

CHAPTER SEVEN

IGNATIUS'S SPECIAL "WAY OF PROCEEDING"¹

Every culture tends to harbor stereotypes of what a saint is supposed to be like and tends to fit the individual into a mold that may be misleading or one-sided. We see what we want to see, or what we think we are supposed to see, and thus are blinded to what may be unconventional about the saint in question. Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, for instance, left behind a kind of diary, written over the span of about six months in 1555, in which he jotted down his observations about Ignatius, with whom he had almost daily contact. The text has recently been published in an excellent English edition with the title *Remembering Iñigo*. From da Câmara's admiring pages emerges an image of a typical medieval saint and religious superior—a person of deep prayer and of almost inscrutable spiritual wisdom. This Ignatius was much concerned with the discipline of the community and with testing the virtue of those who would profit by the trials he imposed. He was so spiritual that he ate his meals almost as if not eating them and the like. Although *Remembering Iñigo* opens our eyes to aspects of Ignatius not everyone will find appealing, there is nothing surprising here for a reader of medieval hagiography.

Da Câmara's is, of course, a valuable historical document, and though we might sometimes question the interpretation he puts on his experience of Ignatius, there is no reason to doubt the basic accuracy of his account. What he misses, however, is perhaps more important than what he sees. He misses what did not fit the mold. Looked at from a distance of four and half centuries, Ignatius in many regards seems more significantly to have defied the received image of sanctity than confirmed it. What da Câmara missed, in other words, is perhaps what makes Ignatius most relevant today. Ignatius redefined the traditional basis of saintliness, that is, "contempt of the world." Is it too far amiss to describe him as a worldly saint?

In our day few pursuits seem more worldly than orchestrating public relations, yet Ignatius was an adept practitioner of public relations.

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He instructed Jesuits not to be shy about their accomplishments when they wrote to him. He told missionaries in distant lands to write back not only about their ministries but also about quite secular topics like “how long the days of summer and winter are,” about “plants and animals” and about “anything that seems extraordinary.” He wanted to show these letters around to win interest in his Society and good will for it.

Ignatius needed to project an image of the order that would counter slanders circulating in high places. Once Jesuits began to run schools, the good will thus generated served another purpose. It helped open the doors of potential benefactors. Ignatius himself knocked on those doors, becoming in effect what we today euphemistically call a director of development or advancement. He validated a pattern in the Society that has led Olwen Hufton, a British historian, to write about the Jesuits of Ignatius’s era as “the first professional fund raisers.”²

Toward the end of Ignatius’s life, with the Jesuits more solidly established in Rome, he began looking for benefactors to build for the Society a church in the center of the city. He did not envisage a modest project. Rather, he saw and approved plans for an immense structure and presumably was pleased when in 1554 it seemed Michelangelo might become the architect. Although the project got nowhere until a few years after his death, when Cardinal Alessandro Farnese built for the Jesuits (and for the glory of his own family) the Gesù, one of the most important church buildings in the modern era, we have reason to think Ignatius would have been pleased with the grand church.

He needed money, too, to buy property so that the Jesuits in Rome might have a villa to which they could repair on occasion for rest and recreation. A villa! A “house in the country”! St. Charles Borromeo, a younger (and much wealthier) contemporary of Ignatius, would never have indulged his disciples with such a luxury. The purchase flew in the face of the traditional otherworldliness of the saints. It also flew in the face of their traditionally harsh treatment of their bodies. (Borromeo was merciless with his.)

At the beginning of his conversion, Ignatius indulged in severe penances, but over time he moved ever further away from them and finally,

² See Dame O. Hufton, “Faith, Hope and Money: the Jesuits and the Genesis of Fundraising for Education, 1550–1650,” *Historical Research* 81 (2008): 585–609 and Id., “Every tub on its own bottom: funding a Jesuit college in early modern Europe,” in John W. O’Malley, *The Jesuits II: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 5–23.

in the Jesuit *Constitutions*, enjoined love and care for one's body. He instructed heads of Jesuit institutions to retain on an annual contract a physician for the students and for the Jesuit faculty. The extremes of "holy folly" were the medieval ideal of sanctity. But in the *Constitutions* Ignatius enjoined not a holy folly but moderation—in food, in drink, in sleep, in labors undertaken, in care for one's health and even in the amount of time devoted to prayer. He prescribed it, in fact, as a norm for the interpretation of the *Constitutions* themselves, so as to steer a middle path between "rigor and laxity."

Especially remarkable about Ignatius was the way he so easily seems to have adopted and subscribed to all the components of the humanistic education that the schools he founded entailed. This meant, among other things, that most Jesuits would spend most of their time not in the confessional or pulpit but in the secular space that is a classroom. Moreover, in those classrooms most of them would teach not the Bible or the fathers of the church but pagan literature, that is, the classics of Greek and Rome. They would teach these subjects not simply as models of eloquence but as embodying, it was believed, a moral and spiritual message. Indeed, they were supposed to find a message compatible with Christianity in texts written by men who had never heard the name of Christ. The educational program was geared, of course, to turn out good Christians, but to do so in a somewhat oblique way. In 1551, Ignatius had his secretary Juan Alfonso de Polanco write a letter explaining to Jesuits what the schools were supposed to accomplish. Polanco's list of fifteen reasons why Jesuits should give themselves to this enterprise contains not a word about serving the church or reforming the church but concentrates instead on such benefits for this world as providing a base for promoting works of social assistance like hospitals and orphanages and on being a way of relieving parents of some of the burdens of educating their sons. More pointedly, it vaunts education for its ability to produce individuals who will grow up to be, yes, "good pastors" but "civic officials" as well "administrators of justice," who will "fill other important offices to everybody's profit and advantage." This was a way of implementing dedication to "the common good" that Ignatius claimed for the Society in the charter of the order he in 1550 submitted for papal approval.

In his sanctity Ignatius was of course fundamentally continuous with the Christian tradition, but he carved out for himself and for his followers a special "way of proceeding," to use his expression, that resulted in something distinctive within it. God is marvelous in his saints. Each one of them, each one of us, is unique and works out the gifts of God's grace in

conformity with that uniqueness. None of them, none of us, can be reduced to a formula. The confluence of these unique workings of grace constitutes a large part of the richness of Catholicism, which is thus more than a catechism of teachings and more than a moral code. That is why we celebrate the saints, and why we are solemnly observing this 450th anniversary of the death of Ignatius Loyola.