

St Mary's, Inverness

The RC Diocese of Aberdeen: SC005122]

The Year of St Ignatius

20 MAY 2021 >31 JULY 2022

FORTY-SECOND IGNATIAN REFLECTION

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST



Ignatius, the young gallant, the courtier and gentleman at arms, experienced life-shattering injuries at the Battle of Pamplona in 1521. Hitherto his life's ambition was to rise to prominence in courtly and political circles, serving the royal households. His mentors and role models were drawn from the nobility, soldiers, diplomats and civil servants. Born into a family of the landed gentry at Loyola, in the Basque country, he had a sense of entitlement, and arrogance that from time to time led him into skirmishes with the law. A cannon-ball at the siege of Pamplona shattered his illusions. During his recovery from both battlefield and further surgery he wanted books to read while he was cared for by his family. There were no 'escapist tales' of adventure available at the family home. The books that he found himself reading were a 'Life of Christ', and the lives of the Saints, particularly St Dominic

and St Francis. Given the shock of his injuries and the end of his expected career ambitions Ignatius was in a difficult place. Yet the prayers of the family and their loving support saw him shifting his allegiances. Now he wanted to be a courtier for Christ, a pilgrim, a Christian knight. With these thoughts in mind he set out for Montserrat and the Shrine of the Black Madonna. On the way he had an encounter with a Moor whose views on 'Our Lady' were contrary to received Catholic orthodoxy. Something of the old arrogant spirit was still lurking in Ignatius when he actively considered killing the Muslim. Divine Providence intervened through the agency of the donkey.



Ignatius was blessed by the donkey that carried him on the straight road to Montserrat. When he arrived at Montserrat he laid aside his military accoutrements and his courtly dress, and pledged himself to be a Pilgrim, wearing the rough attire of a pilgrim.



In his Autobiography he recalled his journey thereafter to Manresa. It was there that he encountered the Book : **“The Imitation of Christ”**. Ignatius later referred to it like this **“It was at Manresa that I saw the *Geronzito* for the first time and since then there is no other book of devotion that I like more”**. The

word '*Gerconzito*' is an affectionate title alluding to Jean Gerson who had been the Chancellor of the University of Paris and a well regarded thinker and writer. Many thought that Gerson was the author, but the modern consensus is that it was in fact written by Thomas a Kempis.

Thomas a Kempis was the Guardian of the Novices at a monastery of Augustinian Canons Regular in Windesheim. His addresses and instructions to the young members of the Community form the book "**The Imitation of Christ**". It came to be a popular devotional work at the time when printed books were becoming more available. The "**Imitation**" became an influential guide to Ignatius in his search for a closer understanding of God. From Manresa onwards it was reported that Ignatius read a chapter of "**The Imitation**" everyday of his life. He kept copies available to give away. It is said that it was the only book that Ignatius had with him in his room at the time of his death.

For Ignatius the search for a new mentor and a role model was found in the person, in the life and teaching of Jesus. This change from the cavalier and military gallant to a servant of Christ the King took place over many months and indeed years. The constant challenges to his assertive and entitled ego were provided by the stringent comments of Thomas a Kempis, who gives encouragement particularly to any sincere searcher and pilgrim. The freshness and direct dialogues within "**The Imitation**" mark a change in the tradition of Devotion from the centuries before. Rather than learned contemplation of theology within cloistered mysticism there is a straightforward everyday asceticism, a personal discipline that enables the pilgrim to be open to the grace of God and so be conformed to Jesus. The pattern of the Life of Jesus, that is found in "**The Imitation**" is one of 'taking up the Cross', accepting

