

THE IGNATIAN ADVENTURE

Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises
of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life

KEVIN O'BRIEN. SJ

LOYOLA PRESS.

A JESUIT MINISTRY

Chicago

Illustrations by:
Thomas Fong '23

LOYOLAPRESS.
A JESUIT MINISTRY

3441 N. Ashland Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60657
(800) 621-1008
www.loyolapress.com

© 2011 Kevin O'Brien, SJ
All rights reserved

Imprimi potest: Very Rev. James Shea, SJ, Provincial.

Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition, copyright 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from The Spiritual Exercises are taken from *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary by George E. Ganss, S.J.* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992). Used by permission.

The poems "Messenger" on p. 47 and "Praying" on p. 73 are from *Thirst* by Mary Oliver. Copyright © 2006 by Mary Oliver. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston.

Cover image: olaser/E+/Getty Images

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

O'Brien, Kevin F.

The Ignatian adventure : the Spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius in daily life / Kevin F. O'Brien.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8294-3577-1

ISBN-10: 0-8294-3577-8

1. Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, 1491-1556. Exercitia spiritualia. 2. Spiritual exercises. 3. Spiritual direction. 4. Spiritual life—Catholic Church. I. Title.

BX2179.L8O26 2011

248.3—dc23

2011019551

Printed in the United States of America

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 Bang 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9

The Journey of Ignatius of Loyola

IÑIGO LÓPEZ DE LOYOLA Y OÑAZ was born in 1491, the thirteenth child in a family of minor nobility. Like other boys coming of age at that time, Iñigo imagined himself as one of the knights he read about in the romantic novels of his era: cultured, pious, skilled in warfare, and irresistible to ladies- in- waiting.

The times fermented the idealism and passion that were in his Basque blood. It was an age for adventurers of all kinds: merchants crisscrossing continents and seas in search of new wealth; explorers setting out on expeditions to unknown worlds; writers, artists, and scientists inspiring a rebirth in learning that would expand the reaches of the mind and culture. In his youth, Iñigo could not have imagined the very different kind of adventure that God had in store for him.



The Young Knight

Iñigo's family connections helped secure him a position serving as a page to the treasurer of the kingdom of Castile. So he left his native Loyola at the age of sixteen for a life at court. The upwardly mobile Iñigo easily fit into his new role: riding, dueling, gambling, dancing, and romancing young ladies. Though short in stature, he got involved in some noteworthy brawls, one of which resulted in charges being filed against him.

When he was twenty- six, Iñigo took up the life of a soldier in the northern town of Pamplona. Ever loyal, Iñigo did not hesitate

to come to the Crown's defense when in 1521 the French attacked Pamplona. It was a lost battle from the start, with Iñigo's small band of soldiers easily outnumbered. As a matter of honor, Iñigo refused to give up the town fortress. Through the walls of the citadel crashed a cannonball, which struck Iñigo in the legs. Impressed by Iñigo's courage, the French soldiers tended to his wounds and carried him back to Loyola, where doctors reset his legs. He almost died from an infection related to the injury.

As with his loyalty and honor, Iñigo's vanity ran deep. After his legs were rebroken and had begun to heal, he noticed that his right leg was shorter than his left and that there was an unsightly protrusion of the bone. He worried that these deformities would spell the end of



his knightly life. He fretted over not being able to wear the flashy, tight-fitting clothing of a courtier. So he had his doctors break and reset his limb again, saw off the bump on his leg, and stretch his shorter leg in a racklike instrument. The pain was excruciating but, in his worldly estimation, worth it.



For six months, the restless Iñigo convalesced. To pass the time, he asked his caregiver for some novels of chivalry to read, but all she could find were a popular version of the life of Christ and a collection of tales of saints. As he read and pondered these books, he noticed a change taking place within him. Daydreams of serving the king as a valiant knight and winning the love of a noble lady, though at first enticing, ultimately left him feeling inwardly dry and discontented. By contrast, when he imagined devoting his life to the service of God and others, as had the saints he was reading about, Iñigo experienced a deep sense of joy. In his autobiography, written in the third person and dictated to a fellow Jesuit near the end of his life, Ignatius writes:

When he thought of worldly matters, he found much delight; but after growing weary and dismissing them, he found that he was dry and unhappy. But when he thought of . . . imitating the saints in all the austerities they practiced, he not only found consolation in these thoughts, but even after they had left him he remained happy and joyful. (Autobiography, no. 8)

God was stirring up something new in our young knight. Ignatius became convinced that God was speaking to him through his interior attractions and reactions.

