

A HIDDEN ENCOUNTER

Ignatius' Conversion

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The 'Conversion' of Ignatius in 1521

THE STORY OF IGNATIUS' 'conversion'—from worldly courtier to committed follower of Christ—is well known. It begins in the period when he still bore his baptismal name, Iñigo, after the local Basque saint Enneco. He was a young man from a family of the lesser nobility, who nevertheless received his education as a page at the court of Juan Velazquez de Cuellar, the treasurer of the Spanish king Ferdinand and, after the former's death, at the court of Duke Antonio Manrique de Lara, the viceroy of Navarre. Iñigo's family clearly had big plans for the boy.

As a loyal courtier, Iñigo took part in military expeditions, with all the attendant risks. In 1521, during a battle against the French at Pamplona, he was seriously wounded in the right leg and was captured by the enemy, who nursed him and then brought him home. This injury required a long convalescence in Loyola. During that period, there was an inner turning point in Iñigo's life. Although he had previously been a faithful Christian, with a certain devotion to the Blessed Virgin and to St Peter, he could have been called *populariter christianus*, an average Christian.

As a result of this turnaround in his life he no longer placed his loyalty in the service of this or that secular ruler, but in radical service to Jesus Christ. His idols were no longer the heroes of profane chivalric epic but the saints, heroes of radical surrender and service to Christ. The life of Iñigo became Christocentric. What caused this turnaround? Years later, when Luis Gonçalves da Câmara asked him to tell his spiritual life-story, Ignatius somewhat avoided the heart of the matter and cleverly diverted attention by referring to internal movements he experienced while reading two books: the *Vita Christi* by Ludolphus the Carthusian and the *Flos sanctorum* by Jacobus de Voragine. The question then, of course, is *why* these particular books suddenly touched him

more deeply than chivalric novels? Why this sudden and intense focus on Jesus Christ, this fascination with Him? Ignatius did not say it explicitly, and kept the central issue hidden, but still gave two small, very discreet indications, as we shall see.

A Remarkable Parallel: Francis of Assisi

Before looking for that hidden core, we may first observe a famous resemblance with another young man who lived several centuries earlier, but whose ‘conversion’ bears surprising similarities to that of Ignatius—namely Francis of Assisi. Francis’s family also had big plans for him: his father Bernardone demanded that his son, who was born while he was on a business trip and who had been baptized Giovanni, should be called ‘Francesco’. After all, in that period in Italy, everything French was considered chic.

Francis was also a worldly young man, and although he was a shrewd businessman (*cautus negotiator*) like his father, he was above all lavish with money (*sed vanissimus dispensator*), as the nobility were.¹ Francis, too, had taken part in a military venture, an armed conflict between Assisi and Perugia in 1202, and he, too, had been captured by the enemy and had to return home—humiliated and sick. The turning point in his life likewise occurred in the period after his failed military expedition. And Francis also, after this turnaround, remained immensely fascinated by Christ all his life. The story of Francis and that of Ignatius a few centuries later show striking similarities.

In order to see exactly what happened in this ‘turning around’, we cannot consult an autobiography of Francis (as with Ignatius), because there is none. Although there are a few autobiographical elements in his *Testament* of 1226—we will return to these later—we must look to other biographers for the story of his life. For centuries, the account by Bonaventure was regarded as the official version, the so-called *Legenda maior*. The General Chapter of the Franciscans had asked this learned scholar to write a biography in 1260, and he completed it three years later. But there are older biographies. For example, there is the *Vita prima* of 1229 by Thomas of Celano, someone who had known Francis personally, and who wrote his biography at the request of Pope Gregory IX.

¹ Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima*, chapter 1. English translation: *The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 1, *The Saint*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (New York: New City, 2000), 183.

For our subject, it is remarkable that, in this oldest biography, Thomas of Celano explicitly presents the ‘turnaround’ in the life of Francis as an initiative from God—it certainly did not come from his parents or from Francis’s upbringing. On the contrary, Thomas says that this upbringing was very worldly, even though everyone called themselves Christians. We might say *populariter christiani*—average Christians—once again, as most people from Assisi probably were. The same can be said of Francis’s peers. Nor was there anything in Francis himself to predict any aspect of his later reversal. He was admired by all, and was extremely ambitious and ostentatious.

