

A Biography of St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556): The Founder of the Jesuits

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The Early Years

Iñigo Lopez de Oñaz y Loyola, whom we know as St. Ignatius, was born in the Castle [Loyola](#), in the Basque country of northeastern Spain, in 1491, during the reign of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

of books he enjoyed reading: romances of chivalry. But the only reading available in the house was an illustrated Life of Christ and a book of saints' legends. He spent hours dreaming. He dreamt of the exploits he would do in service to his king and in honor of the royal lady he was in love with. But he would also dream about the exploits he could do to imitate St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic in fidelity to his heavenly Lord.

Gradually, he began to reflect on these experiences; he noticed what was going on within. Both kinds of daydreams engaged him completely, but after the romantic chivalry dreaming was over, he felt empty and dissatisfied, whereas after the spiritual dreaming ended, he still felt a deep peace, a quiet happiness." [H]e did not consider nor did he stop to examine this difference until one day his eyes were partially opened and he began to wonder at this difference and to reflect upon it. From experience he knew that some thoughts left him sad while others made him happy, and little by little he came to perceive the different spirits that were moving him..."

Here we see the beginning of his powers of [discernment](#), of decision making. He realized [God](#) was leading him by his feelings, drawing him toward an entirely new way of life.

The Pilgrim



As soon as Iñigo had healed enough to walk, he began a journey to Jerusalem so that he could "kiss the earth where our Lord had walked." He traveled through the town of Montserrat, Spain where he gave away his fine clothes to a poor man. Then, in an all-night vigil before the Black Madonna in the church of the Benedictine abbey there, he hung up his sword and dagger. Effectively, his old life was over and his new life had begun.

Barcelona was the port from which to embark on a passage to Rome and then to the Holy Land. Not wanting to see his old friends, who might be in conflict with his new values, he went instead to the nearby town of [Manresa](#) with the intention of staying there a few days. But those "few days" turned into ten months.

The "Pilgrim," as he referred to himself in his autobiography, asked for lodging at a hospital for the poor located outside the town's walls. In exchange for his bed, he did chores around the hospital; and he begged for his food in the town. As we see him here, he spent much of his time in a cave, in prayer with [God](#)—praying as much as seven hours a day. He was blessed with powerful insights into himself and about who [God](#) was for him. Still, for extended periods, he experienced doubts, anxieties, scruples, severe depression; he even contemplated suicide to end his psychic pain.



He recorded his experiences in a notebook and would soon find his jottings helpful in guiding others. These notes which he continued to revise and expand over time as he listened to people became his [Spiritual Exercises](#). Eventually, they were published and then reprinted again and again and translated into many languages as they spread around the world.

An example of a [spiritual exercise](#) might be to reflect on the ways you have been loved, or on

what your personal gifts are and how you use them and for whom, or to imagine yourself present in one of the [gospel](#) scenes—for example, Jesus' feeding of the 5,000.

Today, nearly 500 years later, Jesuits and other priests and sisters and brothers, and an ever [REDACTED] toward spiritual transformation, to a deeper relationship with God.

[REDACTED]

The Pilgrim did manage to beg passage on a ship to the Holy Land. But instead of being able to fulfill his great dream to remain there for the rest of his life, trying to convert the so-called "infidel," he was told by church authorities to return to Europe after only a few weeks. They had enough trouble there without him and his conversion scheme. Another dream of Inigo shattered.

When it came time for him to set sail and head back to the western Mediterranean, he ran back to the Mount of Olives to see which way [REDACTED]

Higher Education in Paris

At the age of 38, the Pilgrim attended the College Ste. Barbe of the University of Paris, considered the heart of the French Renaissance. He knew little French and he was not very fluent or correct in Latin. Still he made progress, little by little.

In those days, students rose at 4:00 a.m.; classes—lectures—began at 5:00 am. There were also classes for several hours in the later afternoon. The university curriculum—in the Parisian style--was much more orderly

themselves into a [religious order](#). They called it the Company (meaning the companionship) or [Society of Jesus](#). Outsiders disparagingly nicknamed them the "[Jesuits](#)" but the name caught on and eventually was used by all alike.

The Founder

The [Society of Jesus](#) was approved by Pope Paul III in 1540 and thus became an official Catholic [religious order](#). Ignatius was elected their first leader. He declined after the first vote. He felt unworthy for the position because of the vanity and licentiousness of his earlier life and because he felt that others were more theologically knowledgeable. After much [discernment](#), he accepted the position and served until his death sixteen years later.

As the [Superior General](#), he sent companions all over Europe and around the world. He called them to "hurry to any part of the world