Five hundred years ago, Ignatius of Loyola was lying in bed at his childhood home, his leg shattered by a cannonball, wondering what comes next. A lower nobleman, the future saint had been preoccupied with court dalliances, vanity and glory; once, he was even cited for brawling. But the brutal injury he sustained at the Battle of Pamplona forced him to slow down and ultimately consider whether he was being called to follow a different path in life.

Today, St. Ignatius' legacy as founder of the Society of Jesus lives on at Jesuit institutions like Holy Cross, in missionary work and at retreat and parish centers around the world. This year, the Society of Jesus is celebrating an Ignatian Year, marking the anniversary of Ignatius' bedridden conversion five centuries ago. And it's also sparking conversations within Holy Cross about how his story can offer instruction and hope as the College community grapples with issues of the current day, from a pandemic and racial injustice to severe political division, social and economic marginalization, and a climate in crisis.

"Ignatius' life after the cannonball is, as I like to say, a series of 'Now what?' moments," reflects Rev. Timothy O'Brien, S.J., '06, Holy Cross' director of mission initiatives. "We face a decision point in this community, and, perhaps in society more broadly, whether we're going to let what we're living through make us wiser or whether we just want to go back to something that feels 'normal.'"

While it's tempting to draw direct parallels between 16th-century Ignatius and one's modern-day life..."
due to his relatability, Fr. O'Brien notes that Ignatius was thoroughly a person of his time.

"Historically, he is still a medieval Christian," Fr. O'Brien cautions. "But all of us need to be attentive to the ways in which our experiences are inviting us to reflect and be open to change," he says.

"For me, Ignatius is the patron saint of Now what?"—which is why we're having this conversation in 2021."

IGNATIUS ASKS, WHO AM I CALLED TO BE?
Born in 1491 at the castle of Loyola in northern Spain, Ignatius was the youngest of 13. "He wanted to be successful in the world as he understood it, which for him meant excellence at arms when needed, but also marrying well and increasing the fortunes of his family," Fr. O'Brien says. While defending Pamplona from French troops, Ignatius was hit by a cannonball, shattering his right leg. Initially, he was so aesthetically concerned with how his leg was healing..."
that he asked to have it re-broken and set again, even though anesthetics were not available.

"While recuperating at the castle of Loyola, he found none of the tales of chivalry that he loved to read," writes historian Rev. John W. O'Malley, S.J., Hon. '99, author of "The First Jesuits." Instead, only two books were available: the illustrated "Life of Christ" by Ludolph of Saxony and a book on the lives of the saints.

Laid up in bed, Ignatius had months to consider his next move. He began to notice that daydreams of returning to his old life left him feeling "dry and agitated in spirit," Fr. O'Malley writes. In contrast, the idea of modeling his life after the saints he read about brought "serenity and comfort." This process of discernment helped him choose a new path. As soon as he was able, he set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

"I talk to students about Ignatius because his story is relevant to us today," says Michele Murray, vice president for student affairs and dean of students. "Ignatius' story is a roadmap for dealing with major heartache and disappointment. I find that this is part of being human: allowing your heart to break and seeing very real desires — good desires — all crumble in front of your eyes. I don't know a person who has not had that experience.

"Ignatius offers us a lot of hope that there's life beyond the disappointment — and that life is bigger and more rewarding and more engaging than what we can imagine on the near side," she notes. "It takes courage and openness to possibility to recognize that disappointment is not the end of the road, often it's the beginning, Ignatius and the early Jesuits teach us that."

In the pandemic times of today, many people around the world are searching for any meaning they can take away from the pain of isolation. "Ignatius let the time and stillness and solitude that was forced upon him become a means of reflection," Fr. O'Brien says. "And that, I think, is relevant to all of us."

**ON DISAPPOINTMENTS AND SETBACKS**

Ignatius' injury at Pamplona would not be the only hurdle he'd face. His new path — even his journey to the Holy Land — brought new disappointments. "At every turn for a while he hit up against roadblocks and had to ask himself, 'Well, now what do I do?'" Fr. O'Brien says.

Due in part to an outbreak of the plague, a short stay in Manresa, Spain, turned into months. Ignatius spent hours praying in a cave and reportedly suffered from mental anguish and doubts of faith. "(He) gave himself up to a regimen of prayer, fasting, self-flagellation, and other austerities that were extreme even for the 16th century," Fr. O'Malley writes. Coping with these struggles, he began to write as a means to help himself and others.

These writings would become part of the Spiritual Exercises — a practical handbook of prayer, meditation and contemplative practice, a hallmark of the Jesuits used to guide people seeking a deeper relationship with God. "Ignatius really found a way of distilling a lot of wisdom that had been passed on, even from early Christianity," Fr. O'Brien says of the Exercises. "He put them together in a readily accessible format. That's the
real innovation of Ignatius." For years, Murray has carried with her an excerpt from the beginning of the Exercises: "The shorthand for it is to listen generously, to give the speaker the benefit of the doubt. At this point in the history of the world, that simple concept feels so countercultural — the idea that we can listen not to argue, but to understand."

Ignatius finally made it to Jerusalem in 1523 — only to be asked to leave two weeks later by church officials who could not guarantee his safety there. Once again, he found himself facing a familiar question: Now what?

**STRONGER IN COMMUNITY**

Ignatius decided that getting an education might be the key to furthering his spiritual work. So, at age 33, he returned to grammar school. After years of study, he moved to France to attend the University of Paris. There, he roomed with fellow students (and future fellow saints) Peter Faber and Francis Xavier. Together, the trio would eventually found a new religious order called the Society of Jesus.

