

THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION OF JESUIT EDUCATION

St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)

Inigo Lopez de Loyola was the youngest son of a nobleman of the mountainous Basque region of northern Spain. When Ignatius was born in 1491, the Middle Ages were just ending and Europe was entering into the Renaissance. So Ignatius was a man on the edge of two worlds. Europe of the late 15th Century was a world of discovery and invention. European explorers sailed west to the Americas and south to Africa, and scholars uncovered the buried civilizations of Greece and Rome. The printing press fed a new hunger for knowledge among a growing middle class. It was the end of chivalry and the rise of a new humanism. It was a time of radical change, social upheaval, and war.

Trained in the courtly manner of the time of King Ferdinand, he dreamed of the glories of knighthood and wore his sword and breastplate with a proud arrogance. In a quixotic attempt in 1521 to defend the Spanish border fortress of Pamplona against the French artillery, Inigo's right leg was shattered by a cannon ball. His French captors, impressed by the Inigo's courage, carried him on a litter across Spain to his family home at Loyola where he began a long period of convalescence.

During his recovery, he found himself drawn away from the romances of chivalry that had filled his imagination from an early age to more spiritual reading—an illustrated life of Christ and a collection of saints' lives.

After his recovery, he set out for the Holy Land to realize a dream of "converting the infidel." On the way he stopped in the little town of Manresa and wound up spending nearly a year there during which he experienced both the depths of despair and great times of enlightenment.

Ordered to leave Palestine after being there little more than a month, Ignatius decided that he needed an education in order to be able to "help souls." In Barcelona, he went to school with boys a quarter his age to learn the rudiments of Latin grammar, then moved on to several other Spanish university cities. In each he was imprisoned and interrogated by the Inquisition, because he kept speaking to people about "spiritual things," having neither a theology degree nor priestly ordination.

Finally, turning his back on his homeland, he went to the foremost university of the time, the University of Paris, where he began his education all over again and with diligence, after five years, was finally awarded the degree "Master of Arts." It was here at Paris that he changed his Basque name to the Latin *Ignatius* and its Spanish equivalent *Ignacio*.

While at the University, he had roomed with and become good friends with a fellow Basque named Francis Xavier and a Savoyard named Peter Faber. After graduation, these three, together with several other Paris graduates, under-

took a process of communal discernment and decided to bind themselves together in an apostolic community. They would live in evangelical poverty and go on a mission to Jerusalem. They originally called themselves "amigos en el Señor"—friends in the Lord.

In 1540, Paul III approved the Institute of the Society of Jesus. Ignatius was unanimously elected General Superior and spent the last sixteen years of his life in Rome directing the fledgling order. The other companions went all over Europe, to the Far East, and eventually to the New World. And wherever they went they founded schools as a means of helping people to "find God in all things."

— www.jesuit.org; George W. Traub, S.J., "Do You Speak Ignatian?"



Ignatian Spirituality

Each of the great religious families in the Church (e.g., Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan, etc.) has its own distinctive way of responding to the Holy Spirit. Ignatian spirituality was developed over the course of many years by St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus (i.e., the Jesuits).

Following the example of St. Ignatius, Jesuit life centers on the imitation of Jesus—focusing on those priorities which constitute Christ’s mind, heart, values, priorities and loves. What are those values, priorities and loves? Ignatius would encourage us to consider what Jesus said and did. At the foundation of Jesus’ life was prayer, a continuous search for how best to live as an authentic human being before a loving God. Jesus preached forgiveness of sins, healed the sick and possessed, and gave hope to the poor, to those socially and economically outcast. Jesus spoke of joy, peace, justice and love; he summoned men and women from all classes of society to continue to follow his way to God and his commitment to helping people become whole and holy. Being a companion with Jesus on his mission gave Ignatius of Loyola’s life a sense of purpose and meaning. It is just such companionship that lies at the heart of Ignatian spirituality.

The Society of Jesus attempts to incorporate these same gospel values into all its works. Jesuits stress the need to take time to reflect and to pray, in order to find out how God wants us to serve in all our ministries. This active commitment to seeking God’s leadership is called discernment. It is at the heart of St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*.

The overriding characteristic we see in Jesus is loving obedience, an open-hearted desire to find and to pursue how God wants other men and women to be forgiven, to be free, to utilize all their talents and opportunities in ways which build up this world as a place where faith, justice, peace and love can flourish. This kind of spirituality is incarnational. It views the world as a place where Christ walked, talked and embraced people. It views the world, therefore, as a place of grace, a place of being able to give life to others.

At the same time, Ignatian spirituality is realistic. The world Christ faced was also a world of cruelty, injustice and the abuse of power and authority. Consequently, Jesuit spirituality affirms our human potential but also is dedicated to the ongoing, day-in-day-out struggle between good and evil. No one apostolic work exhausts how good can be done; therefore, Jesuits do all kinds of work. The Jesuit norm is: to find where God will best be served and where people will best be helped.

– Howard Gray, S.J., “*Jesuit Spirituality*”

The Spiritual Exercises

The greatest spiritual legacy St. Ignatius left his Society was the *Spiritual Exercises*, which is essentially a manual for giving a 30-day retreat. The purpose of this retreat is to bring the retreatant to an understanding and awareness of God while dealing honestly with the failing and drawbacks that hinder such prayer.

During his time in Pamplona and Manresa, Ignatius noticed how God led him to pay attention to the diverse “voices” inside of him—to the movements of consolation and desolation in his heart and spirit. Furthermore, he gradually learned to discern the sources of these desires, thoughts and movements of the heart and spirit: which of them came from God and which of them drew him away from God—and, perhaps most importantly, which of them he should act upon.

Throughout this time, Ignatius learned how important it is to look for God in the stuff of his everyday experience; he learned that God was shaping and forming him to be a companion of Jesus. The fruit of these months of prayer and reflection is contained in his *Spiritual Exercises*.

If there is any genius to the Society of Jesus, it lies in this little treatise on prayer written over 450 years ago. The method of prayer outlined in that book helps each Jesuit to follow Jesus and seek God’s will in any circumstances, from the most mundane day of teaching, administrating or writing, to a particularly trying experience of walking with people experiencing grave suffering or social injustice.

– www.jesuit.org