

# St. Ignatius of Loyola

BORN 1491; DIED 1556  
PRIEST AND FOUNDER  
FEAST DAY: JULY 31

**I**F THE CATHOLIC CHURCH were just a human organization, she could never have survived the assaults from outside and the internal betrayals by her own sinful members for the past two thousand years. But just before he left the earth, the risen Jesus had promised his apostles: *"I am with you always, to the close of the age"* (Mt 28:20). It was during one of the saddest periods in Church history, the corruption of the Renaissance Church and the Protestant revolt, that God raised up one of his greatest champions to defend and rebuild the crumbling and beleaguered Body of Christ, St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Ignatius was born at the castle of Loyola near Azpeitia, a town east of Bilbao in the Basque province of Guipúzcoa on the northern coast of Spain adjacent to France. He was the youngest of thirteen children of the aristocratic Beltrán Ibáñez de Oñaz y Loyola and Marina Sáenz de Licona y Balda. His mother died while he was an infant. Growing up a page in the court of the provincial governor, Ignatius' family's heroic military history and his reading of romantic tales of adventure instilled in him but one dream, that of worldly glory as a soldier. Swaggering about with daggers and pistols, his life became a mixture of court life, military service to the provincial governor, and low-life brawls in taverns, reckless military games, womanizing, and other crimes, including possibly lying about having received minor clerical orders to avoid prosecution for a crime in Azpeitia. At twenty-six, he became for five years an officer in the army of his relative the Duke of Navarra. Ignatius thus became a participant in ongoing conflicts between Spain and France. In 1521, when he was twenty-nine, he was part of a force of about a thousand men defending the Basque city of Pamploña against a French army of thirteen thousand. A cannon ball tore open his left calf and shattered his right knee. The loss of Ignatius caused the garrison to surrender the town, and his dream of military glory was shattered as well.

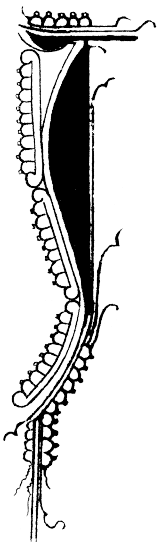


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Taken by the French to his home, Ignatius willingly endured multiple operations without being bound or uttering a cry. His recuperation lasted for nine months, and instead of the romance novels for which he yearned he had available for reading matter only a life of Christ and a book on the lives of the saints that opened with the sentence: "A saint is a knight in service to his Lord." This reading resulted in a profound change of heart. His soldierly mentality responded to the stories of heroic sacrifice for Christ, and he began to desire to rival and even surpass the saints he read about. His conversion was reinforced by a vision of Our Lady holding the Child Jesus; he began to hate his former sins, especially those of the flesh.

Ignatius first threw himself into penance. Leaving home, he went to the Basque pilgrimage shrine of Our Lady of Arantzazu not far from home, where he made a vow of chastity to the Blessed Mother, and put himself under her protection. He then went on toward the Mediterranean port of Barcelona, Spain, planning to use this as a starting-point for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Arriving at the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat near Barcelona, he first made a general confession of his sins, which took him three days to write. He hung his sword and dagger at the altar before the statue of Our Lady at Montserrat, put on a pilgrim's rough garb, and offered himself to God for whatever God wanted of him. A prayer he wrote provides an insight into his spirituality at this time: "Receive, Lord, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. You have given me all that I have, all that I am, and I surrender all to your divine will, that you dispose of me. Give me only your love and your grace. With this I am rich enough, and I have no more to ask."

For ten months Ignatius lived in a cave near the town of Manresa northeast of Barcelona. In solitude and poverty, he prayed, fasted, and cared for the sick at the local hospital, fighting a terrible siege of scruples (an exaggerated sense of sinfulness) that nearly led him to suicide. There he first read Thomas á Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, which he cherished



for the rest of his life. He kept a notebook of his spiritual experiences that in time became *Spiritual Exercises*, a book of spiritual training and formation full of military allusions and characterized by immense spiritual wisdom that many attribute not only to his reading and life experiences but to the special grace of the Holy Spirit and the gentle direction of the Blessed Mother. Now a soldier for Christ, Ignatius began forming an army that would spread across the world, the Company of Jesus, dedicated to serve under the direct command of the Pope.

