



# Saint Ignatius' Story



*Ignatius is wounded at the Battle of Pamplona, 20th May 1521*

*St. Ignatius is the inspiration for this ten-week journey so taking some time to reflect on his life and conversion will be worth your while. His story is in three parts. You can do it on one sitting on a single day. Or you can spread it out over three days and take your time to let the story sink in and have an impact on your heart and mind. You will know best how much time to take.*

## **Part One: St. Ignatius and His Legacy**

### **A Fallen Soldier**

Until his thirtieth year Ignatius Loyola was unconscious of the sacredness of his life. Instead, he was sincerely devoted to life's pleasures and vanities. His life was not easy. Ignatius' mother died when he was an infant and his father died when he was sixteen. Perhaps that had some impact on his personality. He was a gambling addict, sexually self-indulgent, arrogant, hotheaded and insecure. <sup>i</sup>

By our contemporary measures, Ignatius' family was dysfunctional. Was this person a possible candidate for sainthood? It did not look promising. But God does not judge by human standards. It is God's nature to pursue all who have fallen asleep through sin, addiction and selfishness. God judges the heart; with unbounded grace and patient mercy God reaches into the ruins that sin makes of our lives and transforms them into *Sacred Stories*.

Ignatius, with all his narcissism, psychological problems and sinful vices, was awakened by God's great love. A failed military campaign and a shattered leg forced him into a lengthy convalescence. Ignatius' time of recuperation provided an opportunity for Love to shine a light on much more serious and life-threatening wounds that were spiritual, emotional and psychological in nature.

These wounds were supported by the evolution of a destructive, sinful narcissism. For thirty years Ignatius' narcissism had rendered him unconscious to his true human nature and oblivious to his life as *Sacred Story*. The pleasures he indulged in and the power he wielded functioned like a narcotic to numb the pain of his hidden spiritual and psychological wounds. His sinful vices and self-indulgent pleasures blinded him to his authentic human nature and a fruitful life guided by a well-formed conscience.

God's grace reached into the reality of Ignatius' life and awakened in him a desire for innocence. His long-buried aspirations for living authentically suddenly became his prime motivation. He noticed it first while convalescing at Loyola. He became aware of new desires and a different energy while he daydreamed in reading stories of Christ and the saints. Pondering the saints' lives he imagined himself living a different, selfless life.



*Ignatius convalesces at Loyola, 1521 - 22*

He compared these new daydreams to his usual vain, narcissistic daydreams. The old daydreams drew energy from a life of sin, addiction and vice while the daydreams of selfless generosity produced their own energy. Ignatius noticed a significant difference between the two sets of daydreams and the feelings they produced. The vain fantasies entertained him when he was thinking about them. But he noticed that when he set them aside, he felt empty and unsatisfied.

The new holy daydreams also entertained him when he was thinking about them. Yet when he set these aside, he remained content and felt an enduring calm and quiet joy. By paying close attention to the ultimate affective signatures of these two sets of daydreams and discerning their difference, Ignatius made a discovery that transformed his life and the history of Christian spirituality.

### ***The Voice of Conscience***

Ignatius discovered that the new, selfless aspirations were influenced by Divine inspirations. He further discovered that these inspirations reflected his true human nature and that the vain fantasies deadened his conscience. His narcissistic daydreams led him away from enduring peace because they masked his authentic human nature.

The old daydreams were powerful, ego affirming, and familiar. He knew in his heart that living their fantasy was the path to self-destruction. On the one hand he would be judged successful by the standards of the world, a world that measured success in terms of riches, honors, and pride. On the other hand, he would be judged a failure by the standards of the Gospel, standards that advocated a life of spiritual poverty, humility and consequential service—a *Sacred Story* that endures to eternal life.

Ignatius was awakened to the emotional wisdom and spiritual truth of his new daydreams. He became aware of the significant damage that his old lifestyle had done to both himself and others. What had been awakened in him was the divine gift of conscience, and with it, Ignatius experienced profound regret and sorrow for having wasted so much of his life on self-indulgent pleasures and fantasies, seductions that could never bring him lasting peace and satisfaction. He began to understand that living in pleasure and fantasy destroyed his authentic human nature and silenced his deepest desires.

