We are celebrating today the Solemnity of St. Ignatius Loyola, the Founder of the Society of Jesus. One of the wonderful things I have discovered about the spiritual genius of St Ignatius is his ability to speak to people – Jesuits and others – at different stages of their lives. Ignatius the impetuous soldier appeals to the romanticism of youth. Ignatius the pilgrim appeals to people trying to find their way. Ignatius at Manresa appeals to those in mid-life crisis. Ignatius the middle-aged graduate student is an inspiration through long years of studies. In my present position, I have discovered another Ignatius: Ignatius the seasoned administrator, who maneuvered through the rip tides and cross currents of Counter-Reformation Rome where only of late had the poisoned pen or the stab in the back become just metaphors. It is this Ignatius, the man of infinite patience and prudence, plowing through a voluminous correspondence, immersed in the complexity and density of human relations and institutional structure, who has become anew my intercessor and patron: St. Ignatius, pray for me!

I once had a conversation with one of our faculty involved in the continuing education program, who told me that she thought of St. Ignatius as the special patron of
adult learners and part-time students. Obviously, she was right. But so, too, is he the patron of middle-aged Jesuits – well, perhaps even a little more than middle-aged! – who find themselves immersed in administration. Ignatius, more than any saint I can think of, understood what it was at this stage of your life to commit yourself to what you actually find yourself doing after the major decisions of life have been made: not in the fervor of youthful enthusiasm, but in the full knowledge of what an adult’s life is really like. He understood the self-acceptance that has come our way through so much pain and suffering, through so many mistakes we have made and hurts we have received. He understood the complexity and density of culture and institutional life that I referred to earlier, which makes it so difficult to achieve good, but which is simultaneously the condition of possibility for doing good. He understood that to say yes to one’s life at this stage is to labor as God labors, in so many things, constantly, tirelessly, knowing to the tips of one’s fingers and to the depths of one’s soul what the world was like and yet still passionately immersed in it, passionately committed to it. This was the context Ignatius lived in for the second half of his life as the first Superior General of the Society, rarely leaving Rome, rarely leaving his rooms. And do you know what is amazing considering what most of his days were like? That this was the time of some of St. Ignatius’ most extraordinary mystical experiences: a time when he could barely get through saying mass for the gift of tears of joy and gratitude that overwhelmed him: you can see this depicted spectacularly in the famous portrait of St. Ignatius by Peter Paul Rubens, a copy of which hangs in the vestibule of the Chapel. Just imagine: he spent his day in the office, reading letters, writing reports and directives, meeting with his counselors, dealing with the
Vatican bureaucrats, and, at the end of the day he would weep for joy because he saw God at work in all this!

The readings for today’s mass are, of course, specially selected for the Solemnity, and they offer us an insight into what was inside of him as St. Ignatius stood weeping at the altar, until sometimes he collapsed from the emotion until his doctors told him to stop saying mass lest he injure his health and ruin his eyesight. Look especially to the gospel: “The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected . . . and be killed . . . If anyone wishes to follow me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life must lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” Ignatius could see Jesus willingly laying down his life in the welter of sin and human longing for saving which was the world he, Ignatius, lived in. Every day of his life, to the very end of his life, St Ignatius could see Jesus doing this, and so at mass, at the pinnacle and reenactment of Jesus’ sacrifice of himself, Ignatius wept for joy and gratitude until he fell to the ground.

It was to this living presence of the loving, self-giving Christ in the everyday world of his work and labors that St. Ignatius said his yes, and in the pouring out of his own life in the unglamorous work of administering the Society of Jesus, Ignatius said thank you to his Lord: “If anyone wishes to follow after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” Whenever any one of us says yes to our lives and thank you to the Lord of our lives in the actual world we live in, we thus show ourselves to be true sons and daughters of our holy father Ignatius.