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Saint Ignatius Loyola and Jesuit History

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Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was born in northern Spain of a noble Basque family in the castle called Loyola. The year after his birth Ferdinand and Isabella conquered Granada, the last Moorish stronghold in Spain, and sent Columbus in search of China. A decade later two of Loyola’s brothers fought with the Spanish armies that conquered Naples, another helped crush a revolt in Granada, and a fourth sailed for America. Loyola’s youth was spent mainly as a page at two noble courts, and during his twenties he served as a courtier and heard about how an obscure German friar, Martin Luther, was questioning the basis of medieval Christianity.

Loyola was not trained as a professional soldier, but a courtier was expected to take up his sword in an emergency. This Loyola did when the French invaded northern Spain in 1521. Loyola was wounded trying to defend the city of Pamplona; impressed by his valor, his French captors sent him back to Loyola Castle to recover. There he began reading the lives of Christ and the saints when no novels of chivalry could be found. Gradually he came to realize that daydreams about imitating the saints in serving God gave more inward relish than daydreams of knightly deeds.

He determined to go as a pilgrim to Jerusalem and live there. He headed for the port of Barcelona,
but on the way he paused for a few days in the small town of Manresa to write some spiritual notes. The stop dragged on for ten months as he meditated on Christ’s life. His prayer gradually deepened into mystical experiences. The notes he took down at Manresa became the nucleus of his great book *The Spiritual Exercises*, which allow others to share his insights and experiences. Over the next twenty years Loyola added to these notes and directed various followers through the Exercises, a spiritual retreat of thirty days.

The Spiritual Exercises break into four “weeks”: the first deals with the purpose of life, the second with Christ’s public life, the third with his passion and death, and the fourth with his resurrection. The first printed edition of *The Spiritual Exercises* appeared at Rome in 1548. Since then this little book, devoid of literary grace but potent in spiritual teaching, has enjoyed more than 5,000 editions in dozens of languages.

Traveling through Barcelona, Rome, and Venice, Loyola reached Jerusalem in mid 1523, but Church authorities insisted he return to Europe. He then decided that if he were to help others find Christ, he needed an education. At age thirty-three, surrounded by adolescent boys, he spent two years at a grammar school in Barcelona so he could master enough Latin to enroll in a university. He then attended the Universities of Alcala and Salamanca, but in both places his efforts to bring others to Christ aroused
suspicion from the Inquisition and other authorities. His efforts also cut into his study time. Loyola determined to go the University of Paris, where he would get a more systematic training.

At Paris, Loyola, like students down the centuries, had no money, and so he begged for his living from wealthy merchants. Two years after his arrival he was assigned new quarters, where his roommates were Blessed Peter Favre and Saint Francis Xavier. Gradually he won them over to his spiritual ideals; in time he attracted four others. The seven companions were international from the beginning: two Basques, three from Castile, one from Portugal and one from Savoy. In 1534 these seven men pronounced vows of poverty and chastity and a promise to work for souls in Palestine when they finished their studies. If they could not go to Palestine, they would put themselves at the Pope’s service.

Loyola returned to Spain to settle his affairs and recover his health, then moved on to Venice to await his companions (plus several new recruits) and sail for Palestine. But a war between Venice and the Muslim Turks in 1537 prevented their departure.

They put themselves at Pope Paul III’s service, who used them as preachers and teachers. The companions decided they would need more structure if they were to serve God efficiently. They discussed ways of organizing their work and life together; Loyola drew up a document reflecting their discussions and
presented it to Pope Paul III, who gave his oral approval to the new religious order in 1540. His companions elected Loyola its first superior general. For the rest of his life Loyola worked on the 1540 draft until he finished the long and elaborate Jesuit Constitutions, which were approved two years after his death.
The new order grew very rapidly, adding a thousand members before Loyola's death. Unlike earlier orders such as the Benedictines, Franciscans and Dominicans, the Jesuits did not sing in choir but only read privately the Divine Office traditionally said by priests. This allowed them to devote more time to their ministries, which soon branched out. Francis Xavier became the great missionary to the Orient. Reluctantly, the Jesuits opened schools and colleges, but education gradually became their main work. Several Jesuits served as nuncios, or papal ambassadors. Others preached, did parish work, and gave the Spiritual Exercises. Two of Loyola's first companions from Paris served as chaplains in the forces of Emperor Charles V, one in Germany, the other in Africa.

For his last fifteen years Loyola was the mystic and administrator; he alternated his time between prayer and paper work—almost 7000 of his letters from these years survive. But also he found time for several personal ministries. He organized noble women to rescue young girls from prostitution, setting up a half-way house to rehabilitate them. He even opened a convent for ex-prostitutes. He set up a home for poor abandoned girls and refinanced a similar home for boys. At the instance of his followers, he wrote an autobiography of his early life, but burned most of his private spiritual notes shortly before his death on July 31, 1556. He was canonized in 1622.
The Jesuits

The Jesuits, or the Society of Jesus, to use the official title, grew out of six student companions gathered by Ignatius of Loyola at the University of Paris in the 1530s. When their original project of going as missionaries to Palestine was blocked by war, they put themselves at the service of Pope Paul III. Gradually they came to see the need for rules and structures if their work and union in serving God were to continue and increase. They formed a religious order, elected Loyola as their superior general, and obtained papal approval in 1540.

