

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, 1491-1556

Sometimes change is scary.

Even if you know a big change is for the best, it can still be scary. For instance, you know that there must be a better way to spend your time than sitting in front of the television or playing computer games. You know that God created you for more than that. But it's scary to even think about changing. You're just so used to plopping yourself down in that chair and turning off your brain.

Just think—if you really tried to start living God's way instead of the world's, anything could happen. You might not be able to do it. You might not be yourself anymore. That funny, curious, energetic person you thought you were might become boring.

It's okay to have these worries. But the stories of saints show us that we shouldn't worry about change. Just look at St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Ignatius lived in Spain during the sixteenth century. It was a time of kingdoms and battles, armies and soldiers.

From the time he was a teenager, Ignatius had been a soldier. His life was full of adventure and excitement. He spent a lot of time in the palaces of dukes and princes. He was strong and full of life. Ignatius believed in God, but he didn't do much about his faith. He didn't do much more than go to Mass and say his prayers. He spent his spare time doing things that weren't exactly admirable. He used his time and his talents for his own glory and pleasure and not much else.

Ignatius had been living this way for a long time when one spring day he found himself in a frightening position. He was fighting with an army of fellow Spaniards, and they were in a battle with the French. The French had taken all the land around the Spaniards except for one little spot. Ignatius and another soldier held on to that bit of land, which was high on a hill, inside a fort. Everyone else wanted to surrender because there was really no chance that they could win.

Ignatius stood before the troops. He called out to his friends in a clear, strong voice. They couldn't surrender! They had the protection of the fort, and they had weapons. Why should they give up?

So the troops listened to Ignatius and continued fighting against the French. It didn't work. They lost, and Ignatius was shot.

In those days, guns didn't shoot little bullets, which are bad enough. These guns shot big, round pellets that were sometimes the size of small rocks, almost like small cannonballs. That's what blasted through Ignatius's hip and went straight through his leg and down to his other knee. This was a very serious injury.

But, as always, Ignatius was brave. He was strong on the painful journey back to his home, even as he was carried over rough roads, his shattered leg bumping harshly with every step. He was strong when doctors discovered that his leg had been set incorrectly and told him that unless his leg was rebroken and reset, he would never walk again.

When Ignatius's leg finally started to heal properly, he discovered two things. One of his bones was still sticking out, forming an ugly bump under his knee. And the leg that had been broken was now shorter than the other one.

So Ignatius decided he would be strong again. He insisted that the doctors saw off that ugly bump under his knee. He chained a cannonball to his short leg and spent hours each day letting it hang free, hoping the ball would stretch the leg back out to its normal size.

Back in those days, there weren't many ways to relieve pain. So this "therapy" Ignatius put himself through

was probably incredibly painful and tiring. But Ignatius was a strong man.

Because he had spent all those months in his sickbed, Ignatius got bored. He asked for something to read. He was hoping for adventure books, tales that were popular back then: knights fighting for the hands of beautiful ladies, traveling to distant lands, and battling strange creatures.

But for some reason, two completely different books were brought to Ignatius. One was a book about the life of Christ, and the other was a collection of saints' stories.

Ignatius read these books. He thought about them. He was struck by the great sacrifices that the saints had made for God. He was overwhelmed by their love of Jesus.

And Ignatius thought, "Why am I using my life just for myself? These people did so much good during their time on earth. Why can't I?"

Ignatius decided that he would use the talents God had given him—his strength, his leadership ability, his bravery, and his intelligence—to serve God and God's people.

While Ignatius continued to heal, he started praying very seriously. God's peace filled his heart and assured him that he was on the right path.

When Ignatius was all healed and ready to walk and travel again, he left his home to prepare for his new life. It wasn't easy. He was 30, which was considered old in those days, and he was getting a late start in his studies for the priesthood. In those days, the Mass was said only in Latin, and Latin was the language all educated people used to communicate with each other. Ignatius didn't know a bit of Latin. So for his first Latin lessons, big, rough Ignatius had to sit in a classroom with a bunch of 10-year-old boys who were learning Latin for the first time too!

That takes a different kind of strength, doesn't it?

Ignatius continued to travel. He gathered nine friends who felt the same way he did, and together they made a promise to God. They were the founders of the Company of Jesus, also called the Jesuits.

What started with Ignatius and his nine friends grew over just a few years into a group of priests and brothers that had more than a thousand members. They used their talents to teach and preach about Jesus all over the world.

And to think it all began because one man—St. Ignatius of Loyola—was strong and brave enough to change!