



### *A Look At The Young Ignatius*

#### **Part One: THE EARLY YEARS - To JERUSALEM**

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. Iñigo was the youngest of 13 children, raised in a family culture of high Catholic piety but lax morals. He experienced the contradictions between the ideals of church and crown and the realities of his own family. His father had several children by another woman, and his grandfather's lawless behavior led to the top two floors of the Loyola castle being demolished by order of the Spanish king.

Iñigo hardly knew his mother, Marina, she died when he was a child. His father, Don Beltrán Yañez de Oñaz y Loyola, died when Ignatius was 16. One of his brothers went on the second voyage of Columbus and another died in battle also far away. Iñigo was raised to be a courtier and diplomat in service to the crown, having received a chivalric yet academically sparse education typical in his day. He spent some time as a page at court. Winning personal glory was his passion. And he was a fancy dresser, an expert dancer, a womanizer, sensitive to insult, and a rough punkish swordsman who used his privileged status to escape prosecution for violent crimes committed with his brother at carnival time.

#### *THE SOLDIER*

In the spring of 1521, a very large French army attacked the fortress town of Pamplona. A tiny band of Spanish soldiers trying to defend the town were ready to surrender; all of them except Iñigo de Loyola. He vowed to hold off the French single-handedly. But a French cannonball shattered his leg and put an end to his "stand." However, his French adversaries admired the courage of the man and they carried him on a litter back home to his castle of Loyola.

His leg was not the only thing that had been shattered. His image of himself as a handsome, dashing courtier - everything that he had ever lived for - was shattered, too. The broken leg was not properly set and the bone protruded in a way that would show through the tight hose that a courtier of the day wore, "so much as to be something ugly." Iñigo insisted on having the leg re-broken and re-set; there was, of course, no anesthetic. In the end one leg was still shorter than the other; Iñigo limped for the rest of his life.

To pass the time of his recovery, he asked for the kind 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 of the exploits he would do in service to his king and in honor of the royal lady with whom he was in love. 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 which he acquired from his readings.

Gradually, he began to reflect on these experiences and he noticed what was going on. Both kinds of daydreams engaged him but after the romantic chivalry dreaming was over, he felt empty and dissatisfied, whereas after the spiritual dreaming ended, he found and 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 find the beginning of his powers of discernment and decision making. He realized God was leading him by his feelings, drawing him toward an entirely new way of living and learning.

As soon as Iñigo had healed enough to walk, he began a journey to Jerusalem so 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 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 he could embark on a passage to Rome and then to the Holy Land. Not wanting to see his old friends, who might conflict with his new values, he went instead to the nearby town of Manresa with the intention of staying for a few days. 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. 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, and 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 became his "Spiritual Exercises." Eventually, they were published and reprinted again and again and translated into many languages as they spread around the world.

An example of a "Spiritual Exercise" is to reflect on the ways one has 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 priests, sisters, brothers and an ever-larger number of men and women use these *Spiritual Exercises* to guide others toward spiritual transformation, to a deeper understanding of themselves and a stronger relationship with God.

Ignatius 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 the local church authorities to return to Europe after only a few weeks. They had enough trouble without him and his conversion schemes. Another dream of Iñigo 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 the "footprint of Jesus" was facing. Pious legend had it that the mark in a certain rock there was left by Jesus as he ascended into heaven. Now what may interest us is not the historical credibility of the legend, but rather what this action of "the Pilgrim Ignatius" tells us about his own inner life, his imaginative life. He was in the habit of entering imaginatively into all the various gospel stories and scenes, and, in this way, they became very concrete and real and immediate to himself. He wanted to be in an intimate relationship with Jesus, and every detail about Jesus was precious to him. And from that encounter he learned the next step along his way! (next week ...The return to Europe and Iñigo Lopez de Oñaz y Loyola grows into our St. Ignatius of Loyola!