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**Gil Ambrona, Antonio. *Ignacio de Loyola y las mujeres: benefactoras, Jesuitas y fundadoras* [Ignatius of Loyola and the Women: Benefactresses, Female "Jesuits", and Foundresses]. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2017. 424 pp. ISBN: 978-84-376-3665-8**

*Reviewed by Manuel Ruiz Jurado, S.J.*

On the occasion of Ignatius of Loyola's fourth death centenary in 1956, Hugo Rahner published a carefully researched academic book about the saint's letters to the women whom he knew all throughout his life. When I recently came to know about Gil Ambrona's book, then, I had hoped to find more information about this aspect of the personality of Ignatius and the milieu which the saint moved in as he exercised his apostolic zeal. The title and the cover seemed to augur either another version of Rahner's work or something similar but with more historical research about Ignatius and the women who collaborated with him, protected and helped him in his studies and work, and dealt closely with him. My disappointment, however, has been enormous. In presenting his work, the author says that he wants to do away with the "aura of predestination to holiness with which [Ignatius's] Jesuit biographers have dressed him up"; instead, he subjects to doubt or suspicion the entire historicity of those very same sources on which he must base his research if he is going to say anything truthful about the story of someone who is so seriously studied and so well grounded in history as Ignatius of Loyola.

None of Íñigo's biographers ever "predestined" him to become a saint; rather, they found him already a saint who had been previously canonized. The process of investigation that led up to the canonization

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was based mostly on the oath of "de visu" witnesses. The really true biographers had thus taken into account Ignatius's autobiography which he dictated, after having refused for a long time to do so, while he was still living, yet even then he limited himself to the wishes of those who begged him for it with the end in view of knowing "how the Lord had been leading him from the beginning of his conversion" until the foundation of the Society. These biographers also based their research on his other writings and on so many other contemporary sources.

Ambrona, however, does not consider the *Autobiography* of Ignatius of Loyola to be an authentic "memoir" or "testament"; for him it is only a biography of the saint that was written by González de Cámara. He intends to foster doubts and suspicions about what scholarly researchers have been saying until now based on their serious investigations and verifications of accounts that concern the sanctity of Ignatius. It seems that the only history he regards as trustworthy—published in *Manresa* 86 (1914), pages 309–312—is one that received well-grounded criticism and negative appraisal for a book review.

Ambrona, whose studies have been directed toward investigating the situation of women in the 16th and 17th centuries, focuses in this book on those women who wrote letters to St. Ignatius of Loyola. When the author ventures into the field of Christian spirituality like in this case, he gives the impression that the most important and prevalent concern in the Spanish milieu of that time was the movement toward the interiority of the soul peculiar to Erasmism and illuminism—the heritage of the New Christians (converts from Judaism and Islam) and the Illuminati—as though there never existed before, during, and after them genuine Spanish currents of the intense interior life, of a healthy, ecclesial, and authentic holiness proper to Christian spirituality. Every movement toward interiorizing Christian life was for the author a proof of Erasmism or illuminism that derived from a Jewish background. It was as though the strong influences of Sts. Ambrose, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Cassian, Bernard, Francis, Dominic, etc. did not already exist at that time; as though Sts. Thomas of Villanova, John of Ávila, Peter of Alcántara, Francis Xavier, John of God, Teresa, John of the Cross, etc. had not been living in that century. It also seems

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that the author does not know the distinction between the doctrines of the Illuminati and the ecclesial sense of orthodoxy, and this despite the fact that the Inquisition had already made such a distinction on many previous occasions.

The author also does not seem to understand what radical Christian conversion is. It does not seem to him—and he does not take it into account—that a drastic and profound change can happen to a person. He does not recognize the action of the Holy Spirit in a person's life, and he considers Ignatius to be the disciple of a lady who is one of the Illuminati and is therefore an illuminatus himself, as if contact with any persons who at any time might have been illuminati or may have had any Jewish background would automatically make an individual one of them.

Indeed, Ambrona even dares to propose the influence of sexual motives or craving for money in the very persons who, by their vows, simple lives, and sacrifices, have shown disinterest in such worldly concerns. What motivated them was the "pure love of Jesus Christ and zeal for the glory of the one who created us." The author does not acknowledge spiritual motive nor does he seem to understand what it is.

