

# Emulating the Saints: The Conversion of Saint Ignatius of Loyola from Military Leader to Catholic Saint

by Gerald R. Morlidge Jr., Cañada College

Mentor: Anthony Swanson

Before 1521, the man who became Saint Ignatius of Loyola was a nobleman obsessed with military life and personal glory. Events that occurred in that pivotal year, however, led him to change the direction of his life completely. Finding religion, he became one of the foremost proponents of the Catholic Church and the founders of one of its most important orders, the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits as they have become better known. But his conversion didn't mean that his glory-seeking past was completely forgotten or that he was fully in line with the Catholic doctrines of the time. In fact his military past remained a major influence on his religious activities. While today regarded as a leading figure of the Counterreformation, Saint Ignatius' path towards Christianity was a natural substitute for him after he was no longer able to serve as a soldier and, while they vowed devotion to their faith, he and his followers maintained an agenda that emphasized their own activities and frequently prompted investigation from Church authorities.

The military influences that Saint Ignatius of Loyola brought into the founding of the Society of Jesus developed early in his life. He had been born Iñigo Lopez de Oñaz y Loyola around the year 1491 at the castle of Loyola, the thirteenth and last child of a noble family with a long heritage of service and loyalty to the Spanish king.<sup>1</sup> As per the tradition of the time, inheritance was passed down only to the oldest son, a system known as primogeniture. Since Saint Ignatius was the last of his parents' many children, he could not expect to receive anything more than his name. Instead he had to look to one of two places for his future: the priesthood or the military. Despite his father's attempts to encourage him into religion, he instead turned towards a life of nobility and military service.<sup>2</sup>

Entering court life during his teens, Saint Ignatius soon became accustomed to life as a nobleman. He began his training initially under the guidance of Juan Velázquez de Cuéllar, chief

---

<sup>1</sup> Hugo Rahner, *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola: An Account of Its Historical Development*, trans. Francis John Smith (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1953), 2-3

<sup>2</sup> Rahner, *Spirituality*, 7

treasurer to the royal court, and served under him until Cuéllar's death in 1517.<sup>3</sup> He then joined the royal army under the Duke of Nájera and was stationed at Pamplona, capital of the Navarre region of Spain. Together, his experiences at court and in the military led him to develop, in the words of Jesuit scholar William Bangert, a "pleasure in military exercises, the company of women, and sins of the flesh."<sup>4</sup> These are characteristics that are far from what would be expected of someone who would become a major proponent of Catholicism. However these early experiences would come to influence his later writings and religious views. But in order for him to look towards the religious life his father initially wanted for him, he first needed a reason to do so.

The root of Ignatius of Loyola's conversion can be traced back to 1521. In that year, the French army invaded the Navarre region to the welcome of the Navarrese people.<sup>5</sup> Still stationed at Pamplona, Ignatius rallied its defenders not to surrender despite having received orders to do so. On May 20, 1521, the French army besieged the city and "Ignatius stood fighting bravely until a cannonball of the enemy broke one of his legs and seriously injured the other."<sup>6</sup> With its key defender wounded, Pamplona quickly surrendered. Saint Ignatius was taken back to Loyola where, after a brief period of being close to death, he slowly began to recover. Unfortunately the bones in his legs failed to heal correctly and, as having a deformed leg did not fit his image of being a member of the royal court, he had segments of the healed bone cut away and his leg stretched for many days to keep it from becoming shorter than the other.<sup>7</sup> Despite the surgical attempts, his military career was effectively over but in its place, Ignatius of Loyola found an unlikely replacement that promised just as much personal glory.

