The foundation and naming of the Society of Jesus in 1540 is explicitly linked to the “Vision at La Storta”, a central event in the life of the Society’s founder, St Ignatius of Loyola. This life-changing vision is reconstructed visually by the Jesuits between the 1590s and the 1690s, culminating in the sculptural representation on the Altar of St Ignatius in the Church of Il Gesù. In a century of prints and altarpieces, sculptures and frescoes, these images portray the miraculous event in diverse fashions and for various purposes, all of which allow the viewer to comprehend – and even experience – the event that serves as an emblem of the foundation and naming of the Jesuit order. This engaged participation builds on established Jesuit ideals, practices and works of art, including the envisioning essential to the Spiritual Exercises, and the participatory commentaries on the Gospels by Jerome Nadal. This essay examines the relationship between the vision, the denomination of the Society of Jesus, and the artistic representations that allow the viewer to appreciate them fully by experiencing them in the most prominent Jesuit churches.

In the fall of 1537, Ignatius of Loyola approached the city of Rome. He had started out from Paris three years earlier, with his companions, having taken a collective vow to travel to the Holy Land. When this proved impossible they determined to go to Rome and put themselves

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in the hands of the Pope. Now, just miles outside the city where he would spend the rest of his life, Ignatius paused to pray [Fig. 1]. The miraculous event that followed was described in rather meager detail by Ignatius himself years later, in his *Spiritual Diary*, and in his dictated autobiography. His first biographer, Pedro Ribadeneira, however, recorded a fuller account:

The B. Father took his way towards Rome, on foot, with F. Faber, and F. Láinez in his company [...] one day drawing nigh to the city of Rome, leaving the two Fathers in the field, he went into a deserted and solitary church some mile from the city to pray. There amidst the greatest fervor of his prayers, he felt his heart changed, and God the Father appeared to him, together with his most Blessed Son, who carried the Cross upon his shoulders and with the eyes of his soul, illustrated with that resplendent light, he saw that the Eternal Father, turning to his only begotten Son, commended Ignatius, and those in his company unto him, with exceeding great love, putting them into his hands. And our most benign Jesus having received them under his patronage and protection, as he stood in that manner, with his Cross, turned to Ignatius and with a loving and mild countenance said unto him: 'Ego vobis Romae propitious ero' ('I will be favorable to you at Rome'). With this divine revelation, our Father remained very much comforted, and strengthened, and he related it afterwards to those in his company, to animate them the more, and to prepare them for the troubles which they were to endure. And, with this vision, together with many other excellent illustrations which he had, the most sacred name of JESUS, was so imprinted in his soul, with an earnest desire to take our Savior for his Captain, carrying his Cross after him, that was the cause, that at his, and the other first Fathers humble request, the Apostolic See, at the Confirmation of our religion, called it and named it THE SOCIETY OF JESUS.3

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1 The chapel where Ignatius prayed, located on the Via Cassia, was already dilapidated at this time. It was renovated by the Jesuits for the Jubilee of 1700, but further damaged and subsequently rebuilt in modern times. For a view of the chapel at present see Fig. 1.

2 For the account of Ignatius in his *Spiritual Diary*, written 23 February 1544 (translated into English), see Nicolas A. de, *Powers of Imagining, Ignatius de Loyola: A Philosophical Hermeneutic of Imagining Through the Collected Works of Ignatius de Loyola with a translation of these works* (Albany: 1986) 189–238. For the description in the autobiography dictated to Luis Goncalves da Camara in 1553–1555, see *A Pilgrim’s Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola*, ed. J. Tylenda (San Francisco: 2001) 112–113. In addition to the brief accounts of the event by Ignatius himself, and that of Ribadeneira, Láinez, as a witness, wrote an account, and descriptions were compiled by Jerome Nadal, Peter Canisius, and Juan Alfonso de Polanco.