

St. Ignatius of Loyola



On July 31, the Universal Church marks the feast day of St. Ignatius of Loyola. The Spanish saint is known for founding the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits, as well as for creating the “Spiritual Exercises” often used today for retreats and individual discernment. St. Ignatius was born into a noble family in 1491 in Guipuzcoa, Spain. He served as a page in the Spanish court of Ferdinand and Isabella. He then became a soldier in the Spanish army and wounded his leg during the siege of Pamplona in 1521. During his recuperation, he read “Lives of the Saints.” The experience led him to undergo a profound conversion, and he dedicated himself to the Catholic faith.

After making a general confession in a monastery in Montserrat, St. Ignatius proceeded to spend almost a year in solitude. He wrote his famous “Spiritual Exercises” and then made a pilgrimage to Rome and the Holy Land, where he worked to convert Muslims. St. Ignatius returned to complete his studies in Spain and then France, where he received his theology degree. While many held him in contempt because of his holy lifestyle, his wisdom and virtue attracted some followers, and the Society of Jesus was born. The Society was approved by Pope Paul III in 1540, and it grew rapidly. St. Ignatius remained in Rome, where he governed the Society and became friends with St. Philip Neri.

St. Ignatius died peacefully on July 31, 1556. He was canonized by Pope Gregory XV in 1622. The Jesuits remain numerous today, particularly in several hundred universities and colleges worldwide. On April 22, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI presided over a Eucharistic concelebration for the Society of Jesus. He addressed the fathers and brothers of the Society present at the Vatican Basilica, calling to mind the dedication and fidelity of their founder.

“St. Ignatius of Loyola was first and foremost a man of God who in his life put God, his greatest glory and his greatest service, first,” the Pope said. “He was a profoundly prayerful man for whom the daily celebration of the Eucharist was the heart and crowning point of his day.”

“Precisely because he was a man of God, St Ignatius was a faithful servant of the Church,” Benedict continued, recalling the saint's “special vow of obedience to the Pope, which he himself describes as 'our first and principal foundation.'”

Highlighting the need for “an intense spiritual and cultural training,” Pope Benedict called upon the Society of Jesus to follow in the footsteps of St. Ignatius and continue his work of service to the Church and obedience to the Pope, so that its members “may faithfully meet the urgent needs of the Church today.”