During his bedridden recovery, Saint Ignatius turned to books and what he read inspired him towards religion. At Loyola, he found only two books available: *The Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony and *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine. In these two books he was introduced to the lives of Jesus Christ and to the Catholic Saints. In the stories of saints such as St. Dominic and St. Francis, he saw references to knights of Christ who served the Kingdom of God and their exploits inspired him.<sup>8</sup> To have discovered them when he did was a salvation to him as he certainly would have known that his injuries would prevent him from being able to

---

<sup>3</sup> William V. Bangert, *A History of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1972), 4

<sup>4</sup> Bangert, *History*, 4

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*, trans. J.F.X. O'Connor (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1900), 20

<sup>7</sup> Loyola, *Autobiography*, 22-23

<sup>8</sup> Rahner, *Spirituality*, 32-33

show his abilities in battle again and that his leg would never fully look normal. Yet in the saints, he found a new direction from which he could achieve glory. As a result, he determined that he would emulate those saints and everything they had accomplished.<sup>9</sup>

After recovering from his injuries, Saint Ignatius determined he would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1522. After giving up his sword and dagger at an altar in Montserrat, he journeyed to the nearby town of Manresa where he intended only to spend a few days, but instead spent almost a full year.<sup>10</sup> It was during his time at Manresa that he experienced his full conversion to Catholicism, witnessed mystical visions, and ultimately began to write what became the primary document of his future religious order, the *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>11</sup> In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius outlined the basic premise of how one can achieve closeness to both God and Jesus through a series of prayers and reflections upon the events in the life of Jesus. While the *Spiritual Exercises* focuses mainly on religious themes, one can't ignore the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, references to his military past that appear throughout the work.

Frequent in the *Spiritual Exercises* are references to Jesus as a king and his followers as loyal knights who must follow his every command. Those who fail to do so "would deserve to be condemned by the whole world, and looked upon as an ignoble knight."<sup>12</sup> Also used in great detail is military imagery. For example, in the section on the Two Standards, Saint Ignatius defines two opposing sides of a conflict, with Jesus as the "sovereign Commander-in-Chief of all the good" on one side and Lucifer representing "the chief of the enemy" on the other.<sup>13</sup> Both Jesus and Lucifer are also seen commanding their forces from their separate capitals, with Jesus based in Jerusalem and Lucifer at Babylon. Even the title of the section itself is militarily significant as "standards" is a term used to represent an army's battle flag. But Lucifer isn't the only enemy to receive a military comparison. Further on in the work, Saint Ignatius tackles temptation and, among his comparisons, equates it to an army commander searching for the weakest part of a fortification to attack.<sup>14</sup>

While military themes found in the *Spiritual Exercises* can be explained by the short period of time between his past life and his conversion, harder to explain away is the military imagery that appears in the Formula of the Institute of the Society of Jesus. First published in the 1540 bull

---

<sup>9</sup> Loyola, *Autobiography*, 26

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-38

<sup>11</sup> Rahner, *Spirituality*, 49-51

<sup>12</sup> Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A New Translation*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1963), 44

<sup>13</sup> Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 60

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 146

*Regimini Militantis Ecclesiae* by Pope Paul III, and later also by Pope Julius III in the 1550 bull *Exposcit Debitum*, this document was what Saint Ignatius saw as the role of the Society of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> In it, he begins by highlighting the vows and duties expected of “whoever desires to serve as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the cross in our Society.”<sup>16</sup> He goes on further by telling possible candidates that once they have enlisted “in this militia of Christ,” they should be “clad for battle day and night” and ready to go wherever they are sent.<sup>17</sup> In these words, Saint Ignatius has effectively equated the Society of Jesus to a military unit and individual Jesuits as its soldiers. Also prevalent in the document is the theme of absolute obedience to the orders of not only the Pope and to Jesus, but also to the elected Superior General of the Society.<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that Saint Ignatius himself was unanimously chosen the first Superior General. Absolute obedience and loyalty are recurring themes in the order and they could have easily been developed during his time as a member of the royal court or during his military service.

While obedience itself was an important concept in the Society of Jesus, it appears that Saint Ignatius and his followers had a clear agenda of their own that didn’t always match that of the Catholic Church. In fact, in the years after his experiences at Manresa in 1523 and before the approval of the Society of Jesus in 1540, they frequently found themselves viewed with suspicion by Church authorities and often came under investigation. Saint Ignatius himself frequently seemed to ignore the criticism and accepted it as just a natural part of his religious duties. Foremost in the minds of the early Jesuits was a focus on their own works, including providing education, tending to the sick, and preaching the *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>19</sup> Anything further, while not being completely ignored, tended to be considered of lesser importance to their overall mission.

