



**His Excellency,
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Diocese of Belleville**

Sermon:
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time,
July 31, 2021,
St. Teresa Parish, Belleville

“Ite, Inflammate Omnia”
(ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA)

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene:* This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

How many of you have a spiritual Director? All of you? A few of you? None of you?

There was a time when almost every priest, deacon, religious sister and brother and many lay people had a personal spiritual director. This priest director served as a personal guide helping Catholics to learn their faith, love their faith, and live their faith, and discern how to live as a true follower of Jesus Christ in a complex world which often shows very little serious interest in the spiritual life, the journey of a soul from infancy, to childhood, to old age, to death, and to eternal life.

In those days, of course, Catholics went to Confession almost every Saturday evening. Sometimes the confessor served as the spiritual director. More often the spiritual director was a priest in a religious order, like the Jesuits, who regular gave retreats in parishes. Or, who directed a retreat house in a prayerful setting and served as a spiritual director to the members of the women’s Altar and Rosary Society and the men’s Holy Name Society. Most spiritual directors had special training to help them understand the best way to listen to the hearts and souls of Christians as they made the perilous journey from God to God. Spiritual directors guided individuals in meditating on passages of scripture like the ones just proclaimed:

From St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

“Brothers and sisters:

You should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.”

And from the gospel according to John:

“So the people said to Jesus, ‘What can we do to accomplish the works of God?’ Jesus said, ‘The work of God is to believe in the one God has sent you.’”

In the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s, many Catholics faithfully met with their spiritual directors at least three or four times a year. These meetings were so important to the interior life of Catholic Christians that they would not allow anything to cause them to miss this special hour or two in confidential prayerful conversation with their spiritual director. Many of the best spiritual directors, then, as now, made use of one of the great treasures of the Catholic church: The “*Spiritual Exercises*” of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

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Exactly 465 years ago today, July 31, 1556, Iñigo López de Oñaz y Loyola (St. Ignatius of Loyola), 64, died in Rome, from malaria, which was widespread in Rome throughout the Middle Ages. He was Canonized in 1622, by Pope Paul III. His life can be summed up by two of his favorite expressions: “*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*,” “To the greater glory of God,” and “*Ite, inflammate omnia*,” “Go, set the world on fire,” a phrase that inspires Jesuits and other spiritual leaders to this day. I would like to share with you a brief introduction to the life of this most unlikely saint who became a towering spiritual master, whose work has helped tens of millions of Christians to develop a burning love for Jesus Christ. In teaching you about Ignatius, I hope to encourage you to consider making a spiritual retreat in the coming year and to seek out a spiritual director, which, sadly, may not be easy today, since most priests are over-extended and many do not have in-depth training in spiritual direction. With spiritual direction, it is far easier to “put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness.” I personally have had a spiritual director ever since I entered the seminary!

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Ignatius was a Spanish Basque Catholic priest and theologian, who together with Peter Faber and Francis Xavier founded the Society of Jesus (popularly known as Jesuits) in Paris in 1541. Ignatius and his companions, as they are called, played an important role in renewing the Catholic Church after the Protestant Reformation. The Jesuit, arguably the most influential Catholic order in the world, have produced towering intellectual giants (e.g., Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Karl Rahner, John Courtney Murry, Teilhard de Chardin, Avery Cardinal Dulles) and great saints in the Church. The Jesuits are dedicated to education, establishing great universities such as Georgetown University and St. Louis University, and to missionary work. (Many

become doctors and scientists.). Uniquely, Jesuits take a fourth vow of obedience to the Holy Father.

Ignatius was noted as an inspired spiritual director. He recorded his method in his famous book, *“The Spiritual Exercises,”* a simple set of meditations, prayers, and other mental exercises, first published in 1548. He also created the potentially life-changing 30-day silent retreat, which I have made twice. The work of this religious genius is known as “Ignatian spirituality.”

