

Some Thoughts from St. Ignatius Loyola to Busy Priests

I. Regular rest, retreats, and vacations are not a distraction from the ministry but integral to it.

If our focus were simply our own sanctification and virtue we could practice a life of heavy asceticism and self-denial. But because we strive to save the souls of others, we must take care of ourselves in order to have the energy and strength to serve them. We must think in terms of pacing ourselves for the long haul.

A. To young Jesuit scholastics (seminarians) who were inclined to overwork and to skip academic studies for the sake of their work, Ignatius wrote the following.

During your academic studies [and rest], do not think that you are of no use to others. Beyond the fact that you are making progress yourselves. . . you are even now serving others in many ways and furthering the honour and glory of God.

When soldiers are occupied in equipping themselves with weapons and ammunition for a future campaign, it would be wrong to say that their work is not in the service of their prince. . . .

So if you yourselves are growing personally in every virtue in the way I spoke of earlier [i.e., during studies], you are being of great service to others. By making moral progress you are no less (but rather more!) instruments for the grace to be conferred on them than you are by your learning, though obviously God's instruments should be fully developed in both.

B. Regarding a certain Jesuit who was inclined to overwork, Ignatius wrote to his local superior:

Warn Father Leonard (and consider the same as said to yourself) not to overwork himself, even out of genuine charity, to the point where he appears to be neglecting his bodily health. Even though situations sometimes occur where an extra exertion is unavoidable, he should nevertheless not deprive himself of sleep by spending the night in prayer or staying up much of the night, as those close to him report to us he is doing. What holds for sleep applies also to diet and whatever else is needed, as I have said, for the preservation of health. Moderation has staying power; what puts excessive strain on the body cannot last. Understand, then, that Father General's mind on this matter is that, in whatever spiritual, academic, or even bodily exertions you undertake, your charity should be guided by the rule of discretion; that you should safeguard the health of your own body in order to aid your neighbors' souls; and that in this matter each of you should look out for the other, indeed, for both of you.

C. Regarding another Jesuit who had a gift for healing, and to whom large crowds were coming for help, Ignatius wrote to his local superior:

1. He will eat regularly two times a day—unless on some weekday, such as Friday, he should be moved by devotion to fast, taking a collation in the evening instead of supper. By eating two times I mean two meals, with bread, wine, and meat or something equivalent, such as eggs or fish—unless need dictates otherwise.

2. He should have a scheduled time for dining before noon and should be home before then. In cases where he cannot get back because of urgent matters for God's service, he should stay out and eat at

any place he judges most edifying decent. Those at the house should not wait for him longer than until an hour before noon, and should eat with or without him at their scheduled time.

3. He should return home in the evening at the Angelus or before it is rung and check the house, closing the doors, etc.

4. He should go to bed at a scheduled time and see that the others do too, and should remain in bed at least six to seven hours, in order to sleep and rest.

5. Besides the office and Mass (when he says it), he should spend no more than an hour on meditation, prayer, and examen, counting morning and evening together; and during the day, particularly after eating, he should not make any protracted prayer, though he may use short elevations of his mind as often as he wishes.

6. In general, he should devote himself to the service of his neighbors in such a way that he takes into account his own bodily health for love of him for whose sake he serves his neighbors.

II. Knowing when to say “no” to requests often results in upsetting good people who will think badly of you. You need to be okay with that. Christian humility includes a humble acceptance that you can’t do everything.

A parish in northern Italy asked Ignatius for permission to keep a certain Jesuit as their pastor, whom they loved dearly. But Ignatius wanted to send him to other parishes where he thought the priest would serve a greater good. The parishioners took it badly, sending hostile letters to Ignatius and even to the pope, calling Ignatius a callous hypocrite. Ignatius responded to one such letter:

It is true that our Society puts all its efforts into work to help and advance the salvation of souls. . . . What our Constitutions forbid is not that. The professed members of this Society of ours have to be free and unencumbered, so that they may fly rapidly to any place on earth where greater hope of God’s glory and the salvation of souls summon us like beacons; we must not stick to this place or that place (unless we have a college or house there), but devote our efforts now to these, now to those, for a short term, freely and without charge.

It should, however, go with modesty and indeed with prudence that, when people [like me] do something reasonably and in order, and are aiming purely to do God’s will, others [like you] should either approve, or at least do not disapprove without adequate reflection. Everyone who is a soldier of Christ under the banner of the holy Church and with His approval should be allowed to [have his own opinion]. Nevertheless I take in good part what you have written, and put it down to your piety and your charitable concern for your own people.

III. Apostolic service usually means that a priest’s prayer life will become relatively dry, lacking in spiritual consolations (unusually pleasant, strong emotional sensations of feeling close to God). That’s okay. Instead, strive to cultivate **devotion** (a deep sense of meaning in your work and a heartfelt satisfaction that you please God by serving His people.)

Similarly, a married couple can feel powerful periods of romance (this is analogous to spiritual consolation) but they can also cultivate a sense of **devotion** to each other. Feelings of romance come and go, but devotion generally abides, if one makes an effort to maintain it.

Ignatius said that it's okay to ask God for consolations, but not to panic or think less of your spiritual life if you do not receive them. They are a gift from God, but they are not essential to serve the mission.

To a Jesuit who was working as an accountant in a Jesuit high school, and who complained that his work was dry and tedious, Ignatius replied:

Although responsibility for temporal business may appear and be somewhat distracting, I have no doubt that your holy intention and your directing everything you do to God's glory makes it spiritual and highly pleasing to his infinite goodness. For when distractions are accepted for his greater service and in conformity with his divine will as interpreted to you by obedience [to your Jesuit superior], they can be not only equivalent to the union and recollection of constant contemplation, but even more acceptable to him, since they proceed from a more vehement and stronger charity...