

# From Loyola to Manresa on The Camino Ignaciano

By David R. Brock, September 2022

Somewhere along my pilgrimage from Loyola to Manresa, Spain, this past spring, we were shown a piece of cathedral art created to honor Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The work contained a number of large circles. Our guide, Jesuit priest José Luis Iriberry, said no one really knows what the circles represent. I told him my theory—that it has something to do with sports; likely a precursor to the game we now know as basketball! He wasn't convinced, but smiled at my hypothesis.

My first knowledge of the Jesuits, you see, before I ever knew anything about Ignatius, or The Society of Jesus, came because of NCAA basketball. The powerhouses of roundball through the decades included teams from Georgetown, Marquette, Loyola Chicago, Xavier, and these days, Creighton and Gonzaga. I still hold that the ancient artwork we looked upon is connected to Jesuit prowess on modern collegiate hardwoods.

Later I learned that those same schools, and a bunch more, were also among the finest academic institutions in the U.S. I discovered that to become a Jesuit priest required disciplined spiritual practice, learning to live in community, and completing degrees in philosophy and theology—an 8 to 13 year preparation period before ordination. The rigorous spiritual and academic study, arising from Ignatius's own lengthy and difficult educational journey, often included completion of an additional doctoral degree.

Familiarity with Jesuits included the poetry of priest Gerard Manley Hopkins who, as many of you know, wrote

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.*

*It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;*

*It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil*

*Crushed....*

*And though the last lights off the black West went*

*Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —*

*Because the Holy Ghost over the bent*

*World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

Then there was the paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit priest introduced in an earlier "Thirsting for God" session:

*Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.*

*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.*

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.  
We are quite naturally impatient in everything  
to reach the end without delay.*

In seminary I kept seeing news about the Superior General who served the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983. Father Pedro Arrupe was a prophetic voice during the upheavals of Vatican II in the 60's, an advocate for the poor and the oppressed in the 70's and 80's, even when standing in the breach resulted in the martyrdom of priests and nuns. Because of his reforms, Arrupe was, after Ignatius, known as the 2<sup>nd</sup> founder of the Society.

With that smattering of knowledge about The Society of Jesus and about a few well-known members within the Order, it seemed essential to know more about Ignatius of Loyola, the First Jesuit.

During studies in spiritual direction at Mt. Carmel Spiritual Centre in Niagara Falls, Canada, in 2010-2012, I learned about this 13<sup>th</sup> child in the Loyola family. The one time "...fancy dresser, an expert dancer, a womanizer, sensitive to insult, and a rough punkish swordsman...[who]used his privileged status to escape prosecution for violent crimes..."<sup>1</sup>

But, we know him today because he was dramatically transformed to the way of compassion and service as one of history's most devoted followers of Jesus. Those of you are familiar with the story, if not, see [www.Jesuits.org](http://www.Jesuits.org) or Wikipedia or his Autobiography, "A Pilgrim's Journey."

Central to his conversion was the development, practice and guidance of others in The Spiritual Exercises. Every Jesuit clergy completes the practice several times in his life. Since the 1980s the Exercises have been experienced [made as they say] by laypersons and clergy in many denominations.

In this the 500<sup>th</sup> year of Ignatius' "cannon ball conversion" (2022) as some have named it, it seemed timely to learn even more about the life of the First Jesuit. In that year of 1522 Ignatius journeyed some 400 miles on horseback and on foot from Loyola to Montserrat and Manresa. The pilgrimage, a common practice in those days, and more and more in *these* days, changed his life. His further journey with Jesus (including a pilgrimage from Barcelona to Jerusalem) has changed the life of many people in many nations of the world.

On the last night of our pilgrimage last May 2022, we gathered for a final period of worship and reflection in the Jesuit Center at Manresa. I commented to the circle of 24 pilgrims how meaningful it had been to learn about his childhood, his military career, the life-changing injury in battle, the years of pilgrimage and spiritual discipline that culminated in the writing of the Spiritual Exercises.

