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St. Ignatius, pray for us

John Dear | Jul. 29, 2008 On the Road to Peace

St. Ignatius Loyola looms large in the life of every Jesuit. For most of us, he is daunting, awesome, even a bit frightening. He was a strict taskmaster who wept consoling tears every day over the life of Jesus and our call to serve. This week, as we celebrate his feast July 31, my thoughts turn once again to this remarkable human being, and ask for his intercession for the Society of Jesus, the church, and the world.

In 1997, I began my Jesuit sabbatical year, known as ?tertianship,? in Northern Ireland. To begin, I journeyed to the ancient Benedictine monastery of Montserrat, on a mountaintop near Barcelona, Spain. Immediately after his dramatic sick bed conversion, Ignatius went there on pilgrimage, before beginning his year-long retreat in a nearby cave and his journey to Rome, where he founded the Society of Jesus.

After a cable car ride high up to the mountaintop, tourists and pilgrims wait on line to view the famous statue of the Black Madonna, located behind the main altar. Here, in 1521, Ignatius spent a night in prayer. Early the next morning, he took off his sword and laid it down in front of the Madonna and Child. He marked his conversion by literally disarming. From that moment on, he would be a nonviolent soldier of Christ. Then, as Ignatius left the shrine, he gave his expensive clothes to a beggar, put on the beggar?s rags, and became a pilgrim for Jesus.

Ignatius was born in 1491 in the Basque country of Loyola, Spain, the youngest of 13 children. He became a courtier, then a soldier for the Spanish king. During the battle of Pamplona on May 20, 1520, he was struck in the leg by a cannonball. Although he survived, he spent many months in painful recovery and walked with a limp for the rest of his life.

During those months, he became bored and asked for something to read. The only books on hand were the lives of the saints and a life of Christ. He read them all and, in a matter of weeks, decided that he too should give his life to Christ and become a saint.

After his vigil at Montserrat, he spent a year in a cave near Manresa. As he prayed for hours each day, then reflected on his prayer, he noticed how he moved from desolation to consolation, from thoughts of suicide to feelings of ecstasy. With that awareness, he learned how to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit. As he meditated on the life of Jesus, he wrote down his meditations. Over time, these writings became the basis for a ground-breaking retreat manual on spiritual growth and discernment known as the ?Spiritual Exercises.?

After a brief journey to the Holy Land in 1523, Ignatius went back to Spain to go to school. He formed a community, which eventually fell apart, and at one point, he was imprisoned as a heretic. During the next few years, he moved from Barcelona to Alcala to Salamanca and finally to Paris, where he completed graduate studies in philosophy and theology. There he met Francis Xavier, Peter Fabre, and other students who made the Exercises under his direction, decided to give their lives to Christ, professed vows with him in Montmartre in 1534, were ordained as priests, and journeyed with him to Rome, where he founded the Society of Jesus in

1540.

Just before he arrived in Rome to receive permission to found the Jesuit Order, Ignatius stopped by a small wayside chapel in the village of La Storta. There he had a mystical vision of God the Father asking Jesus who was carrying the cross to ?take this pilgrim with you.? Over time, this seminal vision was meant to give all Jesuits the mission ?to accompany Jesus as he carries the cross? for the disarmament and transformation of the world.

Ignatius became the first general of the new Order and spent the last 15 years of his life composing the community?s ?Constitutions? and organizing the growing number of Jesuits. He spent his days writing letters to Jesuits and friends around the world. Some 6,000 letters survive. He also set up a variety of service programs around his headquarters, including a soup kitchen, a shelter for the homeless, and a house for prostitutes. At the time of his death, July 31, 1556, more than 1,000 men had joined the order.

The Society of Jesus was revolutionary for its time, because it was not a monastic community that required long hours of liturgical prayer. Rather, Jesuit priests and brothers were sent into the world to engage the culture, call people to conversion, and lead people deeper into the spiritual life. Jesuits were to spend only a short amount of time in prayer, attend daily Mass, and work hard for ?the greater glory of God? by transforming people and cultures. Catholic missionaries usually traveled to other countries where they threatened people with violence if they did not convert. By contrast, Jesuit missionaries tried to inculturate themselves in foreign lands and point out how God is already at work in their culture, as with ?the Reductions? in South America.

In the 1930s, Mahatma Gandhi dreamed of a ?peace army? made up of thousands of trained, unarmed satyagrahis who could be sent on a moment?s notice into the world?s war zones to disarm and transform other cultures. Four centuries earlier, Ignatius tried to create just such an army of nonviolent warriors who would serve on the front lines of the struggle for justice and peace and help transform the world by welcoming the reign of God. At least, that?s how I like to imagine the early ?Company of Jesus.?

Ignatius wanted his men to undergo his ?Spiritual Exercises,? study philosophy and theology, be obedient to superiors, and pursue the ?magis,? the greatest good for the whole world. His Jesuit spirituality focused, first and foremost, on Jesus. Jesuits were to see life through his eyes, accompany him as he carried the cross in the struggle for justice, and become ?companions of Jesus,? ?Friends in the Lord.? Instead of turning away from the world, Jesuits were sent out to address and transform the world. Finally, Jesuits were to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit, notice the movement of Spirit in their lives, move from desolation to consolation, and help others ?find God in all things.?

Ignatius broke new ground by inviting Jesuits and lay people to use their imagination to contemplate the life of Jesus and understand the nature of God. By calling us to imagine God as a God of love and peace, he helps us break free from our false gods to know and serve the Living God.

Perhaps this week for his feast day, we can join St. Ignatius in praying his concluding prayer for the ?Spiritual Exercises:?

?Take, Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours. Do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.?

John Dear?s autobiography, *A Persistent Peace, (440 pp., with a foreword by Martin Sheen) will be published this week on Aug. 1 by Loyola Press. It can be ordered now at www.amazon.com. For a schedule of his fall national book tour, see: www.johndear.org and www.persistentpeace.com.*

The icon, ?St. Ignatius In Prayer Beneath the Stars,? was commissioned by Jesuit John Schlegel, president of Creighton University, Omaha, Nebr., to mark the university?s 125th anniversary in gratitude for the work of the Jesuit Community.

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