

Follow Me!
Centurion Project
14 March 2018

I want to point out before going any further, how wonderful it is to be with people who have answered the call.

It does not matter if that was to serve and protect a local community or the call to be part of the nation's defense – you have all answered the call.

When, at a point in your life you heard your community – your nation call, in a way that is similar to that of God's call to Isaiah

– Who shall I send – Who will go for us?

You replied: Here am I – Send me. (Isaiah 6:8)

I speak from my experience as a Soldier – Military members all around the world seem to have more in common with each other than they do with civilians from their own country.

I have been in Honduras, El Salvador, Germany, Italy, Spain, and France and interacted with each of those country's soldiers.

In some of those settings there were also soldiers from other countries as well, such as Norway, Sweden, Dominican Republic, and others.

In all of those situations we were able to instantly build a unique rapport.

The reason is – we all answered the call

We all had decided to give up the comforts and safety of life at home and live a life of sacrifice

A sacrifice for people who did not know us

A sacrifice that was largely ignored

A sacrifice that would not even be acknowledged by the majority

All of this reflects how we are made in the image of God

– a God that is willing to self-sacrifice for the benefit of others even when the others do not recognize the sacrifice and most of those who do reject the sacrifice.

It is for this reason that I will occasionally remark that in their actions the Soldier is often more Christ-like than the average person sitting in a pew on a Sunday morning.

It is because they know what it means to leave everything they have behind to sacrifice for others.

The next thing that is just innately known – among those who serve is that nothing which has value comes easily and sometimes the most precious things can only be had through sacrifice and battle.

It is through this recognition that I have found of particular value the study of the lives of Soldiers turned Saints.

The reason is because I can identify with them and I think, you will also.

Men such as St Francis of Assisi and St Ignatius of Loyola

Most people do not realize that St Francis – long before he became the internationally popular garden gnome was a Soldier

A Soldier who went to war – a Soldier who was a POW for a year

A Soldier who came home and could not adjust to life in civilian society

A Soldier who today would be diagnosed with PTSD

Who drank too much – who chased ever skirt he saw

Who wanted to go back to war where he felt he could fit in

The reason is because I can identify with them and I think, you will also.

Today we will look at Ignatius, like St Francis of Assisi before him, a Soldier.

Not only was Ignatius a Soldier, he, through diligent study of the science of warfare, rose through the ranks and became an officer in the Army of Spain.

Ignatius was so dedicated to the cause that he would fight when nobody else would.

In 1521 the French invaded Spain and was moving to take the, at the time, walled city of Pamplona.

Pamplona was not ready to defend itself.

The defenses were not fully in place

Those soldiers who were supposed to defend the city were of almost no value as soldiers – poorly trained and poorly equipped with no motivation or discipline

AND

The people of the city themselves were not even willing to fight for their own homes.

The Spanish King realized that the defense of Pamplona was a losing effort and refused to order fresh soldiers into the battle.

Ignatius, on-the-other-hand, took it upon himself to defend the city

Ignatius went to Pamplona and set himself up on the wall to defend the city even if nobody else would.

His bravery stirred a few other men – actually, according to Ignatius’ account of the day, just two other men – to the fight so, as predicted, it was a loss.

In the process of defending the city of Pamplona, Ignatius was hit by a cannon ball which broke both of his legs.

A wound that could be fatal today and should have certainly been fatal then

Ignatius laid in a military hospital for a year in recovery

When he was first considered well he would have been discharged from the hospital – both of his legs were mended.

BUT

As he tried to walk he realized that one leg was shorter than another – a common problem when bone has been struck and damaged

But Ignatius would not tolerate it

You see while he was recovering, Ignatius had been reading the Gospel and stories of the lives of the Saints – including that of St Francis a fellow soldier

He had determined to go on pilgrimage and find this God he had been reading about and see if he too could live the life of a saint – a Soldier for God – a Soldier for Christ

When he saw his legs were of uneven length, he knew he would not be able to walk well enough to go on pilgrimage

As a result, he had the surgeon break the shorter leg and stretch it – then spent many more months in bed waiting for the bone to recover and to regain his strength to walk.

In his pilgrimage Ignatius did indeed find the God he had read about

In a dramatic story about his time of conversion,

he had been walking for days leading to weeks leading to months all while in his soldier's tunic and carrying his sword until finally at a small church in Montserrat he was moved by the Holy Spirit

Ignatius spent days in prayer and when he was done he removed his tunic and sword and left them at the Altar and turned his attention to serving God with the same zeal as he had devoted to the Army.

Now, here we are near 500 years later, and St Ignatius of Loyola is known for one thing above all others – His guide for spiritual direction called the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola

One of the first things you notice when going through the Spiritual Exercises is that Ignatius did not abandon all he learned as a soldier

His experiences shaped how he communicated and how he saw the growth and strengthening of your soul as a discipline – just as his years in military service emphasized the discipline of the body.

His experiences shaped how he understood our responsibility before God

All of this comes out, in the Exercises and I will share some of that briefly.

First, Ignatius reflected on the call to service – he had answered the call of course.