"Outside my office window is the statue group of the three founders," Murray says. "And I like to tell students not just about Ignatius, but about all three of them — that they were roommates at the University of Paris. They came from different life experiences and didn’t necessarily get along at first, but look at what they did. Their work together and the schools they founded changed the world. Their sense of brotherly love laid the foundation for us at Holy Cross and for all of the Jesuit works. When we talk about community, it’s not an abstract term. It comes directly from the experiences of the early Jesuits."

The Ignatian Colleagues Program (ICP) is one way Jesuit institutions across the country are connecting as a broader network, strengthening and fostering the Ignatian tradition in their campus communities. Offered through the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities for more than a decade, the 18-month program for faculty and administrators includes workshops, retreats, international immersion trips and capstone projects.

This year, Fr. O’Brien is helping lead a new initiative at Holy Cross called the Campus Program, a sort of local version of ICP. The idea originated as a capstone project created by Holy Cross community members and ICP alumni Paul Irish, associate dean of students, and Robert Bellin, professor of biology. Led also by Emily Bauer Davis ’99, associate chaplain and director of domestic immersions, the program focuses on Ignatian tradition of self-reflection. "It’s bringing together faculty and staff, in relatively equal numbers, to engage with their own sense of call and mission on this campus," Fr. O’Brien says.

**THE IGNATIAN COLLEAGUES PROGRAM**

Michelle Sterk Barrett, director of the College’s J.D. Power Center for Liberal Arts in the World, completed her ICP cohort in 2017. The program allowed her to grow in community with other Jesuit higher education professionals, she says, and built her capacity to act as an ambassador of Ignatian spirituality.

Through her ICP immersion trip, she developed an even deeper appreciation for her work with students in experiential and community-based learning, a key function of the J.D. Power Center.

"I went to the U.S./Mexico border in Nogales, where we learned more about the work the Jesuits are doing through the Kino Border Initiative," Sterk Barrett says. "Most powerful for me was the story of a man whom I’ll call Jaime, who had just been deported the morning we met him. Listening to Jaime’s story was incredibly challenging. The pain in his eyes as he spoke about not knowing when he would see his daughters again was almost unbearable to witness. She says the experience gave her a new perspective on an issue central to her youth, as she grew up living near the border in San Diego: "We regularly had helicopters flying overhead with search lights seeking migrants living in the canyons." Though she’d read books and watched documentaries focused on immigrant stories, she says that could never compare to seeing the witness.

"Similarly, I believe firsthand experiences with the very real suffering that exists in our world (through the J.D. Power Center, immersion experiences, direct service and other College opportunities) ideally touch our students’ hearts so profoundly that they are driven to ask more, learn more and, hopefully, use their education for the betterment of our world," Sterk Barrett says. And, she emphasizes, the practice of discernment is accessible to anyone, regardless of whether they are of a different faith tradition or none: "It’s still valuable to reflect and pay attention to one’s emotions and how one’s reacting to experiences to see where we may be called to go."

She says it’s also important to examine the role Ignatian spirituality can play in mental health. "There is abundant research demonstrating a correlation between psychological well-being and increased spirituality," she says, "We are currently facing a mental health crisis as a nation — especially among young adults. It is also well-documented that younger generations have left formal religious institutions in large numbers. With that in mind, I think Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit higher education have a lot to offer and can be quite beneficial at this particular point in time."

Timothy Joseph ’98, professor of classics, will complete his 18-month ICP experience this year. "It is great to have the opportunity to think in a more deliberate way about what Jesuit education claims and aspires to do, both at the larger institutional level and at the levels of the classroom and in individual conversations," Joseph says. Through ICP, he’s been delving into Ignatian writings "on the need to pivot from reflection to action and then back to reflection, and so on" — a practice he sees alive at Holy Cross.

For example, under the leadership of his
colleague Dominic Machado, assistant professor of classics, and the College's Donelan Office of Community-Based Learning (CBL), introductory Latin courses at Holy Cross now have a CBL component, Joseph says. "Latin students meet up weekly with middle school students in Worcester to learn Latin and aspects of ancient Roman culture with them – and there's a process of deliberate adjustment and rethinking over the course of the year," he says. "Here is an example of contemplatives in action," of students putting thought and reflection toward co-learning and toward real, meaningful relationships in our broader community." Joseph plans to weave what he learns through his own ICP experiences back into the classroom: "I'm looking forward to bringing Ignatian concepts about thought and action into my classes more explicitly."

**PIVOTING TOWARD HOPE**

"We're at the advent of a new era," Murray reflects. "We have a new president who has a vision for the Holy Cross of today and tomorrow and what this means for our students and for how the College engages in partnership with our host city." She says she finds a lot of hope in the way the College educates its students: "We are educating young adults who long to make a difference in the world. We meet their desires with a powerful combination of excellence in the liberal arts and helping them understand and cultivate their gifts and talents. They are discovering their purpose." And the College community understands that determining how to use one's gifts and talents is a lifelong process that extends beyond one's years at Holy Cross, just as it was for Ignatius.

"It's important to know that we offer resources not only to our current students, but to our alumni as well," Fr. O'Brien emphasizes. In addition to career services, retreats offered by the College chaplains at Holy Cross' Thomas P. Joyce '59 Contemplative Center are also open to alumni, focusing on life transitions or offering an experience of the Spiritual Exercises. And, he says, the Ignatian Year reminds the College community that Holy Cross exists within a much larger global Jesuit network of not just schools, but also centers where seekers can find spiritual direction or attend retreats. Fr. O'Brien says now is a moment to lean into hope: "Ignatius gives us hope that in the things that happen in our lives – even the things that are difficult – God can be found and is inviting us into a future of hope and joy."