

## The Knight, the Virgin, the Pilgrim

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Hosted by Giovanni Levi at the University of Viterbo in May 1988, a group of historians participated in a historiographical experiment proposed by Daniel Milo. Daniel asked the group to explore what he called the de-familiarization of the writing of history. The experiment consisted of producing a context-free interpretation of two historical texts: the autobiographies of Ignatius of Loyola and Glückel Von Hameln. The underlying assumption was that, in certain ways, contextualization had a normalizing effect on the type and range of possible interpretations of historical evidence. What follows is the direct result of that experiment.

### From knight to pilgrim via the Virgin Mary

Gonçalves, the Jesuit father to whom Ignatius dictated the story of his life, presented the *Autobiography* as a monument to the Society of Jesus itself and not just as the account of Ignatius' conversion and of his early efforts to establish the Society (17).<sup>\*</sup> According to Gonçalves, it was the Jesuit fathers themselves who asked Ignatius to speak his life so that it could be inscribed for the edification of future members of the Society. Therefore, Ignatius' *Autobiography* resembles what anthropologists call a myth of origins—a narrative that framed both the origins of the Society of Jesus and the corporate identity of its members.

Quite appropriately, the *Autobiography* is structured as a pageant of self-fashioning that unfolds as Ignatius moves from Pamplona to Jerusalem and, finally, to Rome. By the end of the trip he is no longer a secular warrior but a knight of Christ. Like a pageant, the narrative of Ignatius' self-fashioning pauses at the specific nodes and then proceeds after appropriate rites of passage. I will analyze one set of them.

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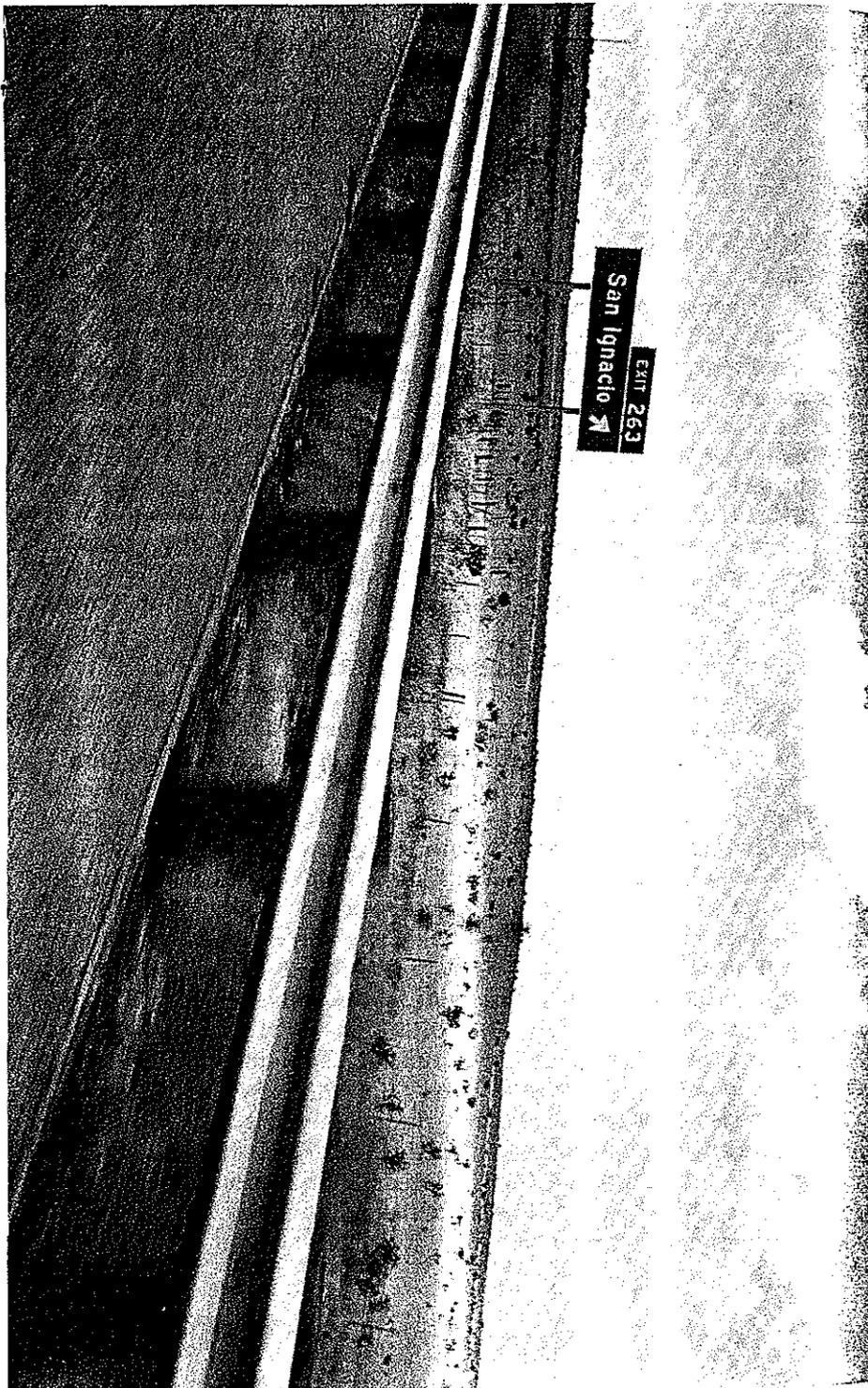
<sup>\*</sup>The numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers of the English translation of Ignatius' autobiography; J. F. Callaghan (trans.), J. C. Olin (ed.), *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