But Ignatius was not always a spiritual man. He had no desire to “put away the old self of his former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires.” Indeed, he was the opposite. Ignatius joined the army at seventeen, and he strutted about “with his cape flying open to reveal his tight-fitting hose and boots and his sword and dagger at his waist.” He was always a fancy dresser, an expert dancer, a big womanizer, concerned about money and power.

In 1521, at the Battle of Pamplona, Spain (now famous for the running of the bulls), Ignatius was seriously injured when a cannonball ricocheting off a nearby wall shattered his right leg. Ignatius was returned to his father’s castle in Loyola, where, in an era before anesthetics, he underwent several painful operations to repair his leg. In the end, the operations left his right leg shorter than the other and He limped for the rest of his life, which he thought was punishment for his sins.

While recovering from surgery, Ignatius underwent a powerful spiritual conversion that changed his life forever. His sister-in-law, Magdalena, brought him spiritual books to read which, for the very first time, made him think seriously about the existence of God and his Catholic faith. In the past, he read only military adventures. Now, for the first time he read the lives of the saints.

But when he read a book on the life of Jesus Christ, he was so moved that he decided to devote himself to the Christian life by imitating Francis of Assisi. Ignatius began to meditate every morning by place himself mentally at the scene of a Gospel story, such as: the birth of Jesus, Jesus tempted in the desert, Jesus calling His disciples, Jesus telling the great parable, the prodigal son, Jesus healing the sick and raising the dead, and, most of all, the passion stories of the suffering, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. This simple morning contemplation of biblical scenes became the basis for the mental prayer that St. Ignatius developed in his *“Spiritual Exercises,”* a form of daily prayer that is the foundation of the spiritual life of all Jesuits and one that has had a profound influence on the prayer life of millions of Catholics throughout the centuries and all over the world.

It was during this form of prayer that Ignatius realized that, for a Christian to grow in holiness, he or she must cultivate a spirit of discernment, a discernment of spirit that would help Christians to determine the path they should take in life and how they could come to know which actions were appropriate for a true disciple of Christ and which actions were not.

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When his leg healed, Ignatius went to Israel, the Holy Land, to “kiss the earth where Jesus Himself had walked.” While visiting a Benedictine monastery he became deeply aware of his past sins, confessed them, prayed for forgiveness, gave his money and elegant clothes to the poor, and wore a garment of sack-cloth.

Later, in France, as a spiritually reborn man, he formed a small group of companions in prayer including Francis Xavier, and Peter Faber, who became the first Jesuits, his religious order approved in 1540 by Pope Paul III.

When his friend Francis Xavier was leaving to become a missionary in India in 1541, Ignatius told him “*Ite, inflammate omnia,*” “Go, set the world on fire.” This instruction has had a profound impact on Pope Francis, the first Jesuit ever to become Bishop of Rome and successor of St. Peter. Indeed, if anyone is truly interested in understanding the pontificate of Pope Francis and his unique approach to ministry, you must start with this central truth: The Pope is a Jesuit, a son of Ignatius of Loyola. Therefore, you cannot hope to grasp the world view of the current Holy Father unless you grasp the world view of St. Ignatius of Loyola. I invite you to read a brief biography of this pioneering, spiritual mentor.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I know that when you entered St. Teresa’s church this evening you were not thinking about Ignatius of Loyola. There are so many things in our complex, troubled world that preoccupy our thoughts. There are so many personal and family concerns that we turn over in our hearts when we gather as a Christian community to hear the word of God and to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. But you should know that Ignatius’ spirituality is born of the Eucharist. He constantly pondered the words that Jesus spoke to us in the gospel this evening: “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst.”

Now that you are thinking about St. Ignatius, I urge you to pray, through his intercession, for discernment. Would your spiritual life be significantly enriched by having a spiritual director? Would your life in Christ be renewed by going on an annual retreat? Each one of us, like Ignatius, are capable of undergoing a deep, spiritual conversion which will give us a new birth in Christ.

“Ite, inflammate omnia!”

“Go now, set the world on fire by your faith!”

St. Ignatius of Loyola, Pray for us!

Praise be Jesus Christ! Both now and forever! AMEN!