



## St Francis Borgia

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The Feast of St Francis Borgia, the third Superior General of the Society of Jesus, is celebrated on 3 October. Borgia came from a noble Spanish family and joined the fledgling Society after being a courtier to Charles V and eventually Duke of Gandía. His life as a Jesuit was not without controversy, as Jesuit historian Thomas M. McCoog explains.

Convinced that Francis Borgia was ‘a little-known and poorly understood saint,’ Cándido de Dalmasas SJ decided a new biography was needed. His original Spanish edition appeared in 1983; an English translation<sup>1</sup> was published eight years later. Much about Borgia, Dalmasas asserted, needed clarification: ‘Even during his lifetime it was whispered that, because his character had been formed in so different a milieu, Borgia had never succeeded in assimilating the Society’s spirit.’<sup>2</sup> Ignatius of Loyola might have defended Borgia, consistently demonstrated total trust in him and employed him on important missions, but this did not dispel a suspicion that the Spanish nobleman enjoyed Ignatius’s consistent approval because of the Basque’s deference to elites despite Borgia’s misunderstanding of the Society’s spirituality and ‘way of proceeding’ during its formative period.

John W. O’Malley’s seminal *The First Jesuits*<sup>3</sup> has cogently argued that the Society of Jesus was not born fully formed in the cave at [Manresa](#) or in the chapel at [La Storta](#), but evolved, slowly defining its identity and role in the Church and in the world. Self-definition continued after Ignatius’s death in 1556. Roads did diverge, and the Society did follow a path ‘less traveled by’ as it moved from country byways to city streets. Some scholars consider Borgia a regrettable detour who set the Society on a path of monasticisation and uniformity that would take centuries to correct. A severe asceticism, exemplified by a gaunt Borgia usually portrayed with a skull, undermined a joyful discovery of God in all things.



Statue of St Francis Borgia by Martínez Montañés.  
Photo via Wikimedia commons.

That there is disagreement regarding Borgia should not be surprising, but the geographical fault lines are interesting. The cult of Borgia is considerably stronger among the Mediterranean countries, especially Spain, than it is north of the Alps. Even within Jesuit Britain, Borgia is overlooked. With the exception of the Jesuit residential district in East Anglia, named in honour of Blessed Francis Borgia in 1625 after his beatification in 1624 – a name

abandoned when the residence was re-branded as the College of the Holy Apostles after William, Lord Petre’s endowment in 1632 – the English and later British Province has dedicated nothing to him.

The great-grandson of the infamous Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alexander VI), Francis was born on 28 October 1510, the first son and heir of Juan de Borgia, third duke of Gandía and grandee of Spain. Raised in palaces among the elites, he later served at the court of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V from 1528. There he met and married Leonor de Castro, a lady-in-waiting to Empress Isabel, in the summer of 1529. They had eight children. The death of the Empress Isabel in May 1539 was a turning point, a Damascus experience, for Borgia. The sight of her corpse, distorted and corrupting, shocked Borgia. *Sic transit gloria mundi!* He could scarcely recognise the legendary, beautiful woman in the casket before him. Pedro de Ribadeneira SJ, Borgia’s first biographer, attributes this insight to him: ‘Never more, never more will I serve a master who can die.’ Perhaps, but not yet: he had a wife and children to support, and a

career to advance. In 1539 Borgia was appointed viceroy of Catalonia, a position he held for four years. In Barcelona, he adopted a more penitential, devout and disciplined lifestyle and met his first Jesuits. Upon the death of his father in January 1543 he became duke of Gandía and grandee of Spain, and he left Barcelona for Gandía that April. The death of Francis' wife in March 1546 revived the sentiments of distaste for the transitory and desire for the eternal. In May he made the Spiritual Exercises at the end of which, on 2 June 1546, he vowed to enter the Society. Ignatius accepted him: 'And thus, in the name of the Lord, from this moment on, I accept and receive Your Lordship as our brother, and as such my soul will have for you that love which is due to one who, with so much generosity gives himself to the Church in order to serve the Lord more perfectly in it'.<sup>4</sup> Borgia explained to Charles V that he preferred the Society because within it all were equal and he would not get special consideration because of his rank. On 1 February 1548 he pronounced his final vows in secret.

Andrés de Oviedo, Jesuit rector in Gandía and, more important for us, Borgia's director during the Spiritual Exercises, made a strange request on 8 February, a week after Borgia's secret profession. Oviedo and another Jesuit, Francisco Onfroy, sought Ignatius's permission to retire into the monastic wilderness for seven years. There they intended to give themselves totally to prayer, for which they had had little time because of the demands of the collegiate apostolate. Fearing a dangerous precedent that might prove contagious, Ignatius denied their request in late March. Jesuits do not withdraw from the world to pray, but pray in the midst of their engagement with it. He moreover instructed Borgia on the best means of containing and ending the problem.