Although Ignatius presents his conversion from secular knight to pilgrim as a revolutionary experience, important continuities remain between his old and new selves. While switching from one army to another, Ignatius remains, in many senses, an aristocratic warrior. He sets aside the knight's sword to pick up the pilgrim's staff, but, in shifting from an immanent to a transcendent lord, he retains most of the values and attitudes associated with his original knightly ethos.

The very same aristocratic ethos which gave him courage to withstand the terrible conditions of war without losing his self-esteem, allows him, as a pilgrim, to let hair and nails grow in a most ungentlemanly fashion and to beg without shattering his dignity (33). Similarly, it is his aristocratic ethic of waste and sense of superiority that routinely allows him to give away the very few coins he happens to receive (42, 46-47, 54). In short, Ignatius' self-inflicted humiliations are not humiliations at all: they are something between martial exercises and expressions of extreme courtly nonchalance. As he puts it, "he was determined to make himself a martyr to his own pleasure" (22, emphasis mine).

Lying in bed at his brother's house, Ignatius slowly heals from the near lethal wounds he received at the attack on Pamplona. He asks for some of his beloved chivalric literature, but is given, instead, a *Life of Christ* and a book on the lives of the saints (23). Probably encouraged by the awareness of his permanent loss of physical prowess, Ignatius begins to perceive a striking isomorphism between the lives of Amadis of Gaul, Saint Francis, and Saint Dominic (23). Behind conspicuous but superficial differences, they all shared an important common denominator: they all committed deeds for their Lord.

As a result of these resolutions, Ignatius begins to imagine himself in the service of a transcendent Lord rather than a secular one. Actually, by choosing Christ over the Duke of Najera, Ignatius would serve a much more prestigious lord. But it is also interesting to notice that Ignatius speaks as if he does not perceive any discontinuity between fighting a war and courting a lady. Both activities were supposed to lead to "victories." In the daydreams of convalescent Ignatius, the deeds through which he imagines he would conquer the woman of his dreams overlap and coalesce quite smoothly with his images of the deeds he would achieve in the name of God (23).



