

## My Spiritual Journey and Big Growth in Spain

In early 2022, I enrolled in a Spiritual Direction Certificate program at Southern Methodist University (SMU). This is where I first learned about St. Ignatius. In my application I described my spiritual journey :

My spiritual journey has not been linear or traditional and for much of my adult life I have not been a regular church goer. I am one of the many people for whom church membership and attendance required too much in the way of beliefs and creeds that no longer made sense to me. But I have always felt called to larger life and contemplation; I've always had a gut sense that there is a whole lot more going on than meets the eye and that these lives we lead and our daily preoccupations are actually very, very small in the big scheme of things. Going to church brought shame because I didn't believe what I thought I was supposed to and what I assumed everyone around me did believe. Talking about going to church brought embarrassment, lest anyone think I believed the unbelievable. I am very much on a journey and believe that this program (and the required Spiritual Direction) can provide structure for that journey. I believe that religion, Christianity, and church communities all have so much to offer our ever more troubled and heartbreaking world. As I explore and release that shame and as I grow in my ability to own and express why I value religion and Christianity and congregational life, I think I can help. I want to help.

The title of the first weekend retreat was *Noticing the Things of God*. What I remember is that I was shocked by an article that said we could use our emotions and feelings to understand God's Will for our lives – no theology I had ever encountered allowed for my feelings. **I had understood I was to submit to God's Will, God's Will was written in the Bible, and other people would tell me what it meant for my life. And according to God's Will, I was very, very bad.** (Ironically, the articles were about the same topic: IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT.)

I was softened by time, the people in my program, and the beginnings of my attendance at an Episcopal church. I was surprised to find that saying the word "God" quickly came to feel familiar. I read a book with the awkward title, *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life – In Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*.

Midway through the Spiritual Direction program we were asked again to our spiritual journey. The final slides show how much my understanding of my journey had changed from when I started the program.

<b>Favorite Hymn (or at least a favorite Verse)</b>	Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.
<b>Favorite Scripture Ecclesiastes 1:13</b>	I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven.
<b>Favorite Poem</b>	Here in the Psalm, by Sally Fisher

And,

## Here in the Psalm, by Sally Fisher

I am a sheep  
and I like it  
because the grass  
I lie down in  
feels good and the still  
waters are restful and right  
there if I'm thirsty  
and though some valleys  
are very chilly there is a long  
rod that prods me so I  
direct my hooves  
the right way  
though today  
I'm trying hard  
to sit at a table  
because it's expected  
required really

and my enemies—  
it turns out I have enemies—  
are watching me eat and  
spill my drink  
but I don't worry because  
all my enemies do  
is watch and I know  
I'm safe if I will  
just do my best  
as I sit on this chair  
that wobbles a bit  
in the grass  
on the side of a hill.



Then something else happened to change my understanding of my journey. I learned about an **Ignatian Camino trip** that Spiritual Director's International was promoting. Based on absolutely nothing except the introduction I'd had to Ignatian discernment, I signed up immediately. When April, 2025 arrived, I suppose my discernment question was: "What will I do when I retire?" I did get an answer to that small and specific question – train to be a Chaplain – on the trip. But I also received an answer to a much larger question that I'd been struggling with my entire life: **What does God ask of me?**

A quick and inadequate explanation of some Ignatian terms. Consolations are movements of spirit (feelings) that indicate you are on the right path – God's will, peace of mind, happiness. Desolations are similar, but indicate you are on the wrong path.

The priest leading the group, Father Jose, gave us scriptures for daily reading and study. The first day, one of the scriptures was Matthew 19:24, "*Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*" This scared me, for all the reasons it scares anyone. As the tour progressed, I was surrounded by stories of people who gave up all to follow Christ. I was walking the path of Ignatius after he received his sudden call to serve God, learning about people like Francis Xavier and others who also left lives of privilege to serve God. My fellow Pilgrims were people who took their faith seriously. One woman had spent over 15 years living in the slums of Calcutta serving with Mother Teresa's group. The Ignatian Camino project itself was created by Fr. Jose at the direction of his Jesuit Order and he'd been at it for thirty years. It seems to bring him great joy, but I understood it had not been his idea.



Over the next few days, I experienced great desolation. In the years since my renewed journey of faith began, I had marveled and wondered that “God hasn’t asked anything hard of me yet.” I guess I had been waiting for the other shoe to drop and now it felt like it was here. Verses like Luke 9:23, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*” echoed in my head. I felt very sad. I still wasn’t ready for that, yet I also knew I didn’t want to turn away from my new commitment to God. I enjoyed the tour but was also exhausted and overwhelmed. At every opportunity I slept and I could not bear to journal my feelings. Always the priest was inviting us to consider three questions: **What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?** It was intense.



The path of Ignatius we were walking ended at Manresa, where Ignatius had rested and stayed for about a year and where he wrote his famous *Spiritual Exercises*. The night before we were to go, I forced myself to write and decided that the next morning on the bus I would ask some questions of the woman who had worked with Mother Teresa’s group. Although she did not use these words, her answer could be summarized in the words of a frequent benediction at my church: “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it. And may the blessing of God Almighty, the father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you now and remain with you always.”

Our first stop in Manresa was the hostel where Ignatius stayed when he first arrived. He was weak because he had been following ascetic practices, including extreme fasting and scourging. Fr. Josep explained that Ignatius was taught that this was not what God desired of him. Fr. Josep He continued to instruct us and then we prayed. As the prayer ended, a fellow pilgrim took a picture of me. It is a picture of my receiving consolation and this is how I represented that moment in another PowerPoint.

That was a moment of the deepest prayer. In this moment of consolation, I understood that the

## Discernment

- What have you done for Christ?
- What are you doing for Christ?
- What should you be doing for Christ?



answers to those questions had nothing to do with blind self-denial I'd been told was God's Will and had everything to do with the using the gifts and interests I'd been specifically given for the good of God's creation and to God's Glory. It is the difference between loving goodness itself and listening to God's call as opposed to resentful outward conformity to doing what I'm told.

And so my understanding of my spiritual journey has grown again. That call to "larger life" I wrote of in my application to SMU was a holy longing that has been with me all my life but stymied by theologies of fear, shame and abuse that left no room for God's grace. Then for thirty years, I quit looking for God in church. Finally, I've found a faith with room for all that which I have been given, including my ability to discern and grace for when I get it wrong. That's why I resonated so much with the title of that book: *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life – In Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There.* Yes, God has been **"here all along."**



Kristin Hamlet, USA.