

The Spiritual Journey of Ignatius of Loyola: 1491-1540

(This narration of the life of Ignatius is based on **A Pilgrim's Testament**, an autobiography dictated to a fellow Jesuit three years before he dies. In speaking, Ignatius consistently referred to himself in the third person.)

Loyola to Montserrat

Ignatius was a minor nobleman, born in 1491 in the family castle of Loyola in the Basque country and brought up as a knight in the courts of Spain. In his autobiography he sums up the first twenty-six years of his life in one sentence: "he was a man given to the follies of the world; and what he enjoyed most was warlike sport, with a great and foolish desire to win fame." The desire to win fame brought Ignatius to Pamplona to aid in the defence of that frontier city against French attack. The defence was hopeless; when, on May 20, 1521, he was hit by a cannon ball which shattered one leg and badly injured the other. Ignatius and the city of Pamplona both fell to the French forces.

French doctors cared for the badly-wounded Ignatius and returned him to Loyola, where he spent a long convalescence. In this forced period of inactivity he asked for books to read and out of boredom, accepted the only ones available -*The Lives of the Saints* and *The Life of Christ*. When not reading, the romantic knight dreamed at times of imitating the deeds of St Francis and St Dominic, at times of knightly deeds of valour in service of "a certain lady". After a time, he came to realise that "there was this difference. When he was thinking of those things of the world, he took much delight in them, but afterwards, when he was tired and put them aside, he found himself dry and dissatisfied. But when he thought of ...practising all the rigours that he saw in the saints, not only was he consoled when he had these thoughts, but even after putting them aside he remained satisfied and joyful... His eyes were opened a little, and he began to marvel at the difference and to reflect upon it. Little by little he came to recognise the difference between the spirits that were stirring". Ignatius was discovering God at work in his life; his desire for fame was transformed into a desire to dedicate himself completely to God, although he was still very unsure what this meant. "The one thing he wanted to do was to go to Jerusalem as soon as he recovered ...with as much of disciplines and fasts as a generous spirit, fired with God, would want to perform."

Ignatius began the journey to Jerusalem as soon as his recovery was complete. The first stop was the famous shrine of Montserrat. On March 24, 1522, he laid his sword and dagger "before the altar of Our Lady of Montserrat, where he had resolved to lay aside his garments and to don the armour of Christ". He spent the whole night in vigil, a pilgrim's staff in his hand. From Montserrat he

journeyed to a town named Manresa, intending to remain for only a few days. He remained for nearly a year.

Manresa

Ignatius lived as a pilgrim, begging for his basic needs and spending nearly all of his time in prayer. At first the days were filled with great consolation and joy, but soon prayer became torment and he experienced only severe temptations, scruples, and such great desolation that he wished "with great force to throw himself through a large hole in his room". Finally peace returned. Ignatius reflected in prayer on the "good and evil spirits" at work in experiences such as this, and he began to recognise that his freedom to respond to God was influenced by these feelings of "consolation" and "desolation". "God treated him at this time just as a schoolmaster treats a child whom he is teaching."

The pilgrim gradually became more sensitive to the interior movements of his heart and the exterior influences of the surrounding world. He recognised God revealing His love and inviting a response, but he also recognised that his freedom to respond to that love could be helped or hindered by the way he dealt with these influences. He learned to respond in freedom to God's love by struggling to remove the obstacles to freedom. But "love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words". The fullness of freedom led inevitably to total fidelity; the free response of Ignatius to the love of God took the form of loving service: a total dedication to the service of Christ who, for Ignatius the nobleman, was his "King". Because it was a response in love to God's love, it could never be enough; the logic of love demanded a response that was ever more ("magis").

The conversion to loving service of God was confirmed in an experience that took place as he stopped to rest one day at the side of the river Cardoner. 'While he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened; not that he saw any vision, but he understood and learned many things, both spiritual matters and matters of faith and of scholarship, and this with so great an enlightenment that everything seemed new to him ...He experienced a great clarity in his understanding. This was such that in the whole course of his life, after completing sixty-two years, even if he gathered up all the various helps he may have had from God and all the various things he has known, even adding them all together, he does not think he had got as much as at that one time".

Ignatius recorded his experiences in a little book, a practice begun during his convalescence at Loyola. At first these notes were only for himself, but gradually he saw the possibility of a broader purpose. "When he noticed some things in his soul and found them useful, he thought they might also be useful

to others, and so he put them in writing." He had discovered God, and thus discovered the meaning of life. He took advantage of every opportunity to guide others through this same experience of discovery. As time went on, the notes took on a more structured form and became the basis for a small book called, *The Spiritual Exercises*, published in order to help others guide men and women through the experience of an interior freedom that leads to the faithful service of others in service of God.

The Spiritual Exercises is not a book simply to be read; it is a guide to an experience, an active engagement enabling growth in the freedom that leads to faithful service. The experience of Ignatius at Manresa can become a personal lived experience.