As usually happens when people respond to the grace of conversion, Ignatius' new aspirations confused and disconcerted many of his closest family members and friends. Nonetheless he acted on these aspirations. Ignatius was now able to understand a path to God, a *pattern of conversion* that countless thousands would imitate.

### ***A Menacing Fear Unmasked***

After some months of living in the light of these new positive virtues, habits, and Divine inspirations, Ignatius was suddenly gripped by terror and panic. How could he manage to live the rest of his life without the pleasures of the past? It was easy to live virtuously for



*Ignatius at Manresa, March 1522 - March 1523*

some months, but for the rest of his life? This was a real crisis because Ignatius began to wonder if this was an impossible goal.

Ignatius had two vital insights about this menacing fear. First, he realized it was a counter-inspiration prompted by the *enemy of his true human nature*. The panicky fear led him to think that it would be impossible to live virtuously for such a long time. Second, the counter-inspiration tempted him to return to his old narcissistic vices and habits. Seduced

by their powerful influence, Ignatius would abandon all hope for a life of virtue. In essence, Ignatius was tempted to surrender living the authentic life that had finally brought him peace. He sensed an evil source inspiring this menacing fear and he challenged it head-on: “You pitiful thing! Can you even promise me one hour of life?”

### ***A Decisive and Enduring Commitment to Remain Awake***

Ignatius dismissed the counter-inspiration and its evil author by re-committing to this new wakefulness for the remainder of his life. This was Ignatius' second insight: NEVER trust the messages prompted by menacing fears. Counter them with a firm commitment to stay the course, to awaken and remain conscious.

This decisive, enduring commitment to persevere restored tranquility, and his fear abated. Ignatius had discovered, unmasked and confronted the deceiver. In this Ignatius learned another lesson about speaking truth to power that would guide his new life and help shape his first set of foundational discernment principles.

Ignatius had to face these same fears many, many more times. Eventually he knew they were false fears, *inspirations* of the enemy of his human nature. Most importantly, he gradually learned how to diffuse them, and to defend against them.

Our Christian life is a labor of love. In order for God's love to heal us we must do our part to open ourselves to God's graces. This requires conscious and ongoing effort to abstain from sinful, addictive habits in thoughts, words and deeds. There is a need to pray for God's grace. First, we must awaken to that grace. With that same grace, we have the strength to resist and abstain from sinful, addictive attitudes and behaviors, both spiritual and material. God's grace makes our spiritual disciplines fruitful, activating the on-going healing of our human nature. Grace helps us climb out of the spiritual, mental physical and emotional ruts of our bound self toward a future of increased hope, holiness and balance and freedom.

## ***Part Two: A Journey to the Heart***

### ***Ignatius in Control***

Ignatius' decisive and enduring commitment to his conversion launched him directly into the center of his heart's brokenness and the pride masking those wounds. After leaving home Ignatius traveled to Montserrat and spent three days reviewing his life. It was at this time that he made a general confession of all his past sins. This first life confession initiated an enduring habit of weekly confession and communion. In this written confession

Ignatius consciously detailed his sinful attitudes, behaviors and passions: gambling addiction, sexual self-indulgence, arrogance, and violent outbursts of temper. It took three days to write the story of his past life.

Yet he discovered that simply detailing and confessing his sinful habits and addictions did not disarm them. That would require going deeper to their source in his heart and history. Only in these deepest recesses could he confront the pattern of spiritual and psychological dysfunction that was most responsible for eroding his freedom and distorting his authentic human nature.

