cycle of Catholic doctrine, in a way almost entirely unmediated by the help of others. Ignatius himself came to realize this. He later said of those first years: "God treated him at this time just as a schoolmaster treats a child whom he is teaching ...he clearly believed and has always believed that God treated him in this way."

There was a clear providential purpose in the conversion of Ignatius. Like St. Paul, Ignatius was a chosen instrument to be used by Christ for the sake of a great apostolic mission. Like Paul, he had a strong personality and an iron will, but these traits were being exercised in a wrong direction. Like Paul, he was taught the Gospel by the Holy Spirit as a preparation for that mission. Paul once wrote of his own reception of the Faith: "Brethren, I would have you know that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:11-12).

Though never claiming any special prophetic or apostolic authority, Ignatius spoke similarly about his own manner of receiving the Gospel. He later recounted an experience of this kind from his time at Manresa: "While he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened; though he did not see any vision, he understood and knew many things, both spiritual things and matters of faith and of learning." Along with this experience of infused understanding, Ignatius received visions of Christ, Our Lady, and the Trinity that so deeply impressed the truths of the faith upon him that, as he later said, "if there were no Scriptures to teach us these matters of the faith, he would be resolved to die for them, only because of what he had seen."

The effect of these divine visions and graces was evident in the way Ignatius began, soon after his conversion, not only to talk about his newfound life, which would have been natural enough, but to lead others confidently as a teacher of the Faith and a director of souls. From a distance of time and a knowledge of his future course, it seems obvious that Ignatius would quickly have become a spiritual guide. But if we see him as he would have been viewed by his contemporaries, the strangeness of his behavior is more arresting. Here was a man who had spent the whole of his thirty years pursuing nothing but worldly interests. He had thrown all his energy into the acquisition of fame and a prestigious career, and his tastes and affections had been molded on that pattern. He was no doubt a Catholic, but of that common hereditary type who was familiar with the cultural practices of the Church but viewed them as mere social conventions. Well-trained in military arts and in the demands of polite society, he was otherwise poorly educated. He knew next to nothing of theology. This same man then has a dramatic encounter with Christ and

determines to change the course of his life. He has a necessarily arduous business before him, the task of every convert who has been busily shaping his character apart from the will of God. He will need to unlearn the ingrained habits of many years. He will need to develop a new set of spiritual senses to come alive to invisible realities. He will need to learn something of the rich body of doctrine and practice that every serious Catholic embraces. He can expect, even as he counts on God's help that this will require time and hard work, and he will need good teachers and mentors to help him along the way.

But under the impulse of grace, Ignatius takes an entirely different path. Though he seeks spiritual mentors, he can find no one who suits his need. Instead, he is drawn into an intense solitary experience of being trained directly by the hand of God, schooled in the truths of the Faith and in principles of prayer and rules of discernment. He then confidently takes others under his wing as a spiritual master and teaches them what he has learned, though he is only the merest beginner in the spiritual life. This sort of behavior would typically characterize an overzealous neophyte with more enthusiasm than knowledge. But such was not the case with Ignatius. Though an untrained layman, he displayed a sure grasp of the doctrinal and moral truths of the Faith. The novel method of conversion and discipleship that he developed during these solitary years, the so-called Spiritual Exercises, quickly came to be recognized as a marvel of Catholic spirituality and have been counted among the most effective means of spiritual transformation that the Church has known. All this from a man who had never studied theology, had never been guided by a spiritual director, and until the day before yesterday had been leading the life of a vain worldling. Those who witnessed the spectacle might well have asked themselves the same question posed by the astonished townspeople of Nazareth as they listened to the teaching of Jesus: "Where then did this man get all this?" (Mt 13:56).

The Pauline-like conversion and early experience of Ignatius underlines a key principle of Church reform: namely, that Christ is Lord of the Church, and it is he who takes the initiative in imparting and protecting the divine life of his Body. The sixteenth-century Church was in dire need of reform, and serious Christians were rightly concerned about what they might do to rectify matters. But the fortunes of the Church depend ultimately not on human activity—however important that may be - but on the faithfulness of God. If the instruments that are meant to care for Christ's Church and his mission prove faulty, he will find others suited to his purposes, even if it means catching hold of a wounded middle-aged Basque soldier.

