

SAINTS OF GOD COME TO OUR AID

St Ignatius of Loyola - Our Guide through the Covid 19 Pandemic !



Can any good come from this COVID19 crisis? Can God manage to pluck a rose from the thorns with which this current pandemic will pierce many people?

One of the effects of this current crisis is that we have lots of spare time, lots of silence, and many of our normal routines are disrupted. For many people the silence, the disruption, the lockdown which brings a person to live, a nearly monastic existence, locked up in their home, can be a gift if they enter it well. An opportunity to meet God, to grow spiritually, and not just a passing inconvenience.

Someone who can help us to understand how to benefit from this excess of time and silence, and maybe even our sufferings, is St Ignatius of Loyola. Read his life, it will help you through the coming months; Pope Francis is a Jesuit. The journey to sainthood usually begins with a personal encounter with Jesus. In this encounter a person goes from knowing God second-hand, because they have been told about him by their parents, priests, nuns, or they happen to be born into a Christian culture, to knowing God because you have met him met him personally.

St Augustine of Hippo met God in a garden in Milan, when God spoke to him; St Anthony of Egypt met God listening to a homily on the rich young man in a church in Egypt; Francis of Assisi met God in a depression after the failure to win a battle and his subsequent imprisonment.

St Ignatius of Loyola met God in conditions which are not so dissimilar to the current Covid19 crisis, through a painful leg injury which forced him to spend months in silence and reflection; this silence created the ideal conditions for God to speak to his heart in a personal way. From his sick bed, St Ignatius would rise to make some major decisions about the future direction of his life, decisions which would eventually lead to him forming the Jesuit order, one of the most important orders in the church. In his time the Jesuits evangelized most of the New world, and helped the church to react to positively to the Reformation. What happened?

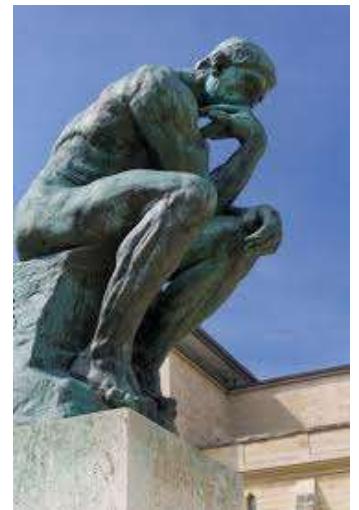
Here is a description of the type of man Ignatius was before his conversion from different biographers. Ignatius had a great love for military exercises as well as a tremendous desire for fame. He joined the army at seventeen, and according to one biographer, he strutted about "with his cape slinging open to reveal his tight-fitting hose and boots; a sword and dagger at his waist". According to another he was "a fancy dresser, an expert dancer, a womanizer, sensitive to insult, and a rough punkish swordsman who used his privileged status to escape prosecution for violent crimes committed with his priest brother at carnival time."

However at the age of 30, in the battle of Pamplona a cannonball, ricocheting off a wall shattered his right leg; he underwent several surgical operations, in an era of without anaesthetics, to mend the break in his leg; one of his main concerns was that he would look good in the tight

fitting trousers of the day; he had to keep his looks ! Not happy with the appearance of his right leg after an operation, he had it re broken again and reset, but in the end had to accept that he would have to hobble for the rest of his life, since his right leg ended up shorter than his left leg. This was the end of his military career as a soldier. Like Jacob in the Old Testament he had been struck, not in the hip, but in the leg.

How did he live this time? We can learn for him how to live this lockdown. With lots of time and silence, Ignatius first attempt at living this moment was to find a way of killing time ? Of passing time ? He loved reading romantic novels which he did; he always envisaged himself marrying into nobility. If he was alive today, Ignatius would be an avid devotee of Netflix or iPlayer.

Silence forces a person to look inward at the heart and this is why we hate it so much, because it confronts us with what is inside of us. External busyness, frantic activism, if often a sign of an inner emptiness from which we seek to escape. But if we do not avert our gaze, do run away from the silence, we begin to notice another presence inside pf us, that of God, we meet God in this silence. This was the experience of Ignatius. There were a number of key elements in this meeting.



