

About the painting "Ignatius as a pilgrim" by Montserrat Gudiol

The Spanish artist Montserrat Gudiol (1933 - 2015) created an unusual portrait of St. Ignatius in 1991 to mark the 500th anniversary of his birth. It now hangs in the church in Manresa, Spain, which was created in the secluded place where Ignatius lived and suffered through the decisive time of his deep conversion.

Gudiol has otherwise mainly depicted women. But in 1983, she was asked to create a painting of St. Benedict for the Benedictine abbey of Montserrat, which, like Manresa, is close to Barcelona. It shows Benedict coming out of the semi-darkness, the rule of the order in his hand, his gaze halfway to the ground, walking towards the viewer with his right foot in front. He is wearing - like the Benedictines - a black robe, but simply cut.

Above all, this is one of the very few depictions that show Benedict beardless and young. He already has a book - the Rule of the Order - in his hand. But you get the impression that this book is not yet finished either. Benedict is holding his right hand as if he wants to reach for it again.

Eight years later, she created her second portrait of a saint. This one is also completely re-interpreted and as a young man. As far as I can see, these are the only two paintings of saints in her oeuvre and are among Gudiol's rare depictions of men.

Gudiol often omits the background of her figures and replaces it with a color, but rarely with so little light. In her Ignatius, one only senses a slight lightening of the black at the top right.

During his time in Manresa, Ignatius experienced inner darkness to the limits of what he could bear. The more he tried to live a radically new life as a Christian after laying down his knight's weapons and the garb of a nobleman, the more he was driven into depression. Only a view of the divine Trinity, which he himself only very cautiously hinted at, gave him the serenity to abandon religiously extreme asceticism on the one hand and, on the other, opened up an inner vision of the reality and presence of God, which shaped all his future studies and mystical life. Gudiol does not show Ignatius as a figure of light, but he clearly distinguishes the moment from the darkness behind it. Even if his feet cannot be seen, it is now Ignatius the pilgrim: a man gifted by God who sets out.

The Jesuits do not have a habit, but the first circle of friends around Ignatius during his studies in Salamanca probably dressed similarly to the one shown here. They wanted to be simple pilgrims. The robe is slightly puffed out in the middle. This is the place where beggars keep bread that is given to them in the absence of a storage bag. Ignatius did not want for himself and later for the order a security that would make them comfortable, but always wanted to be given gifts by people who would enable him to make a living, because it helped him to practise receiving the whole of life as a gift.

This desire to receive is also expressed entirely by the right (the active!) hand. The first activity of the pilgrim is receiving, listening, paying attention. Only from this does the doing, the grasping, the shaping develop. Therefore, receiving is also connected with having something to give. A person who really hears and is awake can therefore be a person who has something to give. In the hand, you can also see the "possibility of giving something" and perhaps even a "hint" of an unimaginable dimension.

The left hand (the less active one for right-handers) is the active one here. The Ignatian short formula "contemplativus in actione" is shown in these two hands.

The concentrated and open gaze is directed into the distance. It corresponds to the slightly sideways posture, which gives the impression of movement. The mystic who calls himself "the pilgrim" in the biography he narrates comes towards us from Manresa. His "pilgrim's account" is therefore less a biography than a memoir that uses the example of his own life to tell how God takes hold of a person and guides them, how God's spirit can transform a life and thus enable them to be placed alongside Christ and serve under his banner.

Martin Löwenstein SJ, 2023