The Second Phase: Apostolic Success and Opposition - From first to last, Ignatius was a man of deeds. He put a high value on prayer, and his own spiritual life puts him in the company of the Church's great mystics; but like an arrow on a string, he was always poised and ready to fly into action. The question he posed to himself and to his spiritual disciples was always: What will we do for Christ and his greater glory? Ignatius's first thought upon his conversion was that he would go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There had been a long tradition of pilgrimage as a penitential exercise, and to this purpose Ignatius added a deeper motive. Knowing that his life was now taking a different course as a disciple of Christ, he hoped to remain in the Holy Land and to serve other pilgrims at the holy sites and, if possible, to preach the Gospel among the Turks. After his stay at Manresa, he set off for the Near East, and through many adventures and difficulties he arrived in Jerusalem. But it soon became clear that the Franciscan keepers of the holy sites would not give him permission to remain. After less than a month in the Holy City, he was obliged to take ship again for home. He later recounted, "After the pilgrim realized that it was not God's will that he remain in Jerusalem, he continually pondered within himself what he ought to do. At last he inclined more to study for some time so he would be able to help souls."

During this new phase of his life, Ignatius pursued his studies, but by his own account his education was not the main thing occupying his mind and his energies. The universities he attended were among the most prominent of his time - the University of Alcala, recently founded by the great humanist scholar and Church reformer Cardinal Ximenes, where he spent a year and a half; the University of Salamanca, Spain's most famous university, where he stayed for six months; and finally the University of Paris, the premier theological school of Christendom, where he studied for seven years and eventually became a master of theology. But though his education was necessary to him as a tool for his mission, it was not an important chapter in the formation of his understanding or his spiritual life. He had already imbibed the truths of the Faith in a profound way by supernatural means.

He later commented that what he had learned directly from God at Manresa, before he had begun his formal education, was of such richness and depth that "in the whole course of his life, through sixty-two years, even if he gathered up all the many helps he had had from God and all the many things he knew and added them together, he does not think they would amount to as much as he had received at that one time."

What did occupy Ignatius's mind and energy during these years, apart from the time-consuming task of begging for his livelihood, was his apostolic outreach.

Here again one sees a likeness to the Apostle Paul. Like Paul, Ignatius had a burning desire to preach the Gospel, what he described as being "of use to souls." Like Paul, Ignatius was warm-hearted and passionate, making a deep impression on all those he met. Like Paul, he was not a skilled speaker: he never really mastered any language beyond his own native Basque, and his preaching and conversation in Castilian, French, or Italian were often peppered with grammatical errors and a mixture of words from different tongues. Like Paul, wherever he went he brought about rapid conversions and raised a storm of turbulence. A regular pattern began to occur: first, there would be public notice of him; then a number of conversions to the Faith; and then growing resistance to his apostolate.

It is not surprising that Ignatius would make a splash wherever he went. A man of the noble class, already in his mid-thirties, he arrived at the university to study with men half his age. Though a layman, he wore a hermit's garb of rough fabric, went barefoot, and begged alms to meet his daily necessities. He spent much of his time praying and was regular and devout in his reception of the sacraments. He took whatever opportunity he could to speak about the service of God, and, by all accounts, despite his unusual way of living - perhaps because of it - he was highly effective. He invited those who responded favorably to his message to take the Spiritual Exercises, and the results were often dramatic. Many, some among them of high station, would take a renewed interest in serving God and seriously alter their lives, and there was always a handful of young men who would join him, throwing over their secular ambitions and imitating his life and his apostolic work.

At a certain point, all this ferment would spark a reaction. Whether from a genuine concern for the good of the Church, or from jealousy of his influence, or from worldly motives among relatives of his converts who were worried at the readiness of his disciples to abandon wealth and position, his apostolic activity would be attacked. By some, he was called a seducer of students; others questioned his orthodoxy; others spread false rumors about his morals and called his companions "sack-wearers" and "illuminati." On more than one occasion, he was imprisoned. Five times he came before the Inquisition, and five times it was found that there was no error either in his doctrine or in his way of life. He carried himself through all these ordeals with calm fervor. "Does imprisonment seem such a great evil to you?" he said to a woman who expressed concern once at finding him in jail. "I will tell you that there are not so many grills and chains in Salamanca that I would not wish for more for the love of God."

The great instrument of Ignatius's apostolic work was the Spiritual Exercises that he first developed at Manresa and continued to hone as the years went by. Much

has been written about the Exercises, which comprise not so much a book of devotion as a manual for making a thirty-day retreat. The point of the Exercises was to take the retreatant out of the normal stream of life and during a prolonged and intensive period set before him the great truths of the Faith, using for the purpose many different means: meditation on the Scripture, strong appeals to the imagination, familiar prayer, external austerities and supports, regular examination of conscience, the pursuit of particular virtues, and frequent reception of the sacraments. The Exercises were intended to result not only in conversion but also in a determination to pattern the whole of life for the glory of God and the good of others. Ignatius had great confidence in the power of the Exercises to effect serious change and would use whatever means he could to bring his friends and disciples to them. Once he made a wager with a friend who was vacillating about taking the month-long plunge. He suggested they play a game of billiards; the loser would do whatever the winner wanted for thirty days. They played, and Ignatius won. The man went through the Exercises and had a complete change of life.