All that we have said about the characteristics of this book and its author are obvious to readers even without much stirring up. What turns out to be surprising and strange is that the last two chapters seem as if they were written by another person with a different mentality, one who is much more objective, better informed about history, and without so many prejudices or assumptions. Nevertheless, hints of the fanciful prejudices of the first part still show up from time to time, indicating that the author has not changed. These are the chapters in which he deals with the women who took their Jesuit vows or, rather, the women who pretended to have taken vows but were never admitted into the Society. The author does not understand why St. Ignatius always refused to have a female branch. He does not understand the true nature of the Society of Jesus and the real spiritual motives for its decisions. To his credit, however, he is authentic whenever he acknowledges the attraction that the spiritual life of the Society has had among women and the transcendent influence of Ignatian

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spirituality on so many female religious congregations in modern times. According to a survey we made, there are more than 300 female religious congregations that follow Ignatian spirituality. This certainly must be due to the influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* more than to the allure of the Jesuit Constitutions.

The author's toil in search of data (which was quite limited to his distorted point of view) on so many persons, their ancestors and relatives, and the general circumstances still yielded many truthful facts and historical details that some ignore. It is sad, however, that these appear to be enveloped in prejudices, fantasies, and suspicions that are so alien and opposed to the mentality of the main subject they refer to. The author seems to be remarkably ignorant of the abundant sources that are available for studying the life and works of Ignatius, e.g., the Constitutions of the Society, the Spiritual Diary written by the saint, the vows, the teaching of the Church, etc.

To highlight one concrete example, Ambrona interprets some of the expressions that are attributed to Íñigo, such as "by the love of God he was imprisoned," among others, as "heretical" or typical of the "Illuminati." These must be understood according to the mind of Ignatius who was never found by his judges to be heterodox or one of the Illuminati despite all the trials and proceedings to which he was subjected, such as the one he suffered in Rome in which he was declared innocent in the presence of those who witnessed against him and being interrogated by judges in so many persecutions in Spain, Paris, and Venice.

The author even makes chronological mistakes at times, e.g., St. Peter Faber underwent the *Exercises* under the direction of Ignatius in 1534, not 1543 (p. 152); the *Exercises* that Fr. Dalmases prepared was published in 1987, not 1985, etc. There are also some important omissions, e.g., Pedroche's opposition and objections to the *Exercises* are mentioned but there is no word of the very well-founded replies that he received from Fr. Jerónimo Nadal (p. 146), nor is it stated that Pope Paul III, in the brief "Pastoralis officii," had already recommended the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius to all Christians as early as 1548. The terrible accusations of Matías de la Posta are referred to

yet nothing is said about how and why they were rejected and how the accuser was condemned (pp. 259–261). The letter of Lady Coutinho is brought up but there is no mention of how many opinions were opposed to her views about Simon Rodrigues (pp. 325–328). It is true that the Jews of Avignon wanted to make Nadal, a Christian doctor, into a rabbi but nothing is said of the latter's angry response to such an audacious proposition (p. 395).

This book and the articles quoted and listed in the Bibliography are of diverse values and tendencies. Yet they also seem to be antiquated.

I am grateful to Gil Ambrona for showing interest in this aspect of the life of Ignatius of Loyola, a saint who is so well known and admired today in the four corners of the world. I lament though that he has not been able to find the great attraction to and incentive for Christian life which so many women and men throughout history have discovered in Ignatius and who have decided to follow in his spiritual path.

If anyone reading this book seeks to know St. Ignatius of Loyola better, she or he will not be able to do so here. What is presented is one of the Illuminati, a disciple of one lady who was one of the Illuminati(!) herself, their sympathizer, and a holder of unorthodox trends. Not even Ignatius would recognize himself in such a portrait—it is so contrary to what he really was and what he aspired to be. Neither the women nor the men who followed him and carried forward his ideal would recognize, in Gil Ambrona's depiction of Ignatius, a holy person who was radically evangelic, filled with love for Jesus Christ and His Bride the Church, fond of all the ceremonies and devotions approved by the Church, and a defender of the sound and safe teaching.

Manuel Ruiz Jurado, S.J.
Sevilla, Spain

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