



# TREASURE HUNTING ON THE IGNATIAN CAMINO

By Lan Chieu  
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The pilgrims prepare for their ascent of Montserrat.

We boarded the bus early to leave Azpeitia, the hometown of St. Ignatius of Loyola, for Arantzazu, where we would start the first long walk (17 km) of our *Camino*. Bouncing in their seats, my niece and the other young adults on this pilgrimage had their eyes glued to their cell phones. I wished they would pause their Pokémon Go for a moment, perhaps to catch the scenery passing us by – green, rolling hills dotted with charming, whitewashed houses adorned with the red shutters typical of the Basque countryside. After all, they had traveled thousands of miles to be here, on the *Camino Ignaciano*.

The scenery changed as we arrived at Our Lady of Arantzazu, the Franciscan sanctuary at the foot of the Aizkorri mountain range. Under the gray sky, the austere modernistic façade of the church loomed over us like something from a sci-fi movie. It was cold, which caught us off guard. The young adults were at once captivated and jittery. They worried about the long walk ahead and wondered if they were adequately geared for this *Camino* after all.

I shivered in my capri-length hiking pants, feeling the cold wind blowing on my calves. The ever-fluctuating weather of the Basque country reminded me that no matter how prepared I was, every journey brought the unexpected – a reminder to let go of the need to control. We entered the church just as it started to drizzle.

As legend has it, at this site in 1468, a young shepherd followed the sound of a cowbell to find a small statue of Mary in a thorn bush. He exclaimed, “*Arantzan zu?*” (“You, among the thorns?”), engendering the name of the sanctuary. Fifty years later, on his way to Barcelona with the aim of reaching Jerusalem, St. Ignatius spent a night here in prayer to strengthen his resolve for the pilgrimage. Inside the now much more majestic church, we, too, bowed our heads in front of the altar and asked the Virgin Mary to bestow her blessings upon our upcoming journeys.

This pattern would be repeated throughout the *Camino*. We stopped at various shrines that marked the significant moments in St. Ignatius’ life or that venerated his early



This statue of Our Lady of Arantzazu, found by a Basque shepherd in a thorn bush in the 15th century, is housed in a shrine where St. Ignatius kept vigil on his own pilgrimage.



companions. The young adults' gleeful chatter would give way to awe of the holy site. Then, after listening to Fr. Jose Iriberry, SJ, the founder of the Ignatian *Camino* and the director of the *Oficina del Camino Ignaciano* in Spain, they would turn to quiet prayer.

I marveled at this sacred land that had produced so many pillars of the Church throughout the centuries. I breathed in the air, soaked up the light and perked my ears at the whispering wind, hoping to be in communion with these holy souls and the thousands of pilgrims who had passed this way. It was my second time on the Ignatian *Camino*, and I wanted to experience the Way more deeply.

My niece soon observed that most of the shrines were dedicated to the Virgin Mary. First, there was Our Lady of Olatz, where St. Ignatius often went to pray, probably in secret to avoid the gossips of his hometown. Then, Arantzazu, where he spent the night in vigil. At Montserrat, in front of the Black Madonna and Child statue, Ignatius gave up his sword and changed into beggar's clothes. Finally, upon arrival in Barcelona, the would-be saint begged for alms on the steps of the Church of St. Mary of the Sea.

Ignatius lived his days true to his prayer that Mary might place him with her son.

The Abbey at Montserrat was built near a cave where, in the ninth century, a shepherd found the ancient black wooden statue of the Virgin and Child. It was probably hidden there during the Moors' occupation of the region. I like to believe that through bell sounds, bright light and singing from the mountains, the angels had led the shepherds to these treasures hidden in the wilderness. Centuries later, the same treasures would serve as guideposts for Ignatius of Loyola in his search for the ultimate treasure – the meaning of his life.

As we followed in St. Ignatius' footsteps, I looked at our young pilgrims and wondered if they were aware that they, too, were making a journey into themselves. What treasures would they find buried there?

Father Hung Pham, SJ, has a tradition on his pilgrimages that during daily Mass, in place of a homily, the participants take turns sharing the gifts they receive on the road. Through these gems *du jour*, I caught glimpses of the hidden treasures within our pilgrims. One pilgrim shared that after everyone had left Our Lady of Olatz Church, she went back alone to pray the rosary. There, she found in her heart forgiveness for her mother and the hope to restore their strained relationship.

Another pilgrim, a man in his 60s, choked back tears as he told us of his wife at home reminding him to pray for their sons, as they walked the *Camino* together. What a gift for the three of them to walk alongside each other on pilgrimage!

Not all gifts were pleasant. On the ascent of Mount Montserrat, another pilgrim, a strong and confident woman, was tested both physically and spiritually. The twists and turns of the mountain road, sometimes filled with loose gravel, required her to be fully present at every step. Gripped with fear and frustration, she found herself repeatedly reciting, "*Señor, guía me!*" ("Lord, guide me!"). She later shared, "At these moments, my only source of reassurance was the faith that God would protect me and help me complete this hike. I realized that I could not undertake this alone ... Asking for help was exactly what I needed to do."

Every day on the *Camino*, we walked in silence for the first two hours, meditating on an Ignatian theme. Then we walked in pairs to share the fruits of our reflection. These ordinary conversations led to extraordinary moments



The group descends into the village of Manresa.

of grace. One pilgrim recognized the encouragement she had been praying for to continue her graduate study. Another saw a hint of a possible direction for her career.

On the road, in nature and away from the noises of modern life, one seems to find what one searches for a bit more easily. Perhaps God always wants to communicate; we just need to pay attention.

Before this pilgrimage, I had hoped to repeat the encounter of my first *Camino*. I had wished to feel again the Divine's presence in the air, the light and the Basque country's wind. While the memories did come rushing back, what I didn't expect to find were the sacred treasures hidden deep in the hearts of my fellow pilgrims.



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