The Exercises provided the age with something many were seeking: a way of approaching the spiritual life that was at the same time explosively potent and eminently practical. Their manner of promoting an intimate personal connection with Christ appealed to a time that was putting more emphasis on individual experience. The Exercises left an indelible imprint on the sixteenth-century reform of the Church. Ignatius wrote of them many years later: "The Spiritual Exercises are the best that I have been able to think out, experience, and understand in this life, both for helping somebody to make the most of themselves, as also for being able to bring advantage, help, and profit to many others."

Two aspects of the Exercises can be underlined as giving a sense of the whole. One was what Ignatius called the "Principle and Foundation." Ignatius focused the mind with a laser-like intensity on the purpose of human life and insisted that everything be seen and judged in the light of that purpose. "Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. All other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him fulfill the end for which he is created." This being the case, one should use the things of the world insofar as they helped to attain that end, and rid oneself of all that might get in the way. All desire and all choice should be directed to "attaining the end for which we are created."

A second key aspect of the Exercises was a way of imaginatively viewing life best expressed in the meditation on "The Two Standards." Ignatius had the disciple imagine, by a careful construction of an interior picture, two armies arrayed for

battle: one led by Lucifer, the other led by Christ. Lucifer was pictured as "seated on a great throne of fire and smoke, in the center of the vast plain of Babylon," surrounded by countless demons whom he scattered across the world "to ensnare men and to bind them in chains." It was "a horrible and terrible sight to behold." By contrast, Christ was standing in a lowly place around Jerusalem, "beautiful and gracious." Christ was choosing disciples, and he sent them "throughout the whole world to spread his sacred doctrine among men of every state and condition."¹¹ Both Lucifer and Christ wanted all men under their standard; each called them to follow him; a great battle was waging between them. The momentous question posed by the Exercises was: Whose standard will you take up? Under which banner will you fight? There was no middle ground; one had to choose one side or the other.

The image of the disciple as a valiant soldier fighting under a glorious captain may have had a special appeal to the former soldier in Ignatius, but it was not his own invention. It was an image rooted in the Scripture and with a long tradition in Christian spirituality. But under the hand of Ignatius that image gained a vivid and motivating clarity. Ignatius would later write to young aspirants of the Society: Place before your eyes as models for your imitation, not the cowardly and the weak, but the brave and the fervent. Blush to be surpassed by the children of the world, who are more solicitous to acquire the goods of time than you are to gain the goods of eternity. Be confounded to see that they run more swiftly to death than you to life. Think yourselves capable of very little, if a courtier, to gain the favor of an earthly prince, serves him with more fidelity than you serve the king of heaven; and if a soldier, for a shadow of glory and for the wretched share of the spoils which he expects from a battle won, fights against his enemies and struggles with more valor than you do to conquer the world, the devil, and yourselves, and to win by that victory the kingdom of heaven and an immortal glory.

During this long period of his education and his growing apostolate, Ignatius had no clear plan to found a new religious community. As a natural leader, he had gathered groups of young men around him who had had been converted to the service of Christ through the Exercises and who naturally looked to him for direction. In 1534, on the hill of Montmartre in Paris, Ignatius and six of his companions, nearing the completion of their studies, made vows together that they would serve Christ in poverty and chastity and would go to Jerusalem and attempt a mission among the Turks. If it did not prove possible to get to the Holy Land (there was intermittent warfare throughout the eastern Mediterranean between the Ottomans and various European powers), they would return to Rome and put themselves at the service of the pope. Six of the seven, including Ignatius, were

laymen. There were strong ties of brotherly affection among them but no formal organization. As it happened, they were not able to make the journey to Jerusalem, so after being detained for a time in Venice (where Ignatius was ordained a priest in his forty-sixth year), they made their way to Rome, where they arrived in 1538 and presented themselves to Pope Paul III. It was only at this point that the idea of a new order arose and, despite another wave of fierce attacks against them, in 1540 the pope established the Society of Jesus.

The Third Phase: Ignatius as General - When Ignatius was elected general of the new religious order by his brothers, he flatly refused the office. When a second election was held four days later and he was again elected, he again refused, until his Franciscan confessor told him he needed to stop resisting the Holy Spirit. No doubt some of his resistance was due to his humility, his sense of his unworthiness to rule other men. But there may also have been a subtler factor in play. From the time of his conversion, Ignatius had wanted nothing more than to be a pilgrim on the road with Christ, to call others to love and follow God.