But the pleasure offered by these imagined scenarios does not last long. The daydreams of Ignatius are soon interrupted by the realization that the life of the pilgrim involves the vow of chastity—something that would drastically disrupt his identity as a gallant warrior. The temptations of the flesh stall an otherwise smooth transition from Ignatius the knight to Ignatius the pilgrim. To become the knight of Jesus, Ignatius needs to do more than drop his secular lord for a celestial one: he needs to reshape his sexuality in radical ways. Providentially, the Madonna intervenes.

The pivotal role of the Madonna in Ignatius' conversion is indicated by her conspicuous presence in the early part of his narrative which contrasts sharply with her absence in the second half of the text. After the conversion, Jesus, rather than Mary, become the focus of Ignatius' worship. But it is the Virgin Mary that guides him through the most difficult stages of his conversion. In fact, Ignatius reshapes his sexuality through a process of sublimation structured around an imaginary love relationship with the Madonna. By worshipping the Virgin Mary, Ignatius sublimates his sexual desire about *women* into a chaste adoration of *the Woman*. It is only after this reshaping of his sexuality that Ignatius becomes a knight of Christ. And it is only at that point that the Madonna disappears from the foreground of his narrative.

Let's trace the procession of Ignatius' narrative until this point. Convalescent Ignatius is obsessed by the dangers of the "things of the flesh." He claims they are the cause of his evil fantasies and despises himself for being so prone to them (24). He contemplates a life as a penitent in order to expiate his flesh-related sins and temptations but "feared that he would not be able to give vent to the hatred that he had conceived against himself" (25). It is interesting that he develops this awareness—and the related extreme cleansing policies—immediately after he has a vision of "Our Lady with the holy child Jesus." As soon as the vision disappears, "he was left with such loathing for his whole past life and especially for the things of the flesh" (24-5). This is the first time Ignatius mentions the Madonna. Just a page earlier he was still dreaming about much more gallant topics, imagining "what he would do in the service of a certain lady, the means he would take so he could go to the country where she lived, the verses, the words he

would say to her, the deeds of arms he would do in her service" (23).

A visit to a sanctuary of the Madonna marks the very first step of his pilgrimage toward Jerusalem and toward his new identity as a pilgrim. As soon as Ignatius regains his health, he leaves his brother's house to go to the court of the Duke of Najera, his secular lord, for a symbolic settlement of his accounts with this world. On the way to the court, he stops at the sanctuary of Our Lady of Aranzazu where he keeps a night vigil praying "for new strength for his journey" and, in seeing that "Our Lady was poorly adorned," he leaves some money "so it could be better dressed and decorated" (29).

Ignatius' concern for the looks of Our Lady of Aranzazu reverberates with an earlier section of the *Autobiography* in which he suddenly shifts from the narration of his impossible love for a very high-ranking lady (possibly the sister of King Charles of Spain) (23) to the vision of the Virgin Mary which triggered his loathing for the "things of the flesh"—a shift that is central to his conversion. Ignatius' pilgrimage to Aranzazu and his involvement with the restoration of Mary's statue indicates that, moving from an impossible love for the sister of the king to another even more impossible for the mother of Christ, Ignatius is beginning to fall in love with the Madonna.

These impossible loves play a specific role in Ignatius' self-fashioning: they help preserve his masculinity in a situation in which it is potentially threatened by his decision to adopt an ascetic and chaste lifestyle. As confirmed by the later part of his narrative, falling in love with the Virgin Mary was a very convenient choice. The Madonna was definitely out of his reach (making Ignatius' love for her very romantic and chivalric) and she was (bound to remain) a virgin. Nothing better than falling in love with somebody who is ontologically a virgin to get rid of the temptations of the "things of the flesh." Suddenly, Ignatius' chastity is no longer a potential symptom of impotence, but a necessary consequence of Mary's axiomatic virginity.