The Pilgrim

Iñigo wisely wanted to test what these unfamiliar desires and dreams were all about. So once he recovered from his injuries, he set out on a new adventure, intending to go to Jerusalem as a pilgrim. He left behind his stately family home and traveled widely— begging, preaching, and caring for the sick and poor. One of his first stops was a Benedictine mountaintop shrine of Our Lady at Montserrat. There, after an all-night vigil, the young romantic left behind his sword before the altar of Our Lady and donned the sackcloth of a beggar.



With a pilgrim's staff in hand, Iñigo gave his courtly robe and feathered cap to a beggar. From Montserrat he set out for the small town of Manresa. Iñigo stayed there for about ten months, spending hours every day in solitary prayer and working at a hospice. Later in his life, he reflected that during this time, God worked on him like a teacher instructing a student, gently schooling him in the ways of prayer and holiness. At Manresa, Iñigo discerned carefully



the interior movements of his soul: the attractions, feelings, thoughts, and desires that led him to greater intimacy with Jesus Christ and those that were distractions to his spiritual growth. Trying to outdo the piety of the saints he read about, he engaged in severe bodily penances. At times, he became mired in self-doubt. Through prayer and wise spiritual guidance, Iñigo discerned that his

seemingly pious acts were really displays of vanity. As he sought a more balanced spiritual life, he encountered a God who was not a tyrant waiting for him to slip up but a helping God who wanted for him the fullness of life.

At Manresa, Iñigo enjoyed the first of several mystical visions that would mark his life. Sitting by the river Cardener, he experienced an enlightenment that allowed him to see the world with new eyes and to find God in all things. In his autobiography, the pilgrim saint remarked that he learned more about God and the world in that one moment than he did throughout the rest of his life.



Iñigo began to make notes of his spiritual insights. He talked to people about the spiritual life whenever and wherever he could and recorded the fruit of these conversations. Those notes became the basis for a manual of prayer that he would later title the *Spiritual Exercises*.



The pilgrim begged his way to Jerusalem in 1523. Iñigo intended to spend the rest of his life in the region where Jesus had lived and labored. However, because of the dangerous political situation in the Holy Land at the time, the Franciscan guardians of the sacred sites ordered him to leave

after only a few weeks. His romantic hopes of spending his life in the Holy Land dashed, Iñigo faced a moment of decision: how was he to serve God? He writes, again in the third person:

After the said pilgrim came to realize that it was God's will that he not remain in Jerusalem, he kept wondering what he ought to do, and finally he was inclined toward spending some time in studies in order to help souls; and so he decided to go to Barcelona. (Autobiography, no. 50)

Underlying this succinct, matter-of-fact account are some profound spiritual insights. Iñigo was learning that he had to be flexible in responding to God's will in his life. And his decisions had to be directed toward "helping souls," or helping people, which he could do in many ways, all depending on the circumstances he faced.

The Student

Once back in Spain, Iñigo decided to begin studies for the priesthood, but he lacked knowledge of Latin, the language of the church. So at the age of thirty-three, he spent two years in Barcelona, studying alongside schoolchildren. Iñigo subsequently attended universities in Alcalá and Salamanca, but his education was self-directed and haphazard. In these university towns, he continued to preach, teach, and offer his Spiritual Exercises. He was arrested several times by the Spanish Inquisition, which questioned his credentials and carefully examined the Spiritual Exercises for heresy. The authorities limited Iñigo's ability to teach and preach, but they did not condemn the Spiritual Exercises.



