

The Life of Saint Ignatius Loyola (Part 1)



Ignatius of Loyola was born in 1491 at the castle of Loyola in Azpeitia in Spain. The youngest of the thirteen children of Don Beltran de Loyola and Marina Balda, Ignatius' path in life seemed marked out for him by tradition and his family's position in the world. As a younger son of a noble household, Ignatius could not have inherited anything from his father, and so he was sent to learn noble skills at the household of Juan Velásquez de Cuellar, an official at the court of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain.

Ignatius had been born a year before these two Catholic monarchs had united all of Spain under their rule (1492) and expelled the Muslims from the south of the country. Following the discoveries of Christopher Columbus, the Spanish crown was the most powerful and wealthy in the world. Because Juan Velásquez was a royal official, both he and his household spent a lot of time at the royal court and Ignatius was brought along to learn manners, etiquette and how to make his way in the world. We are told that he became quite a courtier, worrying about the clothes he wore, the friends he had and the young ladies at the court that he thought were pretty and interesting. In short, he became quite a gallant young man about town, totally interested in worldly things and how to get ahead in government and society.

One of the things Ignatius fell in love with during his time at the royal Court was the fiction of the period: the tales of chivalry that were popular with all the young people Ignatius knew. The stories of knights who fought selflessly for glory and the right, who rescued maidens from evil circumstances, all of this filled the head of the young Ignatius. He wanted to become one of those gallant young men.

In 1517, Ignatius' patron, Juan Velásquez, died. This event forced Ignatius to make a decision: which path would he take in life? What did he want to do? The training Ignatius received at court involved, among other things, military training. With visions of gallant knights running through his head, Ignatius decided to take up the sword. He entered the army of the King and Queen of Spain.

By all accounts Ignatius was a very successful and popular commander with his men. His bravery on the field of battle and his military abilities led many in the army to admire him and to follow him. By 1521, Spain and France were at war and Ignatius was right in the thick of things. He had been sent to the citadel of Pamplona to defend it against French invaders. The situation looked pretty bad since the use of cannons made it difficult to defend a fortress from an army. Ignatius managed to rally the Spanish troops and it is reported that he was everywhere during the battle. Then the unthinkable happened: as Ignatius was encouraging the troops from the walls of the fortress, a French cannon ball passed right between his legs, tearing open the left calf and breaking his right shin (May 20, 1521). Ignatius fell and, without their leader, the army in the garrison surrendered.

The French treated Ignatius well, trying to set his broken leg, and then they sent him home to Loyola on a litter in a journey that must have been agony for the wounded soldier. When he arrived home, the doctors looked at the leg and decided that it had been set wrongly so they re-broke and re-set it causing a piece of the bone to stick out of Ignatius' leg. This was sawn off and, because of the bad doctoring the right leg was much shorter than the other one. The medical establishment of the day decided to fix this problem by attaching weights to the leg to stretch it out. The young Ignatius went through these procedures without a complaint, but the pain and weakness he experienced after all of the trauma was so great that his health began to seriously fail. What was to be done?

~R. Cormier