

The Founding of the Society of Jesus



One of the earliest portraits of Ignatius, this work was executed shortly after his death by the Florentine painter Jacopino del Conte (1510–98), who used the death mask as his model.

▲ Figure 1. Ignatius of Loyola. Jacopino del Conte. Oil on panel, 17.9 x 13.7 inches, 1516. Rome, General Cartas of the Society of Jesus.

St. Ignatius of Loyola

Ignatius of Loyola and nine other students became friends while they were together at the University of Paris. In 1534–35, while still at the university, they formed themselves into a missionary band for ministry in the Holy Land, where they hoped to work for at least a few years for the conversion of Muslims. After failing to obtain passage there because of the unsettled political situation in the Mediterranean, in 1539 they found themselves in Rome. They had to make a decision about their future, and they agreed to meet every evening for several months to consider the matter. By this time they had all been ordained priests, but, as an already international group, they were attached to no particular diocese. The central question before them was whether they should commit themselves to each other for the rest of their lives and form a new religious order.

They decided in the affirmative. They drew up a short description of what they had in mind and submitted it to the Holy See for official approbation. They called the document their *Formula vivendi*, the equivalent of the Rule in other orders. The papal bull *Regimini militantis ecclesiae* of 1540 ratified the Formula, and officially created the Society of Jesus.

Even at its founding moment the Society had features that set it apart with regard to certain long-established patterns for religious orders. The Jesuits, for instance, would not wear a distinctive habit, nor would they have any ascetical or penitential practices imposed upon them by rule. Besides the three customary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the professed members would pronounce a special vow to God to obey the pope “concerning missions.” This was essentially a vow to be missionaries, to be on the move, the polar opposite of the monks’ vow of stability.

In the Constitutions of the Society composed by Ignatius and his secretary, Juan Alfonso de Polanco, Ignatius described the qualities that should be possessed by the general of the order, and in so doing he painted a portrait of the ideal Jesuit. Prominent among the requisite qualities was magnanimity, whereby the general might “initiate great undertakings in the service of God our Lord and persevere in them with constancy when it is called for.” What has never been noticed is that this whole passage of the Constitution is based on a paragraph in Cicero’s *De officiis* (1.20.66), in which he insists that the person committed to the common good of society be ready to risk life and all worldly goods in pursuit of that cause. Besides courage and constancy, breadth of vision is implicitly called for in both texts.

Ignatius certainly showed such breadth of vision when he changed the course of the Society’s history by throwing the full weight of his authority behind the schools. He could not have foreseen all the consequences of that decision. He surely did not foresee that he would thereby imbue the Society with a cultural mission that, in the best of circumstances, would be integrated with its religious mission, but that, in any case, would have a force all its own. It was a force propelled along by magnanimity, by a breadth of vision ready to accept and exploit all the cultural consequences the schools brought with them. It is significant that Ignatius found the best expression of this breadth of vision, which he wanted to be characteristic of every member of the Society, not in the Bible but in Cicero.

—John W. O’Malley, S.J. in *The Jesuits and the Arts* 1540–1773 (Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2005)

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola

St. Ignatius underwent as a soldier a deep religious conversion while recuperating in 1521 from wounds he suffered in the battle of Pamplona. As his relationship with God developed over the next year or so, he began writing down what he was experiencing in order to help himself and also to help others who approached him in order “to converse about the things of God.” These were the origins of the Spiritual Exercises, on which Ignatius continued to work for the next two decades. Although more often cited than studied, the Exercises were destined to become one of the world’s most famous books.

The Exercises encapsulated the essence of Ignatius’s own spiritual conversion from conventional Christianity to a deep awareness of God’s presence and comfort in all of the circumstances of his life, and it presented this experience in a form that would guide others to analogous changes of awareness and motivation. Not a book of spiritual teachings as such, it was rather a design for a process of prayer, meditation, and discernment that would, as Ignatius said, “allow the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with the Creator.”

A call to inwardness, it was the first Christian book to provide such a full, clear, yet remarkably flexible program, and it thus created what came to be known as the “retreat,” a few days, a week, or a month of seclusion set aside in order to open oneself to God’s will. The Exercises were intended for Christians from all walks of life but had special

relevance for members of the Society in that they set the pattern, goals, and style for all of the ministries in which the Jesuits engaged. The importance of the book in establishing the ethos and spirit of the Society of Jesus cannot be overestimated.



▲ Figure 2. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. Mexico, 1756. Saint Joseph’s University, Jesuitica Collection.

The book has had an immense impact on the history of Catholic devotion, an impact that continues up to the present. It has also influenced areas of culture in unexpected ways: with its promotion of the use of the imagination in meditation, for instance, it influenced painters and sculptors, and it helped create the genre of emblem books, with their fusion of symbol and meditation.