Lacking formal academic training and wanting to become a better teacher and preacher, Iñigo traveled to the renowned University of Paris to study philosophy and theology. There he became known as “Ignatius,” a Latin form of his name. In Paris, he met other students, such as Francis Xavier and Peter Faber, who were captivated by Ignatius’s experience of God, his vision of the world, and his adventurous spirit.

On August 15, 1534, in a small chapel on Montmartre, the “hill of martyrs,” in Paris, Ignatius and six other men professed religious vows of poverty and chastity to bind them more closely together. They also vowed to travel to the Holy Land after completing their studies for the priesthood. If, after a year, passage proved impractical, they promised to offer their services to the pope instead.

The Founder

The companions, now eleven in number, met in Venice and preached, worked in hospitals, and gave the Exercises. While waiting for passage to Jerusalem, Ignatius and those others who were not yet priests were ordained in 1537. Unable to go to the Holy Land because Venice was at war with the Ottoman Empire, these “friends in the Lord,” as they called themselves, set out for Rome as they had vowed.

Along the way, near Rome, in a chapel in the small village of La Storta, Ignatius enjoyed another mystical vision, in which he saw God the Father with Jesus, the Son, carrying his cross. Ignatius heard the Father say, “I will be favorable to you in Rome.” In the vision, Ignatius had a clear sense of being called to serve alongside Jesus.

When they settled in Rome, the companions deliberated for many weeks about their future, all the while teaching, preaching, and performing works of mercy. They eventually decided to form a religious order under a vow of obedience to a superior. Ignatius was their unanimous choice.

Inspired by the vision at La Storta, Ignatius insisted that they call themselves the Company (or Society) of Jesus. They dared to take the name of Jesus (which no other religious order had done) for the simple reason that knowing, loving, and serving Jesus Christ was the inspiration and end of their mission together. They wanted to be companions of Jesus carrying his cross.

The Jesuits, as the companions soon would be called, vowed to go wherever the church’s needs were greatest and wherever they could help more souls. Unlike monastic religious orders, their home would be the road. The Jesuits would meet people where they were rather than insist that people come to a monastery or a church. They offered the church a spirituality that was both mystical and practical; they would be “contemplatives in action,” as the first generation of Jesuits described themselves.



When their religious order was formally constituted in 1540, the pope began to depend on the Jesuits for important missions throughout the world. Xavier set sail for India. Faber and his fellow theologians were assigned to participate in the Council of Trent. Jesuits opened schools all over Europe and across the seas to meet the church's great desire for an educated clergy and faithful. Ignatius and his Jesuits chose as their motto *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, a Latin phrase that means "for the greater glory of God." This would be the standard for all their missions.



Ironically, as his young Jesuits embarked on various apostolic adventures around the world, the fifty-year-old Ignatius stayed put. Until his death in 1556, he managed the Society from his desk in Rome, sending others to labor all over

the world while penning thousands of letters of instruction and encouragement. As superior general, Ignatius had great love for his fellow Jesuits, but he did not hesitate to challenge them. During these years in Rome, he also wrote the constitutions of his fledgling order, fine-tuned the Spiritual Exercises, and continued to give the retreat to people from all walks of life.

Ignatius died on July 31, 1556, after suffering the effects of a persistent stomach ailment. At his death, the Society numbered nearly one thousand men, with houses and colleges stretching from Brazil to across Europe and Japan. Ignatius was canonized, together with Francis Xavier, in 1622.



Over the years, the young knight's desire for power, prestige, and privilege had been transformed—by God's grace—into a desire for a life of prayer, service, and simplicity. Gradually, Ignatius grew in his awareness of God's deep love not just for the world generally but for himself personally. He experienced this love as a profoundly intimate call by Christ to follow him, a call that filled Ignatius with a passionate zeal to serve God and to help souls.

For Ignatius and the Society of Jesus, the primary instrument to discern God's call in our lives is the Spiritual Exercises. Through the Exercises, we grow in faith, hope, and love. In them, we prepare for and sustain ourselves in the service of God and others. More than a book, the Exercises are an experience, a great adventure to the heart of God and, therefore, to the real and present needs of the world.