Pierre Emonet, S.J.

Ignatius of Loyola: Legend and Reality. Trans. Jerry Ryan. Ed. Thomas M. McCoog, S.J. Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 151. Hb, \$40.

In this short, sparkling read, Fr. Emonet recounts the life of St. Ignatius Loyola with an eye toward recovering the historical man behind the traditional myths and caricatures. Fifteen very brief chapters—or perhaps accurately, vignettes—follow the saint from his youth in Azpeitia to his death in Rome, with special attention given to his activities and challenges as first superior general of the Jesuit order. The book concludes with fifteen color reproductions of copper engravings on the life of Ignatius by Jean-Baptiste Barbé (d.1649).

For source material, Emonet relies on early texts that he considers relatively untainted by hagiographical or polemical interpolations. By admission, his primary source is the so-called “Autobiography” of Ignatius that the saint had dictated sporadically to Luís Gonçalves da Câmara in the final years of his life. Other sources include the surviving remnants of Ignatius’s spiritual diary, observations provided by his contemporaries, a few select historical studies, and, curiously, a psychological evaluation of Ignatius by Dr. William W. Meissner in 1992 (*Ignatius Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* [New Haven: Yale University Press]).

By now, the kind of project Emonet undertakes is a familiar one. Since the mid-twentieth century, writers have sought to modify established portraits of Ignatius as a rugged ascetic, soldier, and conventional model of consecrated life, with something warmer, more accurate, and more relevant to the needs of the post-conciliar church: namely, a wandering pilgrim, exemplary layman, and mystic in everyday life, whose spiritual wisdom came primarily from his personal experiences of God. The newer portraits were inspired largely by themes in the “Autobiography,” a long forgotten text that first became widely available to Jesuits only in the mid-twentieth century.

Emonet endeavors to humanize Ignatius by acknowledging his idiosyncrasies, political maneuverings as superior general, conflicted relationships with women, and bitter clashes with early Jesuits. Consequently, a unique contribution of the book is the provocative detail not often found in other biographies. We learn, for example, that Ignatius was long smitten by the beauty of his sister-in-law (113), that gossip about his dealings with women might have precipitated his departure from Manresa (114), and that he advocated withholding medical care from dying persons who refused the last sacraments (80).

At times, the author makes pointed assertions for which the evidence is unclear or debatable, for example, that the pre-conversion Ignatius was “an ordinary Christian, practicing regularly” (6), that his specific cause of death

was gallstones (129), and that he deliberately left the Jesuit Constitutions unfinished in order to teach Jesuits not to place their confidence in anything but God (1, 129). As for a rumor that Ignatius had an illegitimate daughter, Emonet summarizes a scholarly article to the effect that “historians have uncovered various indications” in the affirmative, though the proof was not “absolute” (112), when in fact, that article had concluded that there was no evidence, only conjecture.

The task that the author sets for himself implies a scholarly project, but the brevity of the book and its minimal citation of sources are early signals that he perhaps has a more popular audience in mind. Certainly, from a critical point of view, the rationale behind his selection of sources requires more explanation. For instance, Emonet expresses misgivings about the biography by Pedro de Ribadeneyra, “who had no qualms about fostering hagiographical designs” (133), but of course, the “Autobiography” is equally problematic as a historical source—if not more so—insofar as Ignatius’s dictations to Gonçalves were highly redacted, presumably by Gonçalves himself, to illustrate principles found within the *Spiritual Exercises*, and any number of medieval touchstones such as Cassian’s *Institutes* and Athanasius’s *Life of St. Antony*.

One might ask whether the author’s concluding portrait of Ignatius—while largely consistent with prevailing descriptions of the saint in the last fifty years—is as interpolative as anything it is intended to amend. For example, that Ignatius’s “immediate experiences of God” were “beyond all mediation” (3, 135), and that these could be called his “intuitions” (135), and that their orthodoxy could be subsequently verified by an ecclesial community, suggest that, once again, Cartesian epistemological presuppositions are being used, however unconsciously, to interpret the doctrine of a man who died eighty years before Descartes’s turn to the subject.

Or again, the author’s emphasis that Ignatius was a man usually “alone” during his pilgrim years (129) echoes similar trends in recent literature that appear intended to reinforce Ignatius as the prototype of an individual, personal relationship with God. But solitary figures taught by God were a recurring motif in the sayings of the desert fathers and *Life of St. Anthony*, both of which exerted tremendous influence on the spiritual patrimony of the sixteenth century. And as others have already noted about the 1990 biography by Fr. José Ignacio Tel-lechea Idígoras, *Ignacio de Loyola, solo y a pie* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1990), as a matter of historical fact, Ignatius was rarely alone, either literally or in spirit. He sought advisors, benefactors, companions—and of course, townspeople whom he could edify and serve—from his earliest days in Manresa.

Ignatius of Loyola: Legend and Reality ably whets the reader’s appetite for further study of Ignatius. The prose is engaging, concise, insightful, and

refreshingly iconoclastic. At the same time, the author's express intention to portray an ordinary man perhaps results in its own form of hagiography.

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