Orders of monks such as the Benedictines dedicated almost all their effort to prayer; the medieval orders of friars such as the Dominicans and Franciscans tried to mix ministry toward others with prayer; the Jesuits tilted the balance strongly in favor of helping others, striving to find God precisely in an active ministry.

The Catholic Church was facing the crisis of the Protestant Reformation when the Jesuits were founded. By seeking to break away from Rome, the Protestants encouraged efforts at reform within Catholicism. The Council of Trent clarified Catholic doctrine, the popes largely turned from political power games and art patronage to religious revival, new religious orders sprung up—Capuchins, Ursulines, and Oratorians, besides the Jesuits.
Initial Jesuit growth was slow in northern Europe but rapid in Spain and most rapid in Portugal and Sicily, where Islam was the threat, not Martin Luther. By 1565 there were 3500 Jesuits, by 1626 the Jesuits probably reached the zenith of their influence and counted 15,544 members. Their growth was slower during the next century, largely because they lacked the money to train candidates.

The first Jesuits made their mark as preachers, convent reformers, and missionaries, but in 1548 the Jesuits opened their first college intended for lay students at Messina in Sicily. It was an instant success, and petitions for more Jesuits colleges flowed into Rome from most of the cities of Catholic Europe. Quickly, education became the main Jesuit ministry. By 1579 the Jesuits were operating 144 colleges (most admitted students between twelve and twenty) in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. By 1749 the Jesuits were staffing 669 colleges and 235 seminaries world-wide. The Jesuit system of education, building on the curriculum devised by Renaissance humanists, was codified in the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599. This approach controlled Jesuit education until the late nineteenth century, when American Jesuit universities began to make adjustments to the conditions in the United States. Marquette University was a pioneer in educating women, first in nursing and education, then in other disciplines.

With education went writing books—textbooks, catechisms, scholarly works in theology and
philosophy, answers to Protestant polemics, scripture studies, plays written for production at Jesuit colleges, descriptions of the peoples and parts of the world visited by Jesuit missionaries. The Jesuits introduced China to Western science and philosophy. Among the Jesuit writers noted elsewhere in this prayer book are Robert Bellarmine, Peter Canisius, Edmund Campion, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Missionary work has always been among the most prized of Jesuit ministries, from Francis Xavier to the present. In Loyola's lifetime, missions were opened in Africa, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan. Ten years later there were Jesuit missionaries working in North and South America. Jesuits often had to work underground in countries whose rulers persecuted Catholics, and many suffered martyrdom—as did Edmund Campion, Paul Miki and Miguel Pro, who are treated elsewhere in this prayer book. Today, roughly 8,000 of the world's 24,000 Jesuits work in Third World countries.

The Jesuits have made many enemies for many different reasons during their long history. In the mid-eighteenth century they were hated by the philosophes, many of them deists, for their religious faith. The Jesuits were distrusted by the Enlightened Despots because they opposed growing state control of religion and supported the pope. The kings of Portugal, France, Spain and Naples, urged on by advisors who were disciples of the philosophes, first drove the Jesuits from their own lands, then forced
the pope to suppress the Order around the world in 1773. Thanks to a technicality in the Brief of Suppression and the benevolence of Catherine the Great, the Jesuits survived in Russia. Because of the Suppression, the Jesuits played only a small role in the first decades of the American Catholic Church, but a former Jesuit, John Carroll was the first American bishop. Other former Jesuits, notably Pierre de la Clorivièrè, played crucial roles in the establishment of congregations of teaching nuns, who were to be the backbone of American Catholic education in the era 1850-1950. After the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon, there was a reaction to the ideas of the Enlightenment and a religious revival. Pope Pius VII restored the Jesuits worldwide in 1814. By 1830 there were 2,137 Jesuits, by 1900 there were 15,073. The high point came in mid-1960s with 36,000 Jesuits. In the last quarter century membership in almost all religious orders has declined, the Jesuits included. Still, the Jesuits remain the largest male religious order. While their numbers have decreased sharply in Western Europe and considerably in the United States, their numbers in Third World countries, especially Africa and India, and in Eastern Europe are growing. The Jesuits continue to operate a unique network of schools around the world, most notably in the United States, where there are twenty
Jesuit universities, almost all in large cities and eight Jesuit colleges. There are also Jesuit universities in such cities as Rome, Madrid, Beirut, Manila, Tokyo and Seoul. Jesuit periodicals appear in most of the world's major languages, and some 500 Jesuits work in the communications media, mainly in the Third World. At the latest count 4,485 Jesuits belonged to the ten American Provinces. Several hundred other American Jesuits were members of provinces in missionary countries.