

By Hedwig Lewis, SJ

(The Jesuits are observing an Ignatian Year - 20 May 2021 to 31 July 2022 - to celebrate the fifth centenary of the Conversion of St Ignatius of Loyola).

500 years ago, on 20 May 1521, while defending the fortress of Pamplona, Spain, in a battle with the invading French army, Saint Ignatius of Loyola was wounded by a cannon ball ... and that literally set the ball rolling for his eventful process of 'conversion' to God. Yes, the cannonball was instrumental in bringing Ignatius to his knees – but only after a prolonged and painful struggle, first battling with his life from the infection that had set in with the serious wounds he had received in his legs, then the emotional combat in his 'inner fortress' to restore his shattered dreams and ambitions. The man who had taken a cannonball head on and had fallen flat on his face, would rise determined to set the world on fire!

The Battle of Pamplona serves as a metaphor for a common human experience: We all have our 'inner fortresses,' the private spaces in our minds and hearts, to protect our dreams, our ambitions, our emotional cravings and attachments. We build them with 'walls' cemented by our convictions, values, personality and character. We guard them might and main against potential threats or 'invaders.' We may occasionally let a trusted person into our fortresses, but usually the sign at the entrance would read: 'Restricted Area. Keep out!'

And then, there are the 'cannonball' attacks: unexpected, sudden and sizeable tragedies - loss, sickness, failure, accidents - that we all inadvertently encounter sometime or other in life. They knock us off our feet or derail our pursuits. The fainthearted take

long to recover from the shock and may remain paralyzed by the wayside. Those who are resilient and resolute, bounce back and get going with renewed vigour, enthusiasm and determination... just as Saint Ignatius did.

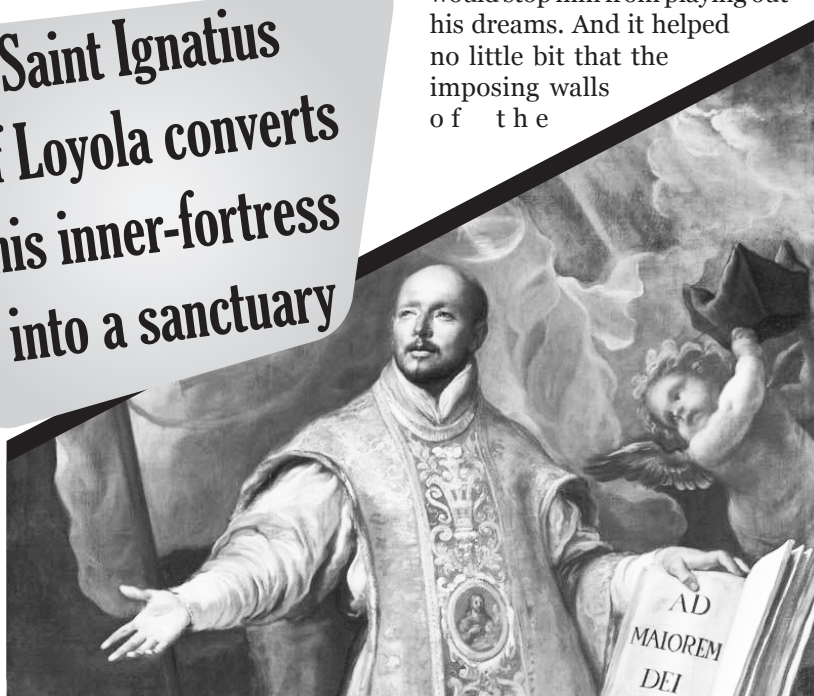
Ignatius was raised in a family of great personalities. His grandfather, father and brothers had won laurels for their military prowess and global enterprises. Stories of their success and exploits were dinned into Ignatius' ears day after day, at dinner table or fireside. He felt both the honour and the responsibility to carry this heritage forward. He dreamed of exquisite and unimaginable things he would do to make his family proud, and win fame for himself.

Loyola was not a big enough field to launch his lofty ambitions. But an opportunity was extended to him, when at the age of about 17, he was invited to be part of the family of the Royal Treasurer, at Arevalo – a bustling city with access to the King's court. For Ignatius it was a dream come true. In the company of the other young courtiers, he

made the most of the education he received in the arts, culture, music, reading and writing, for ten years. More importantly, the courtiers had to undergo basic military training in the use of arms, sword-fencing, horse-riding. And, of course, there were the parades where he could show himself off before the ladies!

