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SPECIAL TEMPTATIONS FOR HONORS STUDENTS

Ignatius' *Screwtape Letter*: Advice from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century

By J. Patrick Hornbeck II

Last fall, I was invited to address the hundred or so sophomores who had distinguished themselves academically in Fordham College at Rose Hill, earning places on the Dean's List. I told them, in what I imagine they thought was some special kind of theologian's trick to avoid stage fright, that I had prepared my remarks by imagining that I were speaking to a crowd of sixteenth-century nuns.

I did so because I wanted to address them as participants in and heirs to the tradition not only of Jesuit education but also of Ignatian spirituality. And indeed, one of the earliest students Ignatius taught was a Catalan nun, Sister Teresa Rejadell. Their correspondence—or what survives of it—is relatively obscure. It has long been the province of scholars of the *Spiritual Exercises*, who have studied the letters for clues to Ignatius' development as a spiritual director, but in preparing for my talk, I discovered that one of Ignatius' letters to Teresa was particularly relevant to the students to whom I would be speaking.

In the letter, Ignatius offers spiritual advice to his correspondent,

describing her as having made much progress in the spiritual life, and praising her for this, but also warning her that there are still dangers ahead. In classic Ignatian style, a style later appropriated by the Christian apologist C. S. Lewis in his *Screwtape Letters*, he describes what he believes will be the devil's next moves in the campaign to catch Sister Teresa asleep at the spiritual wheel. I read the student honorees and their parents and friends a few paragraphs from the letter and then tried to convince them that there is more here than mere historical curiosity.

The general procedure of the enemy is to bring in hindrances and obstacles. This is the first of the weapons with which he tries to inflict wounds. [He asks,] "How are you going to live your whole life in such great penance, deprived of relatives, friends and possessions, in such a lonely life, without even some slight respite? You can be saved... without such great risks..."

Then the enemy tries with the second weapon, that is boasting or vainglory, giving a person to understand that there is much goodness or holiness within them, and setting them in a higher place than they deserve.

[Then] he brings along the third weapon, which is that of false

humility.... He insinuates into these people's thoughts that if they disclose some gifts that God our Lord has given them, whether in deeds, intentions or desires, they are sinning through another sort of vainglory.... He tries to get them *not* to speak of the good things received from their Lord, so that they are of no benefit to others, nor to themselves.

So what is Ignatius saying? In the first place, as the old maxim goes, he is giving the devil his due. We twenty-first-century people may as a group be less inclined than Ignatius to believe in the existence of an actual, physical devil, but we can at least agree that as human beings, we still find ourselves tempted, if not by an external malign spirit, then instead by anxieties and worries and the intrusive thought that we might not be good enough, or that we might fail catastrophically if we took some risk our heart is aching to take. And it is precisely this sort of thinking that Ignatius is warning Teresa against.

The first of the three temptations Ignatius describes, then, is that of

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shying away from some dream, some goal, because we might be afraid of the consequences. If we become teachers or social workers; if we work with the poor or devote our lives to some cause of social justice, will we have enough to feel comfortable? And this is not just a question of money, but also (and maybe more importantly for our students, as recent research suggests) one of social status. Maybe our students wonder, or fear, what it would feel like to return to campus for their ten-year reunion and find themselves rubbing shoulders with classmates who have more than they do. Maybe we, as their mentors and instructors, wonder or fear the same. Might not there be a voice in our minds saying the same thing that Ignatius imagines the devil saying to Teresa: "You can be saved... without such great risks"?

This line of reasoning might, at first blush, seem to be moving toward a critical comment about the proliferation of business schools and other pre-professional programs at our institutions of higher education. But Ignatius would disagree, violently: one of the key insights of Ignatian spirituality is that no field of study, no field of achievement is in and of itself evil. The trick is in discerning which particular goods we are being called to embrace. And that is one of the great gifts that studying at a Jesuit college or university can offer: the opportunity to discern what it is that inflames a person's heart with passion; what it is that speaks to the very depths of her being, saying, "This is what I am here to do."