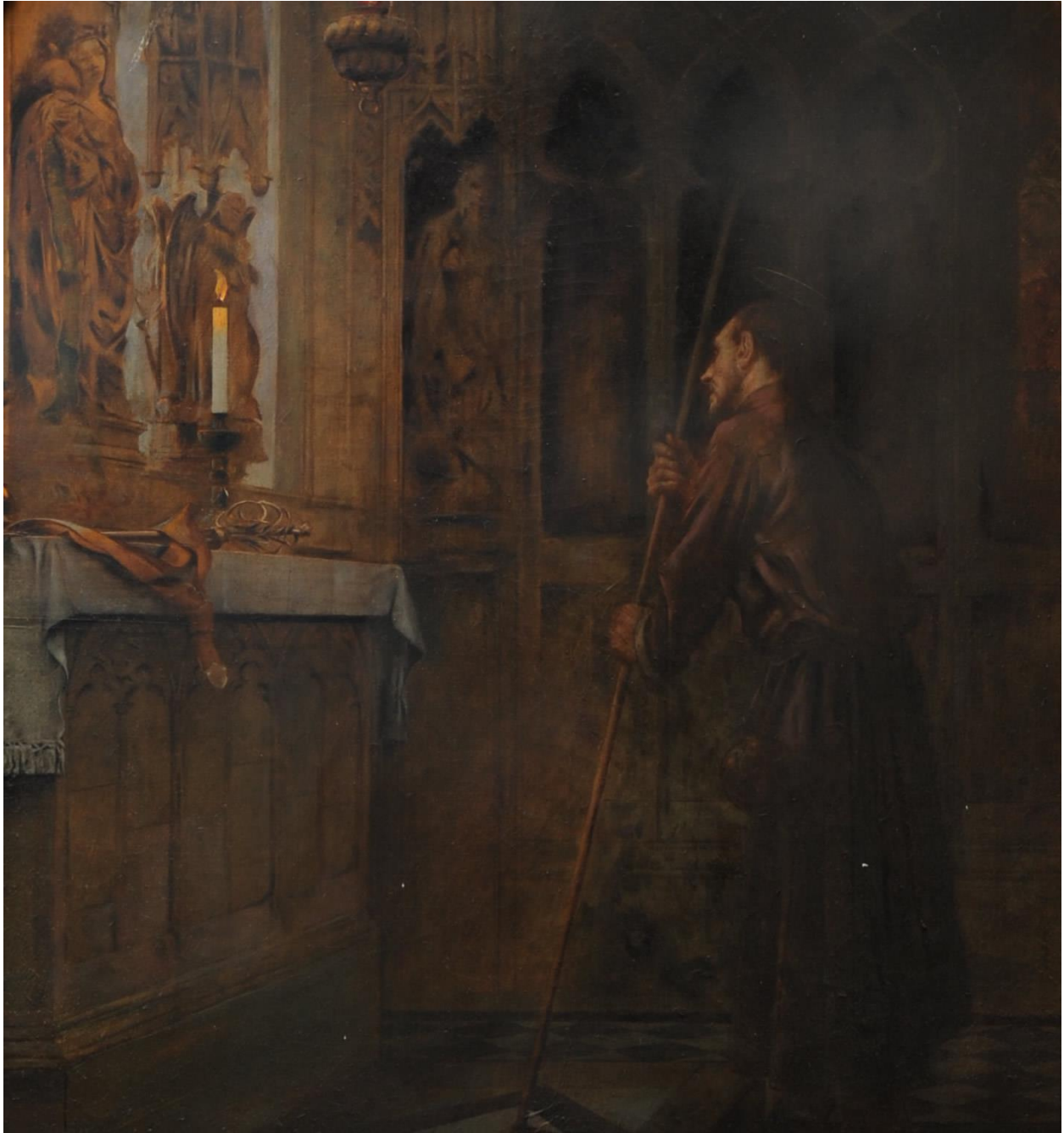
It is this inward journey that fully awakened his conscience. It was only at this depth that he discovered his authentic human nature and regained the creativity of childlike innocence. We do well to understand the tipping point of Ignatius' life from his root vices and narcissism to his new life of wakefulness, light, peace and hope. This is how his story unfolded.

Ignatius' new, pious habit of regular confession evolved into a destructive obsessive and compulsive torture. He confessed and re-confessed past sins multiple times, never feeling he had gotten to the bottom of his immoral deeds. This excruciating spiritual and psychological torment lasted for months. He was so anguished by his obsessive guilt that numerous times he wanted to commit suicide by throwing himself off the cliff where he prayed.

Even awareness of the emotional damage caused by this obsessive confession habit did not help him surrender it. Instead, he initiated new, harsher physical disciplines and spiritual regimens. His goal was to gain complete control and self-mastery over his immoral and dissolute past. He wanted to remember every detail of his past sins so he could be perfectly cleansed, but nothing worked.

