

Gilding the Lily

We recently celebrated the Jesuit feast day of Our Lady of the Way at the Nostalgia Mass for graduates of the College of more than half a century and their partners.

The image of *Santa Maria della Strada*, Our Lady of the Way, in the small parish church by that name, in the heart of Rome and at a crossroads along the ceremonial route of the popes, is first documented in the 16th century. Ignatius probably first encountered it in 1540, when he preached day after day on an adjacent street corner. Within a year, the pope had approved his small band of priests as a religious order and given them *Santa Maria della Strada* as their pastoral home base, effectively making Ignatius caretaker of the painting within. History tells us that the former parish priest of that unprejudging church joined the Jesuits, becoming the first Italian to do so.

The Jesuits soon outgrew the building and Ignatius sought a benefactor to replace it on a grander scale. The generous donor was Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, who happened to be the grandson of Pope Paul III (yes, those were interesting times!). That Pope had earlier authorised the founding of the Society of Jesus. Initially Michelangelo had offered to design the church for free – it seems Ignatius was well-connected – but Michelangelo died before the project began.

Before Ignatius' death in 1556, he instructed his Jesuits to preserve this Marian image and eventually to enshrine it in the new church, the Gesù, so-called after the Holy Name of Jesus. It was to become the Mother Church of the Society of Jesus. The Gesù did not open until two decades after Ignatius' death, but following his wishes, the image was enshrined in a lavishly decorated side chapel where it is to be found today.

Since those early years, and precisely because of the devotional title of the image of Mary, generations of Jesuits have prayed before it before embarking on difficult and far-flung missions. Francis Xavier would have prayed there before leaving on that extraordinary journey to the East from which he would never return. Peter Canisius would have sought Mary's help there before heading north the divided lands of the Protestant Reformation. Those culturally-sensitive missionaries who set up the reductions among the South American Indians would have prayed there. As well as the heroic martyr-saints who lived among the Hurons in the snows of French North America. Those who boldly trekked through the Middle East, dialoguing with Muslim leaders, reaching Tibet, or finding an overland route to China – all of them drawing strength from this Mother of the Society. Our Lady of the Way was to be their patron, their guide and their solace.

For centuries, this image was believed to be a late 15th or early 16th century icon. Clearly, it showed signs of some heavy-handed retouching. Then, ten years ago, when some conservators undertook a long-overdue cleaning of the Madonna, it unexpectedly turned into a bolder reclamation project. The results were startling. The image turned out to be 200 years older than previously thought and, in terms of quality and artistic pedigree, far more interesting. Previously believed to be a work on stone, it is actually a fragment from a larger, now-lost fresco, or a wall painting, almost certainly from the original *Santa Maria della Strada* church.

The original, beautiful in its naïve simplicity, is in somewhat muted pastel tones. But the superimposed version appears distant in its regal arrangement. Cluttered with crowns and jewels. A necklace on Mary, which is so 'stuck-on', seems even to have no point of attachment. Diamond jewellery on Jesus' forehead – really? Clearly a make-over.

I think there is a lesson in this. Not uncommonly, we begin with something pure and simple, something uncluttered, something transparent. Then we tinker with it. We add layers. We embellish it. We 'improve' on it. The core value, the core idea, the core insight may well become obscured or lost. One

famous professor of ecclesiology (that is, of the study of the Church) Fr Alfred Loisy once wrote, “Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God; but what resulted was the Church.” A bit harsh, but some truth. We do complicate things. When Blessed John XXIII initiated the Second Vatican Council, one of his directives to all religious orders was to rediscover their charism, to rediscover the mind of the founder and the order’s core spirituality. Under Fr Arrupe, there was at that time an enormous renewal of the Jesuits worldwide. We scraped away some of those layers, those accretions of the centuries which were masking our origins, who we were to be. It made us ‘radical’ – radical in the true sense of that word, forcing us back to our roots, the *radix*. As we undertake the Masterplan to take the College into a 21st century of teaching-learning styles, we are ever so careful as the theme of the enterprise makes known, to be *Inspired by the Past, Embracing the Future*. There is a style to our schooling, an ethos. These are fundamental values which have always marked out Jesuit schools true to their origins. But we also need to “scrape off the barnacles” of the years, which can weigh us down or slow us up. The non-core values, the allurements and the fads, the temptations of a corporate world of schooling – all those attractions which could take us from our true course.

So, many insights from an icon. But the heart of it is what first attracted Ignatius. A Mother who has the best interests of her children at heart. A Mother who sees them on their way. A Mother watchful on the journey. *Santa Maria della Strada*.