Spirituality is usually taken to be a private affair, and those of us who are purveyors of spirituality, especially in the Catholic Church, bear a certain responsibility for this. Certainly in the Catholic Church that I grew up in, “devotions,” which was how we mostly took our spirituality, were intensely personal, and, indeed, privatized affairs, even when we celebrated those devotions together. Recall, for example, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, which we celebrated every Sunday when I was a kid, most paradoxically, I must say, right after we had celebrated mass and received the body of Christ, which we then proceeded to adore from afar in a monstrance on the altar! Figure that one out, if you can! Anyway, that experience was very much a matter of me and Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and so, too, were most of the liturgical and other devotions we practiced, whether communal or individual (like the Rosary or Stations of the Cross): a matter of an intensely personal relationship with Jesus, or the Blessed Mother or the saints. Of course, we knew that other Catholics around us were doing the same thing, but we did not include them as part of what we were doing. Even the Communion of the Saints, which is supposed to be about us all, we assumed only to be about the officially recognized saints in Heaven. We were spiritual, but we did not understand and could not articulate our connectedness with each other which is at the root of the meaning of religion.

Not only was our spirituality intensely personal, it was also static and ahistorical. We might hope the Jesus we were worshipping was acting on our souls to make us better people, but we had relatively little sense of the Spirit of Jesus acting in the world, to say nothing of the Church as an agent of change.

Why are we surprised, then, when our children and students tell us that they are spiritual but not religious? Were we not the same? Dig under the surface just a bit and it is clear that our spirituality was every bit as privatized and ahistorical as theirs is and that neither could we well articulate our connection to community or tradition.
Jesuit spirituality was certainly not immune from this characterization as privatized and static. Ask anyone who did a retreat before the renewal of the Spiritual Exercises beginning in the 1960’s. Or read the account of his school retreat in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: a caricature, no doubt, but probably close enough to the truth!

The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, whose feast we celebrate today, is, of course, about individual conversion, and it is about hearing God’s call, which is irreducibly personal. But I’d like to suggest that the context of the Exercises is a social one in ways that I do not think we always appreciate, and that the living out of our Christian vocations, in the Ignatian vision of things, is above all through engagement in the world in which we find ourselves.

I suppose the social context of the Spiritual Exercises first struck me a couple of years ago when I was making my retreat and praying over one of the meditations on sin in the First Week. Saint Ignatius asks us to make a record of our sins, year by year, period by period. Now this may sound like a very privatized affair, and even a little self-absorbed, except for the advice that follows. Three things will help us to understand our own sinfulness, Saint Ignatius suggests: “First, to consider the place where I lived; secondly, my dealings with others; thirdly, the office I have held.” It is very clear from this that the “context” of our sinfulness, if you will, for St. Ignatius, is not the realm of the private or the individual, but rather our social lives, rooted in time and place, having to do with social interactions and the fulfillment, really, of our social responsibilities connected with our professional lives.

And if the context of our sinfulness for St. Ignatius is, above all, the realm of the social, the interpersonal and “professional,” so, too, is the living out of our vocations. The key meditations of the Exercises connected with vocation – the Kingdom of Christ, the Two Standards and the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God – all ask us, either in the Preludes, Points or Colloquies, to place ourselves in a social context -- before an earthly king, or before Our Lord under his standard, or before God the Father and Our Lady and the whole heavenly court – and to consider what we would should do in this situation. And the expected response, while couched in imagery congenial to St. Ignatius of joining a crusade, is clearly a matter of engagement in the world in all it manifold complexity and
need, the world in which, the Contemplation to Attain Love of God tells us, God Himself is constantly working in all the creatures upon the face of the earth.

What do these brief reflections on the Spiritual Exercises have to say to us at a Jesuit university on the Feast of St. Ignatius Loyola? Well, obviously, they are a challenge to assess our failures, and, yes, our sinfulness, in the context of what we do at this university – what our roles and responsibilities are and how we are fulfilling them. But they are also a confirmation that what we do here is more than a job: it is our vocation in the very deepest sense of that word: the call we each receive from God and our way to God in this world.