On 30 August 1550, ten days after being granted a doctorate in theology by the University of Gandía, Borgia departed Gandía for Rome, not alone but with an entourage of approximately thirty persons, including the three professed Spanish Jesuits. He encouraged the relatives and the secular and ecclesiastical elites who hosted them on their travels to support the new religious order. At his arrival in Rome on 23 October, he rejected offers of palatial quarters for more humble accommodations. He and his entourage were put up in the Jesuit house in a section slightly separated from the religious community. For three months under the personal tutelage of Ignatius,

Borgia learned about the new Society, its spirituality and its distinct way of proceeding. He also made further donations to the new Roman College which would open in February 1551, a few days after he departed Rome for the Basque country.

In an amazing concession, Ignatius freed Borgia from the jurisdiction of the provincial: Borgia's only superior was Ignatius himself in Rome. Borgia could, according to Ignatius, consult with the Spanish provincial 'concerning your movements and other matters you consider appropriate, [but] you are not obliged to do so, nor are you obliged to follow his advice'.<sup>5</sup> Had Borgia grasped the essence of the Society in three months? William V. Bangert SJ referred to Borgia's ministry as 'free-lanc[ing],' a 'peripatetic preacher.' At his hermitage outside Oñate (Guipúzcoa), he spent long hours in prayer and penance. On 23 May 1551, he was ordained priest. As he preached, directed retreats and ministered, persistent efforts to honour him with a red hat had to be rebuffed. Temptations to accept were strong and so the young Society, fearful of the aftershocks of the departure of their high-profile, A-list recruit whose arrival had been so loudly lauded, did all it could to preserve his vocation. Jerónimo Nadal, nominated by Ignatius as commissary general for Spain and Portugal in April 1553, worried that Borgia was wavering in 1554: 'Three times I warned him as he sat there on his sofa: if he received the red hat I would lose all trust in a man who, even as he presented himself to the public as one learned in the law of Christ, had set his heart on honors'.<sup>6</sup>

In 1554 as Spain was divided into three provinces, Ignatius also named Borgia a commissary general, superior of all provincials in Spain and Portugal. Two commissary generals? Was one superior to the other? Possible conflict was not addressed. As always Ignatius favoured Borgia: Nadal's authority as commissary stopped at the Spanish border. Nonetheless while Nadal was in Spain, he was not subject to any superior. But Ignatius did not inform Borgia of Nadal's exemption. Borgia's triumphant tour of Spain and Portugal disturbed Nadal who suspected him of continuing to be the grandee by taking control and making decisions without consultation. Juan Martínez Guijeño (known as Silicio), Archbishop of Toledo and admittedly neither pro-Ignatius nor pro-Jesuit, charged Ignatius with parading Borgia around the country as a 'hunting trophy'.<sup>7</sup> To Ignatius, Nadal praised Borgia's work on behalf of the Society, but he

also worried that Borgia poorly grasped what he was so effectively advocating. Borgia's formation, Nadal claimed, was deficient. He, for example, failed to grasp the importance of obedience within the Society. Indeed Nadal wondered whether he should assign an older member of the Society as Borgia's tutor in matters Jesuit.

At times Borgia and Nadal clashed. The former resisted the latter's efforts at implementing Ignatian legislation regarding prayer. Nadal reduced time in prayer; Borgia preferred longer periods deemed essential for the preservation of religious fervour and for greater public esteem. Borgia reacted to Ignatius's and Nadal's reprimand against excessive prayer and religious austerity: 'Between the two of you, you will drive me to the Carthusians<sup>8</sup> – and imagine the financial repercussions of such public embarrassment on the Roman College! Nadal detected constitutional violations in Borgia's negotiations for colleges. Borgia resented Nadal's corrections. To Nadal's dismay, Borgia, with his immediate access to the corridors and aisles of power, continued to play the duke.

In 1559, a book attributed to Borgia, even though he had written only one short section, was condemned by the Spanish Inquisition and placed on the Index. Because of *Works of a Christian by the Hand of Lord Duke Francis of Borgia, Duke of Gandía*, Borgia was labelled a heretic and became a 'person of interest' for Grand Inquisitor Ferdinando de Valdés, already a personal enemy. Scandalous rumours about Borgia circulated in the Spanish court. Borgia meanwhile was in Portugal. Diego Laínez, elected Ignatius's successor as general in 1558, summoned Borgia to Rome in 1561 to assist in the governance of the Society. Fearful for Borgia's safety, Nadal advised him to bypass Spain, but Borgia quietly slipped through northern Spain without incident. The rumours ceased and the fears subsided by March 1562 by which time Borgia was in Rome. For various reasons he did not take office as the general's assistant for Spain until 1564. At Laínez's death in January, 1565, Borgia was elected vicar general. At the Second General Congregation, on 2 July 1565, Borgia was elected superior general on the first ballot. A recognition of his mastery of Ignatian spirituality? His holiness? His social status? Both Bangert and Dalmasés characterise his generalate as one of 'cautious consolidation,' but the former is considerably more critical:

