

Reflection for Thursday 20th August 2020

How long has it been since you were on retreat? It has certainly been difficult, even impossible to go somewhere for a retreat during the restrictions placed on us in recent months. Fortunately, some of us were able to go on retreat in March literally days before the lockdown started. There are many types of retreat, some are private and contemplative and may involve a few days away on our own, while others are more structured and involve someone actually giving meditations to think about throughout the retreat.

A very popular form of retreat is known as the Ignatian retreat which is usually conducted in silence meditating on passages from the life of Our Lord. During these meditations we are invited to read a scene from the gospels and imagine that we are actually there trying to experience what it felt like, who was there, what was happening, what was being said. By getting involved like this we can often begin to understand in greater depth the meaning behind Our Lord's actions and words. Ignatian retreats were started by St Ignatius Loyola after he founded the Society of Jesus, known as the Jesuits, in September 1540. He wrote the 'Spiritual Exercises' as a way for people to discern the will of God in their lives and to obtain the grace of courage and strength to follow His will.

St Ignatius was one of the greatest saints of the counter reformation period, when the Church began fighting back from the Protestant reformation trying to rediscover the beauties of the faith in the face of heresy and disbelief. He was born in 1491 in Loyola in the Spanish Basque region. As a youth he wanted to be a soldier but while defending the citadel of Pamplona against a French siege in 1521 his leg was shattered by a cannonball.

The French soldiers took care of him and his leg eventually healed. After contracting a fever during convalescence, he was cured on the eve of the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. He wanted military books to read but was given the gospels and the lives of the saints instead. This inspired him and changed his life completely. He gave up any military ambitions to pursue a life of penance. He also decided to complete his education studying in Barcelona and in 1526 went on to study philosophy at the University of Alcala.

In 1537 he set off for Rome with some friends with the intention of offering his services to the Pope. After experiencing a Heavenly vision, he wanted to form a religious order under the title of the Company of Jesus. When the Pope gave his blessing to the new religious order it became known as the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits. The Jesuits have always been known to focus on specific apostolic works such as the foreign missions, the education of young people and ministering to the poor, the sick and prisoners.

St Ignatius passed to his eternal reward in the year 1556 after contracting Roman fever. He was canonised by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 and his body lies in the Church of the Gesu in Rome. In Christian art he is often depicted wearing red vestments at Mass and experiencing the Heavenly vision. As someone with a military background, he saw the task of spreading the faith as a constant battle between good and evil, between God and the devil and the Jesuits have been known throughout history as the stormtroopers of the Pope, ready to go where no-one else would go, ready to lay down their lives in the service of the Church. We could do with some of their courage and determination in the present time not to let anything stand in the way of the fight for souls in the war against evil.

May the Lord bless us and Our Lady protect us.

Deacon Kevin