

# Following in the Footsteps of Ignatius: Being a pilgrim on the Ignatian Way Natalie Baxter Strange



“Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and lean not on your own understanding.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make your paths straight.”  
Proverbs 3:5-6

Standing in the long line to check-in at Brussels Airport, I scrolled through my emails on my phone to pass the time. These words from Proverbs leapt out at me from my Lenten reflection for that day. What better words to begin a pilgrimage? My heart was consoled; the Lord felt near. To trust in the Lord with all my heart was what I deeply desired in the days to come.

Four months previously, another email had arrived in my inbox: an invitation to join a group pilgrimage following in the footsteps of Ignatius from Loyola to Manresa. The arrival date in Manresa: March 25<sup>th</sup>, exactly 500 years after his arrival in 1522. I was filled with excitement at the thought of it. Yes, count me in!

Our group of 14 pilgrims and our guide Fr. Josep Lluís Iriberry, S.J. arrived in Loyola on a beautiful warm sunny day. Spanish families were enjoying their Sunday strolls and time together in the park by the Basilica. All seemed well with the world in that moment.

That evening, after our first meal together, we gathered in a large circle in the chapel of the Pedro Arrupé Hotel. Excitement and nervousness was in the air as we introduced ourselves and shared our desires, as well as our fears. It was clear that God had drawn each one here through the particular circumstances of our lives. For some, the pandemic had kept them waiting for two years for this day. We had travelled from the USA, Singapore, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Belgium, and ranged in age from 41 to 82. For the next two weeks, we were going to be companions on the Ignatian Way, brothers and sisters in Christ following Jesus.



Santa María de los Reyes, Laguardia

Going on pilgrimage is an adventure. An adventure with God and others. One could say that to expect the unexpected is a good way of proceeding. The unexpected, both the welcome and not so welcome. Only God knew what the days to come would hold for us, individually and collectively. We were in His hands.

Our first full day was spent visiting the important places for Ignatius in Loyola and Azpeitia, culminating in our first Mass in the Chapel of the Conversion. Stepping into the room, one senses a hushed reverence. With the old wooden floorboards and beams in the

ceiling, one can imagine Ignatius recovering from his cannonball injury and surgeries here. In the corner where Ignatius lay for months in his bed, an old, somewhat tattered canopy hangs over a large gold statue of Ignatius

looking heavenward. As we gathered around the altar to receive communion, each of us placed a hand on the altar, offering ourselves and this pilgrimage to God.

Under blue skies we set off the next morning from the steps of the Basilica and followed the former railway line along the Urola River. Spring was bursting forth all around us. At one point, dozens of small colourful butterflies-- blue, white with orange tips, yellow, and mottled brown-- appeared fluttering among the nettles by a cool, gushing waterfall. ones.



We walked those first two hours in silence, as we would do most mornings. In that silence, I became even more away of my deep joy and gratitude to God. My cup was overflowing, like the waterfall by the path. Crossing the old railway bridges the wind reminded me of the Holy Spirit and threatened to carry my hat away. The cool, damp, dark tunnels invited me to pray for the light of Christ to shine in dark places, in me and elsewhere.

To cover the 650+ km of the Ignatian Way in 11 days, we relied on buses as well as our feet to get us to Manresa. We particularly appreciated having the bus as we climbed over 1000m into the spectacular high mountains to Arantzazu, where an impressive Franciscan monastery is perched. Arantzazu, a centre for Marian devotion, was the first of many places where Ignatius stopped to pray to the Virgin/Our Lady out of his deep devotion to her.

From Loyola in the Basque region to Manresa in Catalunya, the landscape varies enormously. Green mountains, river valleys, vineyards in dry, sienna brown soil, the open undulating plateau of Los Monegros, great expanses of fruit orchards. In March, the vines looked unpromising without any new growth but the peach orchards were like great splashes of bright pink along our route. The landscape informed and shaped my conversations with God as I journeyed, along with the suggested grace, reflections, scripture and prayers for each day. The Psalmist writes: "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). It seemed to me that everywhere I looked, the Lord was speaking to me: the small, shrivelled apple revealing something of my own heart; the spiky, sharp plant reminding me of Jesus' passion and death; the beauty of wild flowers and birdsong that filled the air, leading me to praise our Lord and Creator.

Praying with an abbreviation of the Spiritual Exercises material deepened our experience further. After the pilgrimage, when I looked back over my journal, I realised that I had experienced the complete dynamic of the Exercises over the two weeks. Something I had not expected.

And then there were the conversations. Rich, meaningful and memorable conversations. Light, joyful ones. Painful ones. Moments of hilarity and laughter. Moments of tears. Like any companions, we experienced both joys and sorrows. We formed deep bonds very quickly. At the end, when we came to say farewell, we realised how precious we had become to each other. Blessings unnumbered. We had entrusted ourselves as best we could into God's hands, and his love and grace met us in abundance.



Castellnou de Seana

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