

Feast of St. Ignatius, July 31, 2011

Avalon Yacht Club

## HOMILY

Ignatius was a man of relentless ambition and organizational talent. As he matured, he struggled against personal pride to open himself to God's desires. After his conversion at age 30, he placed his ambition and talent in the service of Christ's mission.

Allow me to reflect on two things in the aftermath of my own retreat last month at Ignatius' birthplace in Northwest Spain, in the Basque country, a retreat that included celebrating Mass in the house where he was born and where he experienced God's love while miraculously recovering from a severe leg wound suffered as a soldier in defense of the Spanish monarch.

The first: his ambition that led him to leave the beauty and comfort of his birthplace, not just once as a youth but then again at thirty years of age after his recovery from his wound.

And second: his growing confidence that God had a plan for him and would lead him to his mission as a leader with others regardless of worldly circumstances and those that mistrusted him.

First, his ambition. His birthplace is a beautiful part of Spain, an area of rugged hills and peaceful valleys, rich in pastures and fertile fields. He was the last child in a family of 13. The family lived comfortably on a considerable amount of land managed by some waning rules of feudalism. He could have had a comfortable life in this beautiful rural environment serving the needs of the family and the existing church and civil order. But as fate would have it, his father sent him at age 15 to serve in the household of a Spanish royal official. There he was schooled in the basics and learned the arts of diplomacy and warfare.

He had little opportunity to show his ambition until he takes a leadership role in a battle against the French forces. His wound in that battle changes his life. He retires to his ancestral home, nearly dies as result of the wound, finds great comfort in God in his prayer. God transforms his ambition from one serving a worldly king to one in service to Christ. He becomes a pilgrim for nearly two decades through the cities of Europe finally arriving with some companions in Rome to begin the Jesuits and their service to God's work in the Church. Making my retreat as I did in the lovely countryside of Loyola, I kept thanking God that Ignatius did not succumb to the beauty that God had created right there in his family and in his homeland.

Secondly, we think of Ignatius as a man of extraordinary organizational talent but another talent, confidence in God, stands out and it was surely a gift. Once Ignatius experienced the consolation of God's love for him, he always had a confident focus on how that consolation, discoverable in the process of personal decision making, would lead him in the path that God desired for him.

Ignatius never wavered from this confidence. When outsiders stood in his way, when physical pain or the depression and doubt of the early years of his conversion threatened him, when others disappointed him, when some of his wanderings seemed to be fruitless, when his surroundings were rife with plagues, or wars or every kind of petty corruption in church and state, he never lost this utter confidence that God was the one who would guide his steps. This extraordinary gift of confidence fueled his ambitious nature and led to a great desire: to bring others together in a new companionship, the Jesuits, with the purpose of saving souls not only in Europe but also in new worlds.

At St. Joseph's Prep, more important than academic achievement, more important than preparation for a good college, more important than the eloquentia perfecta that we so often produce, more important than the opportunities provided with sports and other activities, the Prep's ambition, the entire organization of the Prep, must focus on these two aspects of character in our young men: we must nourish their ambitious desires and we must build their confidence that they can discover what God's desires are for them.

Yes, some of our students lack confidence. Others judge our generations harshly when they see the suffering of so many at home and around the world. Even worse some students become disenchanted, even cynical, and lose faith when they see how Christians act. Our own activity, staff and faculty, alumni and parents, must set an example: we must act filled with the conviction that God's creation and redemption through Jesus sets an enduring stage for all of us to find a joyful life using our talents to meet the needs of this world.

Ignatius instructed the Jesuits to make maximum use of the talents and good will of lay men and women. In the ideal Jesuit school lay leaders were to be the founders and the bulk of the faculty and administration. The Jesuit role was to provide well-known ways of tying the mission of the school to that of the Church. They were to animate the mission in diverse ways by providing the sacraments and solid ties to the ambitious and confident vision of Ignatius.

At the Prep, the dialogue that our students, challenged, like the teenage Ignatius, by their new surroundings, the dialogue they engage in with faculty (and Ignatius always wanted to have some young faculty giving good example to those close to them in age), that dialogue, even should the subject be biology or math, was always to have as its underlying topic: God's call, God's ambition for us; God's confidence in us; God's example in Jesus Christ and his followers, God's greater glory.

Last month while on my flight to Spain, I was excited with anticipation about my retreat. I could not sleep. I took a hint from a short story I once read by, surprisingly, Ernest Hemingway. A character of his, when not falling asleep at night, would list in his memory all his friends and relatives and pray for each one by name. Cramped in my seat, the drone of the plane in the background, I took out my notebook and began writing the names from memory of the Prep class of 2011 to whom we had just given diplomas. I did not get as far as I hoped with my list but far enough; written down were many, many names of talented and ambitious young men of great character. No name resonated without promise. My prayer for them very much consoled me.

God, I know, is not finished with any of them, nor is God finished with us. A rich world of service, of study about the nature of God and the divine creation, of love and compassion lies ahead for all of us. Let us give God the praise and thank God for the inspiration that brings us together under the leadership of the ambitious and talented Ignatius.