Finally, exhausted and disgusted with his efforts, he realized he intensely despised the spiritual life he was living. Ignatius had an urgent and compelling desire to "stop it!" This thought alarmed Ignatius, and his spiritual radar went on high alert. Ignatius discerned the inspiration came from another source but what could it be? He discovered the inspiration's origin and author only by understanding where the inspiration was taking him. It occurred to him that the inspiration was leading him in the same direction as the menacing fear he had previously experienced. Inspired to abandon his newly awakened life, Ignatius was being tempted to abandon the peace, the service to others, and the virtuous life of his *Sacred Story*. But *how* did this counter-inspiration succeed in gaining control? Ignatius realized it was rooted in his damaging confession habit and so he ceased the habit then and there of re-confessing past sins.

## ***Surrendering Control to Embrace Powerlessness & Innocence***



*Vigil at Montserrat, March 1522*

Ignatius' description in his *Autobiography* to stop his damaging confession habit appears inconsequential. But the choice was the most significant spiritual decision in his entire life. It was also the most difficult, because that one choice meant fully surrendering his life to God. It meant admitting his powerlessness over his sins and in humility allowing God, not himself, to be the source of his holiness.



Reflecting on the temptation to walk away from his new Christian life, Ignatius received an insight that the burdensome, destructive habit of re-confessing past sins was rooted in a pride to try and save himself. This pride forced him to his knees. On seeing this he “awoke as if from a dream,” and was given the grace to stop the habit.

Ignatius' first life confession at Montserrat documented the *visible* manifestations of this deep distortion in his human nature. The Divine Physician next led Ignatius to the source of those visible sins. It was his wounded human nature that fueled the controlling, narcissistic personality. The pattern of *visible* sins, vices and addictions was only the tip of the iceberg.

From that moment of surrender at Manresa, Ignatius acknowledged his powerlessness and surrendered control of his life to God. For his entire life God waited to transform Ignatius' deepest desires into a *Sacred Story* whose legacy would endure to eternity. This *surrender* defines Ignatius' second set of foundation discernment principles.

An outpouring of mystical grace flooded Ignatius at this point. More importantly a humble and obedient spirit was beginning to emerge which enabled him to respond to the slightest movements of God's grace in his thoughts, words and deeds. In this humility and docility, he discovered a life of service that changed the Church and the world. Later in life he reflected:

*There are very few who realize what God would make of them if they abandoned themselves entirely to His hands, and let themselves be formed by His grace. A thick and shapeless tree trunk would never believe that it could become a statue, admired as a miracle of sculpture...and would never consent to submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor who, as St. Augustine says, sees by his genius what he can make of it. Many people who, we see, now scarcely live as Christians, do not understand that they could become saints, if they would let themselves be formed by the grace of God, if they did not ruin His plans by resisting the work which He wants to do.*

The proud narcissist, the man who was master of his own universe, became a humble and obedient servant of the universe's true Master and Creator. To arrive at this point, Ignatius had to admit his powerlessness. He had to surrender control over his life and the distorted aspects of his human nature that had evolved over the years. He had to learn how to live out of his newly emerging authentic self, his *true* human nature previously hidden behind his wounded heart.

Ignatius also learned how to dismantle the narcissism that had evolved over the first thirty years of his life. The counter-inspirer, the enemy of his human nature, had cleverly concealed his true human nature and Ignatius had to begin life over again, this time

allowing God to reveal his authentic self. This was why, after the resolution of this greatest of his life's crises, Ignatius experienced himself being taught by God. It was, he said, exactly like "a child is taught by a schoolmaster."

### ***The Divine-Inspirer and the counter-inspirer***



*Ignatius learns Latin amongst schoolboys at Barcelona, 1525*

This harrowing crisis taught Ignatius a most vital lesson about counter-inspirations. The willpower and resolute commitment to live virtuously for the rest of his life could be manipulated and turned against him by means of subtle *inspirations*. What seemed like a holy, pious, and noble practice—a serious approach to confession—evolved into a

damaging habit that made him loathe his spiritual life, and in frustration, *inspired* him to abandon it. He learned that the counter-inspirations of the enemy of his human nature could act like “an angel of light.” These inspirations appear holy but when followed, they end in disaster, distancing one from God and from one’s authentic self.