✓ **Spiritual Reading** - when the romantic novels ran out, Ignatius was forced to turn to books which he would normally not read, spiritual books; in this current crisis when you get tired of iPlayer and Netflix, start trying to read some books you normally would not touch, especially the Christian classics, start with the lives of the saints. This Covid19 crisis is going to last for months, profit from the surplus of silence and time.

Ignatius read the works of Carthusian monk, Ludolph of Saxony, and the Lives of the Saints. From Ludolph, he learnt how to pray in a new way, using his imagination creatively, accessing underused parts of his inner being like his imagination, to place himself within the gospel passages as a participant. This brought the word of God alive for him. Modern man, a faithful child of the French Enlightenment, who has made an idol of his reason, and who is easily bored, needs to learn how to access other parts of his being which have been shut down and underused for too long. If we do this, we too will find that a trip to the bible is not a dull experience, but a contact with a living word. The Holy Spirit is our guide in this.

✓ **Lives of the Saints** - reading the lives of the Saints, such as St Francis, put Ignatius in touch with the living tradition of the church, in other the words the practical way in which God takes a soul in any state, big sinner or devoted Catholic, and working gently with this soul through grace, sanctifies it and confers on it a fruitfulness and beauty which is unique. For Ignatius, by now a wounded soldier with no future, and lots of unresolved ambitions for fame and glory this appealed to him. What if I was to do what St Francis and St Dominic did? Here was a path to true fame and real riches, and one which did not seem too difficult; even his bad character and big sins were not an obstacle to God. From the saints, Ignatius received hope, and a promise that God would do for his through grace, what he did for the great saints, and God would deliver on this promise.

What about you? The Covid 19 crisis is a critique of the modern world, and its assumptions about itself, its sense of self sufficiency from God, its atheism, its crude materialism and hedonism, and its search of meaning in money, power, pleasure and success. Here is an opportunity to meet God for yourself – to discover true meaning, true riches, to build your house on the rock of God's promises and not the shifting sands of the world and its passing fashions. Get in touch with the Saints, you are called to be one!

✓ **the Kingdom of God is within you (Lk 17:21)** – with time of his hands and with the collapse of his career as a soldier, there was a lot of inactivity and silence. In this situation, Ignatius began to pay more attention to his interior life and the inner movements of his heart. He noticed that reading romantic novels gave him an initial joy, a buzz, which faded quickly and left him empty in the end. But reading the life of the saints and thinking about doing what they did, at first seemed repugnant, but in the end had the opposite effect, it left him peaceful and joyful; and hopeful about the future. An intelligent, observant man, Ignatius wondered why the difference? This is the first beginnings of the Jesuit tradition of discernment of Spirits.

In the end Ignatius realised that this was God speaking to him, gently inviting him to take the path to sainthood, of sanctity, the path to true peace and joy by following the inspirations that he was being given. For Ignatius to cling to his previous plan of fame and romance would lead him to emptiness. It was decision time for Ignatius ? With his freedom Ignatius had to decide which way to go!

He sold all this goods, gave away his possessions, hung up his sword at the shrine of Monserrat outside Barcelona, and began the adventure of a lifetime, one which lead to sainthood, the founding of an order, and a fruitfulness and notoriety beyond Ignatius' wildest dreams.

All this would not have happened without a stray cannonball, ricochetting and wounding Ignatius and forcing him to convalescence for months, keeping him in silence and in inactivity, in which God could speak him. The Covid19 crisis presents us with the same opportunity for encounter and for spiritual growth.

What about you? Have you met God in a deep personal way? Do you want to? Have you decided yet whom you wish to follow, the world or Jesus Christ? Have you managed to work out where the meaning of the inner chaos which is inside of you comes from? Where does the lack of inner peace come from? Do you want peace. Have you some major decisions to make about your life, not sure what to do? What God's will is?

St Ignatius of Loyola and Our Lady of Monserrat, pray for us.

Suggestions : Put aside a fixed time each day to read the live of St Ignatius, its free on Kindle, and other saints, Francis of Assisi, Anthony of Egypt. Try doing some of the exercises which St Ignatius did, a good book to read is '*The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living.*' - by Timothy M. Gallagher.

