

# HISTORY

## Born of a Disabled Body: The Ignatian Body and Its Role in Jesuit Education

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In Fall of 2008, I entered the Ignatian Mentoring Program with limited knowledge of Ignatian texts thinking that Ignatius' experiences with injury and illness might offer some interesting perspectives on my studies of disability. After reading John W. O'Malley's *The First Jesuits*, my mentor, Sarah Melcher, and I turned our attention to Ignatius' *Reminiscences*. As we read and discussed this autobiographical account, it quickly became apparent that Ignatius had a great deal to say about the body. This initial encounter with Ignatius' works, which I owe to Sarah, led me to examine other early Ignatian texts with the goal of understanding how Ignatius addressed the body and what that might mean for someone teaching at a Jesuit university. Ignatius' references to the body were often complex—at times even contradictory—and his views and approaches to the body clearly evolved over the course of his life. In the end, however, I concluded that highlighting the ways in which Ignatius addressed the body in his writings could offer several insights for those of us teaching, researching, and working at Xavier today. What follows are several brief examples drawn from key Ignatian texts and my reflections on how an appreciation of what I call the "Ignatian Body" might inform approaches to Jesuit education on both a personal and an institutional level.

### Origins of the Jesuits

The story of the Jesuits begins with a would-be knight, "given up to the vanities of the world."<sup>i</sup> During a battle with the French, a shot struck and shattered one of Ignatius of Loyola's legs and badly injured the other as well. Here most accounts of Ignatius, including the autobiographical *Reminiscences*, move on to describe how Ignatius' readings during his recovery from these injuries led to his eventual conversion. As important as that conversion was for Ignatius and the Jesuits, it is equally important to note that this story is about disability. To put it somewhat simplistically, the Jesuits were born of a disabled body.

### *Reminiscences*

The *Reminiscences* provides a selective autobiographical account, which omits a number of significant details, but is, nonetheless, peppered with references to illness, food, clothing, and other aspects of body culture. This work highlights the centrality of the body in Ignatius' understanding of his life and mission. Three brief examples are included here:

And because he had been very careful about keeping his hair as was the fashion at the time (and he had it nice), he decided to let it grow just anyhow as nature took it, without combing it or cutting it.... For the same reason he was letting the nails on his toes and fingers grow...<sup>ii</sup>

He had great inconvenience as far as study was concerned, because the almshouse was a good way from the college of Montaigu, and one needed to arrive back for the ringing of the Angelus if one was to find the door open, while one couldn't leave before daybreak. Thus, he couldn't put in such a good attendance at his lessons. There was also another problem, that of asking for alms on which to survive.<sup>iii</sup>

But when he returned to the college of Ste Barbe...those in the college who knew that he had been into the house with the plague ran away from him, and refused to let him come in. Thus, he was forced to spend some days outside.<sup>iv</sup>

### *The Spiritual Exercises*

*The Spiritual Exercises* are the most famous and influential of Ignatius' writings, and they are undeniably centered on spiritual ideas and experiences. At the same time, the body and embodied practice are central to Ignatius' approach. Exercitants, for instance, are encouraged to try different positions for praying until they find the one that is most effective, and all of the approaches to penance involve the body—food, sleep, and chastisement.<sup>v</sup> The *Exercises* also devote an entire section to a discussion of "Rules for the future ordering of one's life as regards

eating.”<sup>vi</sup> Yet here and throughout the *Exercises*, Ignatius acknowledges that adjustments must be made on the basis of individual needs and limitations, perhaps especially those pertaining to physical wellbeing.

### *Constitutions*

Originally drafted by Ignatius in the mid-sixteenth century, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* outline, in sometimes striking detail, how the Society, its members, and its activities should be governed. References to the body and bodily practices appear throughout the *Constitutions*, including an entire chapter in Part III, titled “The Preservation of the Body.” Three selections from the *Constitutions* are included here:

[292] 1. Just as an excessive preoccupation with the needs of the body is blameworthy, so too a proper concern for the preservation of one’s health and bodily strength for the divine service is praiseworthy and should be exercised by all.<sup>vii</sup>

[298] 4. Just as it is unwise to assign so much physical labor that the spirit should be oppressed and the body be harmed, so too some bodily exercise to help both the body and the spirit is ordinarily expedient for all, even for those who must apply themselves to mental labors.<sup>viii</sup>

[339] 1. For the care and welfare of those who live in the colleges, in regard to the body and external matters, what was stated in Part III [292-306] will suffice. That is, special attention should be given to their abstaining from studies at times inopportune for bodily health, to their taking sufficient sleep, and to their observance of moderation in mental labors so as to be able to keep at them longer both during their studies and later on when using what they have studied for the glory of God our Lord.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Incorporating the Ignatian Body: A Personal Response**

It is often said that *cura personalis*, or care of the person, is at the heart of Jesuit education. Influenced by my readings of Ignatius, I have come to see the body as a fundamental element of *cura personalis*. If people are struggling with mental or physical difficulties they cannot perform at their best. Consequently, I will seek to make my classrooms, my office, and myself as accessible to students as possible and endeavor to allow my understandings of our shared human physicality to guide my interaction with and responses to my students.