Following his year at Manresa, Ignatius set out on an arduous journey to Rome and the Holy Land. Shortly after his arrival, the Franciscans responsible for the care of the holy places told him that it was too dangerous to remain and ordered him to leave. Now thirty-two, he returned to Spain, unsure about what to do next, and concluded that improving his education would make him better prepared for God's service. For eleven years, in Spain and at the University of Paris, he devoted himself to study, obtaining, after struggle, a master's degree and licentiate in theology by the age of forty-three. He attracted groups of followers who became personally attached to him, but not all these young men persevered. He also experienced problems with inquisitors regarding the orthodoxy of his *Spiritual Exercises* which was eventually approved by the Pope, but not before he had twice been imprisoned and once publicly flogged. In 1534, a band of seven men led by Ignatius, including St. Francis Xavier and Bl. Pierre Favre, took religious vows with the intention of evangelizing Muslims in the Holy Land. Three more soon joined the original seven.

While awaiting the completion of the studies of his new companions, in 1535 Ignatius returned home for reasons of health, and sought to make amends for his misspent youth. Living at a hospice, he distributed alms, persuaded the town council to create a program of regularly helping the needy, taught children their catechism, and preached. The following year, he went to Venice to prepare for the mission to the Holy Land. His companions arrived in 1537, where they sought and obtained permission from the Pope to go to the Holy Land. But war had broken out between Venice and the Turks, preventing the group from carrying out its original intention. They agreed to wait a year, and in the meantime those not already priests, including Ignatius, were ordained. The war continued (it concluded in 1540), so they instead offered their services to the Pope for whatever work he saw fit.

Ignatius and two others went to Rome, and while on the journey Ignatius proposed that the group be

called the Company of Jesus. The other seven followed, and the unusual nature of the group was immediately noted by those they served, both spiritually and through works of charity, while awaiting direction from the Pope. The ten agreed that they should form a religious order of men who lived in the world rather than in monasteries, did not pray in community nor wear religious habits, focused on education, and vowed obedience to the Pope. In 1540 the Pope approved the new order, renaming it the Society of Jesus (SJ). Ignatius was forty-eight.

At first, the Society (begun to be called Jesuits in 1544 as a term of reproach but now generally used) was asked to undertake missions to foreign lands, but almost immediately it also became the Pope's chief army in carrying out the Catholic Counter-Reformation, not only as theologians at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) from its earliest sessions, but more importantly as missionaries throughout Europe to restore whole peoples to the true faith and to sustain the faith of those suffering persecution. Very early, the Society's emphasis on education led it to found colleges and secondary schools, which together with worldwide evangelization remains an important element of its mission today.

The Society grew rapidly and became enormously influential, so much so that by the middle of the eighteenth century it had been expelled by several nations. In 1773 the Pope, under extreme pressure, suppressed the Society on grounds of prudence and peace everywhere except where local governments allowed its continuation (which Poland and Russia did). The Society was restored in 1814, and today it is made up of over twenty thousand men. The *Spiritual Exercises* not only continues to guide the spiritual formation of its members, but has become a classic guide to spiritual growth for many ordinary Catholics.

Ignatius was a gifted leader. He did not have a brilliant mind, but he knew that ordinary gifts can be used in astounding ways by God. He took unremarkable men, inspired them with the love and power of God, and formed, under the banner *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* ("for the greater glory of God"), a new army of evangelization and education unequaled in daring, zeal, and accomplishment in the history of the Church. In giving himself to his Maker, Ignatius was able to fulfill the unique purpose for which he had been created. He began life with the dream of attaining worldly renown as a soldier in a worldly army. The stories of the saints opened his mind and heart to another vision, and his courageous acceptance of their example made him one of the great soldiers in the service of an Eternal King.