—John W. O’Malley, S.J. in *Ratio Studiorum: Jesuit Education, 1540–1773* (John J. Burns Library, Boston College, 1999)

Chronology of Ignatius’ Life

- 1491 Born at the family castle, Loyola, Spain
- 1521 Wounded in battle at Pamplona
Recuperates at the castle of Loyola, where his spiritual conversion begins
- 1522 Makes a pilgrimage to Virgin’s shrine at the Benedictine Abbey, Montserrat
Spends a year at Manresa, outside Barcelona. Makes notes of his religious experiences that will develop into the Spiritual Exercises
- 1523 Sets out for Italy in order to travel as a pilgrim from there to Palestine
- 1524 Begins study of Latin at Barcelona
Transfers to the University of Alcalá
Briefly imprisoned at Alcalá by the Inquisition
- 1527 Transfers to the University of Salamanca
After a short while transfers to the University of Paris
- 1534 In Paris on August 15, he and six companions pronounce vows, the nucleus of the future Society of Jesus. They promise to travel together to Palestine
- 1537 The companions, now nine, arrive in Venice to await passage to Palestine
Those who were not priests, including Ignatius, are ordained



This delicate drawing in red chalk is traditionally believed to be the earliest representation of Saint Ignatius’s early companions, including Diego Laínez, Francis Xavier, Pierre Favre, Nicolás de Bobadilla, Simão Rodrigues, Alfonso Salmerón, Paschase Broët, Jean Codure, Claude Jay, and Diego de Hoces, a slightly later recruit.

▲ Figure 3. The First Companions of Saint Ignatius. Anonymous. Red chalk, 10.2 x 6.8 inches, late 16th century. Rome, Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu.

- 1539 Gathered in Rome and unable to secure passage to Palestine, the companions decide to found a new religious order
- 1540 Pope Paul III on September 27 formally approves the Society of Jesus
Francis Xavier leaves Rome for Portugal where he will take ship for “the Indies” the following year
- 1541 Ignatius is elected first superior general of the Society
- 1548 The Spiritual Exercises are published in a Latin edition
- 1556 Ignatius dies in Rome
- 1609 Ignatius is beatified by Pope Paul V
- 1622 Ignatius is canonized by Pope Gregory XV along with Francis Xavier, Teresa of Avila, Isidore of Madrid, and Philip Neri

—John W. O’Malley, S.J. *Constructing a Saint Through Images* (Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2008)



This painting commemorates the founding of the Society by Pope Paul III in 1540, and includes a standing portrait of his grandson Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520–89), the man who would finance the building of the Gesù in Rome.

▲ Figure 4. Paul III Approves the Society of Jesus. Anonymous. Oil on canvas, 91.7 x 109.6 inches, mid-17th century. Rome, Church of the Gesù.

The Ratio Studiorum

As the schools proliferated in the early decades, questions about curriculum, pedagogy, textbooks, administrative procedures, and similar matters began to be asked with greater urgency. An overarching issue was how these many schools could maintain some coherence among themselves. This was important for a number of reasons, not least of which was the necessity for Jesuits being moved from one school to another to fit into the new institutions to which they had been transferred. How, furthermore, could a certain quality-control be established, with standards against which performance might be measured?

Jesuit educators increasingly requested a document, a comprehensive “plan of studies” that they could use as a guide. It was Claudio Acquaviva who was able to bring this long-standing project to completion and officially publish in 1599 the *Ratio studiorum* that became the Magna Carta of Jesuit education. In the Middle Ages, the Augustinians had a document known as *Ratio studiorum*, and other orders had similar documents which were intended for the training of members of the orders. The *Ratio* of the Jesuits was different in that it was meant as much for the education of lay students as for Jesuits, but it also was different because the “plan of studies” now included the humanities—literature, history, drama and so forth—as well as philosophy and theology, the traditionally clerical subjects.

The *Ratio* had all of the benefits and all of the defects of such codifications; while it set standards, for instance, it discouraged innovation. In any case, it had impact far beyond Jesuit institutions because it was seen as a coherent and lucid statement of ideals, methods, and objectives shared broadly by educators in early modern Europe. For the Society of Jesus, the *Ratio studiorum* symbolized a certain maturing in its commitment to education, which had great repercussions for the future of Catholicism.

The schools were often at the center of the culture of the towns and cities where they were located: typically, they would produce several plays or even ballets per year, and some maintained important astronomical observatories.

The commitment to education effected a profound change in the model of the Society of Jesus from what Ignatius and his companions originally envisaged. It meant that the model of itinerant preachers of the Gospel had to be tempered by the reality of being resident schoolmasters. It meant the development of large communities needed to staff the schools; it meant other things as well. Perhaps most profoundly, it meant a special relationship to culture in that the Society as an institution had a systematic relationship to “secular” learning, for its members had to be prepared to teach both the classics of Latin and Greek literature of the humanistic tradition (Homer, Virgil, Cicero, and Terence, for example) and the scientific texts of Aristotle in the Scholastic tradition (we must remember that “philosophy” meant to a large extent “natural philosophy,” subjects we call biology, physics, and astronomy). If Jesuits were to teach these subjects, they would also almost perforce begin to write about them, at least to the point of producing textbooks for their students.

It is highly probable that even without the schools, the Jesuits would have produced a significant number of books, for their counterparts in other religious orders did so. However that may be, the incontrovertible fact is that the schools provided the impetus for an extraordinarily copious production. They also required that the scope of that production be consistently and predictably wide-ranging, for the schools took the Jesuits into just about every conceivable aspect of human culture and made them reflect upon it and come up with something to say.

—John W. O’Malley, S.J. in *Ratio Studiorum: Jesuit Education, 1540–1773* (John J. Burns Library, Boston College, 1999)