

Written in Stone

INITIALS ETCHED INTO THE HEART OF THE SOCIETY

by Brian J. Lehane, SJ

They appear everywhere from the gold and marble reliefs of the Church of the Gesù in Rome to the humble walls of South American Jesuit missions. The initials AMDG and IHS have become integral symbols of the Jesuit identity, each expressing a complex history and a deep spiritual significance.

Students in Jesuit high schools have traditionally been taught to place the initials AMDG in the upper corner of all their quizzes, tests, and papers. In recent years the practice has somewhat fallen off, but maybe it is time we consider bringing it back. AMDG stands for the Latin phrase, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, which translates, “for the greater glory of God,” the motto of the Society of Jesus. It captures in a phrase much of St. Ignatius Loyola’s sense of motivation in all he did. Ignatius wanted to show his gratitude, love, and loyalty to God by using the gifts God had given him well. By writing AMDG at the top of their papers, students remind themselves to make the most of their gifts and talents as a sign of gratitude to God and as a way to honor His graciousness.

For us and for our students, to act for the greater honor and glory of God may not mean doing anything more, as in doing more activities. It may mean simply putting more attentiveness and love into what we are already doing in honor of God. We honor God by developing the gifts we are given for the good of others. We can help students be mindful that even something as simple as trying to do one’s best work on a test or a quiz is a way to give God honor. Marking papers with AMDG is one way students can remind themselves that even doing their homework well has more significance than they may at first realize.



The second initials, IHS, predate even the Society of Jesus. The letters, known as the “sacred monogram,” are the first three letters of Jesus’ name in Greek, transliterated into English as IHSOUS. The Franciscan St. Bernardine of Siena (1380–1444), is largely responsible for developing and promoting devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus by popularizing the sacred monogram. St. Bernardine was so devoted to the name of Jesus that he is largely responsible for having the name “Jesus” added to the “Hail Mary.”

When Ignatius and his early companions were looking for an insignia for their new religious order, they could do no better than choose a variation of Bernardine’s creation. The Spiritual Exercises has a famous prayer experience called a “Meditation on Two Standards,” where ‘standard’ refers to something like a flag. Under whose flag will you serve, the flag of Christ or that of Lucifer, enemy of all that is good? Will you give your allegiance to the true Lord and His way, or will you settle for a different way that is ultimately self-destructive? Ignatius is not talking here about sinning due to human weakness; that happens to us all. He is talking about the fundamental orientation we choose for our lives.

Jesuit institutions bear the insignia of the name of Jesus to show where their loyalties lie, just as AMDG articulates our way of proceeding. Despite our failures and limitations, we return to that fundamental choice to follow the Lord’s way. We lift up the name of Jesus and acclaim Him as our Way, our Truth, and our Life. We renounce false ways of living—the greed, the dishonesty, the violence—and recommit to the gospel values the Lord has taught us. Let us remember, every time we see the IHS or AMDG displayed, that there’s power for a better world in His name for the greater glory of God.

AMDG

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Ignatian Spirituality Opportunities

Bellarmino Jesuit Retreat House

May 14–16 Women's Silent Retreat

For more information, visit www.bellarminehall.org.

Jesuit Retreat House Cleveland

April 29–May 20 Evening Discussion Series
Theological Issues and Scriptural Prayer

May 18 Marian Day Retreat

May 18–25 Discernment of Spirits Retreat

May 26–27 Facing Tragedy Retreat

For more information, visit www.jrh-cleveland.org.

Ignatian Volunteer Corps

(for those 50 and older)

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For more information, contact your regional director or visit IVC on the web: www.ivcusa.org

Jesuit Spiritual Center at Milford

June 4–10 Contemplative Retreat

For more information, visit www.jesuitspiritualcenter.com.

Manresa Jesuit Retreat House

May 14–16 St. Andrew Bobola, SJ, Retreat for Men

May 21–23 Our Lady of the Way Retreat for Men

May 25 The Spirituality of Mother Teresa of Calcutta

June 24–27 Retreat for Women


For more information, visit www.manresa-sj.org.

Charis Ministries

(for young adults)

June 14–19 Chicago Urban Immersion

For more information, visit www.charisministries.org.



St. Ignatius Loyola is depicted here in a stained glass window from a chapel at Colombiere Center in Clarkston, Michigan.