The treasurer's palace contained a large library with the latest editions of the books of chivalry that had come into the market only recently. Ignatius got hooked onto these romantic novels. The heroes engaged in adventures that matched his own and fuelled his imagination to fantastic heights. Ignatius devoured every book he could lay hands on. He crammed his inner fortress with posters of his favourite supermen, knights of valour, the supermen of his time, who captured his imagination, crowded his day-dreams, and were icons worthy of imitation nothing would stop him from playing out his dreams. And it helped no little bit that the imposing walls of the

Saint Ignatius of Loyola converts his inner-fortress into a sanctuary



palace were covered with tapestries of scenes from his favourite books.

No wonder, then, that he longed for these books while he lay idly in bed at Loola as he was recovering from the leg wounds he had suffered at the battle. Weeks after the strain and pain of the three surgeries he had had to mend his fractured leg began to diminish and his mind was no longer sucked in by suffering, he once again wanted to revive his neglected dreams. His inner fortress had been damaged by the impact of the cannonball but certainly not demolished. It now needed restoration for his 'idols' to be reinstalled. He asked for those novels, but to his great disappointment, none was available. His affectionate sister-in-law managed to find just two books in the house: 'The Flowers of Saints' and a 'Life of Christ.' She tucked them under his pillow, in case he cared to read... The rest, as we say, is history!

Ignatius was intelligent and observant. He read the books critically, analytically. As he examined the attitudes and actions of the saints, he found many similarities with the knights, the heroes he had long admired andaped: self-sacrifice, disciplined self-control, fidelity to unquestioned ideals against all odds, superhuman endurance of violent challenges to the body, and devotion to a distant, unobtainable lady and a lord who demanded obedience and loyalty. Both sought to vanquish the enemy, evil. Both contained elements of fact and fiction, reality and myth. The stories of the saints were narrated in a style that bristled with conviction and energy and captured the imagination, just as those of the knights.

Something strange happened to Ignatius, though, that seemed mysterious and confusing. However hard he tried, he could not sustain

his interest in the tales of the knights that had gripped his mind and heart for years. In fact, he felt dissipated after vain attempts to revive his daydreams of knightly bravado. In contrast, he found the religious books very compelling. Every time he read them, his felt increasing joy and consolation.

Ignatius revealed in his Autobiography that one fine day, while he was trying to sort out the mixed-up feelings, "his eyes were opened." He received an insight that would mark a turning point in his life. He felt the hand of God in all that transpired in his being. And he experienced a deep desire to hold on to God. It was a moment of Grace. Ignatius took his first step toward his total 'conversion' of heart and soul.

Over periods of serious discernment and fervent prayer, Ignatius was convinced of what God was challenging him to do. God assured him that he could keep the walls of his inner fortress intact, since they were well founded and cemented by his convictions, loyalty, determination, and courage - "Grace builds on nature." However, he had to make a radical shift: remove the 'idols' that he treasured: his 'worldly superhero' (with fleeting pursuits and promises) and his 'Ego ideals' (craving for self-glory). He must replace these with the Person of Christ (who demanded things of enduring value) and with a 'Heart for Others' (compassionate love and service). In sum, he must free himself from everything that had held him captive for almost three decades, and surrender himself entirely to God's will. And this Noble Knight did exactly that. He converted; his inner fortress into a sanctuary!

In the course of the days and months that followed Ignatius experienced the power of the Holy Spirit guiding him on to a different pathway. Ignatius decided

to switch his loyalties. He laid to rest all knightly quests, and concentrated on the life of Christ and the convictions of the saints. He did not merely re-read the two books but spent ample time meditating and praying over the inspirations they afforded him. More, he began jotting down his reflections, compiling them later into a book of over 300 pages, which he carried with him and referred to in the years to come.

There is clear evidence and confirmation that the 'spiritual conversion' had been effected. Ignatius was experiencing such great joy within him that he could not contain it. His older brother Martin, who had no idea what had transpired between Ignatius and God, noticed a striking change in Ignatius' outlook and behaviour. Ignatius was feeling more self-assured and content.

