

Five hundred Years of Conversion: 1521–2021

From May 2021 until July 2022, the Society of Jesus celebrates an Ignatian Year. David Birchall SJ describes how a war-wound from a cannonball brought about the conversion of Iñigo de Loyola, and how the spirituality he later developed as Ignatius Loyola is still as relevant today.

PHOTO: ST IGNATIUS



held at that time by the Spanish Crown. Iñigo López de Loyola was the right-hand man of the Spanish Viceroy of Navarre who convinced the Spanish forces, against their better judgement, to try to hold out against a superior French force. In the process of the action, this rather hot-headed and determined Basque had one of his legs broken by a French cannon. And so began a great metanoia in the life of the man now known as St Ignatius Loyola.

Iñigo de Loyola, who later changed his name to the more common Ignatius, was a Catholic – as was almost everyone in Spain at the time. But his faith was of the cultural kind which apart from a few formalities of churchgoing didn't impinge too much on how he led his life. After his injury in Pamplona, he was carried on a stretcher one hundred kilometres or so to his home in Loyola. Painful operations and fever followed. During May and June of 1521, his life hung in the balance. However, from the feast of Sts Peter and Paul on 29 June his slow recovery began. His conversion to Christ, which is the real event being celebrated this year, slowly took place during his period of convalescence.

Religious groups typically celebrate the birth or death of their founder, and when significant numbers ending in zeros are reached, the celebrations generally take place with extra enthusiasm. But the Jesuits, and those who consider their foundation to be centred on St Ignatius of Loyola, celebrate this year neither a birth nor a death, but an event that began with a life-threatening war-wound. This year, 2021, is 500 years since French troops with local Navarrese help attacked Pamplona, the capital of Navarre,

Fate, or perhaps more accurately, God, often has a rather strange way of shaping our lives. During the period of convalescence, Ignatius asked his sister-in-law Magdalene if she could find any books for him to read. He fancied the popular tales of knightly derring-do. The recently published tales of the knight Amadis the Gaul were what he was looking for. Instead, all the manor house in Loyola had by way of reading matter was the Life of

PHOTO: CONVERSION CHAPEL



Christ, probably by Ludolph the Carthusian, and *Flos Sanctorum*, the lives of the saints by the Dominican Jacopo da Varezze.

His enforced inactivity during these months of convalescence led Ignatius to rely on his imagination for excitement while he planned a future for himself. He alternated dreams of wooing a noble lady from the Spanish court with dreams of outdoing the saints, whose stories he was reading. He eventually came to see that the dreams of imitating Christ and his saints brought a lasting sense of peace and contentment, whereas the dreams of the lady brought no such lasting peace. Gradually Ignatius began to realise he was being led by God to a new way of life. Instead of a life of sworn allegiance to an earthly lord, he felt drawn to a life of following Jesus Christ Our Lord himself.

Conversion, in the case of Ignatius, was a gradual process. First the desire to dedicate his life to his new Lord, Jesus, then a very slow discernment, during which time he got more skilled at detecting the Spirit of God gently leading him on, and the Spirit of the enemy of our human nature, trying to lead him to despair and suicide. As soon as his leg allowed him to walk, he decided to travel from Loyola to Barcelona to catch a boat to the Holy Land. He so wanted to identify with his new Lord that he wanted to see, touch, smell, hear, and immerse himself in the land where Jesus walked. Being a good Catholic knight, he went via the shrines to Our Lady of Aranzazu, high in the hills of the Basque Country, and then the great Catalan national shrine of the Black Madonna of Montserrat. It was in front of the Madonna he handed himself over to God in an overnight vigil of arms.

He then spent nearly a year in a town a day's walk from Montserrat known as Manresa where he found himself sorely tested. However, this testing led eventually to a greater spiritual wisdom. He rejected his former way of life as a relatively rich member of the land-owning class. Now he dressed in sackcloth and begged for his bread. He helped out in the local hospitals doing menial tasks. This all brought him joy. He tried to make amends to God for the sins of his past life – his vanity, abuse of women, looking down on the poor, fights he had got into. He prayed all hours, he whipped himself till he bled, he kept going to confession with new sins he had remembered. But whatever he did only seemed to lead him further into despair. He had suicidal thoughts. Till eventually the realisation dawned that we can't repay the Lord for his goodness to us; we can't pay God back for our sins. We can only graciously accept forgiveness, freely given out of God's love for us.

