

A modern-day lesson from the conversion of St. Ignatius

The pandemic's disastrous effects should convince us that a conversion from a profligate lifestyle is required from us all



Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was canonized by Pope Gregory XV in 1622.
(Photo: Wikidata)

On May 20, Jesuits will recall a 400-year-old event that changed the life of their founder Inigo (Ignatius) de Loyola and the world's history.

Personal conversions — not always religious — take place when an individual changes not just his thinking but his whole value system. Such changes usually come about gradually as one progressively jettisons the habits of the past and embraces a new framework of thought and action.

But conversions can also be abrupt, decisive and often traumatic. Such was the case of Paul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, of Francesco Bernadone in the rundown chapel of San Damiano ... and of Inigo de Loyola, a wounded soldier struggling with depression and a broken leg.

His personal conversion was a tiny accident when set against the socio-religious upheaval of 16th century Europe.

Two major events agitated his peers in early 1521 — the military campaigns of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman ruler, which threatened southern and central Europe with Muslim domination; and the turbulence caused by a certain Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, declared a “heretic” by Pope Leo X and an “outlaw” by Emperor Charles V.

And yet the changes brought about by Ignatius of Loyola would in time far outweigh in significance the upheavals of both Suleiman and Martin Luther.

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Ignatius’ experiences in finding God’s plans for himself took shape in his little workbook, *The Spiritual Exercises*, through which he guided many to discover their own personal vocation.

Many were the men and women who were transformed by these exercises. Some of these became members of the Society of Jesus or the Christian Life Communities (earlier known as Sodalties). Their impact on their times can scarcely be underestimated.

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And what was the essence of Ignatius' conversion? In just one phrase, it was *en todo amar y servir* — to love and serve the Lord in every possible way.

Yes, service was the key. At first, this had meant that Ignatius and his little band would go to the Holy Land to be of service to the pilgrims there. But the Spirit guided Ignatius differently. He returned to Rome and placed himself and his companions entirely at the service of the pope.

The Protestants had challenged the authority of the pope. Ignatius and his society would be distinguished by their loyalty and obedience to Rome.

Thus, through their preaching and their writings, the early Jesuits — men like Lainez, Salmeron, Canisius, Bellarmine and Faber — transformed the very heart and soul of Catholic life. And the two major instruments of this transformation were *The Spiritual Exercises* (the Retreat movement) and Jesuit schools.

Over the years, however, Jesuits learned how to discern the signs of the times in their ministry. Not obedience as much as discernment, reading the signs of the times, helped to match new conditions with innovation.

The greatest contribution of the society to the devotional life of Catholics, stretching over three centuries, was the devotion to the Sacred Heart with its emphasis on consecration and reparation.

In the years since the Vatican Council II, there have been other emphases, particularly the struggle for faith and justice.

Originating in Latin America but quickly spreading all over the Catholic world, this mandate sought to reconcile the experience of a living faith with the rampant injustice and deprivation seen in almost every society today.

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In South Asia, for example, “walking with the poor” has meant that several Jesuits have paid for their commitment to the marginalized with their lives: A.T. Thomas, Matthew Mannaparambil, Tom Gaffney and Herman Rasschaert among them. Indian Jesuit priest Stan Swamy is now in jail at 84 after devoting his life to helping tribal people.

Thus, the conversion of St. Ignatius becomes a template for our own change of life, our own transformation.

Present Jesuit Superior General Arturo Sosa recently drew the attention of the whole society to four “universal apostolic preferences,” the most significant of them all being the ecological challenge. The other three are the needs of youth, of displaced peoples and the seminal role of the Spiritual Exercises.

Even if one is skeptical about global warming and climate change, the disastrous effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the world at large should be enough to convince one that a serious conversion from a wasteful and profligate lifestyle is required from us all.

With Ignatius, it took the crippling effect of a battle wound to convert him from vain dreams of fame and fortune to a different understanding of God’s plans for him.

What more than Covid-19 will make us change our ways? Our personal conversion and the transformation of our societies depend on this.



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