In the Exercises each person has the possibility of discovering that, though sinful, he or she is uniquely loved by God and invited to respond to His love. This response begins with an acknowledgment of sin and its effects; a realisation that God's love overcomes sin, and a desire for this forgiving and redeeming love. The freedom to respond is then made possible through a growing ability with God's help, to recognise and engage in the struggle to overcome the interior and exterior factors that hinder a free response. This response develops positively through a process of seeking and embracing the will of God the Father, whose love was revealed in the person and life of His Son, Jesus Christ, and of discovering and choosing the special ways in which this loving service of God is accomplished through active service on behalf of other men and women, within the heart of reality.

Jerusalem to Paris

Leaving Manresa in 1523, Ignatius continued his journey to Jerusalem. His experiences during the months at Manresa completed the break with his past life and confirmed his desire to give himself completely to God's service, but the desire was still not clearly focused. He wanted to stay in Jerusalem, visiting the holy places and serving others, but he was not permitted to remain in that troubled city. "After the pilgrim realised that it was not God's will that he remain in Jerusalem, he continually pondered within himself what he ought to do; and eventually he was rather inclined to study for some time so that he would be able to help souls, and he decided to go to Barcelona." Though he was thirty years old he went to school, sitting in class beside the young boys of the city to learn grammar; two years later, he moved on to university studies at Alcalá. When he was not studying he taught others about the ways of God and shared his *Spiritual Exercises* with them. But the Inquisition would not permit someone without training in theology to speak about spiritual things. Rather than keep silent about the one thing that really mattered to him, and convinced that God was leading him Ignatius left Alcalá and went to Salamanca. The

forces of the Inquisition continued to harass him until finally, in 1528, he left Spain entirely and moved to France and the University of Paris.

Ignatius remained in Paris for seven years. Though his preaching and direction in Barcelona, Alcalá, and Salamanca had attracted companions who stayed with him for a time, it was at the University of Paris that a more lasting group of "friends in the Lord" was formed. Peter Favre and Francis Xavier were his room mates, "whom he later won for God's service by means of the *Spiritual Exercises*". Attracted by the same challenge, four others soon joined them. Each of these men experienced God's love personally and their desire to respond was so complete that their lives were totally transformed. As each one shared this experience with the others, they formed a bond of community which was to last throughout their lives.

Paris to Rome

In 1534 this small group of seven companions journeyed together to a small monastery chapel in Montmartre, outside Paris, and the only priest among them Peter Favre celebrated a Mass at which they consecrated their lives to God through vows of poverty and chastity. It was during these days that they "determined what they would do, namely, go to Venice and Jerusalem, and spend their lives for the good of souls". At Venice the six other companions were ordained as priests, Ignatius among them. But their decision to go to Jerusalem was not to become a reality.

Recurring warfare between Christian and Islamic armies made travel to the East impossible. While they waited for the tension to ease and pilgrim journeys to be resumed, the companions spent their days preaching, giving the *Spiritual Exercises*, working in hospitals and among the poor. Finally, when a year had passed and Jerusalem remained inaccessible, they decided that they would "return to Rome and present themselves to the Vicar of Christ so that he could make use of them wherever he thought it would be more for the glory of God and the good of souls".

Their resolve to put themselves at the service of the Holy Father meant that they might be sent to different parts of the world, wherever the Pope had need of them; the "friends in the Lord" would be dispersed. It was only then that they decided to form a more permanent bond which would keep them united even when they were physically separated. They would add the vow of obedience, thus becoming a religious order.

Toward the end of their journey to Rome, at a small wayside chapel in the village of La Storta Ignatius "was visited very especially by God ...He was at prayer in a Church and experienced such a change in his soul and saw so clearly that God the Father placed him with Christ His Son that he would not

dare doubt it.” The companions became Companions of Jesus, to be intimately associated with the risen Christ's work of redemption, carried out in and through the Church, working in the world. Service in God in Christ Jesus became service in the church and of the church in its redemptive mission.

In 1539 the companions, now ten, were received favourably by Pope Paul III. In the "Formula" presented to Paul III for his approval, the Society of Jesus was founded...

to strive especially for the defence and propagation of the faith and for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine, by means of public preaching, lectures, and any other ministration whatsoever of the word of God, and further by means of the Spiritual Exercises, the education of children and unlettered persons in Christianity, and the spiritual consolation of Christ's faithful through hearing confessions and administering the other sacraments.

Ignatius wanted Jesuits to be free to move from place to place wherever the need was greatest; he was convinced that institutions would tie them down and prevent this mobility. But the companions had only one goal: ***"in all things to love and serve the Divine Majesty"***; they would adopt whatever means could best accomplish this love and service of God through the service of others, ever mindful of...***"circumstances of place and person"***.

The Society of Jesus was formally approved in 1540; a few months later Ignatius was elected its first Superior General. He remained in Rome and dedicated the last years of his life to writing the Constitutions of this new religious order and communicating with his 'friends in the Lord'. Inspired by the famed vision embodied in the Spiritual Exercises, the Constitutions manifest the Ignatian ability to combine exalted ends with the most exact and concrete means for achieving them. His Constitutions are all about relationships, friendly relationships; relationships with 'God our Lord', relationships with the Church, relationships with the Pope, relationships with superiors, relationships among members of the group, relationships with other people in service, and those being served, and relationships with the poor. The work, divided into ten parts, is a formative guidebook for Jesuit life.

It was the early morning of July 31, 1556 that Ignatius died.