

Life

St. Ignatius was born in Loyola, Spain, in 1491. Both his parents were from noble families. He was determined to pursue fame through military exploits, but his right leg was fractured by a cannonball in a battle. He went home for surgery and almost died. His injured leg had a protruding bone which was unsightly. In order to continue pursuing fame and fortune in the court, in an era without anesthetics, Ignatius asked the doctor to perform another painful correctional surgery, which required a long period of rest. He wanted to relieve his boredom by reading chivalry novels, but he only found two books: "The life of Christ" and "Lives of the saints". He was deeply moved after reading them and was shocked to realize the illusion of worldly power and wealth and was converted. When Ignatius began to recover, he gave his luxurious clothes to the poor and begged to survive. He lived in the small village of Manresa for about 10 months. He meditated and prayed in a cave and communicated with God. For a period of time, he suffered from an anxiety disorder and was worried about committing a sin in everything he did. He recorded his experience, and it became the material for his later famous work "The Spiritual Exercises". In 1523, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the hope of following the footsteps of Jesus. He wanted to stay and preach there, but the church did not allow a layman to do that. In order to spread the gospel, Ignatius needed to study theology and be ordained as a priest. At the age of 33, he returned to Spain to start his studies and later walked barefoot to France. At the age of 43, he obtained a master's degree from the University of Paris. While studying in Paris, he met like-minded companions, including Francis Xavier (the future patron saint of missionaries). All of them were ordained at different times, and later felt called by God to form a new religious order. Besides the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, this religious order, "The Society of Jesus", must obey the Pope absolutely. Ignatius was appointed the first Superior General. The Jesuits grew rapidly and established many schools. Ignatius died of illness in 1556 and was ordained the patron of all spiritual retreats by the church.

Reflection

It is easy for us to blame God and others when we encounter difficulties. Although St. Ignatius' life plans were constantly destroyed, he faced it with a positive attitude:

- A cannonball shattered his vain desires, and he could not even read his favourite books, but he was willing to read other books, and thus got to know Jesus. This was how he was transformed and started a different life.
- When he began to accept the call to become a soldier of Christ, he suffered from anxiety. However, he discerned God's will through prayers. These experiences enabled him to complete "The Spiritual Exercises".
- His operation was unsuccessful and he would walk with a slight limp for the rest of his life. He endured the pain and made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, hoping to stay and serve there, but he was rejected. He began to study theology and was later ordained a priest. Then with his companions they founded the religious order of the Society of Jesus to preach and save souls.

Let us learn from St. Ignatius not to be obsessed with our own opinions but discern God's will through prayers. Then we will make the right decision and follow the Lord.

Prayer

In St. Ignatius' book "The Spiritual Exercises", he shared his own profound journey of spiritual conversion and guided others on the same journey. It is not a theory of spiritual practice, but a practical manual for spiritual exercises under the guidance of a spiritual director. "The Spiritual Exercises" includes various ways to pray, the book pointed out that "The first Annotation is that by this name of Spiritual Exercises is meant every way of examining one's conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions, as will be said later.... every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one's life for the salvation of the soul, is called a Spiritual Exercise." (*The Spiritual Exercises*, First Annotation) The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises help us discern God's will, allowing people to make free choices and live for God. It originally takes one month to complete, but there are simplified courses. Aspiring learners can refer to some Jesuit websites to experience "Ignatian Spirituality" and "Ignatian Prayer Method" first. After laying a solid foundation, they can learn spiritual exercises under the guidance of a spiritual director.

May we learn from St. Ignatius to face challenges with a positive attitude,
discern God's will through prayer, and then strive to follow it.
St. Ignatius, pray for us.