‘But’, says Thomas of Celano, ‘God in his goodness cast his gaze upon him. The hand of the Lord came upon him, and he was transformed by the right hand of the Most High.’² During his long illness Francis began to think inwardly in a different way from before. On a walk during his convalescence, he looked at the beauty of the landscape, but found that it gave him less satisfaction than before. And he marvelled at the inner change, Celano says.³ The latter is what Ignatius also says a few centuries later: ‘he [Ignatius] began to marvel at this change’ (*Autobiography*, n.8; my translation). This amazement is telling: Francis himself had not foreseen the turning point, any more than had Ignatius centuries later.

When Francis, even though his soul had undergone a profound and astonishing change, was still preparing to engage in another military conflict—this time between the Pope and the seneschal of the German empire—his inner transformation was confirmed by a vision of Christ in a dream, definitively confirming the turning point in his life. We also read something similar in Ignatius. He relates that at one point his changed inner orientation was ‘confirmed by a visitation ... a likeness of Our Lady with the Holy Child Jesus’ (*Autobiography*, n.10). This is a very discreet indication from Ignatius as to where we should look for the origins of his reversal.

Conversion as Encounter

The parallel between the story of Francis’s ‘conversion’ and that of Ignatius is surprisingly close. The interesting thing is that, in the case of Francis, the biographer Celano states very explicitly that Christ took

² Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima*, chapter 1.

³ Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima*, chapter 2.



St Francis at the Foot of the Cross, by
Anthony Van Dyck, late 1620s

the initiative. Francis is fascinated by Christ precisely because Christ presented Himself—unexpectedly but unmistakably. Is this a forced interpretation from Thomas of Celano? Certainly not. After all, Francis himself actually suggests the same thing in his *Testament*, where he states that it is the Lord who gave him his way of life.⁴ We also see this in the case of Ignatius. He says that from the effects of the turning point in his life ‘one can judge that the thing has been of God, although he himself did not venture to define it’ (*Autobiography*, n. 10)—again a discreet indication. The sixteenth-century Ignatius is apparently a bit more hesitant than the thirteenth-century Francis, but they both agree: the turnaround is an initiative of Christ, and that initiative had a huge impact on the personal lives of both. Francis

and Ignatius both remained totally fascinated by Jesus Christ until the end of their lives. But neither of them came to this himself; the initiative came from the Other.

An Ideological Difference in Interpretation

It seems to me that this interpretation—supported by the sources—differs from the one that is more common in current historiography. Contemporary depictions often assume that what happened to Ignatius in 1521 was primarily a form of introspection. It would seem then that Ignatius’ attention was focused on himself and what was occurring within himself. He analyzed his own inner movements, and drew his own conclusions from them, or so it is often presented.

⁴ St Francis, *Testamentum*, n. 1: English translation in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 1, 124.

This representation corresponds very well to a general interpretation of Ignatius and the Ignatian tradition as exponents of the new individualism in modernity, as many contemporary historians argue. While in earlier periods, it is said, a central emphasis was placed on the community, modernity brought the birth of the individual. Individuals make autonomous choices, design their own lives, and decide for themselves to which groups they wish to belong. It goes without saying that Ignatius is then cited as a typical example of this new trend. His ‘conversion’ of 1521 seems fully to confirm this picture. The self-analysis of Ignatius and the way in which he draws his own conclusions from it for the rest of his life are a perfect example of the incipient individualism of modernity which, moreover, is believed to have been profoundly influenced by his *Spiritual Exercises*.

This representation is, of course, very useful for what is seen as the ideal of religion today, in the twenty-first century: a purely personal matter, something that the individual (on whatever rational or irrational inner grounds) freely chooses, and which is respectable as long as it remains wholly private. How often do we hear that spirituality consists in ‘listening to yourself’? This, of course, leaves the role of God completely out of the picture, and that is perhaps exactly what this ideologically coloured interpretation prefers.

Encounter

Our reading of Ignatius’ turnaround shows, however, that he did not listen primarily to himself, but to the Other—to God—who unexpectedly approached him and met him. This makes a world of difference. Ignatius was not an individual who engaged in self-analysis and made certain choices based on his own inner movements. On the contrary, he was a person who was liberated from the tyranny of the ‘self’ because of his immense fascination with that Other who came to meet him. Ignatius does not say it in so many words in the *Autobiography*, but it seems to me the best interpretative key to understanding its coherence.

