

Women Jesuits?

In 1554, Juana of Austria, Spanish princess of the house of Hapsburg, became a Jesuit. That story is not very well known.

Previously, in the mid-1540s, Pope Paul III had directed Ignatius to accept Isabel Roser and two companions as members of something like a women's branch of the Society of Jesus, but that experiment did not last.

Juana of Austria entered almost ten years later. In 1552 the princess, 17 at the time, married the heir to the Portuguese throne. When he died two years later, she returned to Spain. Young, beautiful, and aware of her royal position and power, Juana was also endowed with a talent for ruling. While her brother, Philip II of Spain, was in England as husband of Mary Tudor, he made Juana regent. From 1554 to 1559 she was the effective ruler of Spain.

Juana had an additional ambition: to become a Jesuit. Telling none of her family, she informed Spanish grandee Francis Borgia, an early Jesuit, that she wanted to join the Society of Jesus. The idea was heaped with danger for the Society. Her father, Emperor Charles V, and her brother Philip would be furious with her and the Jesuits for wrecking possible future dynastic marriage plans for Juana. Yet, the new, small, and in some places highly suspect Society could not afford to alienate Juana—depending in part on her good favor for its existence in Spain.

The Society in 1554 had officially been in existence for only fourteen years, yet by Ignatius's death in 1556, there were already 1,000 Jesuits. Men were flocking into the order enthusiastically. Women, too, were attracted and wanted either to found a separate female branch of the Society under the control of the general or to enter directly into the Society itself.

The first of these alternatives had been tried by Isabel Roser in 1545, who got the pope to write a brief allowing her to take the vows of the Society and ordering Ignatius to receive her. In December 1545, Ignatius did receive her vows and those of two other women, but the text of the vows carefully made no mention of entrance into the Society itself. This so-called women's branch of the Society did not last. Roser had been a great friend and patron of Ignatius for many years, but after she took vows she made impossible demands, continued in her own ways, and demanded interminable hours of spiritual

direction (more than all the rest of the Jesuits in the Roman Curia combined). In May 1546, Ignatius asked the pope to dispense the recalcitrant Roser from her vows. As a result of this failed experiment, Ignatius got a brief from Pope Paul III in 1547 forbidding the Society to take under its obedience communities of religious women.

Then came Juana. She wanted, and got, for herself not a separate branch of the Society but membership in the Society itself.

So perilous was the project that all existing Jesuit correspondence about the situation avoids her name, using the pseudonym Mateo Sanchez, or Montoya, instead. In a quandary, Ignatius appointed a committee to advise him. It recommended that Juana enter the Society as a permanent scholastic; truly a Jesuit but forever in formation. Otherwise, with solemn vows, she would have been—according to canon and civil law—legally dead, dispossessed of everything, and incapable of ever marrying again.

With the novel, simple, and terminable vows of a Jesuit scholastic, she could have separated from the Society if necessary. When Juana pronounced her three religious vows as a Jesuit, absolute secrecy was enjoined on everyone. She could make no obvious change in her manner of life. So, for her, poverty meant leading a rather austere life at her already simple court. Chastity meant never marrying again. Obedience—well, her letters show her sometimes trying to give orders to Ignatius and Borgia.

This secrecy was imposed not only because of Juana's position but also to preclude at all costs anyone else following her example. Ignatius and his committee saw the problem of responding to the possibility that a whole crowd of high-born ladies would be knocking on the general's door for entrance into the Society.

The secret was so well kept that no one ever suspected it. And as far as is known today, Juana lived the rest of her rather short life (she died at the age of 38 in 1573) as the only woman Jesuit.

—John Paulberg, S.J., "Secret, Perilous Project," *Company Magazine*, Fall 1999

Portrait of Juana of Austria and a Young Girl.
Sofonisba Anguissola
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.
Artist Sofonisba Anguissola was a female painter of the Italian Renaissance.



Attempts by women to live religious life on the Jesuit model have been fraught with difficulty since the time of Ignatius himself. The reform of female communities was a major project proceeding from the Council of Trent, involving Ignatius and his early companions in a Herculean task. The question arose of taking some of these convents under Jesuit jurisdiction. While the nuns and several of their Jesuit confessors were enthusiastic, Ignatius resisted. Of supreme importance to him was the principle of universal mission and mobility for his fledgling Society of Jesus. To tie his men down to the service of monastic houses was to act in contradiction to this identifying principle. The freedom and flexibility in Ignatius' new concept of religious life for men had already given rise to substantial controversy. Given prevailing views on the place of women in society, and scandals, real or imagined, involving breaches of nuns' enclosure, he was strongly averse to violating social and moral codes with a branch of women Jesuits. While the Jesuits were not exempt from the social prejudices and misogynistic assumptions of their time, Ignatius himself had a wide spiritual correspondence with prominent women and never hesitated to enlist their support in promoting the welfare and apostolic ministries of his nascent order.

—Gemma Simmonds in *The Cambridge Companion to The Jesuits*
(Cambridge University Press, 2008)