One of the first examples one sees of Saint Ignatius following his own agenda is his repeated determination to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After leaving Manresa, he does succeed at reaching the Holy Land in September 1523, however he was only able to spend several days there before he was ordered to leave by Church officials, who cited poor conditions and threatened him with excommunication if he refused.<sup>20</sup> Years later, going to Jerusalem returned

---

<sup>15</sup> Bangert, *History*, 21-22

<sup>16</sup> Saint Ignatius of Loyola, “The Formula of the Institute of the Society of Jesus,” in *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, ed. George E. Ganss (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 66

<sup>17</sup> Loyola, “Formula,” 68

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>19</sup> John W. O’Malley Jr. “Was Ignatius Loyola a church reformer? How to look at early modern Catholicism,” *Catholic Historical Review* 77, no.2 (1991): *Academic Search Premier*

<sup>20</sup> Loyola, *Autobiography*, 73-75

to his active plans when he and his followers made vows of poverty, chastity, and to spend the rest of their lives preaching in Jerusalem. In regards to the last vow however, they also determined that if conditions did not allow them to fulfill it, they would instead offer their services directly to the Pope.<sup>21</sup> This in itself is significant as it shows that the early Jesuits did not originally intend to establish themselves as the order that they became, but only did so because their original endeavor proved impossible to accomplish.

While the threat of excommunication was one instance of a Church official taking action against him, it was by no means the only one. After his visit to Jerusalem, Saint Ignatius began studying for the priesthood but during his studies, he and his followers continued to teach the *Spiritual Exercises* and that frequently got them into trouble.<sup>22</sup> In the town of Alcalá, he was arrested for 42 days after being wrongly blamed for the disappearance of two women who had embarked upon a pilgrimage by themselves. After he was released, he was ordered to stop teaching until he had studied for another four years. Refusing to obey this order, he instead went to Salamanca where he was subsequently arrested by Dominican friars and held for 22 days while his *Spiritual Exercises* were examined for heresy. Going afterwards to France to continue his studies, he was again accused and his *Spiritual Exercises* examined for heresy, but still nothing was found against him.<sup>23</sup>

Such attacks continued up to and even after the founding of the Society of Jesus. According to Jesuit scholar Hugo Rahner, the origins of the persecution may lie in the values that Saint Ignatius himself instilled in the order, namely its focus and devotion to the Church and to Jesus.<sup>24</sup> For his part, Saint Ignatius almost seemed to welcome the persecution. In his dictated autobiography, he related how he once responded to someone who wanted to help him get out of the prison in Salamanca, saying that “for the love of Jesus Christ, I gladly wear all the handcuffs and chains that could be found in Salamanca” and that he was willing to go through “imprisonment for the love of Our Lord.”<sup>25</sup> For Saint Ignatius, any form of persecution against him and his teachings directly paralleled the persecution and sufferings of Jesus. As a result, he and his followers were willing to face persecution and attacks with little or no complaint because in their minds, they were showing their devotion to Jesus by emulating him.

---

<sup>21</sup> Bangert, *History*, 16

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13

<sup>23</sup> Loyola, *Autobiography*, 127-128

<sup>24</sup> Rahner, *Spirituality*, 109

<sup>25</sup> Loyola, *Autobiography*, 106

Despite the suspicion, the Society of Jesus became seen as an instrumental force opposing the Protestant Reformation that was occurring in Europe during this time. However Saint Ignatius and the early Jesuits didn't seem particularly interested in the religious debate to begin with. In fact, Jesuit scholar Father John O'Malley borrows a scientific term and claims that Saint Ignatius became associated with the Counterreformation by "osmosis", meaning that he must have been involved simply because every other church figure of his time was as well.<sup>26</sup> In O'Malley's argument, it is only after Saint Ignatius' death in 1556 that other Jesuit leaders began associating him as a Church reformer defending the faith against Martin Luther and the Protestants. Interestingly, a look at some of his major religious writings provides a possible clue to this as nowhere in Saint Ignatius' autobiography or in his *Spiritual Exercises* is there any mention of the Reformation. Furthermore, it is not even mentioned in the Formula of the Institute of the Society of Jesus, even though this document does specifically mention other enemies of the Church; including the Turks, the people of the Indies, or any other heretic in general.<sup>27</sup>

