

LIFE OF IGNATIUS: A REFLECTION FROM A COLLEGE DIRECTOR OF STUDENTS

Five hundred years ago, Ignatius of Loyola was lying in bed at his childhood home, his leg shattered by a cannonball, wondering what comes next. A lower nobleman, the future saint had been preoccupied with court dalliances, vanity and glory; once, he was even cited for brawling. But the brutal injury he sustained at the Battle of Pamplona forced him to slow down and ultimately consider whether he was being called to follow a different path in life.

Today, St. Ignatius' legacy as founder of the Society of Jesus lives on at Jesuit institutions like Holy Cross, in missionary work and at retreat and parish centers around the world. This year, the Society of Jesus is celebrating an Ignatian Year, marking the anniversary of Ignatius' bedridden conversion five centuries ago. And it's also sparking conversations within Holy Cross about how his story can offer instruction and hope as the College community grapples with issues of the current day, from a pandemic and racial injustice to severe political division, social and economic marginalization, and a climate in crisis.

"Ignatius' life after the cannonball is, as I like to say, a series of 'Now what?' moments," reflects Rev. Timothy O'Brien, S.J., '06, Holy Cross' director of mission initiatives. "We face a decision point in this community, and, perhaps in society more broadly, whether we're going to let what we're living through make us wiser or whether we just want to go back to something that feels 'normal.'"

While it's tempting to draw direct parallels between 16th-century Ignatius and one's modern-day life due to his relatability, Fr. O'Brien notes that Ignatius was thoroughly a person of his time.

"Historically, Ignatius is still a medieval Christian," Fr. O'Brien cautions. He is influenced by the world views of his time. In a Ptolemaic worldview, understandings of how the universe worked and who God was evolved from that same world view. Today, The Spiritual Exercises are being translated for new generations of seekers. While Christians still find resonance with Ignatius' language, persons from many spiritual and cultural traditions find in his 'rules for discernment' something ingenious that transcends time and culture. "all of us need to be attentive to the ways in which our experiences are inviting us to reflect and be open to change," "Ignatius is the patron saint of 'Now what?' — which is why we're still having this conversation and discovering Ignatian spirituality well into the 21st century."

Ignatius gives us hope that in the things that happen in our lives — even the things that are difficult — God can be found and is inviting us into a future of hope and joy.

Timothy O'Brien, S.J.

IGNATIUS ASKS, "WHO AM I CALLED TO BE?"

Born in 1491 at the castle of Loyola in northern Spain, Ignatius was the youngest of 13. "He wanted to be successful in the world as he understood it, which for him meant excellence at arms when needed, but also marrying well and increasing the fortunes of his family," Fr. O'Brien says. While defending Pamplona from French troops, Ignatius was hit by a cannonball, shattering his right leg. Initially, he was so aesthetically concerned with how his leg was healing that he asked to have it re-broken and set again, even though anesthetics were not available.

"While recuperating at the castle of Loyola, he found none of the tales of chivalry that he loved to read," writes historian Rev. John W. O'Malley, S.J., Hon. '99, author of "The First Jesuits."

Instead, only two books were available: the illustrated "Life of Christ" by Ludolph of Saxony and a book on the lives of the saints. Laid up in bed, Ignatius had months to consider his next move. He began to notice that daydreams of returning to his old life left him feeling "dry and agitated in spirit."

In contrast, the idea of modeling his life after the saints he read about brought "serenity and comfort." This process of discernment helped him choose a new path. As soon as he was able, he set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

"I talk to students about Ignatius because his story is relevant to us today," says Michele Murray, senior vice president for student development and mission and dean of students. "Ignatius' story is a roadmap for dealing with major heartache and disappointment. I find that this is part of being human: allowing your heart to break and seeing very real desires — good desires — all crumble in front of your eyes. I don't know a person who has not had that experience."

"Ignatius offers us a lot of hope that there's life beyond the disappointment — and that life is bigger and more rewarding and more engaging than what we can imagine on the near side," she notes. "It takes courage and openness to possibility to recognize that disappointment is not the end of the road, often it's the beginning. Ignatius and the early Jesuits teach us that."

In the post pandemic times of today, many people around the world are searching for any meaning they can take away from the pain of isolation. "Ignatius let the time and stillness and solitude that was forced upon him become a means of reflection," Fr. O'Brien says. "And that, I think, is relevant to all of us."

On disappointments and setbacks Ignatius' injury at Pamplona would not be the only hurdle he'd face. His new path — even his journey to the Holy Land — brought new disappointments. "At every turn for a while he hit up against roadblocks and had to ask himself, 'Well, now what do I do?'" His guidelines for discernment offer a map for every person's journey of the soul.

Due in part to an outbreak of the plague, a short stay in Manresa, Spain, turned into months. Ignatius spent hours praying in a cave and reportedly suffered from mental anguish and doubts of faith. "[He] gave himself up to a regimen of prayer, fasting, self-flagellation, and other austerities that were extreme even for the 16th century," Fr. O'Malley writes.

Coping with these struggles, he began to write as a means to help himself and others. These writings would become part of the Spiritual Exercises — a practical handbook of prayer, meditation and contemplative practice, a hallmark of the Jesuits used to guide people seeking a deeper relationship with God. "Ignatius really found a way of distilling a lot of wisdom that had been passed on, even from early Christianity," Fr. O'Brien says of the Exercises. "He put them together in a readily accessible format. That's the real innovation of Ignatius."

For years, Murray has carried with her an excerpt from the beginning of the Exercises: "The shorthand for it is to listen generously, to give the speaker the benefit of the doubt. At this point in the history of the world, that simple concept feels so countercultural — the idea that we can listen not to argue, but to understand."

Ignatius finally made it to Jerusalem in 1523 — only to be asked to leave two weeks later by church officials who could not guarantee his safety there. Once again, he found himself facing a familiar question: Now what?