

Chapter Three

St. Ignatius Loyola

“Go and set the world on fire!”

The year 1492 is famous to Americans as the year Columbus discovered the New World, sailing under the patronage of the Spanish crown. It has yet another significance in Spanish history. It was the year of the final expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula, the last act in a drama that had been unfolding for centuries, and it marked the beginning of what has been called *El Siglo de Oro*, Spain's Golden Age. First under the joint rule of Ferdinand and Isabella, and then during the reign of Charles V, Spain emerged as Europe's strongest kingdom and the world's first global power. The Spaniards developed a vast empire, controlling large portions of Europe and ruling lands from Latin America and Africa to the Philippines in East Asia. The Spanish army during those years was well-nigh invincible. Yet not only in political life, but in all areas of cultural activity, sixteenth-century Spain saw a remarkable efflorescence. This was the age of El Greco and Velazquez in painting, of Cervantes and Lope de Vega in literature, of Tomas de Victoria in music. It was a time of the growth of universities and of rich developments in many

branches of learning. The Spanish were a proud people: proud of their military talent, of their chivalric customs, of their cultural achievements, and of their allegiance to the Catholic Faith. Having been forged in a centuries-long fight for their national and religious identity, they characteristically pursued their aims with great energy, courage, and determination. A national character of this type could be a double-edged sword. It might, if unredeemed, produce the vainglorious conquistador or the haughty courtier. But when transformed by the love of God, it could also prove fertile soil for a very high type of sanctity.

It is a truth about saints that they transcend the age in which they live. Each generation discovers them anew and finds fresh inspiration in their lives and their example. But it is also true that saints are human characters embedded in the possibilities and limitations of their times. They are not strange prodigies alien to the spirit of their age, but men and women who, by their cooperation with God's initiative, have allowed the whole of their personalities and all the elements of their inherited culture to be touched by grace and thus lifted and purified. In the lives of the saints, as in everything else, grace builds on nature.¹ This truth is clearly at work in the figure of Ignatius Loyola. He was a Spanish hidalgo of Basque descent, and in many respects his approach to God and to the spiritual life reflected his background. At the same time, under the transforming hand of God, the qualities typical of his country and class gained in Ignatius a universal meaning.

¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, 1:8: "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it."

Iñigo was born in 1491, the youngest of thirteen children, in the ancestral castle of the Loyolas, a Basque family of minor nobility. (He would take the name Ignatius later in life, perhaps in imitation of the martyr Ignatius of Antioch.) Of his early life we have little detail beyond a few reminiscences taken down many years later. At around age fifteen, he took service as a page in the household of a relative who had a significant post in the kingdom of Castile. In his mid-twenties he entered military service under the Viceroy of Navarre. The military vocation came naturally to Ignatius; he came from a family of soldiers. One of his brothers died fighting in Mexico City, a second in Naples, and a third against the Turks in Hungary. Ignatius imbibed deeply of the spirit of his time and place, and set before his eyes the ideal of the accomplished man of the world: vain and dashing, concerned with military glory and the attentions of fashionable ladies. His brief comment in his *Autobiography* (in which he speaks of himself in the third person) notes simply that “he was a man given over to vanities of the world with a great and vain desire to win fame.”² In his military capacity under the Viceroy, in the year 1521, he had the task of leading the defense of the fortress of Pamplona against a French attack. It was characteristic of the man to insist on defending the fort even when his comrades-in-arms thought it indefensible. In the midst of battle, he was hit by a cannonball that badly broke one of his legs and wounded the other. With their valiant captain down, the defense of the

² St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Joseph O’Callaghan, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 21.

fort collapsed, and Ignatius was sent by his courteous French captors to convalesce at the home of his father. His insistence that his leg be healed such as not to mar his appearance led to a number of painful operations, and at times he was close to death. He was thirty years old, and his life was about to take a radical new direction.

To pass the time while convalescing, Ignatius asked to be given books of chivalrous romances. There were none of the kind he wanted to be found in the castle, so instead he took to reading two religious books: *The Life of Christ* by the German monk Ludolph of Saxony, and *The Golden Legend*, a collection of the lives of the saints. Confronted by the personality of Christ and the great deeds of the saints, Ignatius was deeply moved. All the Spanish chivalric instinct and desire for glory that ran so strongly in him were caught up and inflamed; his earlier desire for worldly fame was transposed into a determination to do great things for his true King and so to win honor in Heaven. “While reading the life of Our Lord and of the saints,” Ignatius remembered later, “he stopped to think, reasoning within himself, ‘What if I should do what St. Francis did, what St. Dominic did?’”³ He was filled with loathing for his past life, and he determined to do penance by taking to the road as a pilgrim. It was the beginning of a long journey that would ultimately have a great effect on both the Church and the world.

The year 1521 was notable for more than Ignatius’s conversion. It was the year that Hernán Cortés, a man of roughly the same age and social background as Ignatius, completed

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

the conquest of Tenochtitlán and the Aztec Empire, opening a new chapter in Spanish and European history. It was also the year in which Martin Luther, having written three widely-read tracts against the Catholic Church, refused to retract his positions before the imperial general assembly, or Diet, at Worms, thereby effectively initiating the Protestant Reformation. These momentous events did much to shape the world into which Ignatius would throw his considerable energies as a missionary and reformer of the Church. He later said, "I do not consider myself as having retired from military service, but only as having come under the orders of God."