The counter-inspirer conceals our original wounds, counseling and guiding our steps to build a false identity, an anti-story, characteristically identified by a distorted ego and defended by narcissism. Our narcissistic pride rationalizes the habits, vices, addictions and lifestyles that form our anti-story. The counter-inspirer renders us unconscious to our *Sacred Story* and to our true Divinely shaped human nature.

God led Ignatius through this distorted evolution back to the lost innocence of his true human nature. The shattering of his powerful defenses and the unmasking of his prideful, narcissistic ego proved to be the tipping point of Ignatius’ entire conversion process.

### ***Wakefulness, Holiness and Heightened Consciousness***

Ignatius’ conversion from his anti-story and his full awakening to his *Sacred Story* was not a single event but rather a gradual process. His full evolution from a vain egomaniac to a saint took the rest of his life. His was a gradual, steady evolution from a sinful narcissist in control of his own life to an innocent, obedient servant of God. Growth in holiness requires desire, patience and daily effort to awaken to our authentic human nature. It takes time for grace to penetrate the influence of our anti-story so that our *Sacred Story* can more fully emerge. There are no short cuts to holiness, not even for saints.

### ***A Life-Long Commitment to Christ in the Church***

If you desire to surrender your anti-story and open to your *Sacred Story*, grace will awaken you, like Ignatius, to places in your heart’s memories you might not wish to visit. The awakening will begin like Ignatius’. It starts with an honest identification of the *visible* manifestations of those spiritual and psychological distortions in the particulars of your human nature. These distortions disclose your lost innocence and a heart broken by the Original Fall and the cumulative sins of your family, clan and culture. Ignatius started this process with his life confession. He truthfully identified the habits, addictions, sins and compulsions characteristic of his lost innocence and broken heart.

Open yourself to the graces that will illumine the distinctive narcissistic elements fueling your sinful, compulsive behaviors. Ignatius needed much grace to overcome his defenses and unlock this hidden truth about his life. Everyone who embraces this path can confidently rely on the same grace to successfully navigate the journey to the center of one’s heart. As confused as life is due to Original Sin, the Lord can and does penetrate

our hearts and leads us to truth.



*Pope Paul III approves the Society of Jesus, 27th September 1540*

*More tortuous than anything is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it? I, the LORD, explore the mind and test the heart, Giving to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their deeds (Jer 17: 9-10).*

## **Part Three: The Call to Universal Reconciliation**

### **Your Sacred Story**

As with Ignatius, God extends an invitation to awaken to the pattern of spiritual, emotional and psychological dysfunction that has formed our anti-story. God invites us to awaken to our lives as *Sacred Story* and to produce fruit that endures to eternity. The awakening and growth will reveal where our freedom is compromised and how we close our hearts to our authentic human nature. Christ compassionately shows us how our selfishness and pride have corrupted our creativity, robbing us of the joy of innocence. God's invitation is gentle. God's awakening is merciful. Rest assured that God's passion is to pursue us, rescue us, heal us and bring us back to our original innocence. God's passion is Personal. God's passion is Love. God's passion is Christ Jesus. Be Not Afraid!

God's intention is to gradually heal and transform our thoughts, words and deeds. For every thought, word and deed influences my history in the direction of an anti-story or a *Sacred Story*. Every thought, word and deed, for good or ill, touches all people in my life, all the world and all of creation, shaping history's final chapter. The effects of sin and narcissism—as well as the effects of virtue and selflessness—have individual, social, physical, spiritual, and ecological ramifications that reach to the ends of creation. For everything and everyone is one in Love—one in Christ Jesus—through whom and for whom everything was made (Rom 11:36).

Every thought, word, or deed, no matter how discreet, has positive or negative significance in the interconnected web of life that God has fashioned through Christ. It is Christ's being—His *SACRED STORY*—that links each of our individual *Sacred Stories*. It is in Christ that the entire cosmos is joined together. God in Christ has made us responsible for and dependent upon each other and upon the earth that sustains us.