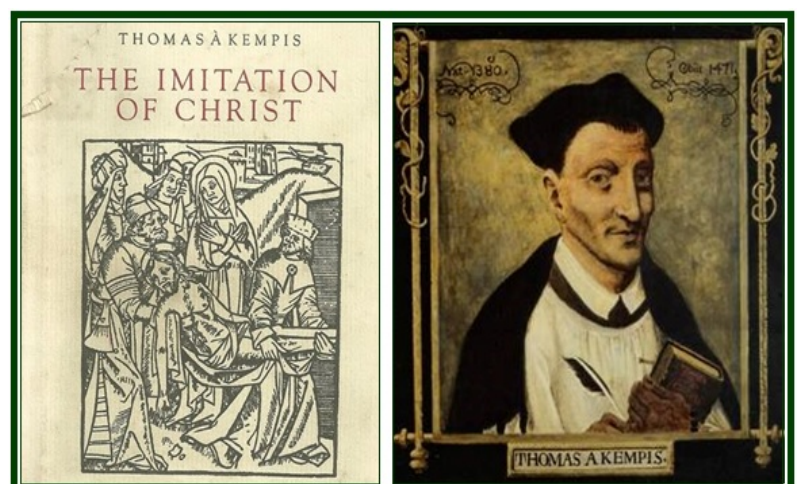
the need for change and constant awareness of the dangers of vain things. Ignatius needed the support of this vade-mecum, a guide for his journey, that at the same time in its later chapters instils a reverence for the Holy Mass. Ignatius would have been strengthened in his resolve to be conformed to Christ by such a passage as :

“For real amendment of life, you need two things above all-you must wean yourself away from the faults to which your nature is especially prone, and you must press on hard in pursuit of the good quality you most need” [Bk1. Ch 25]

Ignatius was to be influenced not only by **“The Imitation”** but also by his own insights, the ‘illuminations’ he received by the River Cardoner while at Manresa. The astringent words of **“The Imitation”** would always counsel against spiritual pride. The fruits of Ignatius’ spiritual journey, were brought together in **“The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola”**. He used ‘The Exercises’ over the years from about 1528 until they took a final shape in their publication in Rome in 1548.

Together **‘The Imitation of Christ’** and Loyola’s own **‘Spiritual Exercises’** became the handbooks for reform of the moral and spiritual life of the Catholic reformation.

“The Imitation” has become the ‘best selling book’ next to the Bible.



This demanding book presents the Christian ideal in robust terms- the language that appealed to Ignatius, and which encouraged him in his own spiritual and psychological development. **"The Imitation"** is a companion book for different stages of life but it can be profitably used as a Lent Book.

Some passages that must have been familiar to anyone who is or was a daily user are particularly interesting, arresting our minds and deepening our reflections :

"As each new day comes, we ought to renew our good resolutions, re-kindle the fires of our devotion, as if today were the first day of our coming back to God.....Progress means a programme..... Morning is the time for making resolutions; when evening comes, analyse your past behaviour- what sort of person have you been today? What have you said or done; what have been your thoughts?"

Bk1. Ch 19

It is clear that these thoughts entered deeply into Ignatius' consciousness influencing what became the **'Ignatian Examen'**.

"You get on well with gentle, good natured folk? Why, so does everybody; we all like to have friends around us, we all have a soft spot for the man who agrees with us. But when people are difficult and cross-grained, when they get out of hand and keep on contradicting us, to keep on good terms with them- ah, that needs a lot of grace; that's a man's job, and you can't praise it too highly."

Bk2. CH 3

A prayer that we may do what God wants of us:

“O most kind Jesus, give me your grace, to be at my side too and share my labours, to be my constant companion to the end. Grant that I may always will and desire what is more acceptable to you, whatever pleases you more dearly....” Bk 3. Ch 15

Here we see an emphasis on 'companionship' that becomes a hall-mark of Ignatius' friendships and defines the relationships of mutual support. The concept of *'the magis'*. *'the more'*..willing and desiring and doing the 'more acceptable'. This yearning for a deeper and more acceptable discipleship in following Jesus is rooted and grounded in 'companionship' ..sharing one bread as one body.

**For we being many are one bread,
and one body.**



1Corinthians 10:17

In the fourth book within **'The Imitation'** the author deals with the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Eucharist.

