

Homily on the Solemnity of St. Ignatius, July 31, 2009, Fr. Myles N. Sheehan, S.J.

As Jesuits, we have many wonderful and stirring documents that are part of our heritage, words that have lasted through the centuries, and words that provide new inspiration for us today and for our future. There is the Formula of the Institute, with its lapidary opening phrase: "Whoever desires to serve as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the cross in our Society...and to serve the Lord alone and the Church his spouse, under the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth..." The 35th General Congregation, in repeating these words, specifically urged all Jesuits "to live with the great spirit and generosity that is at the center of our vocation." That is wonderful and worthy of both praise and emulation.

But today I would not focus so much on stirring phrases, as necessary as they are for our generous service, as consider what Moses' words might mean for us: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you...may live." We gather together to celebrate St. Ignatius, to thank God for the inspiration given to our founder, and for the gift of the Spirit we have received in our vocation. That is why I think the words from Corinthians are so accurate today: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it for the glory of God."

Over the last couple of weeks, I have been getting my orientation to some of the issues and tasks that will face me as Provincial in the coming years. I have referred to it as my "vaccination," receiving a small dose of a potentially lethal agent so that when I come upon it in its wild form, it will not cause me to die. Yet in the difficulties, I also find myself happy at how much generosity, and courage, and holiness there is in our Society here in New England. So, it is truly life and blessings that we should choose today in our celebration.

As you know, at the end of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius urges us to consider how God acts with us and in our world. God gifts, God dwells, and God labors--in our hearts, in the hearts of all humanity, in our varying cultures, and throughout the world. Tonight, for the one who has gifted us so greatly, dwells in us so gently, and labors with us in a way more powerful that we can understand, eat and drink for the glory of God and rejoice in the love that God has given us. Ignatius proposes a number of images for God's love, rays of sun, water in a fountain. How about looking around this chapel for an image of God's love? And consider for a moment what we will see tonight: a group of very different men, some doing well, some not so well, some old, a few young--gathered to celebrate what God has done for us in inspiring Ignatius and allowing us to be touched by that inspiration.

We have all prayed the Suscipe:

“Take Lord, and receive, all my liberty,
My memory, my understanding, and my entire will.
All I have and possess; you have given me, I now give it back to you.
O Lord, all is yours, dispose of it according to your will;
Give me only your love and your grace; that is enough for me.”

The two disciples of John who responded to Jesus’ invitation to “Come and see” found more than they expected. They encountered the love and grace of the Lamb of God. For us as Jesuits, the love and grace we pray for is, in very tangible, mediate, and non-metaphorical ways, all around us. That love and grace may not always be sweet and easy. Sometimes love can be demanding and grace can lead to repentance. At least that is the way it has been for me. Tonight, we have a concrete response to our prayer begging for the Lord’s love and grace. It is not simply the celebration tonight. It is our lives together, as Jesuits, called together in this Society, under the banner of the Cross, and laboring for the service of faith and the promotion of justice.”

Here is my big point. Have a good time tonight. Be companions in the shared recognition that God has been good to us in the gift of Ignatius, in the ongoing life of the Society, and in our own vocation. Remember that Jesus was found to be alive over a meal and a conversation when the disciples at Emmaus thought everything was lost. Celebrate the love and grace that God has given us in our life together in the Society. Choose life, accept the blessing, eat and drink for the glory of God. Come and see.

St. Ignatius of Loyola...prays for us.