Most significantly, Ignatius had suddenly ceased bragging endlessly of the great feats he would undertake, once he recovered, to win fame, glory, and the hand of a beautiful woman. He now spoke about the 'things of God.' Even his family and friends were glad and felt relieved by the change. And they began to visit him more frequently so as to engage in these 'spiritual conversations' because Ignatius sounded so genuine, exuding joy and solace.

With his ego removed, Ignatius had created ample space for others in his inner fortress. He realized the 'good he could do to their souls', in gratitude for what God had done to him. He replaced the signpost at the entrance to his inner fortress: 'Comfort Zone. Walk right in!'

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Along with all their collaborators and well wishers, Jesuits all over the world are commemorating the 500th anniversary of the conversion of Ignatius of Loyola at Pamplona.

Surprisingly, the event was one of a utter failure and a humiliating defeat for the person concerned. But a huge opening for an eventual new Foundation of the Society of Jesus and much more, for the Church of 16th century. The Church was facing at that time a critical phase of its history with waves of Protestantism in the Western Europe after the excommunication of Martin Luther on 03 januray,1521. By the way, this year also happens to be the 500 anniversary of it.

What exactly was the Pamplona-event ? It was on 20 May 1521, the young Spaniard Ignatius alongside his tiny troop was up in the fortress of Pamplona resisting the 12,000 – strong French army. There came a french cannonball that yanked his right leg off, leaving the other badly injured. His recovery was a struggle. In the end, his legs were saved but for the rest of his life, he would limp.



This battle-experience, however, became a turning-point for Ignatius. His worldly ambitions and aspirations all got shattered. That too, at one go. Little by little as he convalesced in his family home in Loyola, he entered into a profound inner journey. He gradually came to realise that those worldly things in which he took delight till then had no lasting value.

Eventually he embarked upon a series of Spiritual Exercises at the Manresa caves and they opened his third eye so that **'all things**

seemed new to him.' Reality became transparent to him, enabling him to recognise **'God in all and all in God.'**

In course of time, Ignatius gathered companions who got galvanised with a fire of collaborating with God in transforming others, especially the little and the least ones. That resulted with the birth of the Jesuit Order in 1540. Not just for Jesuits, the memory of Pamplona-occurrence has some significance also for our modern humanity at large. Let me attempt 3 possibles—in-brief.

01. Disturbance

Here I cannot but recall the following lines of a prayer : *"Disturb us, O Lord, disturb us, / When we have become complacent, / When we have become stagnant, / When we have become mediocre..!"* For Ignatius, the Pamplona-happening was a terrific disturbance. The experience involved both **a conversion from and conversion for.** It was a demanding intervention of God, transforming the moment into one of process and progress. Should not we then be positive about the God-given disturbances and also, responsive to them..?

02. Discernment

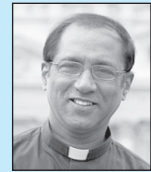
Pope Francis exhorts: "Discernment must help one to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give a Greater Glory to God." Ignatius ever kept himself open to variety of choices, but whenever circumstances demanded, through discernment he proceeded to **choose the more good and the more challenging and the more fruitful.** Discernment should come to be our way of life. If so, should not we be ready to discern over the options with an open mind in order

to arrive at new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realised..?

03. Determination

Determination was one of the hallmarks of Ignatius, even before his Pamplona–conversion. He was immensely loyal to the King, determined to serve the Crown, to fight with pride and never to lose honour. The 1521 cannonball

The Ignatian Year: 3D - Inspiration For Us All



By Jerry Rosario, SJ

moment re-directed his determination to the throne of God of Jesus. From then on, he challenged himself consistently with these enquiries: **"What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What must I do for Christ?"** These questions well up from a heart moved with profound gratitude and progressive love. Should not we be ready to permit same questions to bother us and much more, to impel us to gear up our daily determination?

The Ignatian Year begins on 20 May 2021 and ends on 31 July 2022. It has another key date: 12 March 2022, the 400 anniversary of the **Cannonisation of Igantius and also of Francis Xavier** the First Jesuit to set his foot on our Indian soil on 06 May 1542.

We can seek their special intercession for our sincere imitation of Christ Jesus in all our Disturbance, Discernment and Determination..!