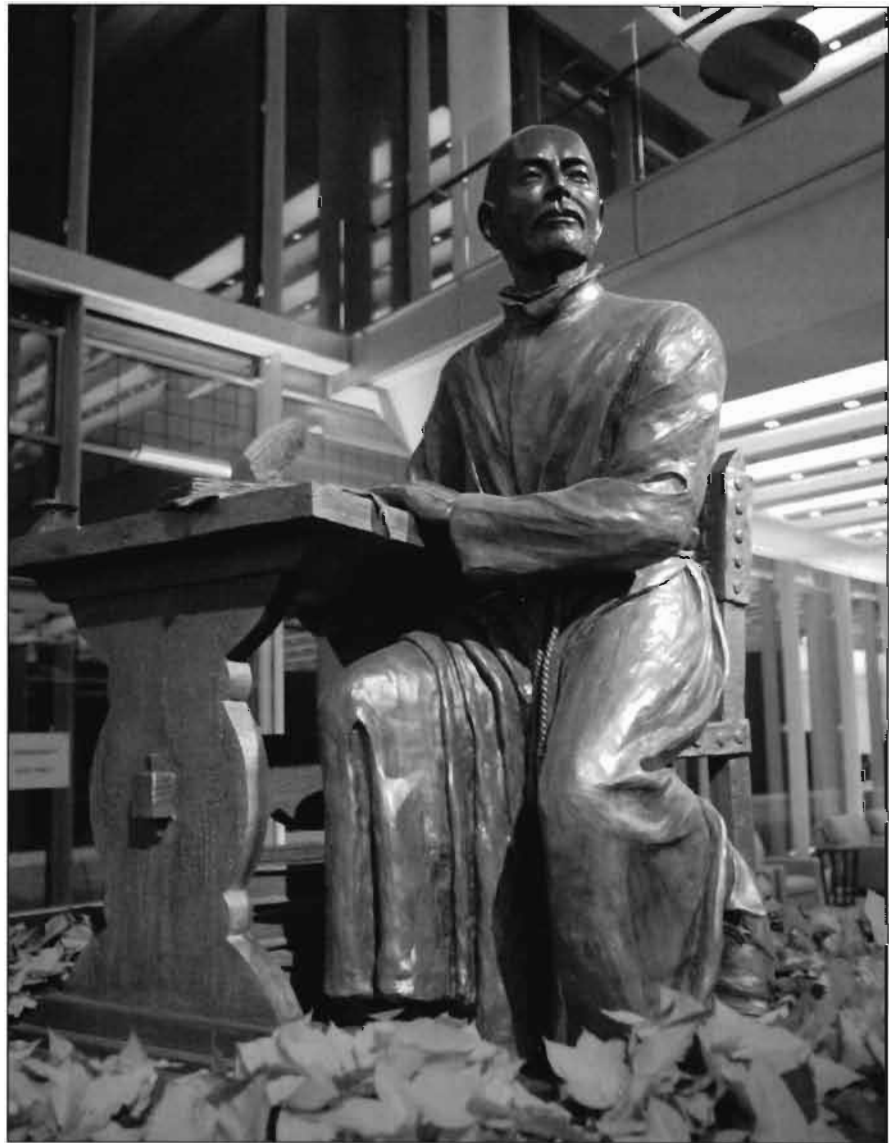
Asking that question is no mean feat; it takes courage. Answering it is even more difficult; it takes perseverance. And that is why Ignatius is so careful to caution Teresa against the easy answer. Ignatius and Jesuit

education are asking something deeper: asking us to live with some tension, with some uncertainty, as we continue to discern how we can best be of service to the world and our fellow human beings.

I told our students that developing this capacity to live with tension, with unresolved questions, is particularly important for young women and men with their gifts and talents. Sister Teresa had gifts, too: perhaps

gifts rather unlike our students', but gifts nonetheless. And in his second point, Ignatius had a warning for her. Don't boast, he wrote; don't set yourself up on a pedestal, thinking that you deserve special regard from others. In short, Ignatius is warning her, and us, not to rest on our laurels.

*Will we have
enough to feel
comfortable?*



Statue of St. Ignatius, Loyola University Chicago.

Reflections

The students to whom I was speaking had achieved much. They had earned academic distinction among one of the most talented classes of students Fordham has ever admitted. But we would be doing them a disservice if we had said that this was enough. One of the great slogans of Jesuit education is to strive always for the *magis*, the greater or the more, and while our students are with us, it is part of our calling to challenge them to push themselves ever harder to achieve excellence, in the classroom and the laboratory and especially in work for social justice. It should be one of our deepest hopes that with each new day with us, our students are becoming more and more uncomfortable with the realities of the world in which we live: realities born out of inequality and privilege; realities

born out of hatred and discrimination; realities born out of the unjust distribution of goods and opportunities. And it should be our hope that this discomfort is a *productive* discomfort: that it is a discomfort which stretches and challenges and makes the talented young women and men we teach ask the question, "What can *I* do to build a more just, more humane world?"

*Am I as attractive
or as buff as
the man or woman
next to me?*

And it is here that the third part of Ignatius' advice to Teresa comes in. He warns her against false humil-

ity, against the temptation *not* to make use of her gifts and talents because she might seem to be casting herself as a saint or, worse yet, a savior. If recent discussions in the media about student "entitlement" are to be believed, Ignatius' fears about false humility might seem to be rather unfounded today. But there is still wisdom here. In our time, perhaps, the danger is allowing ourselves to be weighed down by the industry of comparison that surrounds us. Am I as good, or as smart, or as committed to justice, or as capable of transforming the world—or, if you read *Vogue* or *Maxim* magazines, am I as attractive or as buff—as the woman or man next to me? These and other comparisons can be debilitating, not just because they have the capacity to induce pure psychological anxiety but also because they distract us from the question that Ignatius and Jesuit education are setting in front of us every day. The question is not, "Am I the best at this?" but "How can I put what I have at the service of others?"

I worried that the students and parents to whom I spoke may have felt this to be too heavy a message on a day meant for celebrations and congratulations. But it is part of the genius of Ignatius that our celebrations can never set aside the broader context of the ongoing work to which our institutions are committed: the work of using our knowledge to fashion a world of peace and justice for every person alive today and in centuries to come. For in the end, I said, the work of Fordham, the work of Ignatius, the work of building up a world of compassion and humanity, is the work of Love. ■



Students of art concentrating on their pieces at Xavier University.

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