

“The Man of Loyola”

Today we celebrate the feast of St Ignatius, a man as insightful as he is misunderstood.

The stereotype of Ignatius (and of the Society he founded) is that of the "Soldier-Saint" - a disciplined trooper for the Lord. This is wide of the mark. The sad fact is that on the one occasion he had a go at soldiering he was utterly useless and went home with his leg blown off by artillery (one could say he was "canonised" twice!). Having had most of his men killed or injured (scarcely the mark of a talented general), his soldier days were over for good.



There was, however, a much more Mediaeval military metaphor which drove him. The Spiritual Exercises and his Autobiography are filled with imagery of the knight in shining armour, questing for the honour of his love - firstly his desired noblewoman, then Our Lady and Jesus. His imagination saw in the soul's journey, a quest at the behest of a liege lord above and beyond all others. This is made explicit in the Exercises, where Ignatius has the retreatant imagine a king "so liberal and so kind" instructing his followers to saddle up with him and go forth to battle...and then reflect on how much more they should obey when the king is Christ himself. While there is much controversy over whether or not the seventeenth century Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes used Ignatius as the model for Don Quixote (his would-be knight out of time who charges windmills and makes a helmet of a basin), the image is appropriate. To the Basque saint, even the most everyday situation can become the field of play for the only quest that matters.

The "Man of Loyola", however, was an eminently practical man as well as one endowed with imagination. Just think again of Cervantes, who balances Don Quixote with Sancho Panza (the peasant who keeps him grounded). Ignatius, however, demands that we embody both Quixote and Panza within ourselves. We are to keep Christ, the goal of the quest and our deepest love, in view and allow our imagination boundless play in the service of God, yes, but we must constantly relate the quest to the real world, the feedback we receive from people and situations and to the decisions we make as a result. Only in this way can we truly relate honestly to our Lord.

The quest awaits us all!

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