But I wondered out loud if there was a pilgrimage for older folk like me (the over 60's and 70's crowd) who would follow the steps of Ignatius in his later years. What about all those decades in Rome?

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<sup>1</sup> [Traub, S.J., George and Mooney, Ph.D., Debra. A Biography of St. Ignatius Loyola, Xavier University](#)

- the innumerable steps to establish and gain approval for the Society of Jesus by Pope Paul III in 1540.
- the years of caring for the poor, individually, and through organizations established for their wellbeing,
- the founding of educational institutions in numerous nations (35 schools at the time of his death, almost 400 sixty years later).
- the challenges of calling and training priests (some 1,000 at the time of his death),
- the honing of people skills to gain the trust of Popes and Cardinals,
- the ability to forgive and make friends of enemies who had him jailed 3 different times and tried to destroy him and the Society.

What from the waning years of his life provides guidance for pilgrims like me in my own autumn-into-winter season? My questions now are different than those of the new convert or the busy administrator. At 70, I wonder:

What will aging do to me? To my body? To my mind? . . . Will I matter to anyone? Will I be a burden? How will I die?... Grey hair and sagginess notwithstanding, [says Kathleen Dowling Singh], many of us still cling childishly to so much that is unreal and inessential. Many of us still cling to reputation, to imagined security, to unexamined habits of attitude and behavior, and to self-image. We have deep aversion to having all of our cherished illusions stripped away by life-in-form's seeming indifference.<sup>2</sup> What can I learn from the later years of Ignatius' life?

At the end of my pilgrim journey this spring, as meaningful as it was, I wanted to also walk with the Ignatius who is described in Mary Purcell's biography, *The First Jesuit*.

... he was a small sized man, barely five feet tall, and ... his voice was "thin and delicate." Towards the end of his life he tended to grow stouter. The hair which in bygone days "fell to his shoulders, auburn and beautiful," had faded to "the color of ripe wheat" [358]. "Judging by human standards, our Father was not very good looking" [359].

He had bright eyes, with a penetrating glance that read one through and through, but his modesty seldom allowed him to raise them.... [359].

Smiles and laughter seemed to come to him as readily as tears, and "joy welled up in him at sight of the Fathers [the Jesuit priests], so much so that he had trouble in preserving the serious demeanor he himself had laid down in the Constitutions; sometimes a smile or laugh escaped his lips in spite of his self-control..."[359].

But my pilgrimage began at the beginning, as it should have. On the cool and foggy morning of May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, we stood in the place of Ignatius' birth in 1491, 531 years before. We were

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Dowling Singh, *The Grace in Aging: Awaken as You Grow Older* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2014)

walking on the stone floor where he learned to crawl, to walk, then run in the Loyola family compound constructed in the beauty of Spain's rugged Basque countryside.

In that family fortress, now enclosed within a magnificent basilica bearing San Ignacio's name, we paused in the kitchen where he ate his meals, and where much of his identity was surely shaped. We learned of the wild seeds sown in his youth. We learned of his profligate ways in young adulthood which he described in the third person in his autobiography: "Until his twenty-sixth year he was a man given to worldly vanities and used to take special delight in feats of arms, being filled with a great and vain desire for fame" [19].

We learned details of the near fatal injury from the cannon ball that destroyed his leg in a losing battle against the French at Pamplona in May 1521. We saw the bed, topped with a red, gold-fringed canopy, which was his abiding place for many months during a lengthy and agonizing recovery. We were reminded that it was in that room and on that bed where he read the lives of the saints and the story of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit began Ignatius' transformation from a much-lauded soldier of war to a beggar, dependent on the grace of Mother Mary and her Savior Son.

We then paused from the history lessons, the museum, and the walk through the stunning basilica sanctuary to sit in silence and consider our own stories, our own odysseys. In the quiet we were invited to consider God's unconditional love and reflect on the questions, "Who is God for me?" "How does God see me?" "What worries or fears do I want to let go of as I begin this pilgrimage?"