He was a missionary at heart, with a burning desire to win for Christ's Kingdom those who were most opposed to it. For him that meant the Turks and the whole Muslim world. He had no special aptitude for organizational detail as that is usually understood; he was the opposite of a bureaucrat and the fifty years of his life were not an obvious preparation for an administrative post. He may have thought that he would not be good at it. But his brothers saw the nature of his genius more clearly than he did. That genius, the great gift of Ignatius to the Church, was his ability, one could almost call it an instinct, to find the right institutional forms for capturing the work of the Holy Spirit in the new age the Church was encountering.

This gift of incarnating ideals in living forms, so necessary to a flourishing human life, was in operation in Ignatius from the first days of his conversion. Many have found themselves in the midst of a spiritual battle, needing to learn to listen to the voice of God and to turn from the voice of the devil. Ignatius also had such an experience, but he then took matters a crucial step forward: he gathered up what he had learned into a set of rules for the discernment of spirits that he could give to others. Many have battled to attain virtue; Ignatius developed a method for the acquisition of specific virtues. Many have encountered the drama of standing at the crossroads of life and of needing to make a firm choice for the Kingdom; Ignatius distilled his experience of that choice and produced the miracle of the Exercises.

By the incarnation of his experience into graced institutional forms, the spiritual

wisdom that had been entrusted to him was able to touch the lives of thousands. To get a sense of the breadth of influence and the impact of the Jesuits, it can help to look at their early growth. At the time of their founding in 1540, there were ten members of the Society. By the year of Ignatius's death in 1556, the number had grown to a thousand, of whom only thirty-five were professed members due to their long training process. By 1580, forty years after their founding, there were five thousand members of the Society in twenty-one provinces. By 1615, at the seventy-five year mark, the Society counted over thirteen thousand members. A time that had been bewailing the ignorance and worldliness of priests was receiving its answer. Highly-trained and devout Jesuit priests were to be found everywhere: preaching and giving retreats, building churches, founding colleges and training young men, establishing missions around the world, providing theological expertise at the Council of Trent, engaging in polemics with Protestants, serving as directors of souls, shedding their blood for the Faith; all in the service of Christ, the Church, and the Holy See. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the company gathered together under the Jesuit standard during the first 150 years of the order's existence was the most talented, disciplined, and impressively prepared group of men ever assembled for a single cause in the history of the world. When thousands of young men of ability, many from the upper reaches of society, respond with such alacrity to a high and difficult ideal, it is clear that a deep chord has been touched. By a combination of spiritual gift and native genius, Ignatius intuited the needs and aspirations of his time and fathered a form of life that could capture them and apply them across the miles and down the generations.

Ignatius's great task as the first superior and primary inspiration of the new Society of Jesus was to write the Society's Rule, or as it was termed by the Jesuits, their Constitutions. Ignatius knew that he was forming a new instrument for a new time; it was a long and painstaking labor for him. He introduced many innovations into his community. There was to be no special religious garb. There was to be no obligation to chant Morning and Evening Prayer together in choir. Physical austerities were to be kept to a minimum. The Society would be centrally governed under a superior general, rather than the more traditional form of governance that worked locally by chapter. There was to be no oversight of convents and no female branch of the order. And the training involved for a professed member was to be long and thorough. In a letter to the pope in which Ignatius requested that the Jesuits not be tied down by certain responsibilities, he laid out the ruling idea behind this novel organization: "The other religious orders of the Church's army are like frontline troops drawn up in massive battalions. We are like light armed soldiers ready for sudden battles, going from one side to the other, now here, now

there. And for this we must be unencumbered and free from all responsibility of this type." Unencumbered and free for immediate action: with his great capacity for suiting the means to the proper end, Ignatius fashioned his society with this apostolic freedom in mind.

Ignatius's fifteen years as superior general were a kind of living martyrdom. The man who longed to be an itinerant missionary was compelled to live in Rome, chained to a desk, interminably writing thousands of administrative letters as he directed the rapidly increasing activities of the Jesuits around the world. But obedience was at the very heart of his spirituality, and he willingly put to death his personal apostolic inclinations for the sake of the greater glory of God. His missionary desires were not quenched, only channeled in new directions. To the end they would flash out and enkindle others with his burning zeal for the salvation of souls. As he sent young members of the Society to the missions, he would bid them a final farewell: "Go, and set the world on fire!"