"Go forward, then, with simple, unwavering faith, and approach the Sacrament in unquestioning adoration. Leave your worries behind and entrust to Almighty God whatever is beyond the grasp of your understanding. God never misleads you.....it is with simple folk that God walks, to the humble that he makes himself known; to the little ones he gives understanding, to the pure of heart he rends the veil of outward appearance.....here in the most holy, the most sublime of the Sacraments, faith and love are paramount, causing their effects in ways beyond man's knowing." Bk 4. Ch 18

Ignatius had a deep devotion to the Blessed Sacrament as we see from his letters:

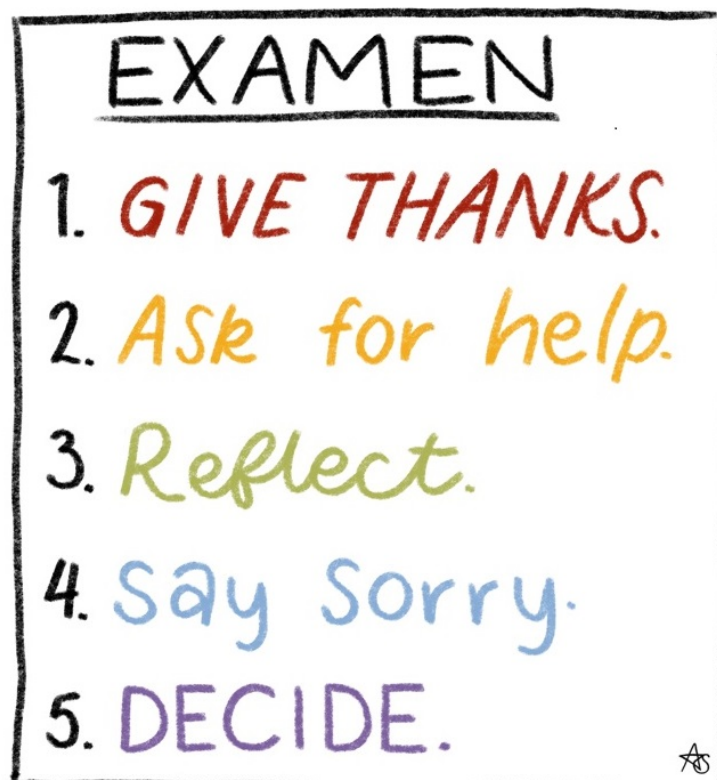
St. Ignatius sent a letter to the citizens of his home town, Azpeitia, reminding them of the reforms which had been achieved with them during his visit there in 1535 : ***" For your greater advancement I pray, entreat, and beseech you by the love and reverence of God our Lord, apply yourselves with great zeal and ardour to honour, please, and serve His only begotten Son, Christ Our Lord, in this great mystery of the most Blessed Sacrament, in which His divine Majesty, with divinity and humanity, is as great, undiminished, powerful, and infinite as He is in heaven.....I close by asking, praying, and beseeching you, by the love and reverence you bear to God Our Lord, let me always partake in your devotions and chiefly in those of***

the most Holy Sacrament, as' you yourselves will always have a full share in mine, however poor and unworthy they may be."

Points to ponder :

- Ignatius reordered his life by a radical conversion to the Jesus of the Gospels and a constant process of self-examination, prayer and renewal, an **'irrevocable dedication'** to God-in-Christ. In this he was assisted by Scripture and **'The Imitation of Christ'**. Do we have a programme? Examen & Suscipe ?
- The absolute and simple dedication to God-in-Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is for Ignatius a daily devotion. It is a simple, humble, pure and generous offering of time in the Divine Presence. Do we make the most of our opportunities ?

Looking at ourselves:



Preparation for Scriptural Reflection :

- *We place ourselves in the presence of God – short prayer of devotion: 'My Lord, and my God'*
- *We open up to God, expressing our sorrow for sin and our gratitude for our blessings*
- *We ask God to receive our lives, our hopes, our best intentions and our prayers*
- *We begin to read the passage of Scripture slowly. It helps to say the words, even silently.*
- *We think imaginatively trying to see ourselves in the scene of the Scripture : what we see, what we hear, what it feels like, what we smell, what we might taste.*

Passage for Reflection :

St Mark. 10.35-45

"Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory."

Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory:

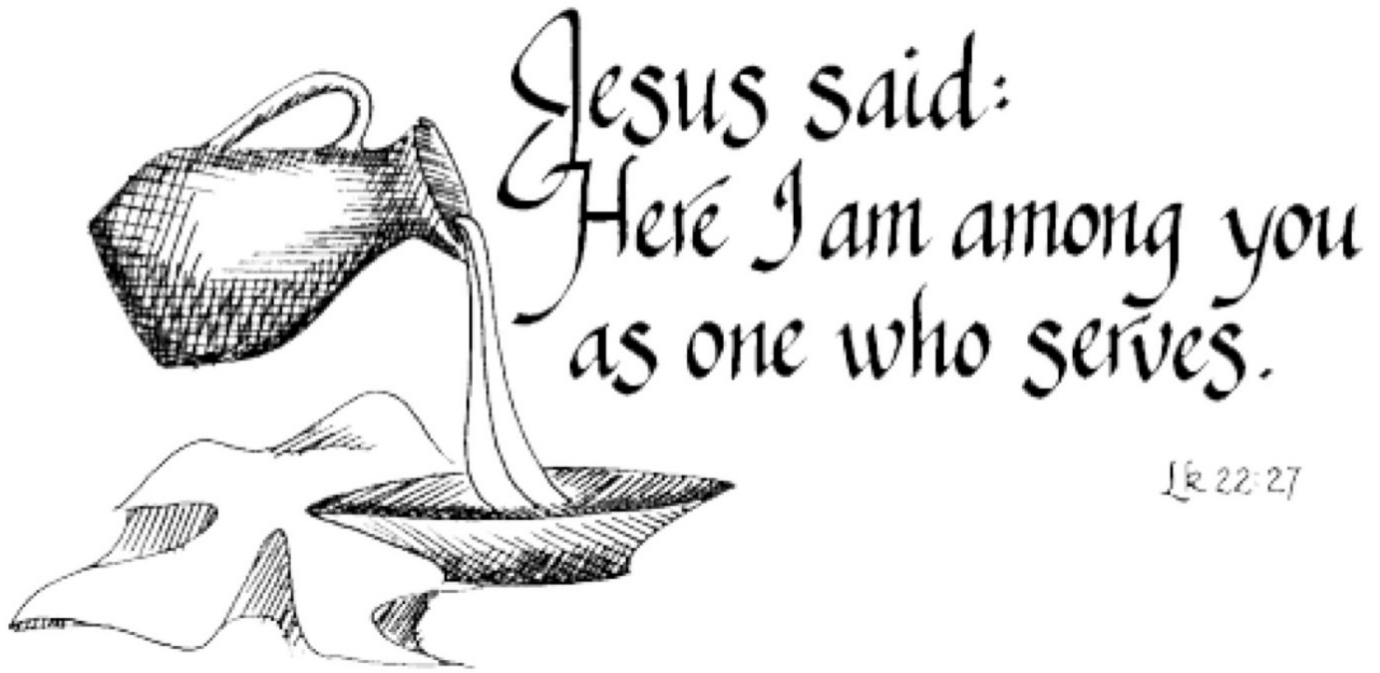
But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with

the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared.” And when the ten heard it, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John.

But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Points for Reflection :

- We may make comparisons with the early Ignatius and the disciples
- Ambitious and vainglorious the disciples do not yet understand Jesus. Resentment and envy threatens unity.
- Jesus calls all disciples to a fellowship of suffering service which strips away artifice, vanity and ambition and reverses the values of worldly success.
- ‘A Common Life in the Body of Christ’, fellowship with Jesus, requires a mutuality of respect, of giving and receiving in the costly simplicity of humble service, always attentive to the needs of others.



- **A Period of Silence** in which we pray with St Ignatius, talking conversationally to God as Father : seeking understanding and insight, ever searching, ever finding, always willing, and Loving.

'Suscipe' : Prayer of St Ignatius

Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess, Thou hast given me: I surrender it all to Thee to be disposed of according to Thy will. Give me only Thy love and Thy grace; with these I will be rich enough and will desire nothing more. Amen.



The Lord's Prayer

Jesus Mercy, Mary Pray

Thank God Always