An ascetic himself, Borgia established strict regulations for every office in the Society. Nadal's earlier suspicions that Borgia did not fully understand the Institute of the Society were shared by many. Complaints that he was too much of a rigorist were common, as customs more applicable to the monastic life were introduced into the Society. The spiritual freedom established by Ignatius was reduced through the requirement of longer periods of prayer. The flexibility valued by Loyola was vanishing.<sup>9</sup>

Borgia added the communal recitation of litanies to the daily order of Jesuit houses, and a distinctive style of dress to an order without a habit. During his administration, Pope Pius V imposed choral recitation of the Divine Office on the Society. Borgia introduced the congregation of procurators, a triennial gathering to advise the general on the state of the Society and the need for a general congregation, and abolished the commissary in favour of visitors who, as the general's delegate, would ensure the conformity of a specific province to the Society's rules. He also influenced Jesuit pedagogy when he formulated the first *Ratio studiorum*, the so-called *Ratio Borgia*.

In May 1571, Venice, Spain and the Papacy formed a league against the Turks. Pius V sent Michele Cardinal Bonelli on a mission to Spain and Portugal to confirm the league, or in the case of Portugal, to persuade it to join the league, and to advance or impede different proposed royal marriages. The pope wanted Borgia as the cardinal's adviser. Juan de Polanco, the Society's secretary, protested the assignment because of Borgia's age and infirmities as well as his required presence at the imminent congregation of procurators. Brushing aside all arguments, Pius insisted: the party departed on 30 June. Borgia learned of the league's victory at Lepanto while he was in Madrid. Illness kept him in Ferrara for four months as he travelled back to Rome after this mixed diplomatic mission. He arrived on 28 September and died at midnight on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

Otto Karrer, a German Jesuit, published the first German biography of Borgia in 1921.<sup>10</sup> The reviews were favourable, and the author continued his research on the early history of the Society. But in September 1922 Father General Ledóchowski detected serious errors in the work. Karrer's insistence that Borgia failed to understand Loyola was obviously wrong. The very insinuation of a dichotomy between

Loyola and a major disciple disedified. Consequently young men in the Society should be denied access to the book. Karrer interpreted Ledóchowski's criticism as a concession (or capitulation) to some unnamed Spanish Jesuits who wished to use obedience to nip in the proverbial bud an image of the sainted Borgia that they could not refute through scholarship. Karrer's 'warts and all' approach to scholarship was not shared by all. Karrer's conflict with Ledóchowski over the Borgia biography resulted in the German's departure from the Society in 1923. He was readmitted on his death bed on 8 December 1976.<sup>11</sup> Times had changed.

Perhaps full disclosure demands that I reveal that I learned all I know about Borgia from Bangert as I edited and completed his biography of Nadal, the generally acknowledged expert on the Society's 'way of proceeding,' or as Hung T. Pham SJ and Eduardo C. Fernández SJ have most recently put it: 'one of Ignatius's most trusted confidants and his official interpreter of the Constitutions'.<sup>12</sup> Like Bangert, perhaps I see Borgia through the eyes of Nadal. On the other hand, Nadal's importance demands that his comments be neither dismissed nor ignored. No one denies that Borgia was a holy man, but was he a holy Jesuit? Perhaps we should conclude with a humorous summary of the Society's evolution. It had a few variations but we shall finish with Michael Campbell-Johnston's version:

Ignatius set up the Society as light cavalry; Borgia turned us into infantry; Acquaviva put us in barracks; Roothan cancelled all leave; Ledóchowski set up a concentration camp; and Pedro Arrupe said: 'Break ranks.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cándido de Dalmases SJ, *Francis Borgia: Grandee of Spain, Jesuit, Saint* (St. Louis, 1991)

<sup>2</sup> Dalmases, *Borgia*, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> John W. O'Malley SJ, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993)

<sup>4</sup> Dalmases, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Dalmases, p. 77

<sup>6</sup> William Bangert SJ, *Jerome Nadal SJ 1507-1580: Tracking the First Generation of Jesuits* (Chicago, 1992), p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Thomas H. Clancy SJ, *An Introduction to Jesuit Life* (St. Louis, 1976), p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Bangert, *Nadal*, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Bangert, p. 314.

<sup>10</sup> Otto Karrer SJ, *Der heilige Franz von Borgia. General der Gesellschaft Jesu 1510-1572* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1921).

<sup>11</sup> See Paul Begheyn SJ, 'Otto Karrer and his Biography of Francisco de Borgia (1921), in *Francisco de Borgia y su tiempo*, eds. Enrique García Hernán and María del Pilar Ryan (Valencia/Rome, 2001), pp. 439-46.

<sup>12</sup> Hung T. Pham SJ and Eduardo C. Fernández SJ, 'Pilgrims in Community at the Frontiers,' *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 48/2 (2016), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> As cited in Begheyn, 'Karrer,' p. 443.