I am also convinced that an Ignatian approach to the body can enrich the content of my classes. Body culture is already a recurring theme in my courses, but by highlighting the often overlooked past and present significance of the body in East Asian societies—ranging from footbinding and sumptuary codes, to opium use and McDonald’s hamburgers—I hope to inspire students to think more critically about their own bodily practices and perceptions. In Fall 2009, for instance, I am offering a course called “Sports in East Asia.” Previous versions of this course have included a unit focusing on the role of sports in shaping body culture in East Asia and our own society. I will be expanding this unit to include examinations of the relationship between sports and popular understandings of disability.

I began my study of Ignatian texts with my research topics in mind, so perhaps it is not surprising that I have found my examination of these texts especially productive on that front. The body has long been and continues to be at the center of my research on the history of modern Japan. My work tracing the emergence and evolution of sports celebrity in Japan gives particular attention to the ways in which sports stars have shaped bodily perceptions and practices. I am also working on a project that uses the Paralympic movement to explore how sports have influenced Japanese perceptions of and approaches to disability. My readings of Ignatian texts have reinforced my desire to understand and address the marginalization of those with disabilities of any sort, for Ignatius himself demonstrates that disability “is a gift no less than is health.”<sup>x</sup>

### **Are We Incorporating the Ignatian Body at Xavier?**

While my readings of Ignatius’ works have led me to contemplate how the Ignatian approach to the body might more actively inform my role as teacher, advisor, mentor, and researcher, with the concept of *magis* in mind, I began to wonder if an understanding of and greater appreciation for the Ignatian Body might help us, as an institution, “find ways of doing what we do better.”<sup>xi</sup> For example, if our university’s mission is to develop a “sense of the whole person—body, mind, and spirit,” where is the body in our core curriculum?<sup>xii</sup> Are we unintentionally devaluing the body, especially since our core does not include any physical education requirement? Do we consider how the size of our core affects our students in terms of the body? When students enroll in five or often more classes per semester in order to graduate “on time,” what toll does that take on their mental and physical health and their performance? Many of Ignatius’ writings suggest that these are the very kinds of issues he and other early Jesuits were struggling with.

Given the origins of the Jesuits, I also believe that our institutional approach to disability issues merits serious consideration. According to our current ADA policy, "Xavier University will not unlawfully discriminate against qualified individuals with disabilities as defined by the ADA because of the disability of such individuals in regard to job application procedures, hiring, advancement, discharge, compensation, job training, and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment."<sup>xiii</sup> As a Jesuit university committed to social justice is it simply enough to meet the legal requirements? Shouldn't we be seeking to exceed them? Is each of our facilities and programs truly accessible and accommodating, or do we need to depend on such clauses as "when viewed in its entirety" or "unless such accommodations would impose an undue hardship on Xavier University" to fulfill our legal obligations?<sup>xiv</sup> Are we, as a university community, addressing disability rights as a social justice issue?

As we seek to fulfill our mission of "forming students intellectually, morally, and spiritually, with rigor and compassion, towards lives of solidarity, service, and success," it seems all too easy to take the body for granted.<sup>xv</sup> But if we are genuinely concerned about the "whole person," we owe to it our students and ourselves to take the body seriously. We might begin, for instance, by asking whether our students are eating, sleeping, drinking, working, and otherwise living in ways that allow them to perform at their best while maintaining their physical and mental health. We should strive to help all of our students develop a sense of appreciation and respect for their bodies and those of others, and we should seek to aid them in developing habits for leading healthy and fulfilling lives. At the same time, we must ask ourselves if *WE* are leading healthy and fulfilling lives. Engaging these kinds of questions and issues, while not easy, suits our mission as a Jesuit university and promises to make the Xavier experience all the more fulfilling and complete for all in our community.

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<sup>i</sup> Luis Gonçalves Da Câmara, *Reminiscences or Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola*, in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, trans. and annotated by Philip Endean (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>v</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, trans. and annotated by Philip Endean and Joseph A Munitiz (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 300-301.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326.

<sup>vii</sup> John W. Padberg, S.J., ed., *The Constitution of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Source, 1996), p. 125 number [292].

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126 number [298].

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140 number [339].

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120 number [272].

<sup>xi</sup> The Rev. Michael J. Graham, S.J., "The Influence of the Spiritual Exercises on Six Dimensions of Jesuit Education," Academic Day Address, October 3, 2006; available in digital format at "The Influence of the Spiritual Exercises on Six Dimensions of Jesuit Education," *Xavier University Jesuit Identity Resource*, 2008, <<http://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/jesuit-education/six-dimensions-of-jesuit-education.cfm>> accessed 5 April 2009.

<sup>xii</sup> Xavier University, "University Mission Statement," *About Xavier*, 2009, <<http://www.xavier.edu/about/University-Mission-Statement.cfm>> accessed 5 April 2009.

<sup>xiii</sup> Xavier University, "Policy: 4.12 AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA)," in *Xavier University Policies & Procedures Manual* (Last Review April 30 2008), p. 1.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xv</sup> The Rev. Michael J. Graham, S.J.