He asks in the Exercises for the Christian to consider That call that an earthly king makes to his subjects

Ignatius writes:

look how this king speaks to all his people, saying: “It is my Will to conquer all the land of our enemies. Therefore, whoever would like to come with me is to be content to eat as I, and also to drink and dress, and everything else, as I: likewise he is to labor like me in the day and keep

guard in the night, that so afterwards he may have part with me in the victory, as he has had it in the labors.”¹

This call stirs a sense of patriotism, adventure, and righteousness in the pending battle

Ignatius finds this call of the earthly – the temporal – king compelling and responds:

good subjects ought to answer to a King so liberal and so kind, and hence, **if any one did not accept the appeal** of such a king, how deserving he would be of being censured by all the world, and held for a mean-spirited knight.²

PAUSE

I joined the Army when I was 17.

I joined for patriotism, for adventure, and in the belief that the United States was righteous in its actions around the world – in 1985 defeating communism, our arch-enemy of the day, was tantamount to defeating the devil himself.

I do not know about you in the listening, but reading the call of the temporal king motivated me
– Where do I sign for a chance to defeat our enemies serving a king who will lead from the front? My response - - - Here am I – send me!

But, if we stop for a moment and think about it
– we know that the recruiting poster is not reality

But we, those of us in this room, we are still willing to answer the call – **we did answer** the call.

¹ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, Second Week “Call of the Temporal King”.

² Ibid.

Knowing that we answered the call

– Knowing we are willing to sacrifice for the sake of others.

Knowing that we would do this for those who are entirely earthly and therefore flawed just like we are flawed

Knowing all of this

Ignatius presents the call again but this time with greater purpose:

if we consider such a call of the temporal King to his subjects, **how much more worthy of consideration** is it to see Christ our Lord, King eternal, and before Him all the entire world, which and each one in particular He calls, and says: “It is My will to win all the world and conquer all sin and so to enter into the glory of My Father; therefore, whoever would like to come with Me is to labor with Me, that following Me in the pain, he may also follow Me in the glory.”³

In the writing of this, Ignatius clearly has the words of St Peter in mind:

The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;

¹² if we endure, we shall also reign with him;⁴

And Ignatius goes on to say: all those who have judgment and reason will offer their entire selves to the labor.⁵

In other words – If we will say to our communities, if we will say to our country, if we will say to those temporary and imperfect authorities

³ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, Second Week “Call of the Eternal King”.

⁴ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 2 Ti 2:11–12.

⁵ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, Second Week “Call of the Eternal King”.

– Here am I send me!

Shouldn't we all the more say,
Here am I send me! to our perfect and eternal King – God Himself?

Ignatius is so convinced that yes, we must follow God, we must follow Jesus that he even provides us an oath, or in this case, a prayer of enlistment

“Eternal Lord of all things, I make my oblation with Your favor and help, in presence of Your infinite Goodness and in presence of Your glorious Mother and of all the Saints of the heavenly Court; that I want and desire, and it is my deliberate determination, if only it be Your greater service and praise, to imitate You in bearing all injuries and all abuse and all poverty of spirit, and actual poverty, too, if Your most Holy Majesty wants to choose and receive me to such life and state.”⁶ Amen

In other words – Here am I – send me!

But when he does so, Ignatius recognizes – and you hear it in those words of the prayer of enlistment, that this means we are marching off to war.

He wants for us to understand that there are two standards to choose from

The use of the term standard is intentional

A standard is a military flag

AND To raise the standard means to take up arms

And, of course, there is the definition that we are more familiar with – standard meaning principles or norms or a set of behavior

In the Exercises, Ignatius explains that there is a war brewing and on either side is a commander with a Standard

⁶ Ibid.

The first is Christ the other is Satan

The Standard of Christ is the Cross

Jesus – Much in keeping with the motto of the Infantry, “Follow Me” – says pick up your cross and follow Me.

Take the Cross

– take the Standard – which is both the flag and arms by which our standards, our principles, norms, behaviors, beliefs, are measured and defended –take up that cross and follow Me.

In preparing this message I was reminded of a book I read many years ago.

The title is *Spirit Warriors* by Stu Weber. I commend this book to you.

In the opening chapter Stu compares his combat experience as a Green Beret in Vietnam to the daily attacks Satan launches against our spiritual, emotional, and even physical lives.

When you know how badly Satan wants to destroy you – how he is at war with your soul – you begin to understand that the Christian life must bear the Standard must bear the Cross– you understand that we will all carry a cross.

But what does that mean for us today?

We have been here at this wonderful retreat center for a few days now.

We have learned a bit about ourselves

We have learned about God’s action in our lives

We have been encouraged in the various sessions

We have been encouraged by each other

We have been encouraged in the times of prayer

But tomorrow we go back to our various homes

What do we do then?

What do we do when the cross is heavy

I suggest that we focus our attention on those last three words

– And follow Me

We are not called to pick up our crosses and wander.

We are not called to pick up our crosses and set our own path.

We are not called to pick up our crosses and explore.

We are not called to pick up our crosses and enter the wilderness alone.

What are we called to do? – And follow Me

Jesus really is the King who leads from the front

We are called to pick up our crosses and follow Jesus.

Jesus has blazed the trail that we are to follow.

Jesus has denied Himself all the glory of Heaven so that He can lead the way.

Jesus has suffered on our behalf so that we know that the suffering we endure can be endured.

Jesus has done all of this so He can say – Follow me

– Follow me, you will not go anywhere I have not been already for you

– Follow me

Jesus does not call us to the impossible

We can each follow Him.

The question is will we follow Him.

Will we turn away from the things of the world that would trap us

Will we pick up our crosses – the Standard of Christ to uphold

Will we follow Him

Again, Jesus calls – Follow me

AMEN