It was no longer Ignatius’ own ‘I’ and his own movements that were at the centre of his attention, but the fascinating Other. That is why he was more moved by the *Vita Christi* and the *Flos sanctorum* than by chivalric romance. That is why he wanted to go to the Holy Land: to get to know the Other even better, by discovering and investigating countless small details that had to do with that Other. That is why Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* bear witness to the same fascination and

essential orientation towards the Other. The words of Erasmus, a man who was equally fascinated by Christ all his life, apply perfectly to the *Spiritual Exercises*:

In order to read the Gospel fruitfully, one should read it in a sober way, not sleepy—as when you read a story about people, which does not concern you—but fascinated, with a never-ceasing attention. One should proceed as a devoted disciple of Jesus, who tries to reach Him in all kinds of ways. He should watch closely what Jesus does, what Jesus says; he would like to investigate it all, to search it and to think it over. In the very simple and natural Scriptures, he will find the ineffable advice of heavenly Wisdom: he will find in this—if we may say so—at first sight lowly and reprehensible foolishness of God something which is much higher than all human science, however sublime and wondrous it may be.⁵

In Ignatius we see what the Jesuit Albert Deblaere once succinctly described as ‘vocation: a fundamental fact that escapes verification, but that changes society’.⁶ What we often call the ‘conversion’ of Ignatius is actually an encounter, a calling by God. That encounter is a fact that, on the one hand, is impossible for a historian to trace as such, but, on the other hand, changed Ignatius as a person and through him societies around the world.

If we want to understand the structure of that encounter properly, we must realise that Ignatius was fascinated by Christ in a special way after 1521: not by certain values and norms, not by structures or institutions, not by beautiful religious experiences, not by a challenging task, but by a person. Purely and only because he was *that* Person. In one of his essays, Michel de Montaigne wrote about friendship, and specifically about his own friendship with Étienne de La Boétie: ‘If I had to say why I loved him, I don’t know the answer apart from this: “Because it was him, because it was me [*parce que c’était lui, parce que c’était moi*]”’.⁷ This also applies in an eminent way to Ignatius (and to so many others, such as Francis, Bernard of Clairvaux, John of Ruusbroec, Theresa of Ávila ...), namely a fascination with Christ purely for the sake of Christ himself. This fascination gave Ignatius an astonishing

⁵ Desiderius Erasmus, ‘Pio lectori’, in *Evangelium Matthaei paraphrasis*.

⁶ Albert Deblaere, ‘Humanisme chrétien et vocation monastique’, *Studia Missionalia*, 28 (1979), 97–132, here 97.

⁷ Michel de Montaigne, ‘L’Amitié’, in *Essais*, volume 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 265–279, here 271.

freedom to lead a life that had only one goal, and therefore only one criterion: the ever-deepening encounter with that Person.

This freedom does change society, as church history shows on almost every page. The freedom to think and choose purely and solely out of a deepening encounter with the divine Other: this freedom no longer cares about one's own image, about prevailing trends, about ideologically correct discourse—all the things that keep society closed and controlled. A freedom comes into being that contains a seed of the real humanisation of society.

The Secret

Finally, we must consider one more question. Why is it that Ignatius was so wary, evasive and even silent about the real significance of what happened in 1521 in speaking to Luis Gonçalves da Câmara, who had nevertheless urged him to tell the story?

The answer is simple: because Ignatius must have been a very refined, courteous and sensitive man, who would not display the beautiful secret that had unfolded between him and God. In fact, in doing so, he joins many others before him, who have valued the same attitude of reverence toward intimacy with God. In a famous example, William of Saint-Thierry (c.1080–1148) described the development of the spiritual life in a letter to the Carthusians of Mont-Dieu—a letter that became so widely read in the following centuries that it is sometimes called the *Epistola aurea* ('golden letter'). The author starts at the very beginning; and at the end of the 'letter' (which in fact has more characteristics of a treatise), William advises the fully grown spiritual man:

... may he not put his treasure in the mouth of men, but hide it in his cell and store it in his conscience. Then he can always put the following inscription both above the entrance to his conscience and above the door of his cell: 'My secret is my own, my secret is my own' (Isaiah 24:16).⁸

This is the secret of all who have encountered Christ. *What* has happened belongs to the intimacy of the personal encounter. On the other hand, they cannot remain silent about that Person. We might

⁸ William of Saint-Thierry to the brothers of Mont-Dieu, n.3, in *Patrologia Latina*, edited by Jean-Paul Migne, volume 184 (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1855), col.295.

think of the meeting of the first disciples with Jesus as described in the fourth Gospel (John 1:35–42). Jesus clearly takes the initiative, and afterwards, the disciples cannot keep silent about him, and Andrew speaks to his brother Peter about him. But *what* happened exactly? All we read is: ‘they remained with Him that day’ (John 1:39).

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