

Desert Cactus

The Symbol of Mother Mary

Ignatius of Jesus

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One day, while I was visiting the novitiate of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Tarbes in Piura, Peru, I noticed that the tall cactus plant which stood elegantly by the front doorway had been newly trimmed. One piece that had been cut off lay by the side of the flower pot. Knowing that a remnant of cactus without roots has the potential to continue growth when placed again in the earth, I asked if I could have the piece of plant.

I took home my little piece of cactus, even though it was difficult to carry, as each thorn seemed to find a very tender spot on my hand. Upon arriving home at Bello Horizonte, I placed the cactus in a large flower pot, much too large for such a tiny plant, but I knew that, if given a chance, my little cactus would some day grow to be a tall, strong, beautiful plant. It did recover and began to show new life as it stretched forth and soon added two or three inches to its height.

Watching my cactus grow led me to reflect on the life of our Foundress, Mother Mary Ignatius of Jesus. I found similar characteristics in both plant and person, which I would like to share with you.

My cactus had a strength, a built-in sense of survival, which came to its aid and helped it to take root independently of the mother plant. I noticed that same inner strength, that strong faith, which helped Elizabeth Hayes separate herself from her mother church, the Anglican Church, which had nurtured her from birth, to become a member of the Roman Catholic Church. She knew this move could marginalize her from family and friends and even from prospects of future work.

That same inner strength helped her in her discernment to leave Jamaica when she found little or no outreach to the poor to whom she felt particularly called. This remarkable courage and strength sustained her in all difficulties. She kept faith, for instance, and compassionately moved forward to take care of the wounded soldiers of the Franco-Prussian War, rather than mourn the closing of her Sevres Convent and the dismissal of her first French novices.

Again, I noticed that naked faith and strength of character show itself at other key points in her life. Consider the challenges involved in the opening of the convents in Belle Prairie, Minnesota, the Georgia convents, and the anxieties over the Roman Motherhouse. Her deep faith sustained her at difficult decision times, at times when money was scarce and bills had to be paid, and more than ever when she saw her beloved Institute divided. She lived through the separation from the Institute of some of her spiritual children whom she dearly loved. Her remarkable faith was evident again on her death-bed, when after months of agonizing sickness she could truly say, "This is truly the happiest day of my life," and "I desire my God."

My cactus adapted easily, accepting its transplanting into new soil. Mother Ignatius, too, was flexible in the many difficult situations in her life. An example that comes easily to mind was her acceptance of the fact that the two Poor Clare nuns, the Bentivoglio Sisters, whom she had brought to America, would not be continuing the journey with her to Belle Prairie. So many months of petitioning and arguing with Church authorities to receive permission for these Poor

Clare nuns to travel with her to America to start a Poor Clare foundation at Belle Prairie came to nothing upon reaching New York. Yet, Mother Ignatius did not look back, but rather set her steps towards Belle Prairie, accepting the change of plans with docility, for she believed that the Lord would bring good out of this disappointment. She had learned to find in each situation something that would bring her to holiness. We find this quality expressed in her Diary, "Even while I weep, a whisper seems to say, *there is something in all of this that would make you a saint if only you were willing and used it so.*"

Slow growth is a characteristic of the cactus. It takes many years for it to come to full growth and maturity. Upon reflection, I realized that Mother Ignatius was formed and fashioned by the hands of the Creator. This process took place over many years, chiefly because she often sat in contemplation at the Master's feet. Piece by piece, the pattern of her life took shape, and little by little, the garden of her soul yearned for one thing-complete union with God. She must have had this deep longing when she wrote, "Nothing but union with God can make one happy."

A desert cactus has a lonely existence. It stands alone as it bears the burning heat of the tropical sun. Mother Ignatius knew what it meant to stand alone; to think differently; to be her own person. During her Jamaican experience, she wrote, "My soul is a martyrdom of loneliness and misery. I resolve to offer this suffering, this very absence of all support of any friends as a part of the penance when the missionary vow was made." Her aloneness, her suffering was not wasted. She channeled it, offering it to God for the missions so dear to her. Indeed, she offered her life and even her death for these missions, that the Institute would bear fruit. She desired that the Institute would be founded on "a generous, broad, and noble spirit." I feel that foundation has been laid, and it is up to us, her spiritual daughters, to carry on that noble spirit into the next century and beyond.

Cacti can be seen as ordinary or extraordinary. They come in various shapes and sizes; from small, fat, ordinary ones, to tall, stately, extraordinary ones. Foundresses of religious communities were ordinary people who did extraordinary things. I have come to regard Mother Mary Ignatius of Jesus that way. When she wrote, "There are only two ways: the ordinary way of human prudence and the extraordinary way of faith and confidence in God," I think she was encouraging us, her spiritual daughters, to take that extraordinary road securely supported by the trust that God, our loving Father, will lead and guide us into the future, where He will continually show us, as He did our Foundress, how to serve Him in the poor and marginalized of society.