The Christ of the Cosmos—through whom and for whom everything was made—became man, and confronted, absorbed, and diffused all the destructive force of evil's evolutionary anti-history running through human nature and the created cosmos. Christ reconciles in Himself everything in the heavens and on the earth to bring peace to all by the blood of His cross. His *SACRED STORY* redeems and renews every chapter in our history, individual and collective.

Christ Jesus passionately awaits our participation to join His work of universal reconciliation. Our willingness to accept the path of conversion entails truthfully identifying our sins, dysfunction and addictions. It entails experiencing and admitting our powerlessness to save ourselves. It requires the patience of a lifetime while Christ writes our *Sacred Story*.

My participation in Christ's work of reconciliation is the only worthy vocation and the only labor that produces fruit enduring to eternity. My accepting the invitation unlocks the very mystery of life. When I accept the invitation, Christ promises to share His universal glory. Accepting the invitation to intentionally enter my *Sacred Story* has momentous consequences.

### ***Now is the Time to Wake from Sleep***

Our time on this earth is so very brief. Since the time of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection, our story can only be measured and valued in light of His eternal mission of Reconciliation. Intentionally entering my *Sacred Story* will, over time, enable me to know God more intimately and serve God more generously. Like Ignatius, I am called to awaken from sleep—to awaken to wholeness and holiness. I was created and infused with the gift to awaken to a life that reverences the God, who in Christ and the Holy Spirit, is present in all things—all persons, and all creation.

Awakening to my *Sacred Story*, like Ignatius, calls for courage in the cleansing of the spirit and psyche that it initiates. The process requires discipline in the face of temptation and monotony. It requires consciously asking, even begging if necessary, for God's graces. It requires time and patience; deliberately choosing each day to be faithful to time and space for God. Awakening requires the patience of a lifetime. The journey is rich with blessings beyond our wildest expectations. Encountering Christ daily in *Sacred Story* forever changes life, relationships, the earth, and eternity.

What is needed for the journey will be provided each day. In my journey through the memories and experiences, past and present, I am promised the power and mercy of the LOVE that maintains and guides the entire cosmos. It is this LOVE that waits to transform your sins, addictions, angers, fears, grief, guilt and shame. It is this LOVE that restores your broken heart into a vessel of forgiveness, light and peace. The more embedded and impenetrable the web of darkness, compulsion, sin, and addiction in your life, the more strategic and magnificent is God's grace in breaking its grip, for nothing is impossible with God (Lk 1:37).

### ***Your Sacred History***

There are no short cuts to the story's unfolding. Conversion is lifelong but measurable when I intentionally, daily, consistently, and faithfully enter my *Sacred Story*. Recall that Christ Jesus Himself has traveled the path. He will guarantee my journey's safe passage and carry my burdens, failures, shame, broken heart, and confusion.



*Ignatius and Companions profess their Solemn Vows, 22nd April 1541 at St Paul's Outside the Walls*

I will hold in my heart the humble example of Jesus washing my feet. He endured humiliations, torture, and a disgraceful death, so that I can find hope and healing for everything in my life that needs healing, forgiveness, and redemption. From the beginning of time His SACRED STORY is mystically imprinted into the souls of His chosen

people and the Church. Through the pattern of His *STORY*, I, the Church, and all people can have their history rewritten as *Sacred Story*.

I will intentionally enter my life narrative for 15-minute intervals once or twice each day. My story linked to Christ's *SACRED STORY* and to all people and to all creation, runs from my birth in all the thoughts, words and deeds to shape my destiny here, and in the hereafter. The prayer will help me attune to Creation, Presence, Memory, Mercy, and Eternity. When I encounter the fears, stresses, angers, temptations, failures, addictions and sins in my day, I can briefly attune to Creation, Presence, Memory, Mercy, and Eternity, and ask for the grace to see my whole story. By so doing, the Divine Physician can heal me and awaken my heart to its true human nature.

Christ extends the invitation and His Love, at the Heart of the Universe, awaits my response. I pray for the courage and generosity to enter with Christ into my *Sacred Story* on this ten-week journey. Be Not Afraid!



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<sup>1</sup> All the paintings of St. Ignatius are by Albert Chevallier-Taylor, (1862-1925). These 1904 paintings by Albert Chevallier-Taylor are from the St Ignatius Chapel of the Church of the Sacred Heart, Wimbledon.