Maybe we should just stop here and spend the rest of the morning considering those three questions. Ignatius would certainly recommend that practice. "It's not about me," he'd say. "It's not about my pilgrimage. It's about your lifelong walk with Jesus. It's about you being created to praise, reverence, and love God."

That afternoon, we walked to places in the nearby town of Azpeitia significant to the life of Ignatius: a hermitage of our Lady of Olatz, a hostel for travelers which also served as a hospital for the sick (the Magdalene), the parish church (Saint Sebastian of Soreasu), a convent just inside city walls that Ignatius would have known in his day. Carolyn and I then walked along the Urola River back to our convent (Jesús Maria religious order) guest house "home." A quiet Sunday evening, the sound of children in a park nearby reaching us on a cool evening breeze.

A worship and reflection time was led by Sister Janice, followed by a hike with Carolyn up the hill behind the convent as the sun set on the first full day of our pilgrim journey. Then, a simple dinner of fish with bread soup at 8:30 (an early dining hour for most Spaniards) and to bed.

In subsequent days we followed a similar rhythm as we made our way toward Montserrat, Manresa and finally Barcelona: visits to cathedrals and parish churches, to shrines and hostels—some existing in Ignatius' day, others built in later centuries to commemorate his life and ministry.

We rode a bus at times. We trekked for miles on the same roads and paths where Ignatius rode his horse or traveled on foot in 1522. We took our meals together. We shared the

eucharist daily. We remembered events in the life of Jesus as outlined by Ignatius in *The Spiritual Exercises*.

Some of Ignatius's beliefs and practices as a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Catholic do not edify me—particularly in his early years. Not at all! The self-flagellation and rough clothing, for example, penitence by pain through excessive fasting, kneeling, and sleep deprivation; sacrifice and suffering as requirements for forgiveness.

I'm intrigued by the theological perspective that led to an often recounted story on his pilgrim journey. At Luceni (Aragon region), Ignatius met a Moor, a Muslim, who was riding a mule as the statue on the street recalls us. They fell into conversation which soon turned to the topic of Mother Mary. The Moor believed the virgin had conceived without human involvement, but couldn't believe she remained a virgin after giving birth. The argument persisted until they parted ways at a crossroad, neither convincing the other of his point of view.

As Ignatius traveled on, he felt as an enthusiastic new convert he had failed Mary. He became angry with himself and decided he was obliged to defend her honor; that it was his duty to give the Moor "a taste of his dagger." In his autobiography, Ignatius quotes the words of a king of France regarding how a blasphemer should be treated: "Chevaliers, when you hear someone cursing the Christian faith, defend the faith not with words but with the sword, thrusting it as far as possible into the belly of the infidel."

But Ignatius had doubts. He argued with himself about what was the right thing to do. At the crossroads where the Moor and Ignatius had departed ways, he decided to let his horse discern what he should do by giving him free reign. If the horse took the road that led to the village, Ignatius would pursue the Moor and kill him. If the beast kept to the highway, he would allow the Moor to escape. It happened through "God's providence," as Ignatius described it, that the mule kept to the highway and the man was saved.

Months later, Ignatius arrived at Mont-Serrat, "The Serrated Mountain," as the famous place of pilgrimage was known. There, he decided to give up his horse, his boots, his sword and exchange his fine clothing for a beggar's garments. On the evening of March 24, 1522, he saw a beggar on the road. He removed his costly clothing, put on the pilgrim's robe and spent the night kneeling at the altar dedicated to the Virgin.

Sometimes good resolves have painful consequences despite our best intentions. You might be able to recount stories from your own life. Ignatius's encounter with the beggar was one such experience. The very next day after giving his clothes to the beggar, a man came running toward him about 3 miles from Montserrat and asked if Ignatius had given a beggar his fine clothing. He acknowledged that he had done so. The man informed Ignatius the beggar, falsely accused of theft, was beaten and ill-treated by local authorities. He wept for the beggar and lamented the consequences of what he had intended for good.