A few days later, the Madonna is again at center stage. Ignatius' first encounter as a pilgrim and missionary is with a Moor, a fellow traveler who quickly demonstrates his deep skepticism of the dogma of the immaculate conception. At first, Ignatius does not quite know how to react to the insinuations of the Moor. Should he "go in search of the Moor and strike him with his dagger for what he had said?" (30). Probably that is

what he would have done were he still a knight. But, like a Roman gladiator who lets the Emperor decide the fate of an enemy reduced to impotence, Ignatius puts the Moor's life in the hands of God (31). In fact, noticing that a crossroad is approaching, Ignatius decides to let the mule (directed by God) decide which way to go. If it went in one direction, Ignatius will pursue and strike the Moor, otherwise he will let him go.

Ignatius' reaction to the Moor is not that of a theologian but that of a jealous lover who feels obliged to defend the honor of his lover in order to defend his own (30). In fact, the Moor's insinuations seem to strike something deep in Ignatius. The Madonna's virginity is more than a religious dogma to him because it is indissolubly tied to the acceptability of his aristocratically dignified chastity. By insinuating that the Madonna was not a virgin, the Moor had claimed unwarily that Ignatius was a cuckold. But, by steering the mule away from a bloody confrontation between Ignatius and the Moor, God tells Ignatius to keep cool. The Moor is a mere gossip-monger; there's no need to worry, *Mary is a virgin*.

The role of the Madonna in mediating Ignatius' change of identity from knight to pilgrim emerges more clearly a few days later in Monserrat. Though Ignatius had, by this time, decided to become a knight of Christ, his chivalric ethos reappears, and, while riding by mule toward Monserrat, he finds that his mind is still "full of ideas from *Amadis of Gaul* and such books" (31).

As a result of the crucial role of the Madonna in his changing identity, and because of the persistence in his mind of chivalric ideals, he conceives of his conversion to pilgrimdom as a quasi-feudal ritual performed not in front of a secular lord, but in front of the Lady. In fact, "he decided to watch over his arms all one night, without sitting down or going to bed, but standing a while and kneeling a while, before the altar of Our Lady of Monserrat where he had resolved to leave his clothing and dress himself in the armor of Christ" (31).

He actually manages to do so. Through a confessor, he arranges for his sword and dagger to be placed on the altar of Our Lady (31). Then, "on the eve of the feast of Our Lady in the year 1522 he went at night as secretly as he could to a poor man, and stripping off all his garments he gave them to the poor man and dressed himself in his desired clothing (the poor man's) and went to kneel before the altar of Our Lady. At times in this way, at other times standing, with his pilgrim's staff in his

hands he spent the whole night" (32).

The feudal and sexual connotations of this private ritual are telling. In a sense, Ignatius "undoes" a feudal ritual of investiture by placing his arms on the altar while asking for a legitimation of his new "arms" (the pilgrim's staff), and his new "armour" (the pilgrim's clothes). But this ritual is not performed in front of the King of Spain or in front of a crucifix. During this symbolic strip, Ignatius undresses and redresses himself in front of Our (silent and immobile) Lady. Moreover, the ritual begins on the eve of the feast of Our Lady and—by going on through the night—ends on her festivity. When the morning comes, Ignatius is another man.

Together with the symbols of his identity as an aristocratic warrior (the sword and the dagger), Ignatius offers the Madonna the very symbols of his chivalric ethos and therefore of his virility. In a sense, Ignatius' offering the Madonna his sword and dagger constituted a ritualistic sacrifice.

Our Lady stood as the highest aristocratic ideal of woman, and in front of her, Ignatius renounces "the things of the flesh." In a sense, he presents his chastity as the greatest of all possible deeds—a symbolic castration dictated by a sort of hyper-maleness. At the same time, chastity is also the romantic ending of an impossible love story between a knight and his ontological Virgin.

After a night with the Virgin Mary, Ignatius is a pilgrim, a legitimate knight (rather than an eunuch) of Christ. He leaves Monserrat at dawn. The Madonna remains behind and, from now on, outside of his autobiographical narrative.