Saint Ignatius' lack of interest in Church affairs is perhaps best demonstrated with his conduct in relation to the first meetings of the Council of Trent from 1545 to 1547. In 1545, Pope Paul III called the Council to discuss and define Catholic doctrine in relation to Protestantism and three Jesuit representatives were sent to take part.<sup>28</sup> But the issue of Catholicism versus Protestantism was not Saint Ignatius' main concern at the Council, a fact he shows in a letter to his representatives in which he clearly points out that their main duties were to continue working with the people of Trent by helping the sick, teaching children, and hearing confessions.<sup>29</sup> He further states directly that they should avoid preaching the "points of conflict between Protestants and Catholics, but simply exhort all to upright conduct and to ecclesiastical practice."<sup>30</sup> O'Malley also cites another letter written by Saint Ignatius to his representatives in 1546 in which he considers "whether it might not be to God's greater glory for them to withdraw from the Council" entirely.<sup>31</sup> These two letters hint that the divide between Protestant and Catholic was not a major issue in Saint Ignatius' mind, but instead he was more concerned with promoting the faith as the Jesuits understood it. That being said, this does not mean that Saint Ignatius would have completely ignored the issue and further investigation of his personal letters may provide more insight into his opinions on the topic.

---

<sup>26</sup> O'Malley, "Ignatius Loyola"

<sup>27</sup> Loyola, "Formula," 68

<sup>28</sup> Bangert, *History*, 24

<sup>29</sup> Saint Ignatius of Loyola, "Conduct at Trent: On Helping Others, 1546," in *Sources of The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures*, ed. Katharine J. Lualdi (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2012), 292

<sup>30</sup> Loyola, "Conduct," 292

<sup>31</sup> O'Malley, "Ignatius Loyola"

In conclusion, Saint Ignatius of Loyola became a leading proponent of Christianity after war injuries prevented him from military glory, however he and the early Jesuits maintained an agenda of their own that did not necessarily fully agree with Catholic Church doctrine. The thirteenth and final of his parents' children, Saint Ignatius sought to make a name for himself as a nobleman in the military. After he was seriously injured in battle and unlikely to achieve this goal in the army or at court, he found a replacement as a soldier fighting for religion. Despite his conversion, military themed imagery continued to influence his thinking and can easily be found in his writings, including in the *Spiritual Exercises* and in the Formula of the Institute of the Society of Jesus. While he proclaimed absolute obedience to the Pope and to Jesus, Saint Ignatius carried with him his own agenda that frequently brought him under investigation by suspicious Church authorities. Even though he came to be known as a leading opponent of the Protestant Reformation, in actuality he appeared to largely ignore the religious debate and instead continued to direct the Society of Jesus to work towards their own projects.

## Works Cited

Primary Sources

Loyola, Saint Ignatius of. "Conduct at Trent: On Helping Others, 1546." In *Sources of the Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures*, edited by Katherine J. Lualdi, 292. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2012.

----- . *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius*. Edited by J.F.X. O'Connor. New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1900.

----- . "The Formula of the Institute of the Society of Jesus." In *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, edited by George E. Ganss. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970.

----- . *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A New Translation*. Translated by Louis J. Puhl. Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1963.

Secondary Sources

Bangert, William V. *A History of the Society of Jesus*. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1972.

O'Malley Jr., John W. "Was Ignatius of Loyola a church reformer? How to look at early modern Catholicism." *Catholic Historical Review* 77, no. 2 (Apr 1991): 177-193. *Academic Search Premier*.

Rahner, Hugo. *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola: An Account of Its Historical Development*. Translated by Francis John Smith. Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1953.

Sources Consulted but Not Used

Meissner, W.W. "Psychoanalytic hagiography: The case of Ignatius of Loyola." *Theological Studies* 52, no. 1 (Mar 1991): 3-33. *Academic Search Premier*.