

Pilgrimage to the past

Some important dates in Ignatius's life

1491: Birth of Ignatius of Loyola (Basque Country).

1521: May. Battle of Pamplona, recovery and conversion.

1522: Convalescence/Conversion experience at Manresa.

1523: Short stay as pilgrim in Jerusalem.

1524 - 1527: Studies in Barcelona, Salamanca and Alcalá.

1528 - 1535: University studies in Paris. Gathers first companions who will found the Jesuits.

1537: June. Priestly ordination in Venice.

1540: Recognition of the Society of Jesus by Pope Paul III.

1548: Approval by Pope Paul III of the Spiritual Exercises.

1553 - 1555: Ignacio dictates his Autobiography to his secretary.

July 31, 1556: Rome. Ignatius of Loyola goes home to the Lord and to enjoy his eternal peace.

Ignatius was born, probably in 1491, into a family of minor nobles in Spain's Basque region. By 1521, with various local Spanish parliaments rebelling against their king, some ten thousand French troops took advantage of Spain's internal chaos to invade the kingdom of Navarre. Severely undermanned Spanish defenders, Ignatius of Loyola among them, futilely resisted the invading forces. Ignatius was injured by cannon shot as the bastion was overrun. The victorious army took good care of him, transporting him to his home in Azpeitia, where he underwent very painful surgery for his damaged leg and, in turn, underwent a profound conversion experience during his long and painful convalescence.

He resolved to become a pilgrim and undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the first stage of which was a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady at Montserrat. He began his journey sometime in late January or early February of 1522, arriving in Montserrat on March 21. His brief autobiography devotes only eight paragraphs to this first stage of the Spanish part of his pilgrimage, recounting among other incidents a chance meeting with a Muslim and a discussion between the two men about matters of faith. This remarkable episode of “interfaith dialogue” almost ends badly when Ignatius takes offense at that Muslim’s understanding of the person of Mary.

Ignatius ended the Spanish leg of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land with more a ten month stay in the town of Manresa, an account of which occupies the largest part of his autobiography. The key spiritual experiences leading to his *Spiritual Exercises* took place during this time in Manresa, and these “exercises”, since practiced by millions of Christians over nearly five centuries in multiple adaptations, remain one the most famous and influential spiritual practices within Catholic Christendom. There is no overstating the importance of this phase of Ignatius’s life. As he explains in the *Autobiography*, “*after completing sixty-two years, even if he gathered up all the various helps he may have had from God and the various things he has known, even adding them all together, he does not think he had got as much as at that one time.*”

Historical context: Ignatius of Loyola and his 1522 pilgrimage

Go inside the experience of Ignatius:

Unfortunately, no traveler along the Camino Ignaciano can count on the same illuminations Ignatius enjoyed. But travelers can count on walking and worshipping where the saint did, which will console and fascinate many trekkers. It’s a safe (though not certain) bet that Ignatius visited most of the pre-16th century churches and structures identified in our website. Ignatius was a religious pilgrim in a religious culture. In smaller towns with only two or three churches, Ignatius might well have visited all of them to attend mass, pray before a locally important shrine, or listen to local friars chant the liturgy of the hours.

Ignatius would have stopped at the town's central square to buy provisions, confirm the traveling distance to the next village, or simply to chat. To be sure, you won't find "Ignatius of Loyola slept here" signs in Logroño, Zaragoza, Tudela, or Lleida. But at hundreds of spots along the route, you can presume that Ignatius prayed here, or shopped in this market square, walked beside this river, climbed this same hill to the shrine or monastery, or scanned astonished at this same landscape as you will.

Pilgrimage sites had proliferated throughout the Middle Ages to destinations considered holy by some association with the saintly or divine. Pilgrims set out for all kinds of reasons. Some sought favors, and many sought healing. The fear of hell became connected with the practice of going on pilgrimage, an important feature of Ignatius's world and worldview, and this is an important difference with the modern mindset. Pilgrimage today can seem an exotic and even odd endeavor; even religious persons might know no one who has ever journeyed on pilgrimage. But pilgrimage was commonplace in medieval life. Many, many Europeans went on short pilgrimages to minor shrines near their homes, and a few had the once-in-a-lifetime privilege of journeying to Santiago de Compostela, Rome, or the Holy Land. 21st century pilgrims will need to do some imagining to appreciate the scope, practices, and theology of pilgrimage in Ignatius's day but it is worth trying! Don't miss this point in your pilgrimage!

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