



Brian B. Pinter outside Manresa, the city where Ignatius Loyola had mystical visions and wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*

Thinking on your feet, Ignatian-style

Brian B. Pinter joins a pilgrimage along a new route that traces St Ignatius Loyola's journey through his native Spain

"God has blessed Spain with a sense of enchantment, an abundance of passion, and a powerful, mystical *eros*. I'm reminded of Song of Solomon 8:6, 'The flash of love is a flash of fire/A flame of Yahweh himself'. These people and their alluring country radiate this romantic energy. I think Ignatius felt this deep in his soul all his life. I understand how he came to find 'God in all things'."

This was the final journal entry during my pilgrimage along the Camino Ignaciano, a new route mapped by the Spanish Jesuits which traces the 650 kilometres Ignatius walked in 1522 from Loyola, in Spain's northern Basque country, to Manresa, in Catalonia. Along with 12 educators from

Jesuit institutions across the United States, I had the privilege of being among the first pilgrims to hike a portion of the Ignatian Way during two grace-filled weeks in July 2013. My experience as an Ignatian pilgrim brought me into intimate contact with what is most essential to understanding Ignatius, but can't be gleaned from any book – the romantic, mystical spirit of his homeland that animated his heart and soul.

Fr José "Josep" Luis Iriberry SJ, who has spearheaded the development and promotion of the Camino Ignaciano, wrote about his ministry in *Yearbook of the Society of Jesus* 2014, "Our objective is to offer men and women of the twenty-first century the opportunity to have the same experience as

Ignatius: entering into oneself and discerning the meaning of what we do and how we live." Fr Iriberry and his staff arrange accommodation (hostels, convents and small, family-run guest houses), meals, and visits to sites significant in the life of St Ignatius.

Our pilgrimage began in Loyola, the small town nestled in the hills of the northern Basque region which was home to generations of Ignatius' family (and still is, according to some local residents who claim to be of the saint's clan). It was here that Ignatius first set out on his own spiritual journey. While convalescing at Loyola Castle after sustaining a leg wound during the Siege of Pamplona in 1521, Ignatius discovered a deep desire to serve God. As he contemplated the lives of the saints, he felt a great sense of peace in his heart, as well as a longing to emulate their holy, heroic lives. Ignatius' method of reflecting on his desires, naming those which bring consolation, naming those which bring desolation, has become a widely recognised prayer method known as the "discernment of spirits".

Ignatius noted in his autobiography that, during his convalescence, he spent many nights gazing at the stars through his bedroom window, feeling a great sense of peace. That room is now a chapel.

We departed Loyola with a blessing – in Euskara, the Basque language of Ignatius – from the Jesuit superior of the shrine. Although a complete pilgrim route retracing the entire journey of Ignatius from the Euskadi (Basque) country through La Rioja, Navarra, and Aragon into Catalonia has been mapped (a 30-day hike, with a significant portion through a desert-like wilderness), our group was taken by bus directly to the small Catalan town of Palau d'Anglesola. From here we would begin our long walk (80 miles/130km) to Manresa – the city where Ignatius had mystical visions and wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*. After a dinner of ham and shared reflection in our group's daily pilgrim circle, I settled in my air-conditioned room (the last time I would experience that particular luxury for the remainder of the trip) for the night's rest

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before our anticipated 12-mile hike the following day. My journal entry reads, "As we begin the walking portion of this experience, I feel drawn to silence, as if the Spirit is pulling me into this place of inner rest. This town is so beautiful; it feels and smells of life. The mystical energy of this place is potent. I want to embrace and kiss all of Spain – its towns, fields, harbours, squares, sun, people, starry nights. I think this is how Ignatius felt about this land, and the whole world."

We set out shortly after sunrise the next morning, hoping to cover as many miles as possible before the heat enshrouded us. The packed gravel road led us through mowed wheatfields dotted with barns, streams and ruins of stone farmhouses. Our way was marked with bright orange arrows, just as the Camino de Santiago de Compostela is marked in yellow. Although we had not formally agreed to it, we were silent as we walked. The rhythm of the hiking, the stillness of the countryside and the bend of the road over the horizon led me to a deep sense of true solitude – I was free to be totally present to the moment. There was no place I'd rather have been but there, on the road with my companions, with Ignatius. We pilgrims were together, yet we were alone.

The Camino gave flesh and soul for me to

the Ignatian spiritual principles of indifference and humility. Indifference for Ignatius was non-attachment to things – "We want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, long rather than short life ... desiring only what is most conducive to us to the end for which we are created ... to praise reverence and serve God." Humility for Ignatius was rooted in the choice of "poverty for Christ, poor rather than riches ... to desire to be rated a fool for Christ". This *agere contra*, way of "acting against" inordinate desires – for comfort, for notoriety, for the status quo – is constitutional to Ignatian asceticism and spirituality.

The daily experience of the pilgrim demands indifference and humility; one is thrust into a state of vulnerability, counter-cultural witness and stripped down simplicity. For example, only one in our group spoke a modicum of Spanish, leaving us to rely greatly on the goodwill of local people we encountered. Pilgrims also encounter unexpected challenges: in Igualada, we were stuck between floors in a lift while touring the cathedral; upon



One of the signposts guiding pilgrims on the Ignatian Way

arriving in Castellolí, we discovered that we would need to hike another three miles uphill to find our hotel for the night (a 1,000-year-old farmhouse); ascending Montserrat, perch of the Benedictine monastery where Ignatius surrendered his sword before the "Black Madonna", we became lost, hiking a few miles away from the correct path before finding our way again.

To subject oneself to the inconveniences of a pilgrimage appears absurd to many (a perplexed family member asked me why I would want to do such a thing!), but the pilgrim does it as an act of faith. And as far as material comforts are concerned, I had nothing more than what I could carry on my back. I ate whatever I was offered, did my laundry every day by hand in a sink, slept in whatever bed was available. (In the town of Verdu, home of St Peter Claver, that bed was located only feet from the town's clock – which chimed on the quarter-hour, day and night.)

The Camino Ignaciano, characterised by breathtaking natural beauty, by a mystical-erotic charge and by the irresistibly vivacious Basque, Spanish and Catalan people, led me to realise that Ignatius had been a romantic – and a mystic – all his life, but that energy manifested itself differently in the first part of his life than it did in the second. As Ignatius flowered, willingly placing his life in the hands of God, allowing himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, his mystical energy flowed out of his senses in a way more life-giving than the Don Juanism and knight-errant chivalry of his early years. Walking in his footsteps allowed me to experience first-hand the love, lust and longing Ignatius felt for God's enchanted Creation. Walking the Ignatian Way allowed me to see that this diminutive but great saint of Loyola has something to teach us about taming and channelling our own erotic pulse for life towards "the greater glory of God".

More information about the Camino Ignaciano can be found at <http://caminoignaciano.org/en>

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