Ignatius's life after his conversion can conveniently be divided into three parts or phases, each of which has its special significance. The first phase, which began as soon as his conversion had commenced, lasted some three years. It included the time of his convalescence, his yearlong stay in Manresa, and his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This was a period of intense interior life: long hours of prayer, rigorous works of penance and purification, and remarkable mystical experiences. The second phase, lasting some fourteen years, was an extended time of study and apostolic activity during which Ignatius gathered groups of men around him, first in Barcelona, then at the universities of Alcalá, Salamanca, and Paris, and then for a short time in Venice. It was a period of honing his method of evangelization and of significant opposition to his apostolate. The final phase began with his return to Rome in 1538 and involved the founding of the Society of Jesus two years later and his wide-ranging duties as general of the order, a task that ended only with his death in 1556.

The First Phase: Ignatius Is Taught by God

A time-honored practical rule of the spiritual life says that one needs to be careful when imitating the saints. Their faith, their virtues, and their abandonment to the Divine Will are examples for all believers. But the particular patterns of their lives and the specific ways they are called to respond to providential initiative are often exceptional and idiosyncratic. What is excellent in the life of a saint may not be prudent or praiseworthy in every believer. This rule should be remembered when we examine the life of St. Ignatius.

From the time of his initial conversion, Ignatius was dealt with by God in a unique way. The uniqueness was not so much in the conversion itself. It was certainly a dramatic event to go from soldier to pilgrim as Ignatius did, leaving behind family, worldly ambitions, social status, and possessions in order to follow Christ. But many others caught by the beauty and love of God have altered their lives in equally drastic ways. When Peter and John left their nets and their fishing business to follow Jesus, they modeled the inner pattern of every true conversion. What made the early years of Ignatius's conversion so distinctive was the degree to which God took him in hand and taught him profound spiritual and pastoral truths, including the whole cycle of Catholic doctrine, in a way almost entirely unmediated by the help of others. Ignatius himself came to realize this. He later said of those first years: "God treated him at this time just as a schoolmaster treats a child whom he is teaching ...he clearly believed and has always believed that God treated him in this way."⁴

⁴ *Autobiography*, 37.

There was a clear providential purpose in the conversion of Ignatius. Like St. Paul, Ignatius was a chosen instrument to be used by Christ for the sake of a great apostolic mission. Like Paul, he had a strong personality and an iron will, but these traits were being exercised in a wrong direction. Like Paul, he was taught the Gospel by the Holy Spirit as a preparation for that mission. Paul once wrote of his own reception of the Faith: “Brethren, I would have you know that the gospel which was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:11–12). Though never claiming any special prophetic or apostolic authority, Ignatius spoke similarly about his own manner of receiving the Gospel. He later recounted an experience of this kind from his time at Manresa: “While he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened; though he did not see any vision, he understood and knew many things, both spiritual things and matters of faith and of learning.” Along with this experience of infused understanding, Ignatius received visions of Christ, Our Lady, and the Trinity that so deeply impressed the truths of the faith upon him that, as he later said, “if there were no Scriptures to teach us these matters of the faith, he would be resolved to die for them, only because of what he had seen.”⁵

The effect of these divine visions and graces was evident in the way Ignatius began, soon after his conversion, not only to talk about his newfound life, which would have been natural enough, but to lead others confidently as a teacher of the

⁵ *Ibid*, 39.

Faith and a director of souls. From a distance of time and a knowledge of his future course, it seems obvious that Ignatius would quickly have become a spiritual guide. But if we see him as he would have been viewed by his contemporaries, the strangeness of his behavior is more arresting. Here was a man who had spent the whole of his thirty years pursuing nothing but worldly interests. He had thrown all his energy into the acquisition of fame and a prestigious career, and his tastes and affections had been molded on that pattern. He was no doubt a Catholic, but of that common hereditary type who was familiar with the cultural practices of the Church but viewed them as mere social conventions. Well-trained in military arts and in the demands of polite society, he was otherwise poorly educated. He knew next to nothing of theology. This same man then has a dramatic encounter with Christ and determines to change the course of his life. He has a necessarily arduous business before him, the task of every convert who has been busily shaping his character apart from the will of God. He will need to unlearn the ingrained habits of many years. He will need to develop a new set of spiritual senses to come alive to invisible realities. He will need to learn something of the rich body of doctrine and practice that every serious Catholic embraces. He can expect, even as he counts on God's help, that this will require time and hard work, and he will need good teachers and mentors to help him along the way.

But under the impulse of grace, Ignatius takes an entirely different path. Though he seeks spiritual mentors, he can find no one who suits his need. Instead, he is drawn into

an intense solitary experience of being trained directly by the hand of God, schooled in the truths of the Faith and in principles of prayer and rules of discernment. He then confidently takes others under his wing as a spiritual master and teaches them what he has learned, though he is only the merest beginner in the spiritual life. This sort of behavior would typically characterize an overzealous neophyte with more enthusiasm than knowledge. But such was not the case with Ignatius. Though an untrained layman, he displayed a sure grasp of the doctrinal and moral truths of the Faith. The novel method of conversion and discipleship that he developed during these solitary years, the so-called Spiritual Exercises, quickly came to be recognized as a marvel of Catholic spirituality and have been counted among the most effective means of spiritual transformation that the Church has known. All this from a man who had never studied theology, had never been guided by a spiritual director, and until the day before yesterday had been leading the life of a vain worldling. Those who witnessed the spectacle might well have asked themselves the same question posed by the astonished townspeople of Nazareth as they listened to the teaching of Jesus: "Where then did this man get all this?" (Mt 13:56).

The Pauline-like conversion and early experience of Ignatius underlines a key principle of Church reform: namely, that Christ is Lord of the Church, and it is he who takes the initiative in imparting and protecting the divine life of his Body. The sixteenth-century Church was in dire need of reform, and serious Christians were rightly concerned about