

ignacianaPilgrimage in the Spain of Ignatius

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The overall importance of the concept of pilgrimage in Ignatius's mindset is substantial. Not only was his masterwork *Spiritual Exercises* largely composed during a pilgrimage, but he refers to himself throughout his *Autobiography* not as "Ignatius" but as the "pilgrim." Moreover, he mandated in the *Jesuit Constitutions* that all Jesuits in training should themselves undertake a pilgrimage, a requirement that is virtually unique among religious orders.

While most major pilgrimages within European Christendom focus on a destination held reverent because of holy relics or religious events, the Camino Ignaciano uniquely traces an actual journey once walked by a human being. Pilgrims will not just be walking to a place, but recreating Ignatius's experience of traveling through Spain.

About 45 million people inhabit Spain today. That sounds like a lot, but even though Madrid and Barcelona rank among Europe's most densely populated cities, Spain as a whole is one of Europe's most sparsely populated countries.

Now consider that Ignatius Loyola's Spain might have sheltered only seven or eight million people, 20% of its current population. Imagine towns a fraction as large as the same towns today. Imagine far emptier vistas: fewer houses, warehouses, and roads; no light stanchions or electrical wires; and so on.

Ignatius's world was also less noisy. Take note of our noisy world. Even small towns are cacophonous symphonies of car engines, hydraulic bus brakes, jackhammers... Ignatius, on the other hand, mostly heard the wind, birds, the clapping of his own donkey, and the occasional drawn cart.

Though Spain was less populous, don't imagine Ignatius as a lonely sojourner who never encountered another living soul while traversing an eerily quiet landscape. True, very few medieval Europeans traveled. They didn't take vacations, relocate their families for better jobs, or attend sales conventions. They subsisted in a

small orbit around their village. Most of Ignatius's contemporaries never journeyed even twenty miles from home.

But Ignatius's contemporaries all journeyed along the same few roads, and, when they met up, likely began discussing the distance to the next town, where one could stay, whether bandits might lay ahead, and so on. After all, Ignatius carried no map, signposting was virtually non-existent, and he couldn't call ahead for directions.

Ignatius had no watch and rarely knew the time. But he needed shelter each night and was therefore more keenly attentive than you or I to the sun's daily passage as he guesstimated how many daylight hours remained before he would have to stop traveling. Bear in mind that few dared travel unfamiliar routes at night in a world without lights.

So he undoubtedly struck up conversations with passing travelers to harvest local intelligence about the towns and accommodations ahead. It's ironic that the only conversation he records involved a Muslim, for almost everyone else he would have along the way must have been a Catholic Christian. True, Martin Luther had fired his first salvo at Roman Catholicism by nailing 95 theses to a German church door in 1517, and while Ignatius was slowly heading toward Montserrat the Catholic Church was rapidly hurtling toward a crisis. A third of its membership would defect to reformed (i.e. Protestant) churches in less than a generation.

But no tremors from that far-away reformer earthquake were shaking Ignatius's Spain, faithful to its Christian Catholic roots and only recently independent of any traces of Muslim rulership. Spain had once sheltered plenty of Muslims and about as many Jews as the rest of Europe combined, but in 1492, the year after Ignatius's birth, Ferdinand and Isabella had given Jews four months to convert or to leave Spain forever. Those who converted and remained, unwilling or unable to wrap up their lives and sell their belongings in so few months, would have concealed their former religion if possible. Prejudice ran deep. Spaniards became obsessed with "*limpieza de sangre*," purity of blood. Converts (and their descendants) were denied various job opportunities and couldn't enter most seminaries.

Given this background, one might imagine Ignatius as a narrow-minded, insulated bigot. But judged within his late medieval context, Ignatius developed a world-

openness that sometimes seems extraordinary even by 21st century standards. Though he grew up amidst Spain's militant anti-Jewish hostility, he would later on welcome converts into the Jesuit order and once stunned Jesuit colleagues by saying he would have counted Jewish blood a blessing (that is, he would have considered ethnic kinship with Jesus' own earthly family as a unique privilege).

Getting a pilgrim heart:

Ignacio is a fool for God, a man of faith, a fighter, not a man of the establishment—an “encendido” or “man on fire” as the Spaniards might call it. And with that faith renewed and purified, Ignacio would become the bearer of the message and method to spearhead the Catholic response to the Protestant Reform (not that the humble Ignatius would ever have made such a claim about himself).

After completing the Spanish stage of his pilgrimage, in mid-February 1523, he sailed from Barcelona to Rome to receive the blessing of the Pope for his Holy Land travels. He traveled eventually to Venice and Jerusalem, but was expelled from the Holy Land by Franciscan friars, custodian of the holy places, who feared the lone pilgrim would get himself into trouble. Back in Spain, he resolves to try to find men willing to dedicate themselves to living in poverty and preaching the Gospel. As a first step in that new direction, he decides to educate himself formally.

Ignacio stays two years in Barcelona and then enrolls at the University of Alcalá. There he and some companions draw attention and concern of Inquisition authorities because of their style of dress and preaching. They are arrested and accused of heresy by the preaching of the Spiritual Exercises.

The Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius largely conceived of these Exercises at Manresa, and polished them over the years. Though brief, they are not the most “user-friendly” of manuals, a collection of meditations, rules, and formulas, divided into a step-by-step series of “days”; their objective is to help a participant get as close as possible to God. They are intensely personal, inviting participants to draw on their own emotions and inner movements while reflecting on the life of Jesus: to feel Him, see Him, touch Him, feel His pain, and follow Him closely.

Studies Continued:

Ultimately banned from teaching his Exercises in Alcalá, Ignatius moved along to Salamanca for further studies. He was arrested again, suspected of heresy and sent to prison for twenty days. He was once more forbidden to speak in public about theology before obtaining the required qualifications. He was determined to do so, and eventually moved along to Paris, the great university city of Christian Europe. Far from Spain, he nonetheless remained a man on a pilgrimage, a spiritual pilgrimage, whether traveling toward Montserrat after his convalescence or established in Rome as the leader of the Jesuit religious order.

If you wish to know something more about Barcelona + Ignatius in Barcelona. If you want to know more of Alcalá. If you are interested in Salamanca.

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