The wisdom gained from his struggle with the good and bad spirits in Manresa was eventually distilled into a small notebook which became what we now know as the *Spiritual Exercises*. It is this programme of prayerful discernment that is the real fruit of Ignatius' struggle which is celebrated this year.

As Ignatius grew in his spiritual life, he began to notice that so many other people, though nominally Catholic, were not in touch with the actions of God in their own lives. God, he saw, wanted the best for each one of his beloved children, and we only had to get in touch with the deepest desires within to find the will of God. God was offering to the believer the freedom of the children of God. He had a very positive anthropology.

Ignatius always had to fight for the truth of his insights into the way God works with human beings. The primacy of the individual's conscience and the belief that God speaks to every one of God's creatures has always sat a little uneasily in the institutional Church, and for Ignatius this certainly was the case. Whilst studying theology in the University of Alcalá in Spain, Ignatius was brought before the Spanish Inquisition. They wanted to know what he was teaching, they probably wanted to find out if he was teaching that anyone who claimed the inspiration of the Spirit could do whatever they fancied. He

convinced his Dominican interrogators that he wasn't. Rather, his belief was that the human heart is most contented and consoled when following Christ and doing good. The Inquisition set him free but told him to stop teaching and leading people through the Spiritual Exercises. This was too much for him to stomach. So much good he had seen through his Exercises that he couldn't just give up. His solution was courageous and radical. Despite the fact that France and Spain were at war at the time, he moved to France where the Spanish Inquisition had no jurisdiction and began to study theology in the University of Paris.

The Catholic Church of the sixteenth century had similarities to that of our day:

1. The Church was losing ground to the Reformers all over Europe. England under Elizabeth I had left the Catholic fold; other European countries had embraced the Reformers; Germany, Switzerland, the Spanish Netherlands – even France was tottering. The situation was not dissimilar to the rejection of Christianity that is engulfing Europe today.

2. The Catholic Church suffered in Ignatius' day from scandals of many sorts. There were many houses of nuns where the standard of living was high and celibacy was not that highly prized. Many clergy, particularly bishops and cardinals entered the Church for worldly rather than spiritual reasons as the Church offered many lucrative and powerful positions. Clerics in the sixteenth-century Church were often not well respected. Reminiscent of today's sexual abuse scandals by clergy which have almost totally eroded respect for those who run the Church.

3. The Church hierarchy in the sixteenth century was made up almost totally of the sons of the wealthy, with the expectations of their class as to standards of living. And as in the Church of Latin America in recent years, the hierarchy were often accused of siding with those in power who oppress the poor rather than being on the side of the poor.

In order to reform the Church from within, Ignatius saw it as necessary for Catholics, particularly the clergy and religious, to be well educated and committed to their faith through knowing, loving and serving God. He believed that a real understanding of God can only come about

through movements of the heart that need to be nurtured through direct communication with God in prayer. The major offerings of Ignatius to the Church in the sixteenth century were colleges for education, and the Spiritual Exercises for personal commitment to Christ.

Given the similarities between the Catholic Church's situation in the sixteenth-century and Christianity in the twenty-first-century, it is not surprising that the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius have undergone a great revival in recent years, not just in Catholic circles, but especially among those of the Reform tradition. The Christ-centred Spiritual Exercises are meeting the same needs in our day as they did for people of the sixteenth-century.

Prior to Vatican II the Spiritual Exercises had been given by priests to large groups of religious sisters, clergy and occasionally lay people in the form of extended sermons. The five hours of prayer a day which Ignatius encourages a person to do when undertaking the Spiritual Exercises full-time for a month were given as extended sermons in a chapel. Although the idea was that an initial few ideas were to be given by the priest and the rest of the hour left to personal prayer, elderly Jesuits talk of some fathers in the 1950s and 60s preaching for the full hour, leaving no time at all for personal prayer. Just after ordination many Jesuits would write their own reflections for the meditations of the Spiritual Exercises on their typewriters and then these gradually yellowing sheets would serve for a lifetime of retreat giving. Those receiving the retreat were passive, hoping that something of the retreat-giver's wisdom might rub off on them, or that God might work in the few minutes left by the preacher.

Vatican II encouraged Christian traditions to go back to their sources. Jesuits were thus encouraged to study Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. A renewal took place spearheaded by Paul Kennedy SJ and Gerard W. Hughes SJ at St Beuno's in North Wales, followed by many Jesuits in the USA and Canada such as John English SJ and William Barry SJ. Instead of preaching to large groups, the Exercises were given individually one to one. Instead of lots of ideas from a preacher, the retreatant was encouraged to allow their own imagination and the Holy Spirit to lead them.

Ignatius' initial insight after his stay in Manresa was that lay people can lead others to God. With the training of many lay people of many Christian denominations in Ignatian Spirituality today, this is finally being realised. It doesn't need a priest to give Ignatius' Exercises.

Covid-19 and the internet have spurred on great developments in prayer and spirituality. When churches shut down, people turned to the internet for their spiritual sustenance. For example, many thousands of people followed the themes of the Spiritual Exercises in Lent, given via the Ignatian Spirituality Centre in Glasgow in 2020. In 2021, even more people joined in, with up to 100 online groups meeting weekly on Zoom through Lent to follow the life of Christ. Many people were greatly surprised at the person they met as they read and prayed over events in the life of Christ. Many were amazed that Jesus Christ was truly human. A real man who had doubts, fears, joys, loves and feelings of anger and compassion. Many grew in the appreciation that God was calling them – not to be priests or nuns but to live a life of service and joy. And many too found great help in an online group of open people where they could be themselves. Is it too fanciful to believe that as the twenty-first century progresses, maybe the majority of people who follow Christ will see their companions on the journey not as a congregation in the local parish church but rather as a disparate worldwide group on the internet? Ignatius embraced the latest technology; he set up a printing press to provide books for his new colleges. He would certainly have embraced the internet.

It is strange how a well-aimed cannonball could have caused the conversion of one man to Christ, and his conversion led to a whole movement within the Catholic Church. A movement initially of priests and brothers in the Society of Jesus, which seems to be growing now beyond the Jesuits and beyond the Catholic Church. All of creation is of God. A spirituality which seeks to find God in all things – which makes the discernment of how best to engage with creation, both human, animal and the whole of our environment – speaks to many people today. Ignatian spirituality always has the person of Christ as the focus, and the knowing, loving and following of Christ at its centre. Prayer, reflection and discernment in the Ignatian tradition is

flexible. This flexibility even stretches to the position of prayer, on which Ignatius' only real rule is, whatever works best for the individual – standing, kneeling, sitting, walking. Walking, in fact, is proving a popular way of praying, particularly in the form of pilgrimages. Pilgrimages allow the pilgrim to ponder, pray, share and discuss with others on the way. When time is dedicated to a spiritual journey, prayerful pondering and spiritual conversation seem to come naturally. Ignatius, known as 'the pilgrim' for his walking thousands of miles across Europe, has inspired many to follow him along the way. The *Camino Ignaciano* (Ignatian Way) is attracting many who want to follow in his footsteps across Spain.

It took 57 years after his death to canonise St Ignatius Loyola; the 400th anniversary of which is being celebrated in 2022. Yet even 500 years after his conversion many are finding that the spirituality he developed in response to the great needs in the Church and the world in his time is still relevant today. Ignatius and the early Jesuits helped the poor and marginalised; it doesn't take much looking to find people who need help today. He tried to lead people to Christ, not so much to know about Christ, but to know him through meeting him in personal prayer. He had a great desire to encourage people to live their faith in a committed, personal way. These anniversaries of Ignatius will provide the stimulus for many to find opportunities to know, love and serve Christ better, whether that be through the Spiritual Exercises, pilgrimages, or other events that will be put on.

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Journey through Lent with Saint Ignatius Loyola (2022) <https://www.onlineprayer.net/>

Pilgrimage through the Spain of Ignatius Loyola, 27 July–3 August 2022
<https://www.iscglasgow.co.uk/pilgrimagespain.html>

Camino Ignaciano
<https://caminoignaciano.org/en/>