From Montserrat, we pilgrims joined Ignatius, now on foot as history tells us, as we walked down the mountain to Manresa. Manresa became the principal place of his illuminations along the Cardoner River. It was here that he received spiritual direction from seasoned clergy. It was the place where he began *The Spiritual Exercises* in the cave where he meditated.

One day while at the Jesuit Center in Manresa, we were given time on our own for reflection, contemplation, or for exploring the old city. I chose to go to a plexiglass covered, man-made meditation 'cave.' It is a place of silence built as a reminder of the nearby cave in which Ignatius practiced his disciplines and wrote. For more than an hour I simply sat in the quiet, looking out on the framed vista of Montserrat in the distance.

There were no illuminations or visions. No audible "Word of the Lord" came to me. I felt no clarity of discernment regarding an important future direction of my life. Mostly, I felt grateful to just sit in the silence and look out on the beauty of the Cataluña countryside and the peaks of Montserrat rising in the distance.

During that hour, I reviewed places and events of those 10 days of pilgrimage with fellow travelers. I also re-remembered decades of learning and teaching and traveling to other nations and wondered at how all that could have happened to a kid from Midwest America like me.

Blessings pressed down, shaken together and running over. Generosity unlimited and immeasurable. That's what I felt and thought about there in that cave. And Elijah's cave where he heard the still, small voice; the stable, possibly a cave, where the Messiah was born; the nearby cave of Ignatius where he practiced asceticism and deepened in wisdom and clarity of call. But, this cave. My cave. Near the end of my pilgrimage. A place of beauty. Reminder of a rich legacy of faith.

I don't know as much as I'd like about Ignatius' final decades, but I know, in part because of my hour in the 'cave', that in my own later years, as James Finley says:

We ripen in holiness and spiritual fulfillment as we learn to sit in the sun of God's mysterious, sustaining presence that energizes and guides our efforts, bringing us to realms of grace that are beyond, way beyond, anything we can achieve by our own efforts alone. . . . [James Finley]

With Joan Chittister, I can affirm:

This is the period of life when we must begin to look inside our own hearts and souls rather than outside ourselves for the answers to our problems, for the fixing of the problems. This is the time for facing ourselves, for bringing ourselves into the light.

Can we smile at what we have not smiled at for years? Can we give ourselves away to those who need us? Can we speak our truth without needing to be right and accept the vagaries of life now—without needing the entire rest of the world to swaddle us beyond any human justification for expecting it? Can we talk to people decently and allow them to talk to us? . . . -Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008).

Franciscan Father, Richard Rohr adds wisdom from his own life pilgrimage.

If we are to speak of a *spirituality* of ripening, we need to recognize that it is always characterized by an increasing tolerance for ambiguity, a growing sense of subtlety,

an ever-larger ability to include and allow, and a capacity to live with contradictions and even to love them! –Richard Rohr

My words and images today are obviously much more about me than about Ignatius—or maybe they are more about the Holy One, God who gives love without measure—to me, to you, and yes to Ignatius and all creation. Flawed and fallible we are. Also, bearers of so much truth, beauty and goodness.

And yet, Ignatius merits a word as I end my reflection on the Camino Ignaciano. This is the way Mary Purcell sums up his life in her biography of the Saint from Loyola whose letters and scholarship were scanty and whose introspective activity was, on the other hand, extraordinarily intense.

“The Spiritual Exercises, the Jesuit Constitutions, the Autobiography, the few pages salvaged [sic] from his intimate Spiritual Diary and almost seven thousand letters, some running to great length, condense the essence of his privileged soul. And even had he left no written word, he left stamped upon his order the unmistakable, indelible imprint of his indomitable will, of his boundless zeal and ambition to win the whole world “for God our Lord.” [THE FIRST JESUIT, 372]

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve;  
to give, and not to count the cost,  
to fight, and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil, and not to seek for rest,  
to labor, and not to ask for reward,  
except that of